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## Pinning crime on fake heroes N.J. agent helps expose and convict those with bogus U.S. medals.

February 11, 2004 | By Edward Colimore INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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New Jersey FBI Agent Thomas A. Cottone Jr. remembers feeling uneasy that day a year ago when he was made an honorary Marine during a Washington ceremony.

He looked at the mass of medals and insignia on the uniform of a fellow honoree, Navy Capt. Roger Edwards, and wondered how Edwards had achieved so much.

"I checked him out, and most of it was fake," Cottone said. "He was in the service but never earned all the valor awards he was wearing."

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Edwards, an ordained Episcopal priest in Maryland, faces a general court-martial March 29 for the unauthorized wearing of a Silver Star, the third-highest honor for valor; a Distinguished Flying Cross; a Purple Heart; a parachutist's qualification badge; and Special Forces Medical Corps insignia.

Across the country, people of all professions and backgrounds are exposed, and sometimes convicted, for exaggerating their military records, wearing decorations they did not earn, even trafficking in the nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor.

And in many cases, Cottone is the one who has caught them - sometimes at their homes, sometimes shortly before a speech at a patriotic event or at a military memorabilia show.

At a time when reporters are scrutinizing the military records of President Bush and his front-running Democratic challenger, John Kerry, Cottone is heading a nationwide effort to bring military impostors to justice.

The agent spends most of his time investigating bank robberies, kidnappings, terrorist activities, and hijackings out of his West Paterson, N.J., office, but he takes special pleasure in protecting the honor of veterans.

Hundreds of tips about phony heroes and fake medals have come in since his work began nine years ago, and the FBI is investigating several cases across the country.

Many people claim to have Medals of Honor to gain some benefit offered by states, such as free special license tags, free hunting and fishing licenses, and tax breaks. In Virginia, 642 people checked a box on tax forms last year claiming to have the medal, which makes military retirement income free of state taxes. But there are only four living recipients in Virginia and 132 in the country.

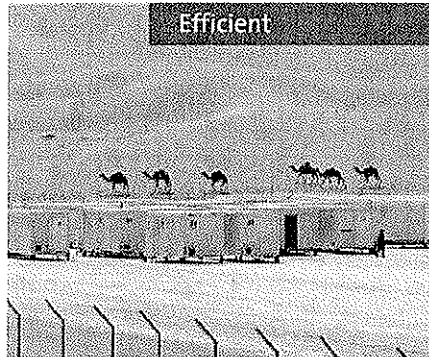
Others are selling lesser medals, insignia and badges on eBay.

Federal statute prohibits wearing a Medal of Honor that is not earned and outlaws its sale and manufacture. It also bars wearing other military medals that are not earned and does not allow their sale and manufacture except by those authorized by the government.

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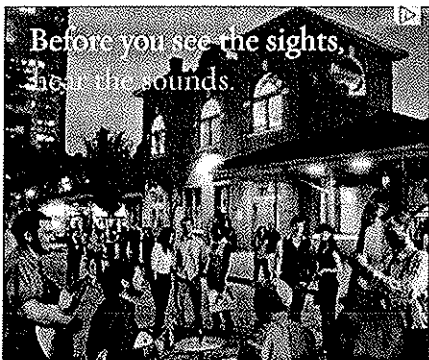


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(Page 2 of 4)

"Some people do it for financial gain, some for instant recognition and fame," Cottone said. "They have big egos and want to impress family and friends."

"But these are people buying valor, not earning it. They're purchasing awards, telling fantastic stories . . . and they're a disgrace to anyone who has ever been in the service."

Cottone, who was made an honorary Marine for his efforts, has been praised by military officials and veterans. He also received the Distinguished Citizen Award from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

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B.G. "Jug" Burkett, military researcher and coauthor of *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*, said the misuse of medals and false claims of military service were pervasive.

"There are tens of thousands of these guys out there," Burkett said, adding that they included members of Congress, judges and celebrities. "And they're in the Veterans Administration sucking up the taxpayers' money."

Victoria Leslie of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society in South Carolina said the public has "a heightened sense of patriotism since 9/11 and is more interested in the military, and that makes them more knowledgeable. And the more knowledge you have, the more you recognize these things."

Cottone, Burkett, the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, and veterans' groups regularly receive tips and have checked out of thousands of hero wannabes. Many have been found wanting.

In the last few years, the list has included:

Dallas Ricker, a retired Marine first sergeant from Birmingham, Ala., who wore the Navy Cross, the Navy's second-highest award for valor. Ricker admitted this week that he had never received it, Cottone said. Ricker, chairman of a nonprofit group that honored two of the Marine Corps' highest-ranking generals last summer in Washington, is considering a guilty plea.

Joseph Ellis, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian on the faculty of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, who was suspended for one year without pay in 2001 for concocting a phony tale of war service in Vietnam. He spent his years in the military teaching history at West Point.

Tim Johnson, former manager of baseball's Toronto Blue Jays, who was fired in 1999 after the team learned he had made up stories about service in Vietnam. He had never been there.