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# Outrageous

MICHAEL CROWLEY

## Tin Soldiers

Phony vets, fake heroes—there's an epidemic of lying about military service

**D**avid Budwah was a true American hero. The Springhill, Louisiana, native fought for his country in Iraq and Afghanistan, suffering injuries to his face and arm after diving in front of a buddy to shield him from a grenade blast. Budwah came home with his scarred face and damaged arm and the nightmares of post-traumatic stress disorder. But he at least had eight medals and ribbons to show for his valor and an inspiring story to tell. “We’re here to make sure of the freedom you have every day,” he told a group of young boys at an American Legion-affiliated camp in Maryland two summers ago.

Budwah was rewarded with a hero’s welcome. He was given free tickets to more than a dozen banquets, rock concerts, and pro football and major-league baseball games. He stood in the ring at a Maryland boxing event for a standing ovation. A nonprofit that helps wounded veterans even gave him a laptop computer.

But Budwah wasn’t a hero.



He was a liar. During the time he supposedly fought for his country, he had in fact served as a radio specialist in Japan, then worked at the postal exchange at the Quantico, Virginia, Marine base. “The truth of it is, I was never deployed, and I was never injured,” he told a Navy judge at his fall 2009 trial.

“Everything that I said was false.” Budwah was sentenced to 18 months confinement and hit with a

\$25,000 fine.

You'd like to think that Budwah was one disturbed individual and that it doesn't even occur to most people to lie about something as sacred as military service. But that would be naive—because the infuriating truth is that phony veterans are shockingly widespread.

“An epidemic,” says Mary Schantag, cofounder of the POW Network, a group that works to expose military fakes. Schantag says that she is aware of nearly 50 prosecutions of phony vets in the past year. The running tally on her website of known frauds has now reached about 4,000 names. Or, as Steve Waterman of Stolen Valor, another fraud-busting group, puts it: “Fewer than 500 Navy SEALs served in Vietnam, and I've met all 30,000 of them.”

What would possess these impostors to spin their disgraceful lies?

Some, like Budwah, are looking for special treatment. Others may just want respect. Damian Pace, who never finished his military training but occasionally wore U.S. Army uniforms and badges meant for combat veterans, told a federal investigator in 2009 that he wanted to “look cool.”

Those guys may be pathetic, but they're not as pernicious as the politicians who want to win votes by tricking us into thinking they're heroes. One of them was Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, who while running for the U.S. Senate last March claimed to a group of veterans that he “served in Vietnam.”

Not quite: Blumenthal got at least five deferments to avoid that war, before joining the reserves. Then there was Illinois Rep. Mark Kirk, a Navy reservist who has often bragged about receiving the U.S. Navy's Intelligence Officer of the Year award.

Earlier this year, Kirk admitted that the award had gone to an entire division in which he had served and made no mention of his name.

Doesn't have the same ring, does it?

But in the pandering pols category, it's hard to top former Atlantic City, New Jersey, mayor Bob Levy. He spun yarns about his days as a Special Forces soldier who'd earned prestigious awards in Vietnam, including one amazing tale about being abandoned by his troops and left alone in the jungle for weeks (the cause, he said, of his lifelong post-traumatic stress disorder).

After a newspaper cast doubt on his stories, Levy admitted that although he had served in Vietnam, most of his specific claims were lies.

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Levy resigned in 2007 and was sentenced to three years' probation and made to pay \$25,198 in restitution. His crime: accepting unearned federal disability benefits.

And that brings us to the worst category of fakers—the ones claiming benefits meant for truly disabled veterans. Our wounded warriors now face painfully long delays in getting the Veterans Affairs benefits that are due to them for their sacrifices.

Meanwhile, the fakers are angling for a share. That's why so often, as Schantag notes, "it's not a victimless crime."

One of these crooks was the aptly named Randall Moneymaker of Clayton, North Carolina, who said he'd earned numerous medals and awards, including a Purple Heart, as an Army Ranger in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and elsewhere. He even had scars from shrapnel wounds, which allowed him to collect over \$18,000 in VA disability benefits. A check of his records revealed that Money-maker spent only two years in the Army—and no time in a combat zone. He's now serving a three-year prison sentence. The scars? From liposuction, authorities say.

Then there's David M. Perelman, who earned more than \$180,000 in disability benefits, claiming he was wounded in combat, though his injury was self-inflicted.

The number of phony claims escalated to the point that in 2006, Congress approved the Stolen Valor Act, criminalizing false claims of military service. But in August, a U.S. Court of Appeals panel in California ruled the law unconstitutional. The appellant's argument was that free speech permits the right to lie about your military service. But veterans groups aren't giving up the fight and are talking with allies in Congress about a new law that can withstand legal challenges. Meanwhile, the fraud busters continue their hunt for fake vets.

"There are a whole lot more resources than there used to be," says B. G. Burkett, a veteran and a former financial adviser who has made catching phonies his life's work. "They are getting caught more often." But until we catch every one of these impostors, who disrespect the service and sacrifice of our true heroes, it won't be often enough.

## DO MORE

Share your suspicions.

> If someone's story sounds false, tip off a fraud-busting website like [pownetwork.org](http://pownetwork.org) or [stolenvalor.com](http://stolenvalor.com).

> Show your support. C o n g r e s s may pass a new Stolen Valor law that can withstand court challenges. Call the law's sponsor, Rep. John Salazar, at 202-225-4761 and find out how you can help.

> Honor the real heroes. D o n a t e to wounded warriors who are in need, through groups like Disabled American Veterans ([dav.org](http://dav.org)).