

# Some among active-duty troops fake valor claims

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SEOUL, South Korea — Damian Barbee was a model soldier, a highly decorated Ranger with nearly a dozen awards for valor and ribbons recognizing his overseas service.

His story was too good to be true.

In May, the former senior non-commissioned officer was found guilty of lying about items on his service record, including claims he earned a Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Master Parachutist Badge and a valor device on his Army Commendation Medal. Even his Ranger tab was fake.

In addition to being court-martialed for seven false claims of wearing decorations and badges, Barbee also lied to investigators, telling one official he had been awarded the Combat Action Badge in 2002, producing a falsified document as proof.

Barbee, formerly an E-8, was sentenced to hard labor without confinement for three months and was given a reduction in rank to staff sergeant.

A groundswell of support for U.S. troops after more than a decade of war has led some to take advantage of that goodwill.

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# Honors: Stolen valor cases also seen among active-duty GIs

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They lie about military service for adoration and financial gain. The practice is so offensive that it's punishable by federal law under the Stolen Valor Act, which was signed by President Barack Obama in 2013.

Most of those cases involve men and women who never served in the military or embellished their careers. Rare are the reports of active-duty servicemembers trying to paint themselves as heroes.

Lying about a service record is something that has probably been associated with wars throughout America's history, said Christopher Frueh, a psychologist at the University of Hawaii who worked at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"In many cases, there's a very clear and specific financial gain that they're seeking. For others, there's something about wanting to be perceived as a hero, to have people look at them with admiration," he said. Their lie "becomes a narrative; it becomes a story, an excuse, an explanation, a way of filling some other gap."

While working at the VA, Frueh said he began to suspect that some veterans were exaggerating their symptoms or lying outright about having served in the military. He coauthored a 2005 study that examined the combat histories and service records of 100 purported Vietnam veterans seeking treatment for combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder.

While the majority had been truthful about their experiences, the study found that a surprisingly high percentage may have misrepresented the nature of their military service or may never have served. Only 41 percent had documented evidence of being in combat, the study found.

Some reported belonging to Special Forces, Frueh said, though detailed training records are kept for those troops and impersonators can be easily identified. One of the most common findings was that troops claimed more combat experience than would have been expected in their jobs.

Service histories may be murky, Frueh said, and it's often difficult to prove that a veteran has lied because records may have been lost; however, the VA makes "very, very little effort" to check patient claims, he said.

It's "extremely common" for



KARA SIEPMANN/Courtesy of the U.S. Army National Guard

**A member of Joint Task Force Domestic Support-Counterdrug receives his Ranger tab after completing Ranger school. False claims of having served in special forces are among the misrepresentations found among some veterans and active servicemembers.**

troops and veterans to lie about their service records, said Doug Sterner, a Vietnam veteran, archivist and military awards expert. It's also relatively easy for them to get away with faking military honors because of the lack of a definitive list of recipients, aside from the Medal of Honor.

"Even some highly decorated veterans have a tendency to do this," said Sterner, who has assembled a Hall of Valor database.

As a master sergeant, Barbee's claims to have a Bronze Star and other combat awards would have been believable, Sterner said. But his claim of being a Ranger was particularly egregious.

"Rangers are an elite group, like SEALs, like Special Forces. It really bothers me when I see someone trying to put themselves in an elite or a very select group," Sterner said.

Fewer than 80,000 troops have graduated from Ranger school since it opened in the early 1950s, said 1st Sgt. Joseph Hester, of the 4th Ranger Training Battalion. The group, which has been involved in most every combat action since the Revolutionary War, takes pride in its lineage.

"It's a small community, it's a tight community, and some people want to belong to that but not

put in the work to get there," he said.

Rangers are often promoted more quickly than others, so some might claim to be a Ranger in an attempt to bolster their careers, Hester said.

"I don't know why they just don't take their career or whatever they did in the military and be proud of that," he said. "But I understand some people want to embellish and say they're something they're not to make themselves better."

In one of the most high-profile stolen valor cases in recent decades, Adm. Jeremy Boorda, chief of naval operations and the highest-ranking officer in the Navy, shot and killed himself in 1996 amid questioning of the legitimacy of two "V" devices for valor that he wore for his service during the Vietnam War. In his suicide note, he called wearing the decorations "an honest mistake."

Today, the seriousness of stolen valor has led to a plethora of veterans hunting for phony awards, Sterner said, with some veterans' groups aggressively leveling baseless charges against other vets. Sterner described them as "bullies."

"We're seeing more and more

false charges being leveled against people by veterans who are jumping the gun," he said. "That's what concerns me. It's almost turning into a vigilante thing out there."

Sterner pointed to an incident at a Memorial Day arts festival in Pennsylvania where a soldier and police officer accused a 75-year-old uniformed Marine veteran of lying about his service.

"He's not a real Marine!" the officer shouted, according to PennLive.com. "Stolen valor!"

Records show that the veteran, Robert Ford, had served from 1958 to 1964. "I was humiliated," he reportedly said at the time.

Proving stolen valor claims is becoming increasingly difficult. For the first time, awards are being given for classified operations, Sterner said, particularly in Navy special warfare, making it hard to prove whether a servicemember might be lying about his or her service record.

"I would never recommend confronting," Sterner told The Washington Post. He said he had taken that step only once in the all the cases he has looked into. Even then, he said, he questioned himself afterward.

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