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- [Credit Card Offers](#)
- [Press Releases](#)
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 - [Nevada](#)
- [Stock Portfolio](#)
- [Gaming Wire](#)

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- [Books](#)
- ▶ [Casinos & Hotels](#)
- ▶ [Celebrations](#)
- [Community](#)
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- ▶ [E-forums](#)
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STOLEN VALOR: Acts of Dishonor

Despite laws against it, thousands wear unearned medals

By [KEITH ROGERS](#)
[REVIEW-JOURNAL](#)



Service medals are displayed on a veteran's chest during a Veterans Day parade in Las Vegas. Review-Journal File Photo



Paul A. Bennett salutes during a March 18 meeting of the Military Order of the Purple Heart at American Legion Post No. 8 in Las Vegas. Bennett resigned his Purple Heart state commander's post last week after admitting he wore valor medals he never earned. Photo by [John Locher](#).



The brochure and Web site for his fly-fishing guide service described Jacob R. Cruze as a U.S. Army colonel, and colonel was what he insisted on being called at his country clubs.

Former Army Rangers at a 2004 convention at the Riviera noticed his combat medals and were eager to hear his war stories. With his arm around an attractive blond woman, they photographed him wearing a colonel's blue dinner jacket adorned with a breast full of valor medals including the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart and Distinguished Service Cross, which is second only to the Medal of Honor.

But the medals, his age, and his rank didn't seem to add up and that didn't sit right with retired Army Lt. Col. Bill Anton, a disabled Vietnam War veteran and vice president of the Special Forces Association Chapter 51 in Las Vegas.

It was odd, he said, that Cruze's uniform bore the burgundy of the medical service corps, yet valor awards are generally associated with infantry and other units that are in direct contact with the enemy. Among the insignias he sported were patches for the 25th Infantry Division and the 1st Cavalry Division.

"I wanted to talk about the 1st Cavalry Division and he didn't want to talk about the 1st Cav," Anton recalled. "And that raised my suspicions. ... He also claimed to have been Ranger and Special Forces," Anton said, noting Cruze couldn't remember his Ranger class date.

"He gave a roundabout answer of 1969 and we knew that he couldn't be a Ranger because you never forget your Ranger class date. It's seared into your systemic memory banks for those nine weeks and everything is built

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Bill Clinton embraces Vietnam War veteran Ronald Patrick Murphy during a campaign rally at UNLV on Oct. 23, 1992. Murphy presented the Democratic presidential nominee with his Vietnam service medal. Years later, Murphy's claim to be an ex-POW was debunked. Photo by [Jeff Scheid](#).



Retired Army Lt. Col. Bill Anton, vice president of the Special Forces Association Chapter 51 in Las Vegas, led an effort to expose military impersonators. Photo by [Gary Thompson](#).



Ed Gobel
Director of Lowden Veterans Center and Museum and past candidate for Assembly



Mark Mayo
Downtown Las Vegas man known as 'Sergeant Major,' arrested on Aug. 18

around that class date. So we knew that wasn't true."

There are federal laws against impersonating military officers, wearing medals that were never earned and falsifying discharge records to reflect accomplishments that never occurred. With that in mind, Anton spent the next year trying to get the U.S. attorney's office in Las Vegas to pursue a case against Cruze.

He enlisted the help of the POW Network, a tax-exempt nonprofit educational organization in Skidmore, Mo., that tracks military impersonators. A Freedom of Information Act request filed with the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis and a second one filed later by a Las Vegas member of the congressionally chartered Legion of Valor showed that Cruze never fought in combat and received no awards or decorations. Instead, he served as an Army Reserve second lieutenant from July 21, 1988, to Jan. 3, 1994, as an inactive clinical nurse for a Phoenix hospital unit.

Anton turned over the records and photographs to the FBI, which took no immediate action. After a call to Thomas A. Cottone Jr., an FBI special agent in New Jersey known for successfully tackling such cases, Anton was contacted by local authorities.

"They said they were going to bust Mr. Cruze and they did. They got his awards and decorations and rank from him (and) they took off his Purple Heart license tags from his vehicle."

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Cruze's exploits while claiming to be a highly decorated colonel are not unique to Nevada. Cottone estimates that "thousands" of other military phonies "would be a low number" for the United States.

Cottone said he has investigated "close to 200" so-called "stolen valor" cases.

The reference stems from the 1998 book by B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, "Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of its Heroes and its History."

In the Las Vegas Valley, there are at least a half-dozen people who are impersonating military or exaggerating their military careers. Their profiles and biographies have popped up



Las Vegas police Lt. Jim Moses holds up the Army uniform that Mark Mayo had donned to assume a different identity. Photo by [K.M. Cannon](#).

on the radar screen of the Special Forces Association and veterans watchdogs.

The list includes a phony Army major general, a wannabe Navy hero, and a former soldier and National Guardsman who received an other-than-honorable discharge in October from the Army, matching one he previously got from the Marine Corps.

At least one in a position of authority among veterans groups, Paul A. Bennett, former Nevada state department commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, has been accused of displaying valor medals that he wasn't authorized to wear.



Army Spc. Phil Haberman leaves Family Court in Las Vegas on Aug. 3. Two months later, he received an other-than-honorable discharge. Photo by [Craig L. Moran](#).

Sources from local Purple Heart chapters reported that Bennett, a Vietnam-era veteran, displayed a miniature Navy Cross medal as well as medals for a Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross on his commander's hat on several occasions including the 2004 Veterans Day parade in downtown Las Vegas.

On March 17, Tom Poulter, national senior vice commander for the Military Order of the Purple Heart, said the issue with Bennett and valor awards "came up a long time ago."

Poulter said Bennett "sent a bunch of documentation" to try to clear himself of allegations about illegally displaying valor medals but the "Navy Cross is not on his DD-214." He was referring to Bennett's official Department of Defense discharge document.

Bennett also is not listed among the Navy Cross recipients register kept by the Legion of Valor.

After weeks of not returning calls, Bennett finally made a series of phone calls Monday to the Review-Journal and admitted that he had displayed miniatures of the Navy Cross, Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross, saying he had carried "around these things for so long."

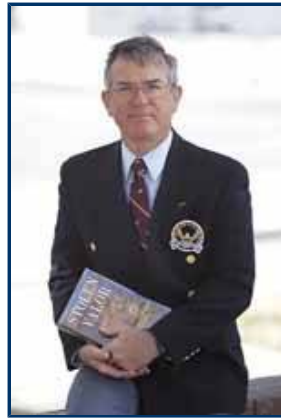
"I never stood in front of an admiral and shook his hand (to receive a Navy Cross). I thought I could just put on a little one," Bennett said. "In a way it is 'stolen valor' because I can't prove it. It's my fault."



Jacob R. Cruze leaves Family Court in Las Vegas after a Jan. 23 child support hearing. Photo by [Jeff Scheid](#).

He said he never did anything to merit such a high valor award.

Bennett, 62, who was an electronics technician and an administrative officer stationed in Atsugi, Japan, said he received a Navy Cross in



Legion of Valor member and Navy Cross recipient Steve Lowery holds a copy of the book "Stolen Valor" on Feb. 28 in Las Vegas.

Photo by [Craig L. Moran](#).

the mail from the Department of Defense in 1972. A member of an aircraft reconnaissance squadron, he said he was wounded during a rocket and mortar attack in Da Nang, Vietnam, in February 1968 and in a crash landing there in June 1967.

"I don't claim to be a hero," he said, noting that he regretted displaying valor medals that he can't document. "I feel very, very bad about it."

A few hours after he spoke to the Review-Journal, he resigned as Nevada Department commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart at the request of the organization's national officials.

Reading a statement, Ray Funderburk, the organization's national public relations director said, "Based upon our research, we have learned that Paul Bennett, the commander of our department in Nevada, has been wearing awards he did not earn."

Funderburk went on to say, "We have not been able to ascertain even if he had a Purple Heart. He was an administrative officer and could have made out his own awards. We find it difficult to see an administrative man in the Navy to have so many awards."

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Over the years, questions have surfaced about the Vietnam War combat claims of another high-visibility veteran, Ed Gobel. He is the director of Lowden Veterans Center and Museum and a past Republican candidate for Assembly District 1.

Members of the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 17 in the past have asked Gobel about his two Bronze Star medals but he has declined to show documents to back up his claim.

Gobel has repeatedly refused to sign a Privacy Act release for the Review-Journal to obtain copies of his discharge papers that list his awards.

Attempts to reach Gobel for comment were unsuccessful.

Among the phonies posted on the POW Network's Web site is Ronald Patrick Murphy, who appeared at a 1992 campaign stop for then-Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Claiming to be an ex-POW who was held captive for 27 days in 1972, Murphy, then a Nevadan, drew a teary reaction from Clinton when he gave him his Vietnam service medal during what appeared to be a staged encounter, according to Review-Journal news accounts at the time.

"He hugged me and it was like being hugged by a linebacker," Murphy told the newspaper in a December 1992 interview. "I told him, 'I would much rather have your name on the presidential ballot

than the Vietnam wall."

Murphy's veterans disability compensation also was increased after the Clinton visit.

But when "Stolen Valor" was published about six years later, Murphy was exposed as never being a former prisoner of war, wounded in combat or involved in Army intelligence as he had claimed. Instead, during his two tours in Vietnam he was a data processing repairman, according to the book, which cites records obtained from the National Personnel Records Center from a Freedom of Information Act request by ABC News.

Murphy died in 2003. Reached this month at her home in Elk Grove, Calif., his widow, Diep Murphy, said he was "stressed out" over the ordeal of being called a phony. She said what her husband did in the Army was secret and he wasn't trying to deceive the Veterans Administration.

Much more recently, on Aug. 18, police arrested Mark Mayo, a downtown Las Vegas man known as "Sergeant Major," who sported an Army uniform with ribbons for a Purple Heart medal, a Silver Star medal and a rare one given to paratroopers with 75 jumps under their belts.

Las Vegas police determined that Mayo, a prison escapee from 1987 who had been convicted of kidnapping and robbery, had served only briefly in the military but never earned any medals. He had donned the Army uniform to change his identity.

From changing identity to impersonating decorated military personnel for prestige and romance, such phonies will stop at nothing to fool the public.

Early last year, a man claiming to be a Special Forces soldier in transit at McCarran International Airport called the Review-Journal requesting help in getting back a laptop computer that he said had been stolen while he waited for a plane. The computer, he said, contained secret military information and he was in desperate need to replace it.

No help was offered, but a couple months later the Review-Journal was directed to a Web site that contained a profile of the same man, Phil Haberman, a self-described injured soldier who had served in Iraq.

When asked about his Special Forces career in a June 21 telephone conversation, Haberman, a former National Guard soldier who had hop-scotched from units in Nevada, California, Utah and North Carolina, declined to elaborate on his military career.

In a voice mail left later that evening, Haberman said, "Something's not sitting too well with me. ... I would appreciate it if you just leave everything be and not contact anybody in the military about me. ... Again, do not contact anybody in my group and don't track down my former command sergeant major. If it is about the computer or if you have anything you need to speak to me about, you can go through my attorney."

Military records show Haberman was allowed to join the Nevada

National Guard even though he had received an other-than-honorable discharge from the Marine Corps.

The Dallas Observer reported last year that Haberman sported a Purple Heart "Combat Wounded" ribbon on the bumper of his car. Haberman went to high school near Dallas, according to the newspaper.

Court papers filed with Family Court in Las Vegas, where his marriage with Kristen Rhoad was annulled, show that Haberman sought a Purple Heart medal. But a Freedom of Information Act request she filed seeking documentation was returned with a message from an Army captain, stating, "Mr. Haberman was not awarded the Purple Heart."

The same captain told Rhoad in another e-mail that Haberman was discharged from the Army on Oct. 26 with an other-than-honorable status.

"Your husband was discharged from the Army yesterday, as well as from the North Carolina National Guard. ... His time in the Army is over. Perhaps he'll try the Air Force next."

Haberman last week could not provide a copy of his discharge papers or his military record to the Review-Journal.

Then there's Andrew J. Yurcho, a former Army specialist who once lived in Las Vegas and Reno and claims to have been a two-star, Army major general. Yurcho came to light following a December article published in DefenseWatch magazine.

A resume for Yurcho from an Army Ranger association in Columbus, Ga., that was published in December by the magazine contains a lengthy list of accomplishments by the "retired major general." He is said to have received the Distinguished Service Cross for actions in the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam. Then a captain, he went on to command Ranger battalions, the 75th Ranger Regiment and as recently as 2003 was offered command of the 82nd Airborne Division, the resume states.

It says he practiced law in Reno and is a "registered lobbyist in the Nevada Legislature 1993 until present."

DefenseWatch, states that records obtained from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, "show that a soldier with the same name and identifying information was a SP4 (specialist fourth class) in the Signal Corps from 1960 to 1962 with no other service noted."

Yurcho also is not listed as a registered lobbyist in Nevada, based on a records search last month.

Yurcho, believed to be living in Southern California, could not be reached for comment.

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Ask Clifton Bryant what makes stolen valor types tick and his short answer is, "We all tend to embellish a little bit."

A Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University military

sociologist professor and specialist in deviant behavior, Bryant said, "I don't think the idea of taking on a military officer identity with high-ranking medals is unique from any form of impersonating."

Paraphrasing 19th-century philosopher Henry David Thoreau, Bryant put it this way: "Every day most men lead lives of quiet desperation. There are some people who try to compensate for the desperation with impersonation."

These impersonators, he said, range from the mentally disturbed to the amusement-fantasy types, to re-enactors to con men to those who do it for identity enhancement, personal gain or romantic conquest.

For Elvis Presley's manager "Colonel" Tom Parker, the title "gave him some elevated status," he said.

"Other people go on cruises and pretend to be a Texas oilman. ... This guy (Cruze) had a more flagrant exercise in impersonation."

Cruze's role as an impersonator wasn't temporary but became part of his life for at least the past four years.

"If you impersonate somebody and it works, why give it up?" Bryant said.

A rule to remember, he said, is "Cocktail talk is cheap. Believe nothing you see and little you hear."

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Cruze was tagged in September by a Las Vegas police detective for an FBI task force. Not only did he illegally possess Purple Heart license plates reserved for wounded Nevada combat veterans, he was driving on a suspended license and had vehicle registration violations.

Earlier that year, Cruze was putting on a Class A Army green colonel's uniform and speaking to fifth-graders gathered for a career day event at Eisenberg Elementary School. A source familiar with his career day presentation said he gave the students a "drill sergeant" routine and later remarked that he hoped he hadn't been too hard on the students.

On March 1 of this year, Cruze faced the three traffic citations totaling \$1,620, but Justice of the Peace Pro Tem Nathaniel Reed, after negotiations via fax with Cruze's lawyer, reduced the fines collectively to \$399 and gave him until May 4 to pay them.

The procedure was standard given the caseload, Reed explained. "I did 75,000 adjudications last year for traffic citations."

Anton, who complained about Cruze, was disappointed, not just because of the fine reductions, but more so because the Nevada U.S. attorney's office did not charge Cruze under federal law for impersonating an Army officer and illegally displaying medals of valor.

Even after paying his reduced fine, Cruze played in a tennis tournament in Las Vegas on March 18, entering himself as "Colonel Jacob Cruze."

"It's an insult to those of us who are military for the U.S. attorney not to charge and prosecute this individual," Anton said. "That's an insult to us. It's not just for me, it's for all those who have served in all wars, all kinds of service and served honorably.

"We've had men and women die earning these awards and we need to leave a better legacy ... than to let these things go unpunished. If there are laws on the books, then they need to be applied across the board, not selectively."

Stolen valor cases are being pursued in the Western District of Pennsylvania. There, the U.S. attorney charged Albert T. McKelvey, 69, with a violation of U.S. Code Title 18, Section 702, impersonating a military officer by wearing a Marine colonel's uniform. McKelvey, a retired Marine Corps lance corporal pleaded guilty Jan. 24 for posing as a colonel for a Memorial Day speech. He faces up to six months in prison and a \$5,000 fine when he is sentenced April 28 for the misdemeanor violation. He also could receive probation.

Another Pittsburgh-area man, John A. Eastman, was similarly charged with impersonating a Marine Corps officer for wearing the rank of major, without authority, on Nov. 4, 2004. His case is pending trial.

Special Agent Cottone said another man caught impersonating a Marine lieutenant colonel in New Jersey soon will be charged. "He was photographed and everything," Cottone said.

For five months after a Las Vegas police detective cited Cruze for the traffic violations, the U.S. attorney in Las Vegas would neither confirm nor deny for the Review-Journal that he had been investigated.

Finally, in a pair of e-mails this month responding to a Review-Journal query, Nevada U.S. Attorney Daniel Bogden confirmed that his criminal chief reviewed the Cruze matter and determined it was appropriately handled by Las Vegas police "who cited Cruze for unlawfully using specialized veteran vehicle license plates and confiscated all improper medals, uniforms and indicia."

The next day, on March 10, Bogden wrote: "Considering our limited resources and manning we did not feel that additional misdemeanor charges ... were necessary since the matter had already been addressed by local authorities."

Anton said he believes the lack of action is "hypocritical," given that in 2002 Bogden's office successfully charged and prosecuted felon Michael Lugiari for carrying a badge and impersonating an officer of the U.S. Marshal's Service who had claimed to be a former Army Special Forces soldier.

"I'm sure they would indict and prosecute someone impersonating an FBI agent," Anton said Jan. 20 in an interview at his North Las Vegas home. "We understand that they are busy. But we also understand that it is honor that's being trampled on and besmirched. We take exception to this."

Three days later, on Jan. 23, Cruze walked away from Family Court in Las Vegas with a blank stare on his clean-shaven face and his left hand clutching a brown folder. He had just failed to persuade the hearing officer to reduce his child support obligation, which had once

totaled \$34,417, according to a Dec. 16, 2004, letter from the Nevada Department of Wildlife that rejected his fishing guide's license.

After the hearing, as he walked along Pecos Road, Cruze refused to answer questions about his purported military career, the discrepancy in his birth date -- listed as April 6, 1956, on his Oregon birth certificate but April 6, 1952, on Nevada court records and his fishing licenses -- and his real name, which is Richard Reginald Cruze Jr., or his self-proclaimed title as "Jacob R. Cruze MD" on a 2003 bank account.

Cottone acknowledges that authorities cannot investigate and prosecute every stolen valor case based on the thousands of military impersonators and fraudulent medal holders in the nation. Nevertheless, he said, the enforcement ratio is very low.

"In the last five years, maybe 15 cases have been charged," he said.

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Marine Pfc. Robert H. Jenkins Jr. "gallantly gave his life for his country," according to the citation for the Medal of Honor that was presented to his family in Interlachen, Fla.

The award, the highest the nation offers, resulted from his actions on March 5, 1969, at Fire Support Base Argonne in Vietnam, where he was a member of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion.

"Suddenly the Marines were assaulted by a North Vietnamese Army platoon employing mortars, automatic weapons and hand grenades," the citation states. "Reacting instantly, Pfc. Jenkins and another Marine quickly moved into a two-man fighting emplacement, and as they boldly delivered accurate machine gun fire against the enemy, a North Vietnamese soldier threw a hand grenade into the friendly emplacement. Fully realizing the inevitable results of his actions, Pfc. Jenkins quickly seized his comrade, and pushing the man to the ground, he leaped on top of the Marine to shield him from the explosion. ... His courage, inspiring valor and selfless devotion to duty saved a fellow Marine."

Steve Lowery, of Las Vegas, will never forget that day.

A Navy Cross recipient for actions on that same hill, he is one of seven still living out of the 12-man reconnaissance team that was sent to occupy the fire base.

"On every 5th of March we trade telephone calls," Lowery, a 1964 Rancho High School graduate, said in an interview last month.

"The person whose life was saved by Robert Jenkins -- Fred Ostrom of Rochester, N.Y. -- sends a small jigger of whiskey and a cigar to each of the survivors. So wherever we are, we can sit back, light up a cigar, have a little swig. ... I'm virtually a nondrinker. I've always been a nonsmoker. But on that day I sit down and sip that bottle and light up that cigar and I sit out on the porch by myself and think about things."

Lowery is a local representative and member of the nationwide Legion of Valor, a congressionally chartered organization for recipients of the Navy Cross, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Air Force Cross and the Medal of Honor.

Lowery knows that real war heroes are humble people by nature. That there are so many poseurs, wannabees and con men who wrongfully and illegally wear those medals and uniforms is shameful, he said.

The experience that merits a valor award, he said, "is sobering and because of that we'd like to keep the integrity of it intact."

The citation for his Navy Cross begins, "For extraordinary heroism while serving as a patrol leader with Company C. ... Corporal Lowery was seriously wounded in both legs by the intense enemy fire. Steadfastly remaining in his hazardous position, he boldly delivered accurate return fire and hurled grenades at the advancing enemy ... killing several of the enemy and causing the others to retreat."

Lowery said he, too, is disappointed that prosecuting stolen valor types has not been a priority in Nevada, where a growing number of veterans reside.

"You don't need to prosecute every one of these cases," said Lowery, 59. But in his view, many impersonators will be dissuaded if a few are prosecuted.

"We won't have that problem," he said. "We can nip this thing in the bud and we can cut it down from a level that it might otherwise achieve if they simply learn that the authorities in the government have decided it's worth their time to uphold the standards that people have risked their lives for."

Lowery and Anton hope that legislation in Congress will beef up the penalties of stolen valor violations, therefore giving U.S. attorneys more of an incentive to crack down on violations of the U.S. Code.

Vietnam veteran Doug Sterner, a military awards historian from Pueblo, Colo., has been working with Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., and Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., to pass a bill, the Stolen Valor Act, that would increase penalties for people who fraudulently claim to have the Purple Heart and valor medals including the Silver Star.

The bill would make it a felony to do so, carrying up to a \$100,000 fine and a year in prison.

"We do want to put some teeth in this so if they use medals in order to give a false impression that it's something they've earned, then it would be a violation," Sterner said last week. "This is a nationwide problem of epidemic proportions."

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