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PROSECUTING FRAUD CASES: Military impostors targeted

State equivalent of Stolen Valor Act proposed

By KEITH ROGERS

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL



Bill Anton
Seeks state stolen valor law

The Nevada Veterans Services Commission wants a state stolen valor law to crack down on military impostors.

On Wednesday, the commission asked its staff to craft legislation that empowers law enforcement to arrest and prosecute those who violate the federal Stolen Valor Act of 2005.

If approved Nevada would join the states with laws to prosecute cases not taken up by federal authorities. Connecticut, Illinois, Missouri, California and Kentucky have approved stolen valor measures, and Tennessee and Georgia are considering a similar law.



Jacob Cruze
Cited for traffic violations

The Nevada measure would be aimed at protecting the integrity of the state's 339,000 veterans who served the country honorably, said retired Army Maj. Gen. Scott Smith, a commission member who invited fellow soldier and veterans advocate Bill Anton of North Las Vegas to make a presentation about stolen valor legislation.

"I believe everybody who has served his or her country has a vested interest in honesty and integrity whether you were a cook, a driver, a logistician, an infantryman or a cannon cocker," Smith said Thursday. "What you did was in service to our country, and anybody who misrepresents themselves takes a little bit of honor away from our country."



David M. Perelman
Faces August trial

The commission, chaired by Assemblywoman Kathy McClain, D-Las Vegas, voted unanimously in favor of the recommendation in the absence of members Sean Fellows, Bill Baumann and state Sen. Terry Care, D-Las Vegas.

Anton, who was inducted into the Army Ranger Hall of Fame last year, said the FBI has time to work on only the most egregious military fraud cases because agents have been consumed investigating terrorism cases since the

Sept. 11, 2001, terrorism attacks.

"The problem is fast reaching epidemic proportions," Anton said. "The impostors ... put their tales of heroism to a wide variety of uses. For some it is a matter of bolstering sagging ego. For others it is a means of gaining respect among their peers. Some invent tales of bravery in seeking public office.

"Others claim military honors to acquire employment, and still others tell stories of hardship and sacrifice on the battlefield while seeking personal or financial gain," he said. "Among their victims

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are banks, charities, businesses, veterans' organizations and wealthy, lonely women. At one time or another, each has fallen prey to the military con man."

Anton's plea came as the U.S. Attorney's office is two months away from prosecuting its first case in Nevada under the federal Stolen Valor Act of 2005.

Air Force veteran David M. Perelman, a former Department of Veterans Affairs employee, is accused of unauthorized wearing of a military medal, the Purple Heart, and stealing about \$180,000 in monthly disability benefits from the VA. His trial is scheduled for Aug. 30 in U.S. District Court in Las Vegas. The felony theft charge for stealing VA benefits carries up to 10 years in prison and a conviction on the misdemeanor of "unauthorized wearing of a military medal" could carry a fine and an additional year in prison.

Perelman, 57, of Las Vegas is accused of wearing a Purple Heart in 2008 during a national convention of recipients of the medal. He was the Nevada commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart that year and had worked as a clerk at a local VA office. He claimed he was wounded in combat in Vietnam when in fact he was wounded by a self-inflicted gunshot in 1991, an indictment says.

Perelman also once claimed to have earned a Medal of Honor, the highest U.S. military valor award, and distributed a phony citation that was the subject of a 1997 federal court case in California. The case was dismissed because prosecutors waited too long to bring him to trial.

In 2006, Anton alerted the FBI to a military impostor, Jacob Cruze, who claimed to be a retired Army colonel and managed to obtain special Purple Heart license plates illegally. The FBI took no immediate action against Cruze, but a Las Vegas police detective for an FBI task force confiscated the Purple Heart tags. Instead of facing stolen valor charges, Cruze was cited for three traffic violations that carried combined fines of \$1,620. A justice of the peace reduced the fines collectively to \$399.

If Nevada would have had its own stolen valor law at the time, Anton said, prosecution for the more serious violations for impersonating a military officer and illegally wearing valor medals "absolutely wouldn't have fallen through the cracks."

"The federal law is being selective enforced, and we want the veterans who are quite incensed over the magnitude of stole valor to have state and local law enforcement officers apprehend and prosecute these impostors," Anton said.

Contact reporter Keith Rogers at krogers@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0308.

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