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Prosecutors: Faked military records cost VA, tarnished medals

By GENE JOHNSON
AP LEGAL AFFAIRS WRITER

SEATTLE -- Eight people who faked their military service in conflicts dating to World War II have been charged in the Northwest this year, and another four cases are under investigation, federal officials said Friday.

The fraudulent claims not only dishonored those who actually served, but also cost the Veterans Administration and other agencies more than \$1.4 million in benefits, said Doug Carver, with the VA's Office of the Inspector General. There are dozens more cases pending across the country, he said.

"The 'phony war hero' phenomenon ... tarnishes the service of thousands of veterans who have served honorably," Carver said. "It strangles VA resources from providing critical care and benefits from deserving veterans."

Carver spoke at a news conference at U.S. District Court following the sentencing of Jesse Macbeth, a 23-year-old Tacoma resident who tried to position himself as a leader of the antiwar movement by claiming to have participated in war crimes in Iraq. In reality, Macbeth, who also sought medical benefits for post-traumatic stress disorder, was kicked out of the Army after six weeks at Fort Benning, Ga., in 2003 because of his "entry level performance and conduct."

Macbeth, who pleaded guilty, collected more than \$10,000 in benefits to which he was not entitled, and his claims of war crimes were quickly disseminated on the Internet. U.S. District Judge Robert Lasnik sentenced him to five months in prison, followed by three months in a halfway house. At his sentencing Macbeth apologized for defaming veterans, while Lasnik noted that "too many people with a political agenda grabbed Mr. Macbeth's story and ran with it, according to a news release from the U.S. Attorney's office.

Acting U.S. Attorney Jeff Sullivan said he served in Vietnam, and that his father, a B-24 pilot, was shot down and killed while bombing a Hanoi cement plant a week before Sullivan was born in 1943. He said he took the cases of these "phonies, liars and thieves" personally, and added that he hoped publicity about the cases would discourage others from doing it.

Besides Macbeth, the cases include:

-Reggie Buddle, 60, of Puyallup, who was sentenced to 500 hours of community service in July for posing as a decorated Marine Corps Chaplain and presiding over weddings, funerals and baptisms.

-Larry Lewis Porter, 52, of Seattle, who was sentenced to 37 months in April for mail fraud in connection with a scheme to fraudulently obtain \$134,000 in disability benefits. He pretended to have PTSD after serving in the Navy.

-Roy J. Scott, 71, of Port Angeles, pleaded guilty Aug. 31 to using a forged military discharge form to obtain \$22,000 in benefits, as well as unlawful wearing of military medals. He claimed to have been wounded in combat in Korea and to have won several medals, including the Purple Heart. He never served in Korea and was court-martialed out of the Marines.

-Merrick K. Hersey, 64, of Vancouver, was indicted Aug. 1 on charges of using a forged discharge certificate to apply for benefits for post-traumatic stress disorder. A fugitive, Hersey claimed to have

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won a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts in Vietnam.

-Michael D. Heit, 58, of Harrington, pleaded guilty Thursday in U.S. District Court in Spokane to using a forged discharge certificate and falsely claiming military medals in posing as a Vietnam vet.

-Elvin J. Swisher, 70, of Idaho, has been charged with taking \$95,000 in unearned benefits and falsely posing as a veteran of the Korean War.

-Carlos Riosvalle, 83, of Portland, Ore., was sentenced in Multnomah County in April for multiple counts of theft by deception. He collected nearly \$23,000 in benefits after claiming to have been shot down during World War II; in fact, he never served.

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