Military Imposters: What Drives Them and How They Damage Us All

The better part of valor is discretion.
Henry IV, Part 1 by William Shakespeare[1]

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This is the second part of an exploration of the phenomenon of stolen valor, where individuals claim military exploits or acts of heroism that are either fabricated or exaggerated, and/or awards and medals they did not earn.[2] In June, I focused on the unsettling story of Sarah Cavanaugh, a young US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) social worker who posed as a decorated, heroic, and seriously wounded Marine veteran for years. Cavanaugh's manipulative masquerade allowed her to receive coveted spots in veteran recovery programs, thousands of dollars in fraudulent donations, the leadership of a local Veterans of Foreign Wars post, and eventually a federal conviction and prison sentence.[3] The first column focused on the legal history of stolen valor; this editorial analyzes the clinical import and ethical impact of the behavior of military imposters. Military imposters are the culprits who steal valor.

It would be easy and perhaps reassuring to assume that stolen valor has emerged as another deplorable example of a national culture in which the betrayal of trust in human beings and loss of faith in institutions and aspirations has reached a nadir. Ironically, stolen valor is inextricably linked to the founding of the United States. When General George Washington inaugurated the American military tradition of awarding decorations to honor the bravery and sacrifices of the patriot Army, he anticipated military imposters. He tried to deter stolen valor through the threat of chastisement: "Should any who are not entitled to these honors have the insolence to assume the badges of them, they shall be severely punished," Washington warned.[4]

It is plausible to think such despicable conduct occurs only as the ugly side of the beauty of our unparalleled national freedom, but this is a mistake. Cases of stolen valor have been reported in many countries around the world, with some of the most infamous found in the United Kingdom.[5]

While many brazen military imposters like Cavanaugh never serve, there is a small subset who honorably wore a uniform yet embellish their service record with secret missions and meritorious gallantry that purportedly earned them high rank and even higher awards. A most puzzling and disturbing example of this group is an allegation that surfaced when celebrated Navy SEAL Chris Kyle declared in *American Sniper* that he had won 3 additional combat awards for combat valor in addition to the Silver Star and 3 Bronze Stars actually listed in his service record.[6]

The fact that for centuries stolen valor has plagued multiple nations suggests, at least to this psychiatrically trained mind, that something deeper and darker in human nature than profit alone drives military imposters. Philosopher Verna Gehring has distilled these less tangible motivations into the concept of *virtue imposters*. According to Gehring, military phonies are a notorious exemplar: "The military phony adopts a past not her own, acts of courage she did not perform—she *impersonates* the heroic character and virtues she does not possess."[7] There could be no more apposite depiction of Cavanaugh, other military imposters, or a legion of other offenders of honor.[8]

As with Cavanaugh, financial gain is a by-product of the machinations of military imposters and is usually secondary to the pursuit of nonmaterial rewards such as power, influence, admiration, emulation, empathy, and charity. Gehring contends, and I agree, that virtue imposters are more pernicious and culpable than the plethora of more prosaic scammers and swindlers who use deceit primarily as a means of economic exploitation: "The virtue impostor by contrast plays on people's better natures—their generosity, humility, and their need for heroes."[7]

Military imposters cause real and lasting harm. Every veteran who exaggerates claims or scams the VA unjustly steals human and monetary resources from other deserving veterans whose integrity would not permit them to break the rules.[9] Yet, even more harmful is the potential damage to therapeutic relationships: federal practitioners may become skeptical of a veteran's history even when there is little to no grounds for suspicion. Veterans, in turn, may experience a breach of trust and betrayal not only from health care professionals and VA leaders but from their brothers and sisters in arms. On an ever-wider scale, every military impostor who is exposed may diminish the respect and honor all veterans have earned.

It is clear, then, why a small group of former service members has adopted the cause of uncovering military imposters and adroitly using the media to identify signs of stolen valor.[10] Yet deception mars even these mostly well-intentioned campaigns, as some more zealous stolen valor hunters may make allegations that turn out to be false.[11] Nevertheless, 500 years ago and in a very different context Shakespeare was, right on the mark: the better part of valor is discretion in describing one's achievements, in relying on the veracity of our veteran's narratives, and when there are sound reasons to do so verifying the truth of what our patients, friends, and even family tell us about their time in the military.[1]

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