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SOF

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Vol. 23 No. 11



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Mark H. Milstein

I have as many reasons to be modest as anybody (ask any of my old SEAL buddies), and one of them is a fellow Texan named B.G. "Jug" Burkett. Let me explain what I mean.

SOF readers might recall two articles I wrote about guys who falsely claimed to be SEALs (November '94 and July '95). Frankly, I got a lot of satisfaction exposing those low-living, sewer-crawling vermin, and I dealt with fewer than a dozen! Imagine how I felt when I ran across a guy who has made book on more than 1,000 frauds: It was humbling, to say the least.

That's right — Jug Burkett has proved that more than 1,000 men who claimed to be Vietnam heroes were phonies. Either they were never in Vietnam, they didn't do what they claimed to do, they didn't receive the awards they bragged about, or, *all of the above*. He did it the hard way, one at a time, through the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

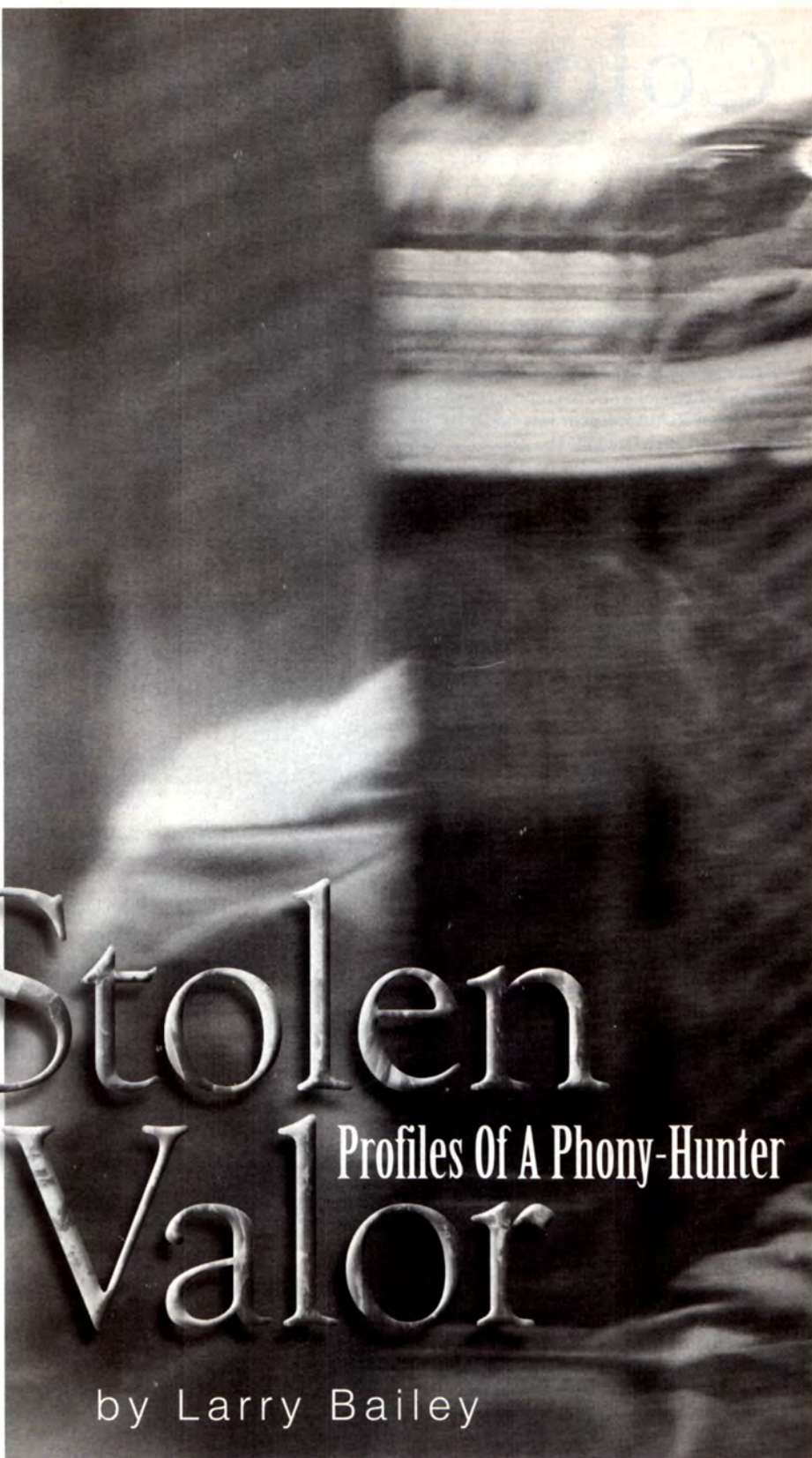
But I got ahead of myself. Let's start from the beginning, when Burkett first "got inspired" to set the record straight about who and what Vietnam veterans really are. The setting was the Texas State Fair grounds in Dallas; the occasion was a news conference called by Burkett (who was the fund-raising co-chair) to publicize the first phase of the Texas Vietnam Veterans Memorial. When media representatives tried to interview the pony-tailed, scraggly bearded, camouflage-fatigue-wearing members of a late-arriving group of "Vietnam Vets" rather than his decently dressed delegation, Burkett decided that enough was enough.

Burkett had long been frustrated about the negative stereotype of the Vietnam veteran. He was particularly upset over the fact that he, a junior officer who did his time in "The Nam," received a couple of awards, and came home to resume his life, was viewed as an unusual example of that species, while the "guys in fatigues" were deemed typical vets of that unhappy conflict. After the fairgrounds incident, however, his frustration metamorphosed into what has become a consuming mission to confirm long-held suspicions that boys in "the camouflage crowd" weren't what they claimed to be.

Toy Soldiers

Turned out he was right. Time after time this iconoclastic bloodhound has tracked down, exposed, and, in many cases, humiliated members of "the crowd." Take his first case, for example, which involved one Jesse Duckworth, who, claiming to be a much-decorated (aren't they all?) Special Forces soldier, frequently showed up at Burkett's fundraising functions dressed in jungle fatigues, reeking of alcohol, and loudly relating his Vietnam experiences. He made himself a prime target by continually referring to Burkett and his friends as "the suits."

Duckworth, by the way, was the



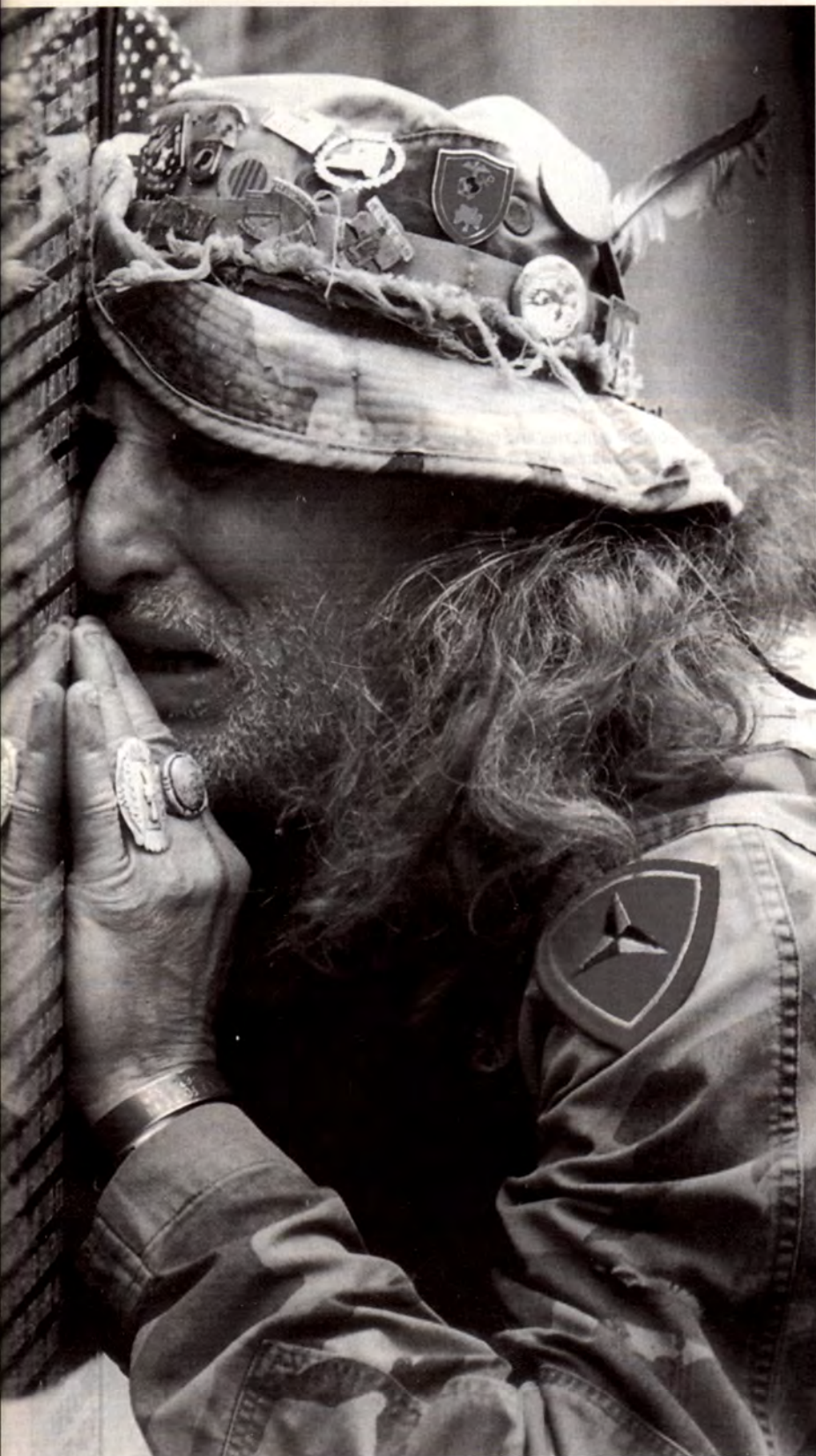
Stolen Valor

Profiles Of A Phony-Hunter

by Larry Bailey

"Vietnam vet" who, in a famous UPI photograph, was captured saluting a pair of combat boots in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in 1987. The photo was printed in hundreds of newspapers across the country, and no correction was ever made, as far as Burkett was able to find. A similar story involves the cover picture of a fatigue-clad, medal-wearing

"Vietnam vet" at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington; Burkett found out who the guy was, dug up his record, and proved him to be a total fraud. The editor of the magazine (*The New American*) not only refused to issue a retraction but became openly hostile toward Burkett for ferreting out the truth. And *The New American* purports to be a patriotic magazine!



AP/Wide World

Identifying himself as a Marine veteran who fought in Vietnam, Roni DeJoseph, of Brooklyn, NY, weeps at The Vietnam Wall Experience, a traveling replica of The Wall, following the 1996 Memorial Day Parade in New York. Researcher Burkett could find no evidence DeJoseph served in Vietnam — or in any branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. Hundreds of papers nationally ran this photo of DeJoseph “paying honor to a fallen friend.”

soon became a crusade to confirm Burkett's belief that the Vietnam vet was as normal as the guy next door. Conversely, he set out to demonstrate that the bandana-wearing brag-garts of “the camouflage crowd” were not representative of the young men who served honorably and well in Vietnam. One of my favorite Burkett exposés involves someone near and dear to my own heart — a phony SEAL. About five years ago, I read an interview with two VN vets, one Special Forces and one SEAL, who, showing remarkable ingenuity and dedication, conceived of, financed, constructed, and furnished the Vietnam War museum in San Antonio, Texas. Something about their interview made me wonder at the time if they were legitimate, but I let the matter drop. Not so Bulldog Burkett!

In due course, my favorite sleuth discovered that the erstwhile SEAL had been a Coast Guardsman and that the Green Beret was too young to have served in Vietnam when he claimed. The sad part about this story is that those two gents accomplished a laudable goal; they just weren't satisfied to be credited merely with their truly noteworthy achievement. (The last I heard, their museum was doing nicely, thank you.)

Nut Cases And The Gullible Media

Another favorite Burkett case was that involving a *CBS Special Report* that featured, among others, a Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) victim identified only as “Steve.” Claiming to be a former SEAL, Steve related his role as a teen-aged “Phoenix” assassin. With too many murders and atrocities weighing on his conscience, a drug-and-alcohol-addicted Steve was, according to him (and naively accepted by Dan Rather), sent home in a straitjacket.

When I saw the program, I calculated Steve's claim to have been a 17-year-old assassin and figured he would have had to start SEAL training when he was 14 or 15 years old. Then there were other problems: One of them was that there were never any SEALs assigned to the Phoenix program. Another was his claim to have spent two years “behind enemy lines” plying his trade. That expression is always the trademark of a phony or an ignoramus, because, in Vietnam, one was either (take your pick) (1) always or (2) never “behind enemy lines,” such was the nature of that war.

Always a couple of steps (or miles) ahead of my own research, Burkett quickly learned Steve's full name — Steven Ernest Southards — and that he was never a SEAL. Although he had been in Vietnam, it was as

Now back to our story. Suspicious from the first, Burkett, whose day job is that of financial adviser, decided to find out just who Brother Duckworth really was. An inquiry to the National Personnel Records Center soon confirmed Burkett's suspicions. It turned out that this stinking, swaggering, green-beret-flaunting, Purple Heart-wearing war hero had never set foot in Vietnam, hav-

ing spent most of his military duty in Germany, where he was less than a model soldier. When Burkett revealed his real history to the Dallas media (which included his having been discharged as a private due to repeated periods of being AWOL), Big Jesse promptly dropped from sight.

What started as a one-off mission to expose a particularly objectionable phony



(left) Sometimes combat fantasies and fallacies have consequences outside the American Legion bar: here, Congressman James Walsh (R-NY) pins some of the nation's highest decorations for valor on a phony Vietnam veteran, Dave Goff. After Burkett exposed Goff's deception in *Reader's Digest*, he was convicted in federal court. (above) Fraud for Fun and Felonies: Executive Director of a Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) center in Dallas, John Woods, supposedly underwent surgery to remove Agent Orange-caused tumors, and had testified before congress about various Vietnam-related matters. In reality, Woods was never near Vietnam, was booted from the Coast Guard, subsequently convicted in Texas of firearms and drugs transgressions, and did time.

a fireman apprentice in support bases. According to Burkett, Southards also spent time in the Philippines, where, like Jesse Duckworth, he spent an inordinate amount of time in the brig for having indulged in too much time off without permission, commonly known as AWOL.

Similarly, four of the remaining five veterans allegedly traumatized by their Vietnam experiences were shown to have misrepresented their sojourn in that unhappy country. One, who claimed to have skinned alive (in an hour, no less!) some 50 Vietnamese civilians, has been diagnosed as a paranoid-schizophrenic by the Army and draws almost \$2,000 per month in disability payments. (I wonder how many other phonies concoct Vietnam PTSD and other stories to justify their claims to taxpayer dollars.)

This case is still not closed, as CBS (pre-

dictably) "stands by its story." Despite Burkett's having furnished documentation of Southards' actual history and of the false claims of at least four others, Rather and the CBS crowd refuse to acknowledge their error. Dandy Dan may yet get his comeuppance, however, since a producer at a rival network knows the true story and is laboring to bring it to the viewing public's attention. (I can't help but fantasize, by the way, about someone exposing those frauds who claim to be responsible TV journalists; anybody come to mind?)

The Trouble With Troubled Vets

One of Burkett's earlier cases occurred in 1988, when a homeless vagrant shot and killed a policeman in Dallas. *The Dallas Times Herald* reported that the killer was a



One Jack Maslin of Delaware displays medals awarded for his Vietnam service, including the DSC: He was actually a clerk who was awarded no valorous decorations. (inset) Several years later, as a member of the Delaware Air National Guard, he still wears bogus medals ... and is considered one of the most decorated veterans on the Delaware Guard.

Just recently, I encountered a doozy of a character at a local fast-food emporium. While waiting to order, I overheard a long-haired character telling a uniformed soldier from Ft. Belvoir, Va., that he had served three tours in Vietnam and that he was in Delta Force and that he was a personal friend of Colonel Charlie Beckman [sic]. Preening my suspicions, I collected my supper and sat down at a table near the guy. Being as casual as possible, I asked him politely when he was in Delta. When he answered "1972," I knew I had another fraud on my hands.

Fast-Food Phony

I asked him how he could have been in Delta in 1972 when it wasn't formed up until the late 1970s; then he started to insinuate to his buddy that I was illegitimate.

It was at this juncture that I asked him why he was claiming to be something he clearly wasn't. He hemmed and hawed and evaded and naturally never owned up to being an impostor, but he did sputter when I informed him that the first commander of First Special Forces Operating Detachment — Delta was Colonel Charlie Beckwith, not Beckman! Of course, he informed me that "everybody" who knew Charlie called him Beckman. I could see that there was no purpose to be served by continuing to press him, so I simply remarked that if he bought *SOF* in three or four months he would see himself in print!

And this final rejoinder is for him: Buddy, if you have problems with who you are or what you are, then be sure that you aren't making false claims to someone who knows better. If you persist in claiming to be a Vietnam hero or a Delta operator or a deep sea diver or an American Gladiator, you just might run into a "real guy" who might not be as pacifistic as I was in dealing with the situation! Or, even worse, you just might be talking to Jug Burkett!

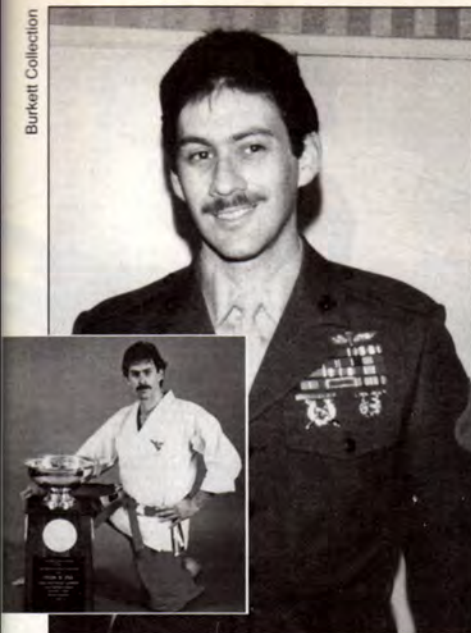
—L.B.

deeply troubled Vietnam veteran. Upon checking the man's service record, however, Burkett learned that he had never served in Vietnam at all. Despite writing several letters to the paper, Burkett was never able to obtain a correction from the *Times Herald*.

The cross-town *Dallas Morning News*, on the other hand, was quick to print a correction on its front page when Burkett uncovered the truth about one John Woods, who was executive director of a Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) center in Dallas.

The *News*, in a flattering story, reported that he had undergone surgery to remove Agent Orange-caused tumors and had testified before congress about various Vietnam-related matters.

Burkett's investigations showed that Woods' military career consisted of a year in the Coast Guard, with Honolulu, Hawaii, being the closest he ever got to Vietnam. Having established a consistent history of drug abuse as a Coast



A perennial on the fraud circuit, Frank Dux (immortalized in Jean-Claude Van Damme's movie *Bloodsport*, and in *SOF's* "Full Mental Jacket" review of Dux's spurious autobiography *The Secret Man* in August 1996) is shown here in Marine uniform with a PX-salad of bogus medals, and (inset) with a martial arts trophy allegedly won in a "world championship" but which was made near Dux's home, in North Hollywood.

Guardsman, Woods was declared unsuitable for military service and discharged. Upon his return to Texas, he was convicted of firearms and drugs transgressions and spent time in prison. When Burkett showed Woods' service record to a *News* reporter, the paper was quick to acknowledge its error, unlike most media organizations.

I asked Burkett which of his exposés gives him the most satisfaction. He hesitated, then related the tale of one David Goff, the former president of a VVA chapter in Morrisville, NY. In a ceremony at nearby Syracuse in 1989, Representative James

Walsh (R-NY) belatedly pinned nine Vietnam-related medals on Goff, including the nation's number-two award, the Distinguished Service Cross. In its coverage of the ceremony, the *Syracuse Herald American* dubbed Goff a "hero."

Burkett became suspicious of Goff when the latter claimed to have been a CIA assassin and to be suffering from the usual illnesses that seem to be part of the phony-vet syndrome (PTSD, depression, alcoholism, etc.). When Burkett obtained military records indicating that Goff had never been to Vietnam at all, he made them available to the *Herald American*.

Not surprisingly, the paper "stands by its story," despite the fact that Goff confessed, was convicted in federal court, and was meted a \$2,000 fine and sentenced to probation and community service. The Army, not surprisingly, has repossessed all the medals Rep. Walsh pinned on him. (To his credit, the congressman was instrumental in charges being brought against Goff.)

The Real Vietnam Vet Stands Up

What has been the greatest disappoint-



Stephen T. Banko III, of Buffalo, NY, displays his Vietnam decorations — including the Distinguished Service Cross he was not awarded. Many claim Banko is the most decorated veteran of New York state. Oh, well ...

ment in Burkett's campaign to bring out the truth about Vietnam veterans? He avers it to be the general unwillingness of the media to correct the record when they make mistakes. It would appear that the more outlandish the story told by these phony vets, and the more definitive the proof of their lies, the less inclined are the media to correct their stories.

The Dallas Morning News, according to Burkett, was unique in its prompt repudiation of the Woods story. The attitudes of CBS, the *Syracuse Herald American*, and the *Dallas Times Herald* are more typical, unhappily for those of us who long to see objective treatment of the Vietnam veteran.

What, indeed, is the typical Vietnam vet? It appears certain from data Burkett has accumulated that the vet is different from the average American, albeit not in the manner that the media would lead us to expect. Among other things, statistical analyses in Burkett's possession demonstrate that Vietnam veterans:

- have a lower unemployment rate than the national average;

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The grander the fraud, the better its reception. Bogus Medal-of-Honor recipient, David Wilk, addresses an audience at the Dallas VA hospital, where he was honored as the keynote speaker.

Partners In Slime?

Not content with simply exposing phony heroes, Jug Burkett has taken on another mission — exposing fraud within the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital system! This crusade got started when, in the course of his seminal research on wannabes, Burkett came into contact with a number of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) victims. So, he did what Burkett does best — checked 'em out. Turns out that, according to him, up to three-quarters (that's 75%) of all PTSD sufferers were never in combat at all! He relates story after story of migrant "Vietnam veterans" who travel from one VA hospital to another until they persuade some weenie of a staff psychologist to diagnose them as suffering from PTSD, which all too often results in these phonies obtaining 100% disability payments.

What makes that situation even worse is the fact that these parasites obtain access to VA hospitals without having even a rudimentary records check done to prove eligibility for VA benefits. A phony DD-214 seems to work all too well, and the VA system itself contributes to the ease with which the system is accessed and the

extent to which it is abused. Burkett maintains that the VA aids and abets this fraud in order to create and keep jobs — he also maintains that congress is also accountable in that it enacts legislation (often if not always sponsored by Vietnam Veterans of America — successors to Vietnam Veterans against the War) that broadens the charter of VA hospitals not only to accept more psychiatric patients, but to actually search them out! Believe it or not, PTSD diagnoses are now being made for wives and children of Vietnam vets (or whatever)!

Burkett cites case after case of blatant abuse of the system by both ineligible patients and medical staff, with some professionals actually creating "legends" for putative PTSD patients. It is his view that the entire VA system, from top to bottom, is corrupt and needs a drastic overhaul. He is so upset about the abuses that, when I speak with him, he spends more time on that subject than on phony heroes. In my judgment, it is dead-certain that his next book will be an exposé of how non-combatant (and in many cases non-veteran) patients can obtain treatment at the expense of the average American.

For my part, I'd sell my stock in the VA hospital system once Jug Burkett gets up a head of steam!

— L.B.

Stolen Valor

Continued from page 61

- received dishonorable discharges less frequently than non-Vietnam vets;
- left military service at higher ranks than their peers;
- have no higher rates of divorce, suicide, alcoholism, and drug addiction than the general population;
- and have been more successful than their peers who did not go to Vietnam.

So, what does this all say about the long-haired, smelly, self-congratulatory individuals who create the impression that they are the true human heritage of the Vietnam War? What it says to Burkett is that they are one screwed-up bunch of people, people that "... would have been screwed up if they had worked for the Cincinnati Transit System."

What it also says to him is that this abominable stereotype of the Vietnam vet is largely a concoction of the media. They, not content with having played such a decisive role in our defeat in Vietnam, justify that role by presenting "the crowd," with its hangups and neuroses, as evidence of their omniscience about the evil nature of the conflict. They cannot bear to consider that the average Vietnam veteran is what Burkett says he is — the guy around the corner with

a job, a wife and kids, and a mortgage.

Setting The Record Straight

Jug Burkett is truly a man with a mission, if not an obsession. His concern with debunking what he refers to as "The Myth of the Vietnam Vet," given today's public perceptions, is surely a tall order, but one he continues to try to fill. As he says about his task, "If not me, who? If not now, when?" I asked him how he planned to continue to draw attention to those parasites who survive on the blood shed by their betters.

First, he told me of his increasing exposure in the media. His first important national exposure was in Malcolm McConnell's article, "True Face of the Vietnam Vet" in the May 1994 issue of *Reader's Digest*. Then, on ABC TV's 20-20 news magazine show in October of the same year, he was featured as the pre-eminent authority on the phenomenon of the

To order *Stolen Valor* by B. G. "Jug" Burkett (700 pages, 16 pages of photos), dial toll-free 1-800-8253-6789. To order by mail send your name and address with payment or credit card information to: Verity Press, P.O. Box 50366, Dallas, TX 75250. The book costs \$31.95, plus \$4.95 postage and handling (Texas residents add 8.25% sales tax). For an autographed copy, please add \$3. Further information is available at the web-site: www.stolenvalor.com.

phony Vietnam vet. Burkett then told me a sad story about another segment of the media — the publishing world. Having been so successful in uncovering such a large number of phonies, he was certain that he would have no trouble at all in obtaining a contract with a major publishing house for a book relating his experiences and discoveries. In his mind, such a book would go a long way toward sensitizing Americans to the problem of Vietnam-era impostors.

It was not to be, however; not a single publishing house was willing to commission Burkett's proposed work. Burkett couldn't believe that the American reading public would not be interested in reading about one of the major scandals of our time, so, as he's become used to doing, he decided to publish his own book. And that's "where he is" now — having hired a first-rate writer to collaborate with him in writing a book to be issued by his own newly created publishing house. I'll guarantee you that one of the first copies will be bought by your friendly correspondent!

As a man who did what his conscience compelled him to do once he realized the extent of the problem, Jug Burkett deserves the respect and gratitude of all those Americans who reported when called and fought when directed; he certainly has mine.

Former SEAL Larry Bailey is a frequent contributor to SOF. ✕

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