

# No Medal without the Mettle

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Last week, the movie 'Act of Valor' opened up to smashing box office success. The film stars real Navy SEALs reenacting their dangerous special operations. After the SEALs' well-publicized raid last year that killed Osama bin Laden, the Navy's special missions force is the subject of American adulation. Disney even tried to trademark the name 'Seal Team Six.'

Our servicemen and women and their families sacrifice so much to preserve our freedoms. They are true heroes and it's only fitting that they be portrayed that way in movies like 'Act of Valor.' However, because members of our military deserve that kind of praise and admiration, it's not surprising that some people try to get in on the action.

That's why in 2006 Congress passed the Stolen Valor Act, which makes it illegal to make false claims about military accomplishments. The law was passed to prevent people from demeaning the system of military honors that was established by Gen. George Washington in 1782.

The law reminds me of another movie, 'Trading Places.' This comedy stars Eddie Murphy as Billy Ray Valentine, a career criminal and con artist. The film opens up with Murphy pretending to be a blind, legless veteran who is panhandling in the streets of Chicago.

When confronted by the police, Murphy claims he served in Vietnam. Not believing him, the two police officers, who actually did serve in Vietnam, pressed Murphy about his service. Murphy replied he was with the Green Beret special unit battalion and his name was Agent Orange. Upset because Murphy is playing on the sympathy for vets even though he isn't one, the police promptly arrest him.

The same ire resulted when in 2007 Xavier Alvarez told an audience that he was a Medal of Honor recipient, when, in fact, he was not. Alvarez was promptly charged with and convicted of lying about military honors under the Stolen Valor Act.

After the trial, however, Alvarez appealed his conviction. The case is currently in front of the United States Supreme Court, who last month debated over the constitutionality of the Stolen Valor Act. Apparently, the Justices are divided about the validity of the law.

Some of the Justices support the position of many veterans. They feel that our military awards are the highest honors that can be bestowed upon an American. When people did not receive these honors but claimed they have, it tarnishes the integrity of the award system and diminishes the honors' value.

Other Justices, however, seem to agree with Alvarez, who bases his appeal on the premise that the Act infringes on his right to free speech. During their debate, some of the Justices claimed that upholding the Act could lead to future laws that might make it illegal to tell other lies, such as fibs about an extramarital affair or a college degree.

If the Court does decide that the Stolen Valor Act is unconstitutional and is thrown out, Congress is reportedly working on alternate legislation to make it a crime to lie about a military award for profit.

Because of the Stolen Valor Act, from now on when I tell people that I went to the Military Academy at West Point, I'm going to add that it was just for a field trip.