

Did a chaplain's fake Purple Heart erase good deeds?

National Guard Capt. Kurt Bishop was a respected chaplain. But store-bought military decorations—including a Purple Heart—ruined his career. Do they erase his good deeds in an Afghanistan combat hospital?

By Lee Lawrence, / Correspondent | APRIL 3, 2011

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As he turned in his discharge papers in 1991 after four years in the Army's 82nd Airborne, 22-year-old Specialist Kurt Bishop decided he was going to change his life. Growing up, he had always hovered at the periphery of groups – not quite an outcast, but never at the center. His father was a retired fighter pilot; his brother flew helicopters for the National Guard, and though they never showed him anything but love, he was well aware that even during his nine-month deployment during Desert Storm, he had worked at a desk, not in a cockpit. He was the guy infantry soldiers teasingly call a POG – Position Other than Grunt.

So on that afternoon in 1991, he walked into a uniform store and bought four ribbons – color-coded insignia that signify military honors and medals. Mr. Bishop knew that a chestful of decorations made people go, "Wow!"



Correspondent Lee Lawrence spent three months in Afghanistan and Iraq with US military chaplains for a 2007 Monitor series. This is an update on National Guard Chaplain Kurt Bishop (center, in a combat hospital in Afghanistan). Information about Lawrence's full-length documentary film on chaplains is available at: www.chaplainsunderfire.com (Courtesy of 'Chaplains Under Fire')



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The ones he bought included a Purple Heart, awarded to those wounded or killed serving the country, and a Bronze Star with a 'V' that recognizes heroism in combat. Nobody asked any questions – the sale and purchase of decorations is not illegal or monitored. He also bought seven badges that denoted advanced military training – including a Rangers patch, which marks the wearer as one of the Army's elite.

Had the former tennis jock just stashed the medals away as a sort of talisman, nobody would have gotten hurt. But, in 1996, Bishop chose to make a career in the Arizona National Guard, using them to bolster his application for officer status. Having literally heard a calling, he became a military chaplain, serving in Afghanistan where he took on extra duties at a field hospital and built a reputation for relieving tension with humor and personal accessibility.

Bishop's is a morality tale of the destructive power of lies – they have killed his career and wiped out his family's financial security. Casting a pall over 20 years of service to his country, the lies have even thrown into question the good he did as a chaplain: If the man counseling troubled troops was living a lie, does this negate the comfort and aid he offered?

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It was in the tense moments after a rocket attack that the Monitor first met Bishop in April 2007 at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Salerno in southeastern Afghanistan. The first lieutenant appeared, round-faced and smiling, at the mouth of a bunker full of soldiers and contractors. He was stopping in on his way to the hospital, where he went after every attack in case there were casualties.

Bishop did his job as a chaplain "better than most," hospital commander Lt. Col. Richard Phillips said at the time. "He's part of the team," meaning Bishop was right there in the fray – handing nurses bandages, gathering bloodied swabs, counseling a frazzled tech – not sitting in his office waiting for people to come to him.

"It's hard for Christians sometimes not to judge other people and not to think 'you're too profane, too unrepentant, too unsaved for me to reach out,'" Phillips said. "With Bishop, it's like 'I'm here, I am who I am, I'm not going to pretend to be something different and I'm not going to expect you to be something different.' "

But Bishop was not living up to that bargain.

Asked what he'd done during his active tour of duty, he told the Monitor he was a combat engineer, "doing all those crazy things – blowing things up." And when another soldier made a big deal about Bishop's Ranger status, the chaplain played the part: "I was joking with my battalion executive officer," he said, "and we were laughing at changes since we had gone through [Ranger school]. We all came to the conclusion that if this were something you had to requalify for every year, there would be a 99 percent failure rate."

US Army Chaplain Scott Kennaugh, who overlapped with Bishop in Salerno for about a year, remembers hearing a lot about Ranger School. In a recent conversation from his current deployment in Germany, Kennaugh recalled his concerns about Bishop's immaturity: "People give us a certain amount of respect and credibility right off the bat just because we're chaplains. Some chaplains come in and feel like they have to prove themselves beyond that to the combat arms guys, whether it's through prior service or education. I guess that's what kind of came across to me with Kurt – that he was not content or not comfortable with the credibility he should have had just as the chaplain."

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"They always want to be more than they are," says Mary Schantag, one of a handful of watchdogs devoted to unmasking the thousands of people falsely claiming military service or decorations.

Among the most galling is the falsification of a Purple Heart. "When you join the military," explains B.G. Burkett, author of "Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History," "you effectively turn your life over to America; you have begun the trip into the Valley of Death."

Medals have special currency in the military, explains Mr. Burkett: "They don't give you stock options or million-dollar bonuses. You get minimal pay, and the only true accolades you get are campaign medals; or if you did something mildly heroic, you get a Bronze Star."

In the civilian world, too, military honors carry weight. As Burkett says, "The second you say you're a highly decorated veteran, they don't just think you're brave. You're trustworthy, you're patriotic, you're loyal, you're reliable...."

To stanch such lies, the Stolen Valor Act (SVA), enacted in 2006, broadened the existing law criminalizing the wearing of unearned decorations to apply also to people falsely claiming honors "verbally or in writing." SVA proponents say such claims are often the tip of the iceberg – uncover them and you discover fraud. SVA critics, however, complain that the law now curtails constitutionally protected free speech, making prosecutors leery of invoking it.

All agree, though, that fakers often conform to patterns. Burkett, who has investigated some 3,000 suspected fakes over the past 25 years, says that, like addicts seeking a new high, most keep adding awards and distinctions. Here Bishop fits the mold. But when it comes to a pattern Ms. Schantag has detected, Bishop is an outlier. Many use the lie to defraud the Veterans Administration or pick up women, and "most, when confronted," Schantag says, "continue to lie. Typically they move to another community and start again."

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"I need to tell you something – you're not going to like it," Bishop told his wife the evening of Nov. 30, 2009. He had been back from Afghanistan almost two years, living in Phoenix and working for the Arizona National Guard.

That afternoon, the Judge Advocate General had called Bishop to his office. The unit's new commanding officer, he told the chaplain, had reviewed his bio and suspected Bishop of having lied repeatedly.

"I said, 'Yes, I did these things,' " Bishop recalls confessing, and the National Guard confirms that Bishop from the start collaborated with the investigation. "I felt relief, followed by shame and sheer terror. How am I going to tell my wife?"

After putting their son to bed, Bishop came clean. He told her he had been wearing unauthorized decorations and lying about military training. He told her he had doctored his records to cover his tracks. He told her he had subsequently claimed even more honors and training on official forms, which he then signed, perjuring himself.

Joan Bishop recalls feeling the world cave in. That night she kept shaking him awake: Had he really been in Desert Storm? What else wasn't true? A former nurse, she is down to earth and without artifice.

"I had been lied to," she says, and though she believed Kurt to be fundamentally good, "we had to rebuild that trust."

Over the coming days and weeks, Bishop confessed to his brother, his father, his sister and brother-in-law, some close friends, and some National Guard chaplains. The hardest was telling his 9-year-old son, he says: "There's no worse feeling in the world than seeing the hero you were to your child die – I could see the change in his eyes."

Dismissed from the National Guard with an "other than honorable" discharge in March 2010, Bishop then faced charges in a civilian court. The man who had shepherded troops when they failed drug tests and had helped hospital personnel digest the horrors of combat found himself last April standing at the edge of his own precipice. Indicted in federal court, he faced charges that could carry a punishment of up to 20 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines. The indictment charged that he had not only fraudulently claimed some 15 honors on federal forms and worn "dozens" of unearned decorations, but that he had used these to gain promotions and higher pay. Because Bishop's salary, processed by an Indiana-based Department of Defense payroll agency, crossed state lines to reach Bishop's bank in Arizona, the prosecution also charged him with wire fraud. The statute of limitations precluded any charges on doctoring his personnel file.

In August, Bishop pleaded guilty to one felony and one misdemeanor, and the prosecution dropped the wire fraud charges and all charges connected to the SVA. In November, Bishop was sentenced to five years probation, 120 hours of community service, and restitution of \$29,608 calculated on the increased compensation that he earned over time after being promoted. (Bishop, say those familiar with military procedures, would not have needed the honors he falsely claimed in order to rise to the rank of captain, but they probably cast him in an especially favorable light.)

Having reviewed Bishop's finances, the court waived the fine.

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A couple of months before sentencing, in a living room stripped of photographs showing Bishop in uniform, the couple sat together on the couch for a Monitor interview. He realized, he said, that he had not been a good steward of what God had given him and that, having resisted divine urging over the years, God was telling him, "You weren't getting things straightened out, so now this needs to happen to get it fixed."

As the Bishops spoke about the emotional and financial stress the process entailed, there was a revealing moment when the camera came out. Bishop instinctively reached up to remove his glasses. When his wife asked him why, he looked like an overeager kid and said something about glasses creating a reflection. Mrs. Bishop gave him a "knock it off; be yourself" look. His expression sobered. The glasses stayed in place.

Months later, Bishop admits that he has to remind himself every day that there will be "situations where I could easily embellish or give myself more credit" and "just like others when they're fighting their battles, [I have] to say 'No, I'm not going to do that.'" He has a written reminder in his wallet and stuck on his computer: "Consciously decide to live the way God wants me to live."

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In their straitened circumstances, and handicapped by his felony record, Bishop looks for professional job openings while paying the bills with a patchwork of part-time jobs: teaching tennis, cleaning offices at night, doing Costco road shows. Joan, whose nursing license has expired, assists the librarian in a nearby public school.

Bishop is also in counseling with a therapist and with his pastor, and as of last month has begun paying restitution, \$250 at a time.

In every conversation, Bishop brings up the chaplaincy – are there now commanders, he worries, who mistrust chaplains, "who say, 'Is he like that guy in Arizona?' Have I compromised a chaplain's ministry in a combat zone?"

"That tears me up," he adds, just as when two chaplains said they could not separate Bishop's deception from their evaluation of him as a chaplain. "If that's what they use to measure my effectiveness," he says, "then I wasn't a very good chaplain."

Yet in the hospital of FOB Salerno, it was clear that a good chaplain was precisely what Bishop strove to be. No sooner would the camp's loudspeaker announce incoming patients than Bishop would hurry to the field hospital.

On an April afternoon in 2007, medics were rushing in Afghan soldiers hit by an IED – but for one, it was too late. Bishop helped the hospital team wrap the corpse according to Muslim custom, then read a Muslim rite over the body.

Later, he admitted that he wasn't sure his religious endorser, the Evangelical Church Alliance, which had the power to yank military chaplain credentials, would approve of his saying a non-Christian prayer – but he felt it was the right thing to do.

Significantly, Bishop did not lie about his ministerial and chaplain credentials. He did not even try to embellish them. Asked in 2007 whether he had clinical pastoral training, he said no, though "it would help in some regards." And the master's degree he said he earned from Luther Rice Seminary in Atlanta, in 2006, checks out.

Still, this was not enough to insulate his chaplaincy work from the lies about his service. Phillips today feels "violated."

"After I earned my Purple Heart," Phillips says, "we had this heart-to-heart discussion about what it feels like and how it sets you apart – obviously everything [Bishop] was saying was a complete fabrication.... There's no apology that would be sufficient."

The chaplaincy itself has also been "bruised," says Jack Williamson, retired Air Force chaplain and executive director of the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces. Trust is central to the chaplain's job, and "most commanders that have problem chaplains get distrustful of chaplains in general," he says. "That's where the bruising and damage comes."

In the end, Bishop hurt that which he most valued – family, chaplaincy, military.

There is something tragic when a person's worst act is seen as his most defining one, especially if, as New York City psychotherapist Alan Bernstein speculates when presented with the facts of the case, Bishop perhaps strove to make real "his fiction of himself as a 'hero' by becoming a spiritual resource" for soldiers he admired.

And if that is the case, does the shadow side of a person prevent any light from shining through? For retired Sgt. 1st Class Kevin Cox the answer is clear. Though never a close friend, he worked as Bishop's chaplain assistant during their 22-month deployment in Afghanistan and knew him through the National Guard at home.

Mr. Cox is convinced Bishop reveled in the attention the rows of ribbons brought him: "On the other hand, there is no doubt that he had the heart to help soldiers. And you know what? I'll take a chaplain Bishop any day over a chaplain who won't leave his office."

For Phillips, the answer is murkier. Speaking from Afghanistan, where he is once again deployed, he reiterates: "[F]rom what I saw, everything Bishop did in the hospital, he did well. I can't say [his deception] undoes the good that he did, but it taints everything."