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PRECIOUS MEDALS

Vietnam veteran Joe Wilkins claims he was twice wounded in combat and earned the nation's third-highest decoration, a Silver Star. The military says otherwise.

BY DUSTY RHODES P11



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PHOTO BY NICK STEINKAMP

When Joe Wilkins posed for *Illinois Times* in August 2003, he wore a small, rectangular lapel pin, purple with a white stripe at each end, indicating he had received a Purple Heart medal for being wounded in combat. U.S. military archives have no record that Wilkins was ever awarded a Purple Heart.

Precious medals

Vietnam veteran Joe Wilkins claims he was twice wounded in combat and earned the nation's third-highest decoration, a Silver Star. The military says otherwise.

BY DUSTY RHODES

Joe Wilkins' record of military service should make any veteran proud. During his 1967 tour of duty in Southeast Asia, Wilkins served as an intelligence officer, collecting and evaluating counterinsurgency information, determining targets for the bomber pilots. In January and February 1967, Wilkins took flights on small planes to observe battlefield situations and help direct fighters toward important Viet Cong positions, "with complete disregard for his personal safety," according to government records.

For his work, the U.S. Air Force awarded Wilkins a half-dozen medals, including the Bronze Star for meritorious service. The South Vietnamese military awarded him a Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star.

Wilkins, now 62, also claims a pair of Purple Hearts for being wounded in combat and the Silver Star, this country's third highest award, just two notches below the Medal of Honor. He has frequently worn replicas of these medals on his lapels and boasted of his claims in newspaper articles. He has two sets of special license plates issued by the state of Illinois — one set displaying the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, indicating multiple medals, and another showing that he has the Silver Star.

Wilkins' storied military record laid the foundation for a

distinguished civilian career in which he achieved influential positions in academia, business, and politics [see "Friends in high places," p. 16]. At the local state university, Wilkins was granted full professorship and tenure, despite never having published in scholarly journals nor completed a doctoral degree. A resident of Pleasant Plains, Wilkins has been active in Springfield politics, playing a lead role in the recruitment and selection of Springfield's police, fire, and utility chiefs, and serving on several advisory committees. At the state level, he has won lucrative grants and contracts and holds a paid position on one state agency's employment board. The daily newspaper has lionized him.

The trust placed in Wilkins by local and state decision-makers doesn't surprise B.G. "Jug" Burkett, a recognized expert on military records.

"When you see somebody with a Silver Star, you automatically think he's brave, he's an American hero, he's ethical, he's trustworthy — a whole string of things," Burkett says.

Indeed, official military records confirm that Wilkins was a good and competent intelligence officer. The records do not, however, support his claim of two Purple Hearts and the Silver Star, three medals that are central to his reputation and persona. Historians, experts, and other Vietnam veterans who have examined Wilkins' military record and other documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act question Wilkins' claim to these heroic honors; several

say his assertions are fraudulent.

Through his lawyer, Wilkins declined to comment for this story.

Illinois Times first profiled Wilkins in August 2003, soon after he restructured Springfield city government at the request of newly elected Mayor Tim Davlin [see Rhodes, "Mystery man" at www.illinoistimes.com]. In the course of research for that profile, a routine check of Wilkins' military records sparked what became a yearlong investigation.

Records from the National Personnel Records Center (the official repository for personnel records for all military employees) in St. Louis show that Charles Joseph Wilkins was on active duty Sept. 3, 1965, through March 28, 1969, and that his service in Vietnam began Nov. 7, 1966. By Dec. 11, 1967, he was back in the United States, stationed at Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue, Neb.

When *Illinois Times* initially asked Wilkins to explain why the two Purple Hearts and Silver Star he claims don't appear on his official record, he produced several documents for viewing only, allowing a reporter to read the text into a tape recorder.

One of these documents was his DD Form 214, the form used by the Department of Defense to document a soldier's record upon transfer or discharge. The DD-214 contains a veteran's service record, including all awards and decorations. This document is the basis for everything from

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE WILKINS

Wilkins shakes hands with Vietnamese Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang after receiving a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry medal. This picture was taken Oct. 7, 1967, just four months after Wilkins purportedly sustained two wounds to his left arm requiring hospitalization in the Philippines.

Precious medals

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Veterans Affairs and Department of Labor benefits to fraternal-organization memberships to burial rights at military cemeteries. The service member's signature at the bottom confirms that the information on the form is accurate and complete.

Wilkins' DD-214 lists these medals: NDSM; VSMw/1 BSS; RVC M; SAEMR; RVN w/SvStar-7 AF, 67; BSM, SO G-1671, 7AF, 67. This string of abbreviations exactly matches the NPRC's list of Wilkins' decorations: the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal with one Bronze Service Star, the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal (issued to everyone who served in Vietnam for six months or longer), the Small Arms Expert Marksman Ribbon, the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star 7th Air Force 1967, and the Bronze Star Medal Special Order G-1671, 7th Air Force, 1967.

In a 2003 interview, Wilkins acknowledged that he had signed his DD-214 and that he had not filed the forms necessary to correct any mistakes discovered in the DD-214, despite the fact that this document reflects neither of the two Purple Hearts he says he received. He told *Illinois Times* that DD-214s are filled out by clerks who are neither extraordinarily smart nor diligent and that he didn't want to argue with these clerks about the inaccuracy — he just wanted "out."

As for the Silver Star, Wilkins pointed to the abbreviation "SvStar" and said, "There it is." But the only mention of a Silver Star on his DD-214 is in the abbreviation "RVN w/SvStar-7 AF, 67," which means "Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star, 7th Air Force 1967." The Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry — a medal issued by a foreign country — is not equivalent to a Silver Star issued by the United States.

But the DD-214 wasn't the only document Wilkins had to support his claim. He also presented four typed pages that appeared to be two sets of orders and transmittal letters awarding

him one Purple Heart and the Silver Star. According to the orders, dated July 12, 1967, he received both awards for an incident that occurred on June 8, 1967, in Tay Ninh Province, while he was assigned to U.S. Army Advisory Team 95. The Purple Heart order mentions that he sustained two wounds to his left arm severe enough for him to be sent to the Philippines to recover at the Clark Air Base hospital.

"When you see somebody with a Silver Star, you automatically think he's brave, he's an American hero, he's ethical, he's trustworthy."

— B.G. "Jug" Burkett

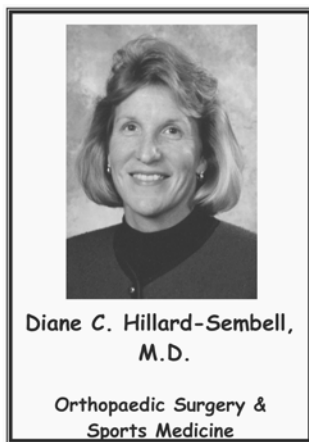
The documents do not specify what act of gallantry Wilkins performed; instead, they state: "The details of this engagement are classified Special Intelligence/Codeword and can be accessed through the appropriate office, this Headquarters."

Wilkins said this supersecret classification prevented him from allowing the documents to be photocopied by a reporter.

As for the second Purple Heart, Wilkins produced nothing to prove that claim, saying only that he could not find the documents.

In newspaper articles, on his résumé, and in University of Illinois at Springfield presentations, Wilkins has claimed that his service in Southeast Asia involved clandestine "special operations" missions. His official record shows that he was an intelligence officer and that, once he returned to the United States, he was assigned to the Special Projects Division at

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Wilkins displayed this photo in his office at University of Illinois at Springfield. He said this picture was taken in Long Tieng, Laos, in 1966. But until 1970, U.S. military in Laos were participating in a covert operation and dressed in civilian clothes, not military fatigues.



Offutt Air Force Base.

But experts and other Special Operations veterans who have reviewed Wilkins' records see no indication that he was given any "black ops" or special-operations assignments. Even if he had been assigned to secret missions, any medals he received would still appear on his official record.

Military decorations, especially those of the caliber of the Silver Star, typically come with at least three documents: a numbered order simply stating that the service member has been awarded the medal in question, a citation spelling out exactly what the service member did to earn the honor, and a certificate, often suitable for framing. If the service member has been transferred before receiving the award, it may be accompanied by a letter of transmittal, forwarding the documents and the medal to the service member.

The order may be so generic that a single page can be used to award two dozen service members the same type of medal. Each citation, on the other hand, is written specifically for the particular service member and consists of a detailed description of his or her heroic act. Experts say that such citations could possibly be classified but that, more often, the wording regarding the location of the incident is purposely kept vague.

For example, the citation accompanying a Silver Star awarded to a soldier whose heroic act was committed during secret operations (with troops in Laos, for example, when the United States was officially not present in Laos), might have been classified. More likely, the citation would simply read "Southeast Asia" instead of "Laos." But regardless of whether the citation was classified, the order would not be classified.

"Every order awarding a decoration is public. There are no secret orders," says James Howard, a veteran who works with historical military records. "There's a very good reason for not having classified orders. The order is the bona fide, and it has to be available to everyone, including yourself. The citation very easily could be classified, but if a person has a decoration, then he has to be able to produce an order of the award."

Tom Lee, a retired Air Force colonel who flew scores of missions as a targeteer in Laos during the "secret war," says that the decorations he and his fellow airmen received were not secret. Lee, who spent 26 years in the Air Force before taking a job with a Virginia-based defense contractor, maintains a database of fellow U.S. veterans who served in Laos, and says he doesn't know Wilkins.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE WILKINS

"My medals that came out of Laos in the classified period — and we were in black ops — they're on my record. They don't say where I was, but they do say what I was doing," Lee says. "So the probability is rather slim," he says, that Wilkins' medals were "secret."

Hal Fritz's decorations include the Silver Star, two Purple Hearts, and the highest award of all, the Medal of Honor. In May 1995, after 27 years with the U.S. Army, Fritz became deputy director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, a post he held through April 2003. He now works for the Illiana Healthcare System at the VA outpatient clinic in Peoria. Both of these jobs require him to read and interpret military personnel records, and he has learned to spot inconsistencies.

In 1994, Fritz conducted an investigation of Kane County Circuit Judge Michael O'Brien and ultimately forced the judge to resign from the bench, admitting that he was not the Medal of Honor recipient he claimed to be.

As for Wilkins, Fritz says he met the professor and specifically remembers attending a strategic-planning seminar at UIS during which Wilkins, a speaker, was introduced as a Vietnam veteran with a distinguished military career.

But when Fritz reviewed Wilkins' official service records and other documents obtained by *Illinois Times*, he became suspicious.

"I've seen enough records in the Department of Veterans Affairs and in the military that I recognize certain keys, like, 'Something is wrong with this picture.' And that's what happened when I went through [Wilkins'] records," Fritz says.

He wonders why Wilkins would claim five medals not supported by his DD-214 — the Silver Star, two Purple Hearts, the Air Medal, and the Air Force Commendation medal — yet never attempt to correct the document.

"If the person won the award and was actual-

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Precious medals

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ly awarded the medals late, then the individual can go back and request an official correction to be added to the discharge papers," Fritz says. "If the individual didn't do that, there's a reason, and one reason is that the medal never existed."

Military policies provide for orders and citations to be recorded in numerous official repositories in case the decorated soldier loses the documents or awards. But no record of Wilkins' highest medals could be found in any official archive.

Using the tape-recorded transcripts of the documents he provided, *Illinois Times* sent a FOIA request in the fall of 2003 to Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, headquarters of the Air Force Personnel Center, seeking confirmation of Special Orders S-869 and G-1049, the orders Wilkins had shown to prove his Silver Star and one Purple Heart.

In November 2003, Randolph's FOIA manager, Karen Murray, responded: "After a thorough review of Mr. Wilkins' official military personnel records, we were unable to verify the award of the Silver Star or Purple Heart. In addition, Mr. Wilkins' DD Form 214 (Armed Forces of the United States Report of Transfer or Discharge) does not reflect award of either the Silver Star or Purple Heart."

Murray forwarded the FOIA request to the headquarters of the Pacific Air Force, Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, "to ensure we have exhausted all possibilities of locating these records." On Nov. 17, 2003, Hickam sent this reply: "We have conducted searches for Special Orders S-869 and G-1049 which awarded 1LT Charles J. Wilkins the Silver Star and the Purple Heart in July 1967. Searches were conducted by the Osan AB FOIA Manager, the HQ PACAF FOIA Manager and the HQ USAF Records Manager; no records were located."

Another FOIA request, this one to Hickam's history section, produced a similar response: "Mr. Bill Harris, of HQ PACAF's History Office, conducted an extensive, page-by-page research through PACAF and 7th Air Force histories and archives. No special orders or letters awarding Lieutenant Wilkins the [Silver Star] medal was located."

Not only could these Air Force historians find no record of these medals, but they also pointed out problems with the documents Wilkins presented. Murray, the FOIA manager at Randolph, noted that Air Force regulations dictate that award orders bear numbers starting with the letter G, not the letter S, as Wilkins' Silver Star order does.

Murray wrote: "In researching the Special Order Numbers you provided we find that 'S' series orders are not prescribed in Air Force Instruction (AFI) 33-328, Administrative Orders; concluding Special Order S-869, 12 July 67, may not be a valid order number."

Researchers at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala., the history center of the U.S. Air Force, noted that the phraseology of the Silver Star order presented by Wilkins doesn't match the Air Force template. The official criterion for the Silver Star is "gallantry in action"; Wilkins' order reads "valor in action." Also,

Maxwell researchers said, if these documents were secret, the pages would have been stamped with proper indicators.

When a military service member is promoted, the event is documented with an official photograph of the service member wearing his or her uniform with all decorations arranged in a specific order — highest honor on the top inside position and any foreign medals on the lower outside position. This portrait goes into the soldier's personnel file.

"I've seen enough records . . . that I recognize certain keys, like, 'Something is wrong with this picture.'"

— Hal Fritz

Wilkins' last official promotional photo (see cover), taken upon his promotion to captain, Sept. 30, 1968 — more than a year after he received the Silver Star and Purple Heart, according to his own documents — reflects the same set of medals listed on his DD-214, the highest of which is the Bronze Star for meritorious service. Like other official documents, the photograph indicates that he has no Silver Star and no Purple Heart.

An earlier photo, taken Oct. 7, 1967, raises more questions. It shows Wilkins standing in line with at least two other airmen, shaking hands with Vietnamese Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang after receiving the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. Wilkins' sleeves are rolled up past his elbows, revealing arms that appear strong and healthy. Yet the photo was taken just four months after Wilkins sustained two wounds to his left arm that required his evacuation to the Philippines, according to the documents he showed *Illinois Times*.

This picture appeared in Wilkins' hometown newspaper, the *Anna Gazette-Democrat*, on Oct. 27, 1967, in the "Servicemen's News" section. And that was the only news about Joe Wilkins in the *Anna Gazette-Democrat* between the date he purportedly won the medals and the end of that year. There is no mention that a native son of Cobden — a tiny community just five miles north of Anna — received a Silver Star or Purple Heart.

Although Wilkins refused to allow a reporter to photocopy his "secret" medal orders, the secretary of state's office recently provided copies of the same documents in response to a FOIA request seeking proof of Wilkins' eligibility for special Purple Heart and Silver Star license plates.

The orders appear to have been signed by Air Force Capt. Donald L. McCabe. The transmittal letters appear to have been signed by Air Force Capt. Carl I. Walters. But when contacted to confirm their signatures, both Walters and McCabe said they did not sign the documents.

Walters, a former Air Force pilot who now works as an engineer at Hill Air Force Base in Utah, says that he never signed any document pertaining to a Silver Star — or any other decoration. As a forward air controller, he spent most of his time flying. His “extra duty” assignment as “awards-and-decorations officer,” handled in his spare time, was limited to creating the first drafts of citations for various awards. He forwarded these drafts to the office of the commander where, if approved, they would be typed up and signed by either the commander himself or, more likely, his administrative officer. Walters says he could not sign orders or even the transmittal letter forwarding an order to an airman in the hospital, as Wilkins’ documents suggest.

“The awards-and-decorations officer would never, ever send a transmittal letter to another organization saying, ‘Award something.’” Walters says. “It was not within my purview to sign that.”

When he examined a digital scan of Wilkins’ documents, he said the signatures definitely were not his but appeared to be someone else’s effort to match his handwriting.

McCabe, now a safety consultant, contacted at his home in North Carolina, says he did sign the Bronze Star order contained in Wilkins’ official file. “That’s a legitimate order. That’s my signature,” he says.

But after reviewing what was supposed to be his signature on the Silver Star and Purple Heart



PHOTO BY NICK STEINWAMP

Lance Charlson teaches close-quarters countermeasures (hand-to-hand combat) to a variety of military and law enforcement agencies on a contractual basis. After Wilkins visited Charlson’s class at the U.S. Army’s Night Stalkers regiment, the *State Journal-Register* published a feature story in which Wilkins claimed he had been teaching hand-to-hand combat to elite special operations soldiers for 30 years.

orders Wilkins’ provided, McCabe was shocked: “That’s so outrageous, that’s not even a good attempt. Good grief.”

McCabe spent his yearlong tour in Vietnam doing nothing but handling awards and decorations for Headquarters Seventh Air Force. McCabe doesn’t claim to have committed any heroic acts. “I was just an administrative officer,

signing on behalf of the commander,” he says. But he read enough nominations, citations, and orders to consider himself a good judge of real awards — and he says the four “secret” pages presented by Wilkins do not conform to the format of similar awards, even awards for special-operations officers.

The fact that medals Wilkins claims don’t

appear on his DD-214 further persuades McCabe that the medals don’t exist. He won’t even listen to a reporter repeat the explanation Wilkins gave in 2003, that the reason the medals were omitted is because clerks were careless.

“There’s no ‘it’s because,’” McCabe says. “It’s not on his 214. The reason it’s not is because it’s a fraud. The orders are fraudulent for both the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. I don’t have any question about that — none.”

The Wilkins orders that bear McCabe’s name are dated July 1967. McCabe was at Syracuse University at that time, finishing his last two courses for his MBA. He didn’t arrive in Vietnam until Sept. 20, 1967, two months later.

The medals are just part of Wilkins’ warrior persona. A pilot, scuba diver, and skydiver who keeps himself fit by running regularly, Wilkins exudes the self-disciplined, spit-and-polish image befitting a military hero.

When he was teaching at UIS, he used the classic bomber-pilot movie *Twelve O’Clock High* as a lesson in his business-management course. He addressed his fellow faculty members as “ma’am” and “sir” as though they were military officers, and offered to loan at least one professor a videotape about Vietnam, as a way to help his colleagues understand his mindset. And in his office he displayed an 8-by-10 photo of himself,

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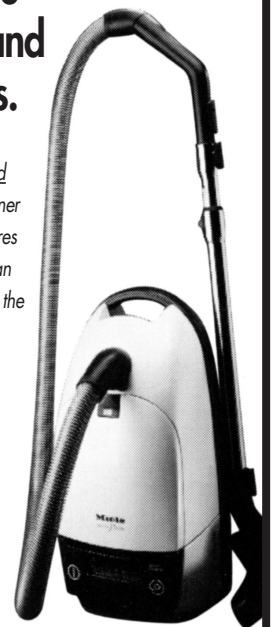
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BY DUSTY RHODES

For a farmer's son from the tiny southern Illinois town of Cobden, Charles Joseph Wilkins' success in academics, business, and politics is phenomenal. He has built a prestigious and lucrative career comprising all three fields.

At Sangamon State University, which became the University of Illinois at Springfield, Wilkins divided his time between teaching business-management courses and assisting the most powerful people at the university — first as faculty associate to the vice president for academic affairs and later as executive assistant to the school president, a post he held through 1988. University administrators waived the school's policy requiring a doctorate for tenure and full professorship, granting Wilkins both despite the fact that his highest degree was a master of government.

Outside the university, Wilkins has long been active in politics, albeit mostly behind the scenes. The grandest office he ever bid for was chairmanship of the Sangamon County Democratic Party, a race he lost narrowly in 1986. Instead, he helped run the campaigns of U.S. Sen. Alan Dixon; Illinois Attorney General Neil Hartigan; Fred Lebed, in his bid for state comptroller; and Jerry Cosentino, in his campaign for secretary of state.

At Springfield City Hall, mayors of both political parties have given Wilkins, who lives in Pleasant Plains, influential positions in their administrations. In 1982, under Republican Mayor Mike Houston, Wilkins served as comptroller. In 1987, under Democratic Mayor Ossie Langfelder, Wilkins helped shape Springfield's aldermanic form of government by training newly elected members. Both Republican Karen Hasara, elected mayor in 1995, and Democrat Tim Davlin, elected mayor in 2003, appointed Wilkins chairman of their transition committees. Both mayors also put Wilkins in charge of committees to select chiefs for the city's police, fire, and utilities departments.

Although Wilkins retired from his university post, he remains active in the community. In the past few months, Davlin has appointed Wilkins to a new seven-member Veterans Advisory Council and to the Economic Development Council.

Although most of his City Hall work had been unpaid, he seemed poised to take on a key post at City Hall — director of

hometown security — in 2003. The transition team he chaired created this directorship, and Wilkins drew up a résumé emphasizing his "extensive experience with Chemical, Biological and Nuclear weapons of mass destruction" and his "training and experience in demolition with C-4, Semtex and other specialized explosives." When asked whether he was applying for the position he had created, he responded, "Hey, if you want to try to get me a job, go ahead!" Wilkins was considered by City Hall insiders to be the frontrunner for this job, but the City Council, facing a severe budget crunch, failed to fund it last year. This year, though, the council voted to fund a homeland security director at a salary of \$80,600.

Wilkins' state connections have been more lucrative. For four years, 1999-2003, he had a \$40,000-per-year contract to



In 2003, Joe Wilkins (left) was chairman of Mayor Tim Davlin's transition committee. The mayor has appointed Wilkins to the Economic Development Council and the new Veterans Advisory Council.

advise the Secretary of State Police Department, in addition to \$35,621 from White's office in specific grants and contracts on which Wilkins served as project director. Since 1999, he has served as one of three paid members of the state comptroller's Merit Commission, a panel that decides employment issues for the agency's nonunion employees.

Fundraisers for the scholarship UIS established in Wilkins' name bring out representatives from all of his power bases. The booklet promoting the scholarship contains glowing letters from U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, former U.S. Sens. Gary Hart of Colorado and Alan Dixon, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, Senate President Emil Jones, Speaker of the House Michael Madigan, and Comptroller Dan Hynes.

In August, Davlin and former Springfield Mayors Hasara, Langfelder, and Houston, along with the mayors of Jerome, Southern View, Chatham, and Sherman, co-chaired a reception at Pasfield House to raise funds for the Wilkins scholarship. ■

Precious medals

continued from page 15

wearing fatigues and posing in front of an airplane. This photo, he told *Illinois Times* in 2003, was taken in Long Tieng, Laos, in 1966.

Lee, the targeteer who was stationed in Laos 1968-1969, says this picture doesn't look right, because Wilkins is wearing a U.S. uniform at a time when any U.S. presence in Laos was in clear violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords.

"During my time, we were known as the 'aloha shirt' crowd — all civilian clothes," he says. "Our cover was exceedingly thin. Our story was that we worked for USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development]. We tried to avoid telling any story, however."

This same photo accompanied a Jan. 17, 2002, feature story in the *State Journal-Register* that further enhanced Wilkins' reputation as a military leader. Not only did it mark the first publication of Wilkins' claim to a Silver Star and two Purple Hearts in a news story, it made the medals a mere footnote in a tale of larger heroism — that Wilkins had spent 30 years teaching combat and survival skills to special-forces soldiers.

Published on the eve of the release of the movie *Black Hawk Down*, which is based on the true story of a tragic 1993 special-forces mission in Mogadishu, Somalia, the article described how Wilkins had been a mentor to the hero of this movie, Chief Warrant Officer Mike Durant. Eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed, and Durant was held hostage for almost two weeks.

Wilkins told the *SJ-R* that he had taught hand-to-hand combat to Durant and other "elite special-operations troops" such as Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, Delta Force, and the 101st Airborne's Screamin' Eagles. "He periodically is summoned by military officials to various bases to teach combat survival courses to troops trying to refine their skills," according to the *SJ-R* story.

"The people with whom I work are already at the 'instructor' level of proficiency. I work with only the most elite of the special-operations troops," Wilkins is quoted as saying. "They bring youth and strength; I bring skill and experience."

He showed the reporter a copy of the book *Black Hawk Down*, autographed by Durant, and said that the helicopter pilot was just one of the many special-forces soldiers he had trained over the years.

But Durant, contacted by e-mail, told *Illinois Times* that he didn't know Joe Wilkins.

There's another explanation of how Wilkins obtained Durant's autograph and of how he came to claim that he teaches special operations forces.

Lance Charlson worked more than 25 years for the Illinois Secretary of State Police, rising to the rank of investigator and captain. He met Wilkins at this agency, and they became "friendly acquaintances," Charlson says.

Knowing Wilkins' interest in military operations, Charlson invited him to visit Fort Campbell, Ky., where, for the past decade, Charlson has worked on an as-needed contractual basis teaching "close-quarters countermea-

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SPECIAL ORDER
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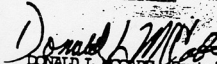
12 July 1967

By direction of the President, the following person is awarded the Silver Star for valor in action while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing armed force.

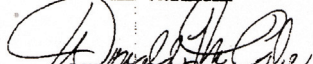
First Lieutenant Charles J. Wilkins, FV3158641 (Seventh Air Force Officer assigned to U.S. Army Advisory Team 55) on 8 June 1967 in Tay Ninh Province, Republic of Vietnam distinguished himself and the United States Air Force by heroism in combat against an overwhelming enemy force. The details of this engagement are classified Special Intelligence/Codeword and can be accessed through the appropriate office, this Headquarters.

This Headquarters requests the Commanding Officer of the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron, Bien Hoa Air Force Base, Republic of Vietnam forward this Special Order and the accompanying Award Elements to the Commanding Officer of Clark Air Force Base, Republic of the Philippines for presentation to Lieutenant Wilkins who is recovering from wounds in the USAF Hospital on Clark AFB.

FOR THE COMMANDER


DONALD L. MCCABE, Captain, USAF
Administrative Officer

FOR THE COMMANDER


DONALD L. MCCABE, Captain, USAF
Administrative Officer

When asked for proof of his Silver Star medal, Wilkins presented this document. Donald L. McCabe, whose name is on this document, says the signature is not his, but that his actual signature (inset) is shown on Wilkins' Bronze Star order.

tures" (hand-to-hand combat and personal firearms) to the U.S. Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

The 160th is better known as the Night Stalkers, and Durant — as well as five helicopter pilots killed in the Somalia tragedy — were members of this regiment. Charlson does not claim to have taught any of them. He works only with Night Stalkers' training group, or "green platoon," certifying instructors to teach close-quarters countermeasures to other soldiers.

The day Wilkins visited Fort Campbell, Durant was there, running the Black Hawk simulator. Charlson asked Wilkins whether he'd like to meet the *Black Hawk Down* hero, and says Wilkins eagerly agreed.

"They were meeting each other for the first time," Charlson says. He saw Durant give Wilkins the same souvenirs he gave many people: an autographed book and a business card.

Wilkins sat in on Charlson's class and made a brief speech when Charlson introduced him to the soldiers. When Wilkins joined them on the pistol range and in their combat exercises, Charlson says Wilkins demonstrated no skill in either area.

Jeff Hahn, a helicopter pilot who was then the executive officer of the green platoon, was on hand that day and remembers overhearing Wilkins regaling the young soldiers with Vietnam War stories. One tale involved Wilkins retrieving sensitive material from a downed plane in Cambodia, and Hahn — who served seven years on a Green Beret Alpha team — says the story didn't sound right.

"In my heart, when I heard him talking, I had doubts. There was something about Joe's story when he told it that did not sit well with me," Hahn says. "What didn't jibe with me was, the Air Force didn't have guys during Vietnam doing that as their mission . . . Normally they would send in a Green Beret or SEAL team. Cambodia was known to have a lot of special forces operating over the border, so normally a special-forces team would do a cross-border-type operation."

Hahn didn't mention these doubts because he had complete faith in Charlson, he says,

and Charlson had introduced Wilkins as a special-operations veteran.

Weeks later, Charlson put Hahn in touch with Wilkins again. Hahn, in the midst of a difficult divorce and needing cash, had asked Charlson to help him find someone who might be interested in buying his prized collection of six artistic prints, created especially for members of the Special Operations Command, commemorating their missions. One was a limited-edition print given only to Delta Force personnel involved in Operation Just Cause, in which Gen. Manuel Noriega was snatched from Panama. Another depicted Mike Durant's Mogadishu crash site. And most were signed by Hahn's fellow soldiers.

Charlson contacted Wilkins, who immediately agreed to buy the art. Hahn says Wilkins paid him \$2,500 and promised to hang the prints in the military wing of a library.

When Charlson picked up his newspaper weeks later and found the feature claiming that Wilkins had trained Durant, he was stunned. "It floored me," Charlson says.

A mutual friend told Charlson that he had called the *SJ-R* at Wilkins' request, giving the paper a "tip" about Wilkins' purported *Black Hawk Down* connection. Charlson called the story's author, Matthew Dietrich, to complain. But Charlson says that Dietrich didn't seem to take his call seriously, and Charlson decided not to push it. "I didn't want it to become an issue the 160th had to deal with," he says.

Nevertheless, that experience changed his view of Wilkins. Had he known then what he knows now — that medals Wilkins claims are not supported by official documents — Charlson says that he never would have taken Wilkins to Fort Campbell.

"There wouldn't have been any association with him at all if I'd known that," Charlson says.

Anyone who served honorably in Vietnam, as Joe Wilkins certainly did, merits respect. Anyone who earned a Bronze Star, as Wilkins certainly did, deserves to be admired.

But Wilkins went to great lengths to convince

continued on page 18

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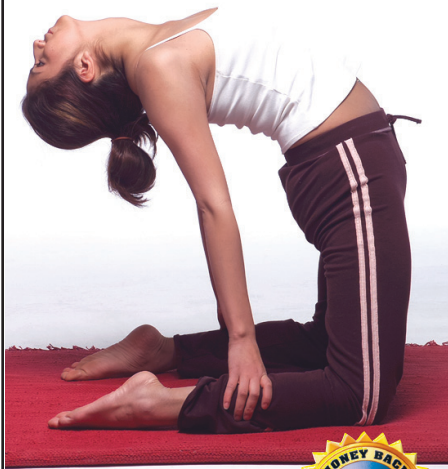
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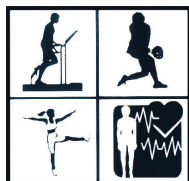
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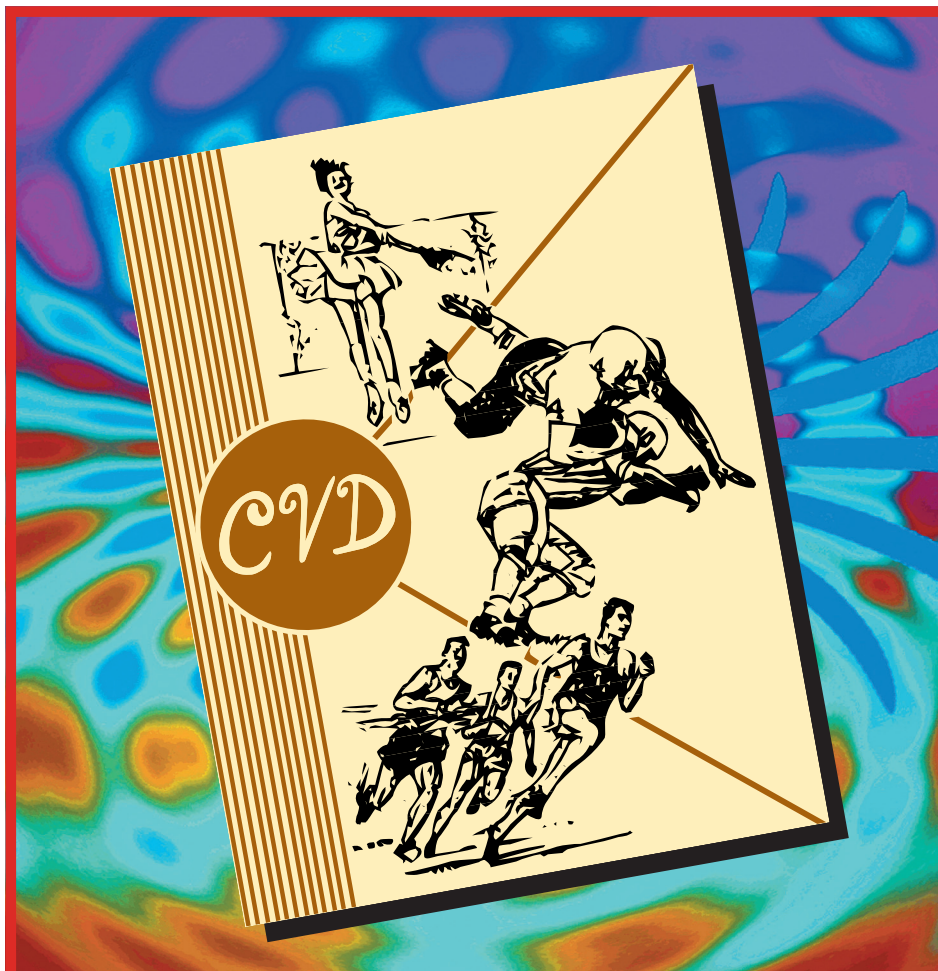


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Precious medals

continued from page 17

others that he had earned greater honors, including the Silver Star. He wore special lapel pins, applied for special license plates, and, once he obtained the plates, mounted them on the flashiest car in his personal fleet, a late-model Corvette convertible.

If he truly has all these medals — the two Purple Hearts, the Silver Star, and the others — he has not taken the necessary steps to have his official record corrected. If he truly doesn't have these medals, federal law says it is a misdemeanor for him to wear them, even the small lapel-pin versions.

Burkett, the military-records expert who has unmasked some 2,000 individuals making fraudulent claims about Vietnam War records, says that such perpetrators are seldom prosecuted, so long as they agree to stop making false claims. As the co-author, with Glenna Whitley, of *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*, Burkett received the Army's highest civilian honor, the Distinguished Civilian Service Award, in 2003 for his research. Acting as an unpaid consultant, Burkett advised every step of *Illinois Times*' investigation into Wilkins' record and reviewed all documents we obtained.

To Burkett — himself a Vietnam veteran with a handful of medals, the highest of which is a Bronze Star for meritorious service — the deceit of claiming unearned medals is less a crime than it is a blasphemy.

"We Americans have all these freedoms, and they weren't given to us by politicians," Burkett says. "They were given to us by citizen soldiers who were willing to strap on a weapon and defend our freedoms.

"They don't get stock options and retirement packages for going to war. The way we recognize them is with a piece of ribbon and a medal that's worth maybe 65 cents — and to lie about it and cheat and steal the honor and bravery of another man, it's a form of sacrilege," Burkett says. "That's my good Catholic upbringing talking."

More than a dozen veterans were interviewed for this story. All shared two reactions: bewilderment at Wilkins' apparent failure to realize that he already was a war hero, and utter disgust at the possibility that he may have claimed honors he did not deserve. Those who know him personally expressed profound sadness; those who don't know him had trouble sympathizing with him.

Jeff Hahn — the Night Stalkers veteran who sold Wilkins his prized military art collection — regrets his unwitting role in helping Wilkins embellish his record. As a genuine special operations soldier who counts Mike Durant and other *Black Hawk Down* heroes among his friends, Hahn has only a few carefully-chosen words for Wilkins:

"Tell Joe I want my pictures back." ■