

"With a real hero, you normally have to drag a story out of them," says Burkett (in Dallas). "It's not, 'Let me tell you about the war...'"

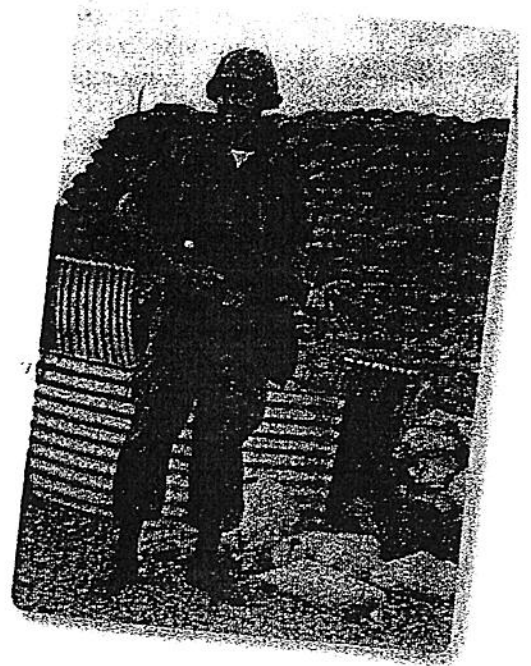
# Lie Detector

Veteran B.G. Burkett wages a one-man war against those who falsely claim they served in Vietnam

**F**or most people, the Vietnam War ended decades ago—but not for B.G. Burkett. Every day for the past 16 years, the Dallas veteran has continued to fight a solitary battle, often coming under fire in the process. His mission: to expose frauds who fabricate claims of heroism in Vietnam and to debunk stereotypes of Vietnam vets as homeless, homicidal, drug-abusing losers. "You were either there or you weren't," says Burkett, 60, who spent 11 months in Vietnam as a first lieutenant with the Army's 199th Light Infantry

Brigade. "I have no tolerance for those who lie about going to Vietnam, and utter contempt for those who were there and take credit for things they did not do. It's the equivalent of stealing from the dead."

To date, Burkett has unmasked more than 2,000 Vietnam wannabes, ranging from such high-profile people as actor Brian Dennehy (see box) to accused murderers attempting the Vietnam-made-me-crazy defense. His efforts have made Burkett, who juggles his research with a day job as a stock-

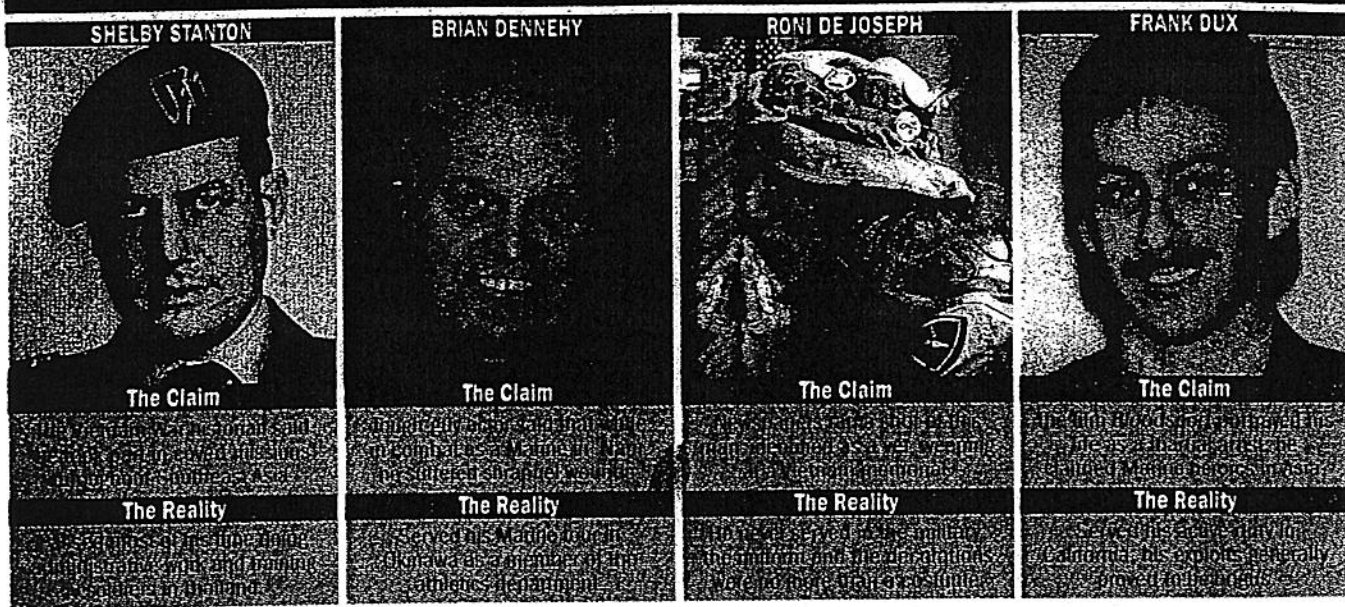


"I can't quit, because the job's not done," says Burkett (in Vietnam in 1969).

COURTESY: B.G. BURKETT

Photograph by ALLISON V. SMITH

Vietnam Wall of Shame



broker, the target of death threats and two libel suits, and cost \$250,000 out of his own pocket to publish 1998's now classic *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (which he cowrote with journalist Glenna Whitley). But he's also become a prime resource for police and prosecutors, and he ranks as a real hero among bona fide vets. Says Navy vet and former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach: "He's passionate about what he's doing, and I'm proud of him."

Burkett never suspected he was embarking on such a consuming crusade back in the mid-'80s, when he started trying to raise \$2.5 million to build a Vietnam veterans' memorial in Dallas. "Every time we asked people for money," recalls Burkett, the only son of an Air Force colonel, "they'd respond, 'Why should we give money to those bums?'" To better arm himself against such criticism, he began studying statistics from sources including the National Archives. The search painted a picture of vets very different from the media portrayals. "In every category for which I could find statistics," Burkett says, "Vietnam veterans were as successful or more successful than men their age who didn't go to Vietnam. They'd go on

with life and were doing fine, holding good jobs and raising families."

So who were all the Vietnam vets committing crimes and grabbing headlines? Whenever he heard such stories, Burkett began to file petitions for the suspect's military records under the Freedom of Information Act. In three-quarters of the cases, he discovered the individual had never even served in the military—or, if he had, had never seen combat. The latter was the case with Patrick Henry Sherill, an Oklahoma postal worker whose 1986 shooting spree left 14 people dead. Appalled, Burkett became a self-appointed watchdog for the reputation of Vietnam vets.

His search for frauds intensified as he began to expose such prominent fakes as Dennehy, who had falsely claimed that he was a Vietnam Marine combat veteran. By 1992 Burkett was filing at least one request for public records every day and spending hours many evenings sorting through the mounds of documents with his sister Barbara, 54. "He's an honorable man," Barbara says of her brother, who shares custody of his 13-year-old daughter Catherine with his soon-to-be-ex-wife.

Burkett believes that low self-esteem, the need to be admired and desire for personal gain prompt many to boast

about nonexistent Vietnam service. Others, he contends, lie about their military history to claim disability benefits, costing the government tens of millions of dollars a year. And then there are those like Joseph Yandle, the Massachusetts murderer who in 1995 succeeded in getting his life sentence commuted on the basis of his supposedly harrowing Vietnam service. Even before his release, Burkett questioned Yandle's claim and soon showed that Yandle had only served as a supply clerk on Okinawa. In 1998 Yandle was back in prison. Says Bob Watson, an assistant U.S. attorney who has tapped Burkett's expertise on several occasions: "He's been astonishingly successful finding out people's true backgrounds."

In December, with his daughter proudly watching, Burkett received the U.S. Army's highest award for civilians from former President George Bush, who said he "almost single-handedly set the record straight on Vietnam veterans." Afterward Burkett played it all down. "I'm being given a medal for telling the truth," he said. "I'm a little overwhelmed because none of what I've done exceeded just doing my duty."

By Pam Lambert, Anna Macias Aguayo and Elise Pierce in Dallas

COURTESY: B. G. BURKETT; DENNEHY: VAN HINE/CONSON; DE JOSEPH: JON MACK/UP; STANTON: B. G. BURKETT