

Is it illegal to wear medals you weren't awarded?

WHO, WHAT, WHY?

The Magazine answers...

A man who attended a Remembrance Day parade with medals he wasn't awarded has been ordered to do community service for his deception. But there is a thriving trade in second-hand military decoration, so is it illegal to wear them?

Veterans call them "Walt medals" - as in the fictional fantasist Walter Mitty - and keep an eye out for unawarded decorations worn at military occasions.

They wouldn't have found it difficult to spot bogus war hero Roger Day at a Remembrance Day parade in Bedworth, Warwickshire, last November. The ex-servicemen marching alongside Day, 62, wore perhaps one, two or three medals each. But his chest was adorned with 17 medals, accessorised with an SAS tie pin and beret.

THE ANSWER

It's illegal if the intention is to deceive, to pretend to be member of armed forces, or a veteran

It's an offence under the soon-to-be superseded Army Act of 1955

Arrested after a member of the public alerted police, Day pleaded guilty on Tuesday to unlawfully using military decoration.

While it is not an offence to own medals which have not been awarded to you, it is illegal under section 197 of the Army Act 1955 to use these to pretend to be a member of the armed forces. (This act will be superseded by the Armed Forces Act 2006 in November.)

The act makes wearing any military decoration, badge, wound stripe or emblem without authority a criminal offence. It is also illegal to wear a replica "as to be calculated to deceive", and to falsely represent yourself as someone entitled to wear any such award.

Intention is all. Those, such as pop stars Cheryl Cole, Chris Martin and Sgt Pepper-era Beatles, who don military regalia for fashion would not be culpable.

"There have been one or two cases like this one," says Steve Partridge, spokesman for the Ministry of Defence Police. "What we usually deal with is people impersonating members of the armed forces to defraud others - to give them money for charity or to get a bed for the night."

It is unclear how many others have been prosecuted under the act, as these are dealt with regionally, says Mr Partridge, with MOD police working with civilian police forces. "Having said that, cases like Day's do tend to get quite a bit of publicity."

In the United States, there have been about 60 cases since the Stolen Valor Act became law in 2006. Most involve people trying to gain recognition or prestige by wearing medals they didn't receive.

Collector's piece

The UK's act also makes it an offence to trade in medals and other military decorations while the person awarded it is still in the armed forces - the medal remains the property of the government until they pass away or leave the military.

"When they leave the armed forces, they can sell them on and there's a thriving trade in military memorabilia. But there's a difference between having a display case full of medals, and wearing them to pass yourself off as a war hero," Mr Partridge says.

Day's medals had been bought for him by his younger wife, who believed he was a much-decorated war hero whose medals had been lost in action or sold. She set about replacing them "out of kindness", buying from veterans and online dealers.

WHO WAS WALTER MITTY?

Thurber's short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* told of a meek accountant who daydreamed about a life of derring-do

The name is now shorthand for a fantasist

Experts say only a "world-famous Rambo character" could have accumulated such an array of hardware, a haul which includes awards for bravery and long service, campaign awards from the first Gulf War and the Falklands, medals for both officers and other ranks, and foreign decorations.

But it was all a charade. Apart from attending an 18-month Junior Leaders' course as a teenager, there are no records of Day having been granted any medals or serving a tour of duty.

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/magazine/8454715.stm>

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