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Stolen Valor visits the Northland

How Rick Nolan and the MN DFL's latest ad has Northland veterans claiming stolen valor.

For any veteran, there exists the mere mentioning of names of those they served with that always brings about an instant reaction- the name of the leader they always looked up to, the unit prankster that always kept them laughing, their “battle buddy” who they could always depend on, and then the names of “that guy” (which is held for those who embarrassed the unit, always seemed to mess things up, or the proverbial ‘blue falcon’ of military lore). Yet above any of those traditional reactions is the instant anger reserved for the worst of those who served- the barracks thief. The mere mention of that name always draws an opine of the most colorful language. Recently in the Northland, a name of a former barracks thief is coming out in public for a second time, and again has local veterans who served with him questioning if this is a case of stolen valor. Worst yet, this time the controversy stems from an airing MN DFL radio spot that features a former national guard member who is a MN DFL director, and whose name is all too well known for those who served with him, none of it in the positive.

The radio ad, coupled with a 2015 medal ceremony conducted by MN Congressman Rick Nolan that will be shown to be a staged event, has not only offended those who had to serve with him, but exposes some very large discrepancies between the two publicized stories that both cannot be accurate..... There are more questions than answers, and the entire fiasco leaves local veterans asking *did Rick Nolan and the MN DFL employ stolen valor tactics right here in the Northland trying to sway veterans during a political race?*

To examine the issues between the two events, our citizen journalists spoke to several Veterans who served with the individual in question and compared the radio spot currently being broadcast on local radio with the Duluth News Tribune article from the 2015 staged



medal event featuring the same former National Guard Soldier for a medal pinning ceremony that can now be confirmed was a completely staged event (more on that later). Here is the article from the Duluth News Tribune: <http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/3739447-duluth-army-national-guardsman-receives-long-overdue-medals>

Issue #1: Where do you work again? Neither the radio ad nor the newspaper article mention that **Joel Heller**, the veteran featured in both pieces, proudly proclaims to be a State Director of the MN DFL party on his public social media page (see below). While none of our citizen journalists were able to find an exact start date, several Veterans he served with stated that he long bragged of being a democratic operative as far back as 2003. If you couple this fact with dozens of pictures on his social media page featuring him with state and national DFL politicians including Rick Nolan, it becomes obvious to see a false narrative was laid out when the DNT reporter describes Heller as being in disbelief that a U.S. Congressman was pinning his medals on him. Heller is later quoted as saying that fact was “the icing on the cake”. Really? The news article tries to paint a rosy picture when in reality Mr. Heller is at that point either a MN DFL director or experienced DFL operative.





Issue #2: How long did you serve again? In the 2015 article, Heller is described as having joined in 1996 and serving for ‘a decade’. Yet, in the 2016 radio spot currently playing across radio stations in the Duluth area, Heller describes himself as having served for “7 years in the Army”. Which one is right? If you are not a veteran, you might see this as just a slight error, but anyone who has served knows that your service dates are the hard dates that tell your tale- you don’t make them up. This is also a very important fact as we examine Heller’s Iraq claims later in the article after speaking to several Veterans who served with him during the time in question. Heller’s public social media profile also states that he joined the military in 1996 (see below). So, if we believe his claims from the radio spot in which he said he served for 7 years, then he would have a term of service from 1996-2003. This becomes a very problematic claim with both the staged medal ceremony in 2015 and with facts from those who served with him in Bosnia. According to his old unit members, Joel Heller (at the time a Private First Class) deployed with his unit out of Duluth to Bosnia in 2003 and returned in early 2004. In fact, it is that deployment that would have earned him the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal that was the feature of the staged medal ceremony and the accompanying Duluth News Tribune article. This was confirmed after talking to a Human Resources Sergeant in his unit during that deployment who processed all of those awards.

In the radio ad Heller claims to have served 7 years, which would mean his service began in 1996 and ended after he returned from Bosnia in 2004 but doesn’t leave time for his Iraq claims. This is most likely true, after talking to his three former roommates from Bosnia who are all still serving. “Man it sucked when we were forced to take in that guy in our room after he got busted- we had to lock up all our S!%&t because we couldn’t trust a thief in our room” one roommate stated. Another of those roommates described in detail how he accompanied the unit’s First Sergeant in a vehicle to go to Heller’s house in 2004 to retrieve his Army issued gear because Heller went AWOL from his unit after the unit returned from Bosnia. “After he got busted stealing in our first two weeks in Bosnia and sent off to another unit, he was too embarrassed to come back to drill when we returned to Duluth” that former roommate explained. Speaking to a third roommate, Heller was caught stealing a gaming system during the unit’s first two weeks in Bosnia and was removed from the base he was

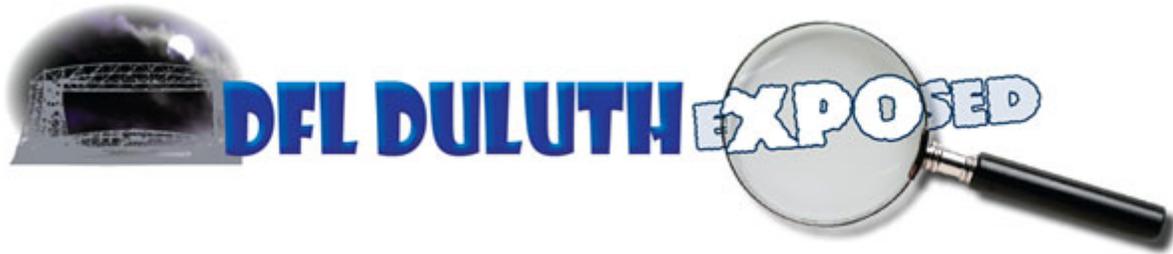


assigned to as part of his punishment and sent to another base. Another Veteran from his old unit described how he had to assign Soldiers under his section to escort Heller to the chow hall and back after he arrived at their base as part of Heller's duty restrictions stemming from the theft. The barracks thief is a much loathed creature in the military, and also sheds light onto why Heller served 7-10 years (depending on the story) yet was only a Private First Class, one of the lowest ranks in the military. In speaking to Heller's roommates from the Bosnia deployment, they all participated in a medal ceremony to receive their Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal as part of their homecoming at the Duluth Armory and were pinned by a One Star General. Of course, if you were a disgraced barracks rat that was sent away from your unit, you wouldn't have been at the ceremony. Even with this, that isn't the final word on Heller's medals.

Issue #3: Using the old "clerical error" narrative. By now, you have noticed that our journalists keep referring to the 2015 medal ceremony conducted by Rep. Rick Nolan as being "staged". This is not an empty charge. It is also not based upon the fact that Heller was a planted veteran who was actually a DFL officer or operative. It also isn't a charge made based upon the fact that his unit members describe in detail how Heller was a disgraced barracks thief that was kicked off his assigned base as part of his punishment. The ceremony was staged, a fact that is verified by none other than Joel Heller himself. In the 2015 Duluth News Tribune article, Heller was quoted as saying his lack of receiving his medals was likely a "clerical error" and further "it gets forgotten about". At the time, it fit the public narrative very nicely. Congressman Nolan helps local veteran, 'a guy from the central hillside' as the article paints, to get the big bad bureaucracy of the VA to get him his medals back at a time when the V.A. is under fire for its competency and treatment of veterans. This narrative, of course, is a lie and part of the staged ceremony. Despite the press of the event as depicted in the DNT article, the V.A. doesn't get Soldier's their medals back, as that duty is done by the National Archives according to none other than the V.A. website:

https://iris.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/1206

Sadly, that also isn't the verifying proof that the medal ceremony was staged. If we examine Joel Heller's public social media page, we can see a VERY contradictory photo he proudly displayed on April 8th, 2015 less than a *month* before his May 2015 medal ceremony.



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In the photo, Heller displays his NATO non-article 5 medal and wrote “only one I did not throw away when I got home from my military fun!! Mom saved it.” (See below). WTF? Heller proudly proclaims he **threw away** all his military medals but one on social media less than a month before the media puff piece (complete with false narratives) accompanying a *staged* medal ceremony with his boss about his supposed long lost medals he allegedly hadn’t received. Heller himself proves the event was STAGED. The clerical error NEVER existed because the problem stemmed from a garbage can ceremony. The Congressman didn’t help get his “lost” medals from the V.A. as the event claimed as even the V.A. says they don’t do that service, just as the whole ‘local guy’ false narrative never existed because he was a DFL operative. What a moment of moral bankruptcy for Heller, Nolan, CVSO Rodriguez, and the MN DFL. Heller deployed to Bosnia, got busted as a barracks thief, came home as a disgrace to his unit, and threw his medals out in protest before going AWOL from his guard unit. In reading the article, the DNT reporter states that Heller ‘contacted Congressman Nolan’s office last month...’ which would mean he contacted Nolan’s office in April 2015, the same month he was proclaiming he threw his medals out on his public social media page.





Going further into the article, the DNT stated that Heller was first presented with his Army Service Ribbon, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, and National Defense Service Medal. Anyone who has served in the Army knows that these medals added to the staged event. First, the Army Service Ribbon is awarded for graduating from Army Basic Training and is even worn on a Soldier's basic training pictures. . In the Army it is called a 'gimme' award because it isn't formally presented. Second, the Armed Forces Reserve Medal is awarded for serving 10 years in a Reserve component, which would match Heller's conflicting service dates from the 2015 article but doesn't match the 7 years of service from his 2016 radio spot. The award is also a 'gimme' since just being in the Guard for ten years would have qualified someone for the medal even if they were a disgraced barracks thief who left service as an E-3 after a decade. Lastly is the National Defense Service Medal. Heller qualified for this medal because he served in the military after 9/11, when the nation went to war against radical Islam. In essence, these medals are the type that don't merit a ceremony, unless apparently you are a DFL operative staging a faux ceremony for medals that you earlier threw in your trash to make your boss look good before an election.

Reading the article with a few of Heller's former unit members, several remarked how sad it was to include both his mother and his son in the article. "What kind of person brings his son to a fake ceremony when he knows he threw his medals in the trash?" asked one of Heller's roommates in Bosnia. When we compared the article with his photo from his social media public profile another of Heller's former roommates remarked: "he brags about throwing out his medals and thanks his mom for saving one of the awards, then the paper quotes his mom during the faux ceremony when she obviously knew he had thrown them out. That's gross."

Issue #4: The "cream of the cream" and questions about Iraq. In the current 2016 radio spot, Heller says he was on a patrol in Baghdad, hit an IED, and was awarded a purple heart. For the several Soldiers we spoke with who served with him, this seems to be a very unbelievable claim. Heller says in the same ad he served 7 years in the Army and as discussed, his social media profile and the DNT article both say he joined in 1996. If we are supposed to believe



both of his claims, then when did he deploy to Iraq? For those who served with him they know it wasn't between 1996-2004. The *when* aspect of Heller's claim elicited several impassioned responses and opinions from his former peers that cannot be printed, with good reason when compared to the DNT article depicting the 2015 staged ceremony. If you are a veteran who deployed to a war zone like Iraq, was wounded and awarded a purple heart, you are in rarified company in the lineage of Military service in the United States. The Purple Heart is a national Treasure, traces its lineage to 1782 and is the oldest military medal in the nation's history that is still actively presented to recipients. Around 2% of those who served in Iraq or Afghanistan have been awarded a Purple Heart according to the numbers taken from the website Wikipedia. When we examine this against Heller's other claims, too many things don't make sense or at a minimum require explanation.

In the article depicting the 2015 staged medal ceremony, Heller himself is quoted as claiming that the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (AFEM) was the "cream of the cream" of military medals and went as far as to later say it was the medal that would give him "street cred" among Veterans. These are horribly laughable claims if not for the complete dishonesty in saying them. Nolan's comment in the same article claiming that the AFEM is the 'medal soldiers value the most' is so outrageous it is offensive. This medal since 1992 is only awarded for operations that do not qualify for a named campaign that carries its own medal like Operation Iraqi Freedom (war in Iraq) or Operation Enduring Freedom (war in Afghanistan). In layman terms, this medal is for those smaller scale military endeavors that aren't a war campaign, most often for non-combat quagmires like Bosnia. Both Nolan's and Heller's comments regarding the medal are unacceptable for those who have served. While those who earned the medal (and didn't throw them out like Joel Heller) take pride in their service during those applicable periods, they do so knowing where the medal stands in military order of precedence and lineage when they build their ribbon racks for their uniform. The AFEM is the 31st award in order of precedence, with 25 medals higher than the AFEM in order of precedence. Knowing this, why would Nolan note it as 'the medal soldiers value the most'? Further, Heller's comments really produce questions. Heller proclaims in the radio spot that he has a purple heart from Iraq, which is one of our nation's most rare and prestigious awards for good reason. If this is true, then why would he describe the AFEM, a



middle of the pack award that wasn't earned in combat, as both the "cream of the cream" and the medal that would give him "street cred" among Veterans?

While our journalists want to believe Heller, his comments defy logic for anyone who has served in combat. There is just no way that a combat wounded war veteran values a non-wartime medal above his purple heart, especially with the knowledge gained from those who served with him in Bosnia. Heller wants us to believe that to him the "cream of the cream" is a medal he earned for a non-combat period in which he was busted as a barracks thief and later went AWOL, more important than a purple heart he supposedly earned for injuries sustained in combat? Further, any Veteran with a Purple Heart would have no worry about "street cred" amongst his fellow veterans, as a Purple Heart recipient would be in rarified company amongst *all* veterans. To help explain this, we spoke to one of Heller's roommates from Bosnia who not only has the AFEM but is also a veteran of 2 deployments to Iraq and a confirmed recipient of a Purple Heart. His reaction to the discrepancy between Heller's claims of a purple heart in both 2015 and 2016 against his proclamation of the AFEM as the "cream of the cream" was met with serious offense. "No f\$%^&ing way." He said angrily, adding "if he actually had a purple heart then he wouldn't give a s%\$&t about some peacetime award." All of Heller's roommates from Bosnia and the several former peers of Heller also questioned Heller's comments, since they make ZERO sense in the veteran community. These same veterans instantly added to the discrepancy with their knowledge of Heller's term of service. These members of his unit know of his service from 1996-2004, and openly questioned when exactly he went to Iraq as he claims. These are the Soldiers who knew him from his enlistment through his discharge after Bosnia.

Issue #5: So you say there is a chance? Our journalists want to give Heller the benefit of the doubt, despite all the discrepancies. In the radio ad he claims to have served 'seven years in the Army" right before he tells of his experience in Baghdad while in the 2015 newspaper article he is said to have served a decade. Is it possible that his deployment to Iraq came during a period of service after he was discharged from the National Guard? Could Heller have been discharged after Bosnia (allegedly for going AWOL) and somehow enlisted with the Active Army or the Army Reserve? No one in this article has reviewed his military records, so there is the potential, albeit minuscule, that the former barracks thief turned it all around,



signed back up in a different guard unit or another component of the Army, and then did a separate '7 years in the Army' that he was talking about in the radio spot. Did he go into the Inactive Ready Reserve and get involuntarily recalled onto active duty? Every one of his former peers was adamant in their doubts of such a path based upon their anecdotal recollection of their experiences of his conduct and character. Of course, the various facts of Heller's own statements work against this possibility, but it still would be a possible explanation if *proven* true. If this did indeed happen, then in his 2015 public social media post bragging about throwing away his medals, doesn't Heller's comment that his NATO medal is the *only* one his mom kept mean that he also threw away his Purple Heart and Iraqi Campaign Medal?? His post is long after his service, so if Heller proclaims it is the "only one" he kept then why didn't Nolan and his cronies also include his purple heart in the staged 2015 ceremony? What about his Iraq Campaign Medal and other medals earned during service in Iraq? Heller will no doubt have photos from his Purple Heart ceremony to silence those questioning the discrepancies surrounding his 2015 and 2016 claims. Heller's inconsistent comments and vast discrepancies cast doubt on this past, but Heller could easily silence his critics with evidence to clarify **his** own words.

The evidence is clear that Joel Heller, who claims to be a State Director in the MN DFL, and Rep. Rick Nolan participated in a staged medal ceremony in 2015 in the awarding of medals that Heller previously bragged on his public social media to have thrown in the trash. While this is obvious, it is unclear if the county veteran services officer and Duluth News Tribune reporter were part of the stage, or merely victims of the Heller/Nolan conspiracy. In either case, this event is inexcusable for Rep Nolan's constituents who wore their uniform and served with pride and serves as evidence of the moral bankruptcy of a career politician looking to sell a narrative leading up to an election year. Further, if this staged event was a coordinated effort between the MN DFL and the Nolan campaign with knowledge that Heller had thrown his medals out, then the ceremony may carry into a criminal conspiracy reportable to the FEC and/or the MN Secretary of the State.

The evidence shows that Joel Heller and Rep. Rick Nolan committed an act of stolen valor when they engaged in a staged medal ceremony for medals that Heller proclaimed he dumped in a trash can. Yet, this may not be Heller's biggest stolen valor offense. Heller is



described in detail by several of his former Army peers as a barracks thief who was once AWOL from his guard unit and never deployed to Iraq when he served with them. Did he turn it all around, re-enlist, deploy to Iraq, and be awarded a purple heart as he claims? Possibly. If he shows this is the case, we respect him and appreciate his sacrifice. If that is true, however, then why would he still engage in the dishonor of a faux ceremony to receive medals he knew he threw out? Further, his social media post says he only kept the NATO medal, so did the trash dump include his purple heart? Why? Finally, why in the Duluth News Tribune article would he be quoted as calling his non-combat AFEM medal the “cream of the cream” and the medal that would give him “street cred” if he truly had been awarded a purple heart? None of his former peers believe his series of conflicting statements and each had a very unfiltered and visceral reaction to his claims. Inevitably, some will claim that a veteran shouldn’t have to ‘prove’ that they earned a purple heart. While this might be true, when someone has displayed the dishonor and moral bankruptcy of participating in a fake medal ceremony, then everything they claim comes under question, especially when the times, facts, and claims obviously don’t match. Additionally, it is his fellow Veterans demanding the answers. If MN DFL Director Heller did not earn a purple heart and is committing the ultimate stolen valor offense, did the MN DFL and Rep Nolan use such stolen valor tactics during an election? If so, that might be an outrageous act even in this outrageous election cycle..... Before Northland Veterans vote, we believe they deserve to know the answer to that question.