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News Update

Military activist's past questioned

By Bryon Wells, Tribune

As a U.S. Army platoon commander fighting in the Vietnam War, Noel T. Benoist tried to stop a colonel about to lead his troops into a massacre.

Benoist, now 57 and living in Apache Junction, couldn't remember the colonel's name, but he did recall the senior military officer was reading a map wrong.

"I tried to save approximately 1,000 men, but the colonel in charge wouldn't listen," Benoist said. "It was supposed to be a landing on a friendly beach, but we were in the wrong place."

He said the colonel lost the men within one hour.

But historians, military watchdog groups — and Benoist's service records — suggest Benoist was a private in the U.S. Army who never set foot in Vietnam.

Chuck and Mary Schantag of the Missouri-based P.O.W. Network said Benoist's story is part of a national phenomenon where people pose as war heroes — sometimes costing the government millions of dollars in benefits. They have independently researched Benoist's military background and some of that research appears on the organization's Web site, pownetwork.org

"This is the worst-case scenario we have ever had," said Mary Schantag, whose nonprofit organization expanded from documenting prisoners of war history to investigating people who may be misrepresenting themselves.

"This guy has caused so much havoc. Legitimate veterans have left the (East Valley Chapter 8 of the Disabled American Veterans)."

Benoist has gained the trust of members in the East Valley DAV, a nonprofit corporation that advocates veterans rights. In the thick of an ongoing dispute with the DAV Department of Arizona, Benoist rose to the position of judge advocate, a legal adviser to the now embattled and temporarily shut-down local chapter, which serves 2,300 members in Mesa, Chandler and Tempe.

Past chapter officers and DAV members such as Darrell Carey and Norvan "Dick" Fulton, both of Chandler, said Benoist helped orchestrate their ouster from Chapter 8 — bringing in a new group of officers who signed off on measures that landed the group in a lawsuit with the DAV Department of Arizona. That included transferring property and entering a deal to sell off the chapter's thrift store.

CREDIBILITY CONCERNS

Some members of Chapter 8 and the state DAV question Benoist's credibility and say he is leading the chapter to ruin.

A lawsuit filed by the state DAV in Maricopa County Superior Court claims that suspended Chapter 8 officers and managers of the chapter's thrift store, which earned \$1.3 million last year, commingled funds and mishandled chapter property. Benoist is not a defendant in that lawsuit, but state DAV Commander Phil Seward called Benoist a main "agitator" in the ongoing dispute that ultimately led to the chapter's suspension.

While involved in the local DAV, Benoist filed for injunctions against former officers with the intent to keep them out of the thrift store. Those injunction requests were dismissed by Mesa City Court.

Benoist also has been a party in dozens of civil lawsuits either as a plaintiff or

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defendant. He said he has received settlements but characterizes his involvement merely as seeking justice against wrongs.

As for his military background, Benoist insists he's telling the truth. He said the Army altered his military records because of his intelligence background and to avoid embarrassment over his operations behind enemy lines. Adamant about his military intelligence background, Benoist said he rose to the rank of major, and conducted secret operations in Vietnam.

"They've got (the records) but they won't release it," Benoist said. "The truth will eventually surface."

Benoist's military records were released with his consent by the Department of Veterans Affairs Phoenix regional office. They indicate Benoist applied for serviceconnected benefits for post traumatic stress disorder that would make him eligible for at least \$2,100 per month tax free. The VA has denied his claim at least four times. Benoist is appealing.

"The veteran's contention of service in Vietnam where his entire platoon (except himself) was wiped out is unsubstantiated," VA records indicate.

The VA has five volumes of records on Benoist. The records indicate:

- Benoist enlisted in 1966 and was honorably discharged in Jan. 1970 as a private, not a major.
- A list of Benoist's duty stations show 18 months of service in Germany, but no where in Vietnam.
- Benoist's military occupational specialty in the Army was an arts and crafts specialist. Some of Benoist's records indicate he was attached to an Army Security Agency post in Germany, which did have intelligence capacity. A military historian said the Army rarely did amphibious landings in Vietnam. There were no recorded battles in Vietnam where U.S. forces lost 1,000 troops in a day, let alone an hour.

"That's a lot of people in one day," said Jim Knight, of the Army Center for Military History in Washington, D.C.

In comparison, during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in 1969, there were 232 Americans killed and 929 wounded in the first two days of the enemy attack, Knight said.

Benoist has letters written by two men who said they remember him from their service in Vietnam. One of those men is now dead, and the other, Phoenix resident Roger Grinstead, signed a letter that he said was typed by Benoist saying the two met in "Sigon (sic)."

Benoist also said office of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., in Tempe is helping him obtain his classified records. A source in McCain's office said he could not speak about veterans the senator may be helping.

WHO'S LYING?

Benoist seems charismatic and intelligent. But many of his claims run contrary to official records, are rooted in conspiracy and depend on his word. For example, Benoist said he has had access to information that proves the existence of UFOs, and that Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., was set up at Chappaquiddick in 1969, when a woman riding with the senator in his car drowned in a crash.

Citing Watergate and past abuses by intelligencegathering agencies, Benoist argues his story is genuine and another example of government lying and cover-up.

"They're lying to you," Benoist said of the VA. "The government, they owe me a big backing."

On the national scale, people posing as war heroes have been documented in books like "Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History," and "Fake Warriors: Identifying, Exposing, and Punishing Those Who Falsify Their Military Service."

Henry Mark Holzer's book, "Fake Warriors," outlines many harrowing tales from veterans whose records illustrate a more passive story. It is too easy for people to

doctor military records and gain entry into groups such as the DAV and the American Legion, where they often repeat their stories, he said.

"Those organizations are riddled with these people," said Holzer, a Santa Fe, N.M., attorney and Korean War veteran. "The fabrication knows no bounds."

Benoist also was kicked out of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Apache Junction, said Jim Willie, commander of that post. Willie said he could not say why, but added Benoist's military records don't back his claims.

"He's not qualified to be a member, and his card has been revoked by national," Willie said. "He obtained his card under false pretenses."

Holzer said military imposters illustrate a widespread problem.

People have used embellished war exploits to gain office or other positions of prestige — but another concern is that their delusions of grandeur are a slap in the face to veterans who actually went through the horrors of battle, Holzer said.

Money also could play into the deception. A September 2003 report to the congressional Committee of Veterans Affairs found that potential fraud annually results in overpayments in veterans benefits of up to \$124.7 million. Holzer said many false claims for benefits are related to post traumatic stress disorder.

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