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## Romance Fraudster Steals Military Hero's Identity



Reporting  
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SAN FRANCISCO (CBS 5) — If you decide to try an online dating site, here's a question: How do you know the person you're talking to, is real? And how would you feel if the person you shared your private thoughts with turned out to be a con man?

Stephanie Wilson signed up for a dating website three years after losing her husband. "I decided it's time for me to move forward," she said. She was looking for love. "They have a photo gallery where you can search," she said.

And that's where this military veteran found someone she thought might be a soul mate, a fellow soldier, Sergeant 1st Class John Adams. "It said he was in Afghanistan," Wilson said.

He wrote her from his post overseas, telling her that, like her, he'd lost his spouse, his wife. "Here is someone that has gone through the same thing that I have gone through." Their online relationship progressed quickly: "He started telling me that he was falling in love with me," she said, calling her "darling" and "baby."

But then, he asked her to send him something, something expensive: A satellite phone. Price tag? A thousand dollars. And that's when she realized: "He was trying to work me."

So who is Sergeant 1st Class Adams? Turns out, he is not your ordinary military man, he is a hero. The army awarded him the bronze star for valor in Iraq.

They even made a movie out of his achievements, showing in this re-enactment how he took enemy fire while preventing the setting of roadside bombs south of Baghdad, potentially saving hundreds of American troops in the process.

Those real events, all featured on the United States Army's gaming website, called "America's Army", where Adams even gets a bit of the celebrity treatment: His own action figure. But there's just one problem: Adams isn't on duty in Afghanistan. These days, he's a recruiter who lives just outside Indianapolis, Indiana. And he isn't a widower. He's married, with a young daughter.

Something Stephanie Wilson discovered when she found his family photos on that website. "He looked very happily married. I got really angry," Wilson said. But guess what? Adams isn't happy, either.

Adams is a hero, but he never went on those dating websites. His identity was stolen, from the America's Army website. And his reaction? "Confused, angry, I'm like the normal person you don't think its going to happen to you," Adams said.

So how does it happen? "It's a classic example of the romance fraud," said Detective Josh McFall with the REACT High Tech Crimes Taskforce. McFall said con men are now hiding on internet dating sites. "They are creating these false profiles and they are making connections with victims, luring them into this false sense of security. And once they have got the victim really hooked, they will ask the victim to send them money for a variety of purposes," he said.



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McFall said many of those victims are women. "They're just playing to the victim's innermost desires." And the con man who stole Sergeant Adams' identity? "He certainly knows what he is doing," McFall said.

In fact the con man is still pretending to be Adams, on the social networking site Tagged, messaging a woman in Austria. She didn't want her name used out of concern for her safety, but spoke to CBS 5 Investigates via Skype. "He want to know me much better," she said.

But in her case, he picked the wrong victim. She runs an anti-scam blog in Germany and made this scam public. "I saved his profile and posted it on our anti-scam forum in Germany," she said.

Detective McFall said that may be the only solution, because "romance fraudsters" operating from foreign countries are nearly impossible to catch. "As soon as I find that a search warrant takes me out of the country, it's pretty much closed," he said.

A point that frustrates real Army hero Adams: "You grit your teeth and you want to meet them face to face," he said.

And victims such as Stephanie Wilson: "I think its really terrible. I wish I could find him and put an end to it, but I can't."

CBS 5 Investigates also found out, two other soldiers featured as heroes on the America's Army site had their identities stolen as well. The United States Army says it's investigating.

As for the dating sites, they commonly tell visitors they can't conduct background checks on people who sign up.

*Statement from America's Army:*

*"We are extremely saddened that someone would misuse information about heroic Soldiers. This is a legal matter that has been referred to the appropriate authorities."*

*Statement from Tagged.com:*

*"With hundreds of millions of people worldwide using social networking sites — 80 million of them registered on Tagged — it's not just a possibility but a fact that some users will post dishonest information about themselves. We monitor our website daily to review and remove offending profiles. When people behave unethically on our website, community vigilance often alerts us to the problem. Every profile has a "report" link, and members can contact customer service through our help site."*

**Tips to Avoid Internet Fraud from the REACT High Tech Crimes Taskforce**

[http://www.reacttf.org/press\\_releases/2005\\_pr/20050811.htm](http://www.reacttf.org/press_releases/2005_pr/20050811.htm)

Internet fraud is more pervasive than ever. These frauds are easy for criminals to perpetuate and very profitable. Often scammers will perpetrate their fraud across a very wide geographical area, which often makes the case impractical – at best – for law enforcement to investigate. At worst, the case becomes impossible because the suspect resides overseas or has successfully covered their online tracks.

While no set of tips or guidelines can completely insulate you from becoming a victim of fraud, these simple tips will help protect you from many of the common internet scams.

1. If the deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Whether it is an online investment with a higher-than-average advertised rate of return or steeply discounted merchandise, be wary of any deal that is significantly better than the competition.

2. Scammers will frequently send you a check for hundreds or thousands of dollars more than required and ask you to send them the difference. The check or money order you receive will almost always be fake, and the bank will hold you responsible when the fake is eventually discovered.
3. Never give out your financial information to any un reputable source that you do not personally know and trust. This includes bank account number, social security number, PayPal account information, or bank website log in. Transact business via the internet only with trusted merchants.
4. Never wire funds via Western Union, Moneygram, or other wire service unless you personally know and trust the recipient. Once you have wired funds they are gone for good, and it is usually difficult or impossible to identify the true recipient.
5. Deal locally, whenever possible. Most scammers will refuse to meet face to face because they are "travelling," "ill," or "deployed in the Armed Forces."
6. Donate money or merchandise only to well-known veteran's groups or those who have been active for some time in your community, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, or local military family support group.
7. Many online escrow services are fraudulent. Do not agree to any online escrow service unless it is operated by a well-known financial institution, preferably one with a number of brick-and-mortar branches that you could visit to conduct business in person.

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