

## Authorities charge man in thefts of war medals

August 03, 1995 | By Kris Antonelli | Kris Antonelli, Sun Staff Writer Sun staff writer Kerry O'Rourke contributed to this article.

In less than an hour, Stephen Van Rensselaer Pyne charmed his way into retired Adm. Maurice H. Rindskopf's home and promised he would mount the World War II hero's Navy Cross medal and five other badges of honor on a royal blue background and put them in a gold-framed shadowbox.

"He was just darling," recalled Sylvia Rindskopf, the admiral's wife. "He was absolutely charming. He was a big guy . . . and you just wanted to hug him."

Yesterday, Mr. Pyne, a Carroll County budget analyst, was charged in Anne Arundel County with stealing six of Admiral Rindskopf's medals and replacing them with fakes.

He also is charged with defrauding two other war heroes from the Annapolis area.

Although Mr. Pyne, 35, is charged with three felonies, Anne Arundel State's Attorney Frank R. Weathersbee said there are at least two dozen more victims, including retired Capt. Edward L. Beach, a Naval Academy graduate and author of the 1955 novel "Run Silent, Run Deep."

Investigators said they also have found victims in New Jersey, Virginia, Washington and Hawaii.

Mr. Weathersbee said he has sent that information to federal authorities.

On July 12, investigators found hundreds of the stolen medals, ++ certificates and citations when they searched Mr. Pyne's home in the 100 block of Federal Ann Court in Westminster, said Kristin Riggin, state's attorney spokeswoman.

L Mr. Pyne has agreed to surrender to investigators tomorrow.

Mr. Pyne has resigned this week from his \$31,629-a-year position as a senior management and budget analyst for the Carroll County Department of Management and Budget. He had worked for the county since October 1989.

Brian M. Bowersox of Westminster, Mr. Pyne's lawyer, said his client did not want to comment on the charges.

"We're preparing a vigorous defense," Mr. Bowersox said. "I don't think the facts are as news-grabbing as the story comes out in the newspaper."

Carroll County court records show that Mr. Pyne was convicted of misdemeanor theft in 1988 and 1990.

Five civil judgments were awarded against Mr. Pyne in 1992 and 1993 for failing to pay almost \$5,000 in debts. He repaid the money, court records show.

Name from a directory

Admiral Rindskopf, a 1938 Naval Academy graduate, said Mr. Pyne called him at the end of March and told him that he had gotten his name and address from a directory of Navy Cross recipients.

The couple invited him to their Severna Park home and they chatted in the living room about the Navy and military history.

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The admiral said Mr. Pyne told him that he collected military memorabilia and that his grandfather was a Naval Academy graduate.

If the admiral would give him his ceremonial sword, hat and handmade flag from the submarine the USS Drum, Mr. Pyne said he would frame a dozen of the medals, Admiral Rindskopf said.

"He looked through all my papers and medals," said the admiral, who at 26 was the youngest submarine commander during World War II.

Call from friend

A few weeks after Mr. Pyne returned some of the miniature medals, Admiral Rindskopf got a call from a retired captain who was doing research on the Navy Cross.

"We were talking about the medal and then just before he hung up, he asked me if I had ever heard of Mr. Pyne," the admiral said. "I told him that Mr. Pyne was framing my medals and the captain, who was also an old submarine man, told me I had been scammed."

Admiral Rindskopf said he felt empty.

He had been awarded the Navy Cross for sinking six Japanese ships in the Pacific from Sept. 9 to Nov. 8, 1944, while he was commander of the USS Drum. He also earned the Silver Star and Bronze Star while aboard the USS Drum.

"These meant a lot to me," he said yesterday. "They represent the recognition I received for my work during the war."

He said he called Mr. Pyne, who returned the medals in a shadow box on June 22.

"The medals looked too new," the admiral said. "There were no scratches on them. After about 50 years, there is no way they could look that way. He made a big point of telling me how he cleaned them up for me."

Admiral Rindskopf said he pried the box apart and looked more closely.

One of his submarine pins had three bronze stars on it; the original had one silver star in the middle.

He called the state's attorney's office and also began his own investigation.

Through calls to other veterans, he developed a list of missing medals.

Many matched the offerings in a catalog for an auction that was held yesterday in Houston. The catalog placed the value of the medals at \$2,000 to \$3,000.

"Mr. Pyne was very sincere," the admiral said yesterday. "I had been trapped like a pretty big fool, and then I found out how many more people had been trapped in the same way."

Other victims said a similar approach was used with them.

"He told me he was writing a book," said retired Capt. Joseph Taussig Jr., a Navy Cross recipient and Annapolis resident. "He wanted some Navy memorabilia, but I didn't want to give any of it away."

Pearl Harbor hero

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