

Soldier impersonators target women in web scams



AP – This screen shot take from Facebook.com on Thursday, Feb. 24, 2011 shows a Facebook page set up by a ...

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. – Scammers are targeting women on Facebook in what's becoming an all-too-common ruse: They steal photos of soldiers to set up profiles, profess their love and devotion in sappy messages — and then ask their victims to cut a check.

Army Sgt. James Hursey, 26, discharged and sent home from war in Iraq to nurse a back injury, found a page with his photos on Facebook — on a profile that wasn't his. It was fake, set up by someone claiming to be an active-duty soldier looking for love.

Military officials say they've seen hundreds of similar cases in the past several years. Some of the impersonators have even used photos of soldiers who have died overseas.

"It's identity theft, really, if you think about it," said Hursey, of Corbin, Ky., a married father of a 2-year-old.

The impersonator using Hursey's photos portrayed himself as a soldier named "Sergeant (sic) Mark Johnson." The fake followed the same steps every time: Send a friend request, immediately express undying love and affection, and ask for money.

The fake's cover was blown, though: Janice Robinson, 53, of Orlando, Fla., knew something wasn't right when the man professed his love to her and signed every message with, "Johnson cares." She had begun talking to him thinking he was one of several people named Mark Johnson that she knew.

"I said, 'How can you say you love me? You don't even know me. You are insane,'" she told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "... You could tell the guy in the picture was young. I'm 53 years old. You can look at my picture and tell I'm not 20."

Her story was first reported by WYMT-TV in Hazard, Ky., and WKMG-TV in Orlando.

Christopher Grey, spokesman for the Army's Criminal Investigation Command at [Fort Belvoir](#), Va., said the Internet impersonators often make ridiculous claims. Some say they need money for special laptops and cell phones. Others say they need cash to buy special papers to come home on leave or a registration form because military officials won't let them talk to family.

"Well, there is no such thing," Grey said. The papers are phony, often poorly doctored versions of actual military documents.

The person using Hursey's photographs sent Robinson what he called a form to register to be able to speak to the soldier on the telephone. He told her it would cost \$350 for them to be able to communicate by phone.

The form, a poorly doctored copy of a common Army form used to correct information in a soldier's official record, included a blank to fill in the intended victim's social security number.

Robinson said she knew people didn't have to register to talk to soldiers and refused to fill out the form. She also refused his requests to wire money and send credit card and bank account numbers.

Instead, she contacted a local television reporter and Hursey, whose name was visible in the phony profile's photos.

"I just wanted to see exactly how far this would go and I wanted to protect people ... that aren't as savvy to scams as I am and don't pick up on this stuff," Robinson said.

Grey said there are no known instances of Army personnel losing money in such scams. But the victims have. In one case, a person lost some \$25,000, he said. Because many scams originate in foreign countries, military officials can do little except offer advice about the scams and direct victims to agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission.

The scammers use untraceable e-mail addresses, route accounts through international locations, and use pay-per-hour Internet cyber-cafes that also make it difficult to trace them, Grey said.

The Army encourages anyone who suspects they are being used in a scam to file a report with their local police as well as report the cases to agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission.

Only one state, California, has made online impersonation a crime, said Tim Senft, founder of [Facecrooks.com](#), a website that focuses on scams via social media. The law makes impersonating someone online a misdemeanor, punishable by up to a \$1,000 fine and a year in jail.

Hursey, who had been based at Fort Richardson, Alaska, said has no clue who concocted the scheme or why he was targeted.

The fake profile featured several photos of Hursey: After basic training, in Iraq and decked out in his military dress uniform. There was even a picture of his dog. Some of the photos apparently were taken from his mother's Facebook page, Hursey said.

"I think it's pathetic that someone is going to impersonate a soldier to try to get money from women," he said.