

10/6/00

# Man Tied to King's Slaying Wins \$11 Million in Suit

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C., Oct. 5—A judge has awarded \$11 million to a man who said he was libeled in a book that claimed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination was a conspiracy involving the government, sniper teams and organized crime.

Billy Ray Eidson sued London lawyer William F. Pepper and his publishers in 1997 for writing that Eidson was part of a Special Forces unit sent to Memphis on April 4, 1968, to kill King.

Eidson was a firefighter in Birmingham at the time and said in a deposition that he had never been to Memphis and was working at the fire station on the day King was slain.

Pepper, in "Orders to Kill: The Truth About the Murder of Martin Luther King," wrote that Eidson was killed to ensure secrecy. Eidson, alive and well and living in Costa Rica, surprised Pepper in June 1997 on the ABC television show "Turning Point."

The lawsuit was filed in South Carolina, which has a two-year statute of limitations on libel. The book was

published in 1995.

Judge Roger Young awarded Eidson \$1 million in actual damages and \$10 million in punitive damages Wednesday.

"Eidson may well spend the rest of his life trying to undo the damage done by Mr. Pepper," Young wrote.

In court documents, Pepper denied Eidson's allegations that he was negligent in his research. Pepper was later found in default for failing to appear after receiving notice of Eidson's deposition and the damages hearing.

The judge said Eidson testified

that "callers threatened to kill his family and that he is constantly getting questions regarding his involvement in the plot. In fact, Eidson testifies his day-to-day routine has been altered substantially due to the recognition that has been thrust upon him."

Eidson's attorney, Steve DeAntonio, did not return a telephone call seeking comment. Attempts to reach Pepper at his London office were unsuccessful.

The lawsuit also named Carroll & Graf Publishers Inc. and Warner Books Inc. Both settled with Eidson.