
Defense Report

AUSA



The Vietnam Deserter; A Profile

Only 12 per cent of those who deserted the Army during the Vietnam War decided to desert because they were opposed to the War, according to survey results recently released by the Department of the Army.

The survey used as a sample nearly 4,000 of the 7,800 Army men who deserted during the Vietnam war—about 50 per cent. These 4,000 were part of the approximately 4,500 Army men who participated in the President's Clemency Program in 1974-75.

The most common cause of desertion was family/financial problems as over 50 per cent left the Army for this reason. Twenty-seven per cent said they deserted because they could not "adjust" to the military, and 12 per cent went over the hill because they did not support the War. The remaining 11 per cent deserted for other reasons.

According to the survey, the typical deserter was under 20 years of age, was a volunteer rather than a draftee (56% were volunteers), was white (80%), was not married (61%), served 13 to 24 months before deserting, and was in a combat unit although not in Vietnam.

The survey exploded the myth that most desertions occurred while the soldier was on leave or was traveling between assignments. Actually, 56 per cent deserted while on duty and 38 per cent while on leave or in transit. The survey also showed that 64 per cent of the deserters were high school dropouts.

The survey revealed that most (87%) had not attempted to hide after deserting and that all but three per cent were employed at the time of the President's Clemency Program.

Fifty-eight per cent sought help within the Army in solving their particular problems prior to deserting. Most tried more than one source of assistance. More than half of this 58 per cent looked for help from the chain of command and, that failing, turned to such sources of assistance as the Chaplain, the Red Cross, and Army Emergency Relief.

This last point raises the issue that some of the desertions of the Vietnam War might not have occurred had the Army chain of command showed more compassion and understanding when personal/family problems were raised by its soldiers. In fact, the Army's official press release concerning the survey pointed out that research had clearly indicated that an important factor in holding down AWOL/Desertion rates is the commander's interest in his soldiers' problems. The significant drop in the Army's AWOL and desertion rates in recent months indicates that today's commanders have learned this lesson.