
Defense Report

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Carter's Discharge Upgrade Program Getting Little Response

President Carter's plan to forgive Vietnam-era deserters and to upgrade less-than-honorable discharges imposed administratively, often in lieu of court martial, has so far failed to receive a substantial response from those who could benefit by it.

When he announced the program, President Carter explained that there are approximately 432,500 men and women who served in the military forces during the Vietnam years who are finding that the lack of an honorable discharge makes job-finding and other activities difficult. The program also offers to let deserters turn themselves in to military authorities and, unless a violent crime was also involved, receive discharges under honorable conditions. Former service personnel who had received less-than-honorable discharges administratively can apply to have their discharges upgraded to the honorable level. Those whose bad discharges were imposed by courts martial and have been reviewed and sustained in judicial channels are not affected.

As President Ford found in his earlier program, there has been a lot of verbal heat over the discharge question but not much action on the part of those who claim to be injured by the lack of an honorable discharge. As of the first week in June only 39,279 applications had been phoned in to the special center established near Indianapolis, Indiana and only 539 deserters had turned themselves in. Combined, they represent just nine percent of the total eligibles.

The situation is so bad that the Carter administration proposed to order the Army to conduct an advertising campaign to sell the program. Congress reacted to this proposal with a dictum against spending appropriated money to advertise it.

By now it must be obvious that the great bulk of the people who acquired less-than-honorable discharges during the Vietnam period are not worried about it enough to make an effort to get the discharges upgraded. Each time the subject comes up for public discussion it is supported by the same people who gained notoriety through anti-Vietnam protests. It is the protestors, few of whom ever had any association with the military establishment, who have kept this peripheral issue alive while the war itself is rapidly fading into the past.

The current, over-generous effort should be the last. If it fails it is because the people who might benefit from it don't give a damn, not because an honest try hasn't been made. After all, it takes only a toll-free phone call to set the wheels in motion. If an honorable discharge isn't worth that much effort, President Carter's concern is unwarranted.