

Some Hid Out in the Open

Deserters Who Returned

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The first month of President Ford's clemency program has been full of surprises for returning military deserters and for the military staff that works seven days a week to process them

here at Camp Atterbury.

Many of the returnees, for example, said they have not been in hiding.

They said they spent the two to six years since they deserted living in their hometowns, holding jobs, raising families, filing yearly income tax returns under

their real names with their correct Social Security numbers.

Some said they even were arrested on civil charges without ever falling back into military custody, a statement that draws expressions of amazement from some other deserters

who are returning from exile in Canada.

Army Major Archibald M.S. McColl, the chief military counsel here, said the "overwhelming preponderance" of returnees deserted for personal reasons, such as family problems or inability to adjust to military life, and not because of opposition to the Vietnam war.

Many served in Vietnam before deserting, he said.

Some served more than once. "Most are the exact same kind of deserters you can find in peacetime," McColl said. "We've gotten very few politicals."

Twenty returnees interviewed here expressed surprise at the courteous treatment they have received and at the speed with which

they were processed out of the military. The Army said this reaction of surprise holds for all of the more than 1100 processed to date.

One group made it through the procedure last Wednesday in 16 hours.

Most returnees agreed that they'd made the right decision to return, however difficult it might have been. Most had received their terms of alternative service, generally 20 to 24 months.

Of the 20 interviewed — half of whom had been to Vietnam — 12 said they had not tried to hide after they deserted. One said he had gone to school, worked for four years under his own name, and been jailed twice, once for 30 days.

The returnees come here scared, not entirely convinced there isn't a nasty trick hidden somewhere, and they're prepared for a hostile reception with the usual military rules and red tape.

Instead, they found they do not have to wear uniforms, salute, pay attention to rank, face restrictions on when they leave the camp or where they go, or obey regulations on clothing or how to wear their hair.

Even the term "deserter" is shunned by the staff, which prefers to use "returnee" or "absentee."

McColl said the staff, handpicked from military camps around the country, has orders to treat returnees "with respect and courtesy."

Twenty-three-year-old returnee Guy Polito is impressed.

He thinks he will do alter-

native service rather than wait out the six remaining months he needs to become a Canadian citizen.

"There's no publicity up there about what it's like," Polito said. "I want to get a message back to the guys in Canada. Just tell 'em come on down, it's cool." A half dozen other deserters from Canada nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

There are about 12,000 Vietnam-era deserters, ac-

said, about 20 per cent of the entire Army's soldiers are black.

Once alternative service is completed, the program calls for those undesirable discharges to be exchanged for clemency discharges, which also make the returns ineligible for veterans' benefits.

Initially, more than 100 deserters a day were coming through the camp because the Army shipped in

according to Pentagon figures, but an estimated ten to 20 per cent are ineligible for amnesty because they are charged with offenses in addition to desertion.

Approximately 1000 men and three women had been processed out of the service here by last week, receiving their undesirable discharge papers and their terms of alternative service.

About 30 per cent of the deserters are black, McColl

convicted deserters already serving time in military prisons.

But the flow has steadily dropped to fewer than 50 a day, so low that preparations are under way to move the national processing center from here to Ft. Benjamin Harrison, close to Indianapolis, where the board that determines length of alternative service meets every day.

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