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September 6, 1974

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND AT-LARGE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Recently there has been a revival of interest around the amnesty issue. Gerald Ford is taking a less unyielding stand than the "get tough" policy of his predecessor.

To give the impression that he is trying to bring the American people back together, Ford is expected to propose a case-by-case conditional amnesty scheme for those who refused the draft or resisted the Vietnam war through other forms of individual protest. Whatever the specific outlines of Ford's plan, it will cover only a handful of the hundreds of thousands of men who were victimized by the Selective Service system and the U.S. military over the past decade. These include draft resisters, "deserters" and veterans with less-than-honorable discharges. The YSA stands unequivocally for universal and unconditional amnesty for all.

Already there has been some interest generated in calling protest meetings around this issue. Enclosed is a copy of a recent newsletter from the Americans Exiled in Canada (AMEX) calling for a September 29-October 6 National Week of Concern for Peace in Indochina and Amnesty for U.S. War Resisters.

YSA locals can take the initiative on the campuses to hold meetings, picket lines or forums with other forces around the amnesty issue. Student groups, veterans organizations, Black groups and parents whose sons are exiled in Canada and Sweden can be involved in such activity.

These activities can be of special interest to Blacks. Many Black GIs were given less-than-honorable discharges for participating in antiwar and anti-racist actions while in the service. This status denies them GI Bill educational benefits and other vocational opportunities. Enclosed is an account of the plight of these vets from the September Ebony magazine.

During the high point of the antiwar movement, we worked with a number of the groups that are now active around the amnesty issue. In New York, for instance, a September 28 amnesty action is being sponsored by the Peace Parade Committee, the local affiliate of the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, the "multi-issue peace coalition" dominated by the Communist Party.

Some of these organizations may try to push the "Implement the Paris Accords" line that is included in the IMLX statement. We do not support this slogan because the accords include many U.S.-imposed provisions that violate the right of self-determination for the Vietnamese people. We should not associate our name with leaflets or press statements that advance this slogan. Our interest is to build the broadest possible united front around universal and unconditional amnesty. Along with this central slogan, we can call for an end to U.S. aid to the Thieu dictatorship and for the release of South Vietnam's 200,000 political prisoners.


In some cases, where the relationship of forces is such that the "Implement" line is advanced by the organizers of the amnesty actions in a major way, we can still participate and build the actions with our own leaflets, signs and banners focused on amnesty and No U.S. Aid to Thieu, and through sales of our press and distribution of SWP campaign literature.

The interest around amnesty also provides the YSA an opportunity to conduct some education around the continuing war in Vietnam. We should consider holding campus forums on the topic "Amnesty and the Ongoing War in Vietnam." YSA student government and SWP election campaigns will also want to take up amnesty in speeches and statements.

Locals should contact the YSA National Office about any actions in which they participate. Articles on the events should be sent to the Young Socialist and The Militant.

Further material relating to our position on amnesty can be found in Fred Lovgren's article in the May YS. Comrades should also refer to the editorial in the Sept. 13 Militant.

Comradely,

  
Steve Clark  
YSA National Office

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AMEX/CANADA

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AMERICAN EXILE COMMUNIQUE--August 23, 1974

Dear Friends in the Movement Against U.S. Imperialism,

On August 19, the new President, Gerald Ford, announced that while he rejects amnesty for war resisters, he also rejects revenge. He went on to offer a program of "earned re-entry" for what he called "the 50,000 of our countrymen loosely described as draft dodgers and deserters." This program would involve investigation of each individual case and application of "a penalty to fit the individual mistake."

As Ford himself was the first to admit, this is not amnesty. It is just a more sophisticated but no less conservative effort than that of Ford's predecessor to label war resisters as law breakers and to divide us from the majority who need amnesty: those now underground and in prison because of their active opposition to the U.S. war in Indochina, and the half million Vietnam era veterans with less than honorable discharges.

Significantly, Ford's statement did not mention the unpopular and illegal U.S. war in Indochina, which still rages in violation of the January 1973 Ceasefire Agreement, with American advisors and dollars propping up the dictators Thieu and Lon Nol and causing the deaths of as many Indochinese now as in 1972, and the imprisonment of thousands of South Vietnamese Political Prisoners. Of course, the criminality of this war policy could not be admitted without granting universal and unconditional amnesty, and we believe that by continuing to struggle for total amnesty we are also waging a crucial "war to explain the war" to the American people, thereby building resistance to continued U.S. aggression in the Third World.

It should be noted that Ford's early action on amnesty is an indication of the importance of the issue. As we have said, once Nixon is gone, the real battle for amnesty begins. Ford has now launched a national debate and struggle on amnesty, which we should take up sharply. It is also clear that some who wish for us to forget Nixon's crimes would like to trade "partial amnesty" for war resisters with full amnesty for Nixon. But we want no part of such trade-offs--Nixon is a criminal and war resisters are not. The fight for amnesty is a battle for justice.

If we are to continue this struggle, we need your support--now more than ever. There are those conservative liberal elements (like the New York Times) that care little for justice or peace and would gladly support Ford's "earned re-entry" proposal as fair and wise. Thus they crown the new President with the laurels of

reconciliator and peace-maker while the Indochinese continue to die and the war resisters are still punished.

We are therefore asking you who encouraged our resistance to the war, to now redouble your efforts to win universal and unconditional amnesty. Now is a most sensitive time, when your action could mean the difference between full amnesty or many more long months in exile, prison, underground, or suffering with less than honorable discharges, for those of us who resisted the war. We believe that the new Administration can and must be pushed until we can win total amnesty.

Especially now, in the coming weeks, we call on you to vigorously organize popular demands for universal and unconditional amnesty, freedom for the South Vietnamese Political Prisoners, and a full implementation of the Peace Agreement. September 29 to October 6 has been named the National Week of Concern for Peace in Indochina and Amnesty for U.S. War Resisters. We urge you during that time to mobilize in every possible way to build support and pressure for these demands. Follow the lead of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization and the National Council for Universal and Unconditional Amnesty, and organize support in every possible constituency. We are counting on you.

UNIVERSAL AND UNCONDITIONAL AMNESTY FOR ALL WAR RESISTERS!

FREE THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE POLITICAL PRISONERS!

IMPLEMENT THE PEACE AGREEMENTS/END AID TO THIEU AND LON NOL!

(Subscriptions to AMEX-CANADA cost \$5.00 and are available from:  
P.O. Box 189 Station P, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S7 Canada.)

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## BLACK VETERANS: THE FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF VIETNAM

From Ebony--September, 1974

By Peter Bailey

Reentry into civilian life is often made difficult by lingering effects of biased military policies.

"Being Black and having that 'bad paper' is a major problem." With this bitter observation, 27-year-old Vietnam War veteran Earl Abrams of Chicago accurately describes the situation confronting the many thousands of his peers who came out of that controversial war with less-than-honorable discharges. Abrams, who heads the Concerned Veterans of the West Side, a loosely formed organization of some 400 Vietnam vets, all with combat experience and less-than-honorable discharges spent 16 months in Vietnam combat as a weapon and demolition specialist. For his time he got shell fragment wounds in his back, head and feet, a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart, and a Bad Conduct Discharge.

"You know what I got this for," Abrams says, his eyes flashing with anger, "for being AWOL in my tent. I hadn't run away or anything but I didn't report for reveille every morning because of the danger involved. Too many dudes had been blown away by Viet Cong rockets while standing in formation. They knew I was in my tent, but they kept marking me AWOL. Finally, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, disorder reigned in Vietnam. After things quieted down, an order came down to get rid of all so-called trouble-makers and militants as fast as possible. They went back six months to find things to charge people with. I ended up getting 13 months of hard labor at Ft. Leavenworth and a Bad Conduct Discharge."

By now, Abrams was pacing the floor of the small apartment he shares with his wife and daughter, his voice getting angrier and angrier. "Man, I didn't want to go to Vietnam in the first place. They had to shackle and handcuff 43 brothers to get us out of Ft. Benning, Ga. We had told them we weren't going, so they put us in the stockade. Then they took us handcuffed and shackled to the Oakland, Calif., embarkation point. They didn't take those things off until we were on the way to Vietnam. Now they have practically put me under the life sentence of that bad paper."

He is correct about that. As long as Abrams and his colleagues have those less-than-honorable discharges, their future remains uncertain. The "bad papers" will hover over them like ominous shadows. The bad conduct discharge that plagues Abrams is one of five basic types of discharges issued by the military. The others are "honorable," "general," (under honorable conditions), "undesired and dishonorable." The first three are issued under administrative action which means that they are given by a commanding officer, exercising general court martial jurisdiction, upon the recommendation of an Administrative Discharge Board. Such boards are not judicial bodies. Once the service decides that a man is to be brought before a board to determine his suitability to remain in service, the serviceman must be notified that he has the right to representation by counsel or to submit statements in his own behalf or to waive his appearance before the board which is tantamount to acceptance

without contest. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the young soldier, fed up with the military, anxious to get out and having no knowledge of the long-range consequences of less-than-honorable discharges, eagerly takes the third option, usually ending up with the undesirable discharge.

The use of the administrative discharges has been a powerful weapon in the hands of the military to rid itself of people it doesn't want or to discipline those it considers trouble-makers. Notes Michael Martin, a Silver Star-Purple Heart Vietnam vet who coordinates veterans affairs at the University of Missouri in St. Louis, "The administrative discharge became a mechanism for the military to rid itself of people they didn't dig or who were too difficult to handle, without going through the cost of a court martial. What happened was the brothers were pimped by the federal government. They got everything they wanted out of them, then they cut them loose." Supporting this view is statistics compiled by Otilio Mighty, director of veterans affairs for the New York Urban League. They show that the number of less-than-honorable discharges issued by the military increased significantly from 32,914 in 1967 to 87,960 in 1972. There was an especially large jump in the undesirable figures from 9,920 in 1967 to 40,018 in 1972. "The most interesting thing about the figures," observes Mighty, himself an Air Force veteran and a 20-year worker in the field of veterans affairs, "is that while the undesirables, which are issued administratively, increased so much, the number of bad conducts and dishonorables which require at least the semblance of due process, remained almost the same." It is obvious that the issuance of undesirables saves the military time and money not only in service, but even afterwards. Vets with undesirables are ineligible for any benefits. This means literally millions of dollars saved in education, medical and housing benefits.

Mighty, a man not known to bite his tongue, hooks up the tremendous increase in less-than-honorable discharges with an almost forgotten project started by former Sec. of Defense Robert S. McNamara in 1966. "It was a classic con job," declares Mighty. "McNamara came up with an idea supposedly as a means to upgrade ill-educated and/or basically deficient blacks and poor whites who couldn't meet the military standards. They would take these guys into the service, upgrade their health and skills and then incorporate them into the military, especially the Army and Marine Corps. Presumably after they re-entered civilian life, they would be better equipped to survive." That's what Project 100,000 was supposed to do. What it really did was something else altogether, according to Mighty. "The reality of the situation was this," he explains. "At the time, due to student deferments and middle-income whites getting medical disability statements from their private doctors or going off to Canada, the military was feeling the pinch of a manpower shortage. They needed bodies fast and where better to turn than the politically, economically and socially powerless sons of minority groups and/or poor people. They took all of those young dudes in, having lured them with all those promises and nothing happened. A bare minority may have been helped but most ended up getting the worst assignments, including combat duty in Vietnam where many of them were killed or wounded. Many more ended up getting undesirable discharges. Project 100,000 was nothing more than a guise to deal

with manpower shortage." What the project finally ended up doing was setting up confrontations between thousands of poor, black youth influenced by the liberation movement and the stiff traditions of a military system which is dominated by Southern and small town whites in its NCO and officers corps. The result was conflicts, misunderstandings and less-than-honorable discharges.

These discharges, in turn, led to their being denied most all GI benefits, even after combat duty. This means no education, housing and medical benefits; no GI Bill, no jobs with local, city or federal governments, which includes the post office, transit systems, anti-poverty programs, etc. It's the same in private industry. Mighty says he has had to deal with employer after employer who refused to hire anyone with a bad discharge.

Vets with bad discharges find it harder, if not impossible, to procure life and medical insurance, mortgages, home improvement loans, bonding or credit. They can't even get on welfare. So, now thousands of young men in their early 20s are severely hampered in job hunting, unable to get help from government authorities, resentful, angry, hang around in many areas of the country. What happens next is predictable. According to Brown, "Many veterans without the means to make an honest living are sometimes forced to do so by illegal means. The ACLU Foundation reports that a startling proportion of the black prisoners in the jails of this country are men with less-than-honorable discharges. The vicious cycle of discrimination in the discharge process aggravates the drug abuse and crime problem in ghetto communities and the problem of unemployment, cynicism and mutual destructiveness."

And as if less-than-honorable discharges are not enough, the military has come up with an even more ingenious way of dealing with those whom it considers trouble-makers, the infamous code numbers. All discharge papers (DD Form 214) include one of these numbers at a top corner of the discharge. Its purpose is to state the reason for the discharge--i.e., 248-Unsuitability, 246-Discharged for the good of the service, 265-Character disorders, 368-Anti-social personality. The Defense Dept. insists that these orders are confidential but according to Brown, "it is our understanding that most big employers have access to resources for decoding them despite Defense Dept. denials." Urban League Executive Director Vernon Jordan Jr. points out that "the really vicious part about all this is that the veteran himself has no idea what the code means or why it was put there. He has no opportunity to challenge it or determine who made the judgment or do anything about it immediately. All this compounds the employment problem faced by minorities, especially since racial attitudes on the part of some officers and NCO's is prejudicial. And with blacks making up a fifth of today's Army, the problem is bound to become worse." A veteran can walk around with an honorable discharge being turned down for job after job without knowing why, all because of a small number such as 461 for "inadequate personality" (whatever that means), on his discharge.

Under pressure from various groups, the Defense Department announced that "After May 1, 1974, those veterans who request to have their separation codes interpreted will be provided this information. Similarly those who request to have the separation codes

deleted from their copy of the DD Form 214, will be provided a new copy with the information deleted." Skeptics are watching closely to see if and how the new policy is carried out.

Dealing with the less-than-honorable discharges will be immeasurably more difficult. Concerned experts in the field of veterans affairs have come up with several suggestions. One is from a former Army major, West Point instructor and Vietnam veteran Carl McCarden, who is former head of New York City's Mayor's Office for Veterans Action and the coordinator of an extensive series on Vietnam vet problems for Penthouse Magazine. As spokesman for the Vietnam Veterans of America, McCarden says, "In view of the many difficulties and delays involved in pursuing reviews of military discharges, and because of the severe financial, social and emotional problems being inflicted on young, immature veterans as a result of less-than-honorable discharges, it is proposed that each serviceman, upon separation from the military, be issued a single certificate of service indicating his date of good military service. This certificate will indicate to prospective employers the serviceman's date of induction and date of separation from the military and would in no way give an employer any reason to handicap the veteran because of certain indiscretions that occurred while in military duty."

Mighty and Brown take an even more radical approach. They insist that any amnesty granted to those who fled to Canada rather than go to Vietnam includes vets with less-than-honorable discharges. In a statement directed towards those who support amnesty for the men who fled to Canada, Mighty declares: "We will support amnesty for those men who avoided the draft by fleeing to Canada and other foreign countries, provided the men who did not avoid the draft, the men who went to war, but who were rewarded with discharges other than honorable, are given the same opportunity to have their undesirable, general and such other discharges changed to honorable. And it must be made clear, to the politicians, churchmen and others presently calling for amnesty that they can expect to be challenged on all fronts not only by black people, but by all people who recognize the application of the double standard in this new call for amnesty."

How will the authorities respond to these suggestions? What are they going to do about what Mighty calls "the cruel and unusual punishment" that has been inflicted on so many thousands of Vietnam vets? That very unpopular war was fought mainly by the have-nots of this affluent society. A continuation of the current veteran policies will insure that most of them will remain have-nots or worse.