

U.S. Soldiers Vote With Their Feet:

NEW YORK (LNS) — The Army used to have the final word. Bucking the military was like fighting City Hall — futile, completely hopeless. Not any more. Now, GIs are saying No to the Army in increasing numbers.

According to the Wall Street Journal, 500 GIs desert every day of the week.

LIFE IS BAD

Army life is bad. It always has been. The food's no good, the work is rotten, the discipline absurd. These are standards. Why, then asks the WSJ, has the desertion rate tripled in the past three years? Obviously, it's the war and the movement.

Right now some 23,000 ex-soldiers have been gone from their bases for over thirty days and are therefore classified as deserters. This "military absenteeism" is really disturbing the brass, who have to worry about spending all that time and money trying to catch up with these men as well as maintaining "morale" among the rest of the troops.

"Morale" couldn't be much in an Army from which fully 10% of its soldiers feel free to leave when they want to. In the fiscal year ending June 30 (the Army runs on fiscal years, which tells you something right there) 56,000 men deserted and 10% of the 1.5 million soldiers went AWOL at one time or another.

FIGURE LOW

Even these figures are low, however. Clerks at various Army posts admit they routinely reduce reported AWOL figures by as much as 25% because their "superiors" feel that all those men picking up and leaving will look bad on their own records. The officers, of course, deny all this.

The Army doesn't know how to deal with this mammoth rejection of its authority. If they come down hard on the deserters the "morale" will get even lower and GIs more angry. If they're too soft then everybody will split. On top of that, the stockades are already full to overflowing with political prisoners and other military discipline-breakers — and they want to get everybody they can over to Vietnam. They are uptight, indeed.

REPERCUSSIONS

In an effort to intimidate new recruits into sticking around (fully one-fifth of all Army recruits go over the hill for at least a while before they've been in the service five months) the Army has tried brow-beating recruits with tales of "possible repercussions"

involved in getting picked up on the outside. This just seems to make soldiers take better care not to get caught.

But mostly, the Army has tended not to rock the boat. Sentences for going AWOL have been generally light. The exception to this rule is in cases against the soldiers who have made a large political point about leaving the Army. In those cases they have frequently trumped up other charges against the men and have tried to lock them away forever. Political prisoners scare the Army the most — since the Army survives on discipline and those who challenge this authority are the gravest threat to the Army's security — and they come down most heavily on them.

AWOL IS FTA

For the average apolitical GI, going AWOL just means FTA — Fuck The Army. Guys used to accept the absurd life as part of what you had to go through. Now, they're actively rejecting it.

The Army got a great surprise last Christmas. Usually after the holidays guys stay out for a little while. They've been home, tasted normal life, and decided the Army wasn't the way they wanted to live. In time, however, this usually wears off and — out of fear, duty or simple intimidation — they return to their camps.

LOST 10,000 YEARS

At Ft. Knox, desertions are up 300%, and AWOLs are up 200%, with no prospect of the rate dropping. The Army lost 10,000 man-years of service last year to dissident soldiers talking with their feet. And it promises to get even higher. The AWOL rate has doubled in two years, the war's going worse, and the movement is strong.

Among the soldiers who don't desert the Army, a Pentagon Colonel explains with less than enormous satisfaction, is the "militant who doesn't desert because he wants to fight the Army from within."

They seem to be doing their work well.

Army Desertions Up 300%



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