

American exiles call it discriminatory

Carter's "pardon" does little for deserters

By MAXINE KOPEL

In 1970, Jack Colhoun packed his suitcase in his Wisconsin home and, without turning back, came to Toronto to try and establish a new life for himself.

Colhoun is one of thousands of American war evaders now living in Canada, Sweden, or France. Some are waiting for the opportunity to return home, while others have adopted the lifestyles of their host countries as their own.

Unemployed, Colhoun turned to Amex-Canada, a magazine and organization designed to help newly-arrived Americans get a fresh start on a new life and a new home. Today, with a PhD from York University in American history, Colhoun is co-editor of Amex-Canada, and is helping other Americans who, like himself seven years ago, suddenly find themselves in a foreign country with nowhere to go and nowhere to turn to.

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Colhoun is paid by Amex-Canada and lives with two Americans whom he met through the organization. Their home is cluttered with various Toronto and out of town and country newspapers. The phone is constantly ringing with inquiries pertaining to Amex-Canada by Americans seeking answers to their questions. Reporters, cameras, and film crews have made the Summerhill area home a public entity.

Colhoun is originally from Philadelphia and later moved to New York, then Wisconsin, to attend school. In September of 1963, following his high school graduation from a small New York high school, Colhoun enrolled in the ROTC, (Reserve Officers Training Corps) unaware of what committing himself meant. "No one knew anything about Viet Nam in Northern New York, so I enrolled in ROTC."

During his years in the ROTC, Colhoun attended university in Toledo, and later transferred to the University of Wisconsin, where he was "confronted with the committee to end the war in Viet Nam. I took literature, read a lot, and slowly changed my position on the war."

"While I went through basic training in the army, I listened to arguments and weighed them. I was brought up in a very conservative, the government is never wrong upbringing. It took two years of reading literature before I became sceptical. Basic training brought it into focus."

Basic training was a matter of survival, according to Colhoun. It meant carrying a nine-pound rifle in 110° heat and being commanded to hold it at arm's length for five minutes, if something is done wrong, until the trainee is on the verge of fainting.

"They (ROTC) taught you that the Vietnamese were subhuman. They told you to kill anyone who wasn't white, or they'd kill you."

In the fall of 1965, Colhoun informed his mother and friends that he would not serve. "I was against the war before I finished ROTC but I couldn't get out. You could resign in the last year, but they classified you as 1A, and you were drafted."

"In my third year I wanted to

quit. But I would be immediately drafted in retaliation, or I would just get drafted anyways."

In September of the same year, Colhoun signed his second contract with the ROTC, as he had agreed to do when he enrolled. Also, his father had just died.

An increased number of American troops was entering the war. "Like most Americans, I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't."

Colhoun was not a typical ROTC trainee. "I carried poetry books and novels into ROTC. Most of them were in engineering." His hatred for the ROTC and the war movement kept growing, and finally climaxed with the anti-Dow demonstration.

"It was said that Dow chemical was making napalm. It burned the skin, and the only way to get the napalm off the skin was to cut the skin off. I couldn't believe Americans would do this. I thought it was 'Commie anti-war people' who made up the myth. I went to the demonstration to get both sides. There was a counter demonstration by a group of the ROTC. They carried signs like 'Napalm is good for Viet Cong acne.'"

Colhoun claims this counter-demonstration received high praise from the ROTC.

Finally, in 1968, Colhoun completed the ROTC as a second lieutenant of the US Army military police and became a full participant in the anti-war movement. He wanted to get a new start on life after the military and decided to apply to the University of Wisconsin graduate school in American history. Thus, by remaining in school, Colhoun was granted a student deferment, delaying any possible draft notice for two more years. He also tried to get a branch transfer to avoid being drafted, but that failed. Obtaining Conscientious Objector status, in which a person may avoid being called on grounds of moral attitude, also was out of the picture. "There are three in ten chances in being accepted. If you're denied, you get



harassed. Then you can still be sent to Viet Nam. It's not a good option."

Like thousands of other students, Colhoun was hoping the war would end before he graduated. Unfortunately, it did not. In June of 1970, he was active in the anti-war movement. But when then-president Nixon sent troops into Cambodia, Colhoun decided it was time to consider different means of avoiding the draft.

"I thought of committing myself to a mental institution, but I worked



Jack Colhoun, editor of amex-Canada, a Toronto-based magazine about Americans in Canada, exiled for refusing to fight in Vietnam.

with the mentally-retarded, and I know that once you commit yourself, you might not get out for a long time. I thought of cutting off my trigger finger — a friend of mine did that — but I thought I might want it someday. I thought of going to jail, but I didn't want to. The last thing I considered was coming here.

"I went through physical and mental exams, and tried to get exempt. Two military doctors said I wasn't suited but they were overruled. Two US senators and congresspersons worked on my case. You had rights on paper, but not in reality. It was like Catch 22."

"From 1968-70 I was a second lieutenant on reserve status. I went AWOL. If I stayed in the States, I would've gone to jail" But, continues Colhoun, that would have been useless. "Why should I go to jail when the president and vice-president (Nixon and Spiro Agnew) support the shooting of students?" (This is in reference to Kent State, when, on May 4, 1970, four students were gunned down by national guardsmen during a campus demonstration).

"I decided to come here." Colhoun received landed immigrant status at the border. "Getting landed immigrant status was easy. It worked on the point system. I was white, middle class, had general skills, and plenty of letters of recommendation." Colhoun stated that most resisters fall into this category. Deserters, according to Colhoun, belong to low income, minority groups. "Many deserters did not get landed immigrant status. It depended on your class and race. I realized this after a while. This is when my interest in amnesty arose." (It is no longer possible to acquire Canadian landed immigrant status from within the country; an immigrant must return to his home country to apply for such status).

Colhoun wanted to help other war evaders. During his first year in Canada, he was active in anti-draft programs, helping newly arrived Americans get jobs and "put down roots." He eventually joined the Amex-Canada staff, and in late 1971 became a member of the editorial board.

It's difficult for Colhoun to understand why he was exiled, and why some people react distastefully to his actions. "If the war was wrong, then it was wrong to fight it. It's hard for people to accept this. They say, 'work through the system to change it.' But how?"

"It's hard ... I want to go back but I can't. There's no difference between resisters and deserters. It's just the timing, when you did it. Guys in universities got defer-

ments. The others didn't have the same option."

By "others", Colhoun refers to the lower class and minority groups who weren't able to go to university, due to financial circumstances or racial discrimination. On university campuses, knowledge of the war was more prevalent and easy to reach; students learned sooner what was evolving. But, claims Colhoun, men in the working world who were not exposed to anti-war campus organizations, rallies, and literature did not learn soon

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enough what being drafted meant. Students who opted to leave the US were classified as resisters; they refused to be inducted once they received their notice. Those men already drafted or in military, like Colhoun, who decided to leave, or go AWOL, became known as deserters. They fled the US after pledging to serve.

"The only difference," Colhoun, emphasizes, "is the timing."

Approximately one-half of the 20,000 war evaders in Canada are eligible under Carter's amnesty plan. But not all 10,000 men can still return home, claims Colhoun. Many evaders have been in Canada from 5-12 years, and about 7500 of these men have become Canadian citizens. Many have since married, started families, and acquired jobs. "It's easy to melt in (to Canadian society), you just have to learn enough of the minimal things." Then men that have become Canadian would also have to apply for American citizenship. As Colhoun states, "they would go back to virtual uncertainty."

None of the evaders have returned to the US since fleeing, as crossing the border could mean imprisonment. Draft resisters may now return legally. But since some friends and family were bitter about their men running, it is uncertain as to how these same folks would welcome the returnees.

Colhoun's own experience with his family is a bittersweet one. His widowed mother fully supported his

decision to go AWOL. However, six weeks after his arrival in Toronto, Colhoun learned his mother had terminal cancer. An only child, Colhoun could not return to the States to visit his mother, and knew he would not be able to attend her funeral. "I didn't have much money to call, so I wrote a lot." The last time Colhoun spoke to his mother — the night before she died — "there was perfect communication." Mrs. Colhoun didn't want her son to attend her funeral, due to the possible consequences. "I was afraid my aunt would spoil things by bringing up the war, but she didn't. No one gave me trouble, there was no problem. I had a lot of support. Others didn't. Over the years, people come to accept it."

Colhoun sees quite a bit of anti-Americanism in Toronto. "A lot of it is justified. Coke is more expensive. You pay 2c more for 2 ounces less, than in the States. Things made in the US cost more here. Economic dependence is on the US."

Colhoun personally confronted anti-American sentiments from peers while attending York; the discovery by some natives that Colhoun was American astounded them. "I'd give rides to hitchhikers on St. Lawrence (where the road signs are). They'd ask me what I'm taking, and I would just say history. They'd ask me what kind. When I'd answer (Colhoun pauses here) 'American,' they'd look at me and say (Colhoun finishes in a sarcastic tone) 'are you American?'"

Amex-Canada magazine is printed in a small basement office at 614 Huron Street. The magazine has developed into a highly sophisticated magazine with complex amnesty issues, explains Colhoun. Many of its editors have returned to the States as well as travelling to different parts of Canada to work on amnesty programs.

The magazine currently has two editors. Although Amex-Canada is bi-monthly, there were no issues last year. "We spent a year creating the events we are writing about," says Colhoun. A few of these events include devising a program for the National Amnesty Council, doing media work, letters to the editors campaigns, a conference, following candidates across the US (by those who could legally travel) and staging an eleven-day vigil in Washington to express sympathy for the men excluded from Carter's amnesty plan.

Amex-Canada has a subscribers' list of 4000 names, internationally dispersed; a majority of the subscribers reside in the US, Canada, Sweden, and France. With a phone call to 924-6012 or a letter to the Amex-Canada office plus a five dollar donation, any one can have his name added to the list. Between 3,000-11,000 additional copies are printed and distributed, to bookstores, including the York Bookstore.

When asked why he thought President Carter gave amnesty only to resisters, Colhoun replied, "I don't know. You'd have to ask him. If I had to go to Viet Nam, I would resist."

Colhoun doesn't think many Americans in Canada voted in the past election. "Some didn't try to get out. But why should we endorse someone who went against deserters?" Colhoun doubts whether the absentee ballots sent by those who did vote were even counted.

Colhoun has received death threats and hate mail, but doesn't let it bother him or slow him down. "It's not as bad as it was before. Instead, Jack Colhoun continues to fight for his cause. "We were right so many years in advance."