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BWB-20
An American Deserter in Sweden

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

My previous newsletter began with an explanation that a trip to the States had postponed my writing about Swedish students. This newsletter, on the other hand, is being written just a few days after I have my notes in hand again--notes that I made during a talk of several hours with Desmond Carraghan, one of the first deserters from West Germany to Sweden, and then agreed to leave with him when, midway through our conversation, a friend of his called to warn him against talking to me. I had heard that it would be difficult to gain the confidence of these young men who have cast themselves out from the mainstream of American life, young men who belong to a group that Vice President Spiro Agnew damned as "deserters, malcontents, radicals, incendiaries, the civil and uncivil disobedients among our young." Said Agnew, "I would swap the whole damn zoo for a single platoon of the kind of young Americans I saw in Vietnam."

With such loving words from the second-highest elected leader of the U. S., it is understandable that Hans Göran Franck, a tall, patrician lawyer who is a member of the Swedish Committee for Vietnam and who handles many of the deserters' legal problems, was very reluctant to give me names and telephone numbers. The deserters, I heard from several people in Sweden and the United States, had been given such bad publicity that they hesitated to have their fingers burned again. Mr. Franck relented and gave me the names of three young men who he thought might be willing to talk with me. I discovered afterwards, midway through my talk with Desmond, that he'd later regretted his decision and telephoned the three to warn them against an interview. But Desmond had been in classes at his computer training program, and he didn't get the message until late afternoon when we were already having tea. Since he felt he could not allow me to leave with my notes after being warned by Mr. Franck, we struck a bargain--Desmond would send me my notes after checking out the Institute with the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam.

We had already established some trust in each other through our conversation, so I left it at that, After all, although I think it important that the deserters take advantage of the means of expression that are offered them, some--like one whom I had called earlier that day--evidently did not bargain for the notoriety they would achieve

through a train or plane ride to Sweden. They took one step--desertion--either to avoid fighting a war in which they didn't believe, or to avoid fighting a war. But most are neither willing nor able to continue a political fight beyond their individual statement. "We have a right to our privacy, too," said one deserter, obviously angered. "We're not a bunch of guinea pigs to be studied by every journalist and sociologist who comes tripping through town. I'm a free-lance translator. I work during the day, not at night, and when I spend time talking to you that costs me money."

Happily for me, Desmond was not as cantankerous. Although he was preparing for an examination the next day, he told me when I called about 4 p.m. that he could take a couple of hours out then if I could arrange to come. I first bought some milk and cakes and cookies--it seemed proper to bring something edible when you arrive at tea-time--and went to the fourth-floor apartment he shares with his actress girlfriend.

The first phrase in my notebook indicates how quickly we discovered a mutual acquaintance--"tell eric to send back personal pix" refers to a Frankfurt photographer, Eric Meskauskas, who, on assignment for Life Magazine, accompanied Desmond to Sweden when he deserted. Since Eric is one of my close friends, I promised Desmond to remind Eric to return the pictures.

The next phrases in my notes provide the vital statistics--26, born in Great Britain (Glasgow), lived ten years in London, went with his mother and brother to Eugene, Ore., to live with his sister when their father died. His sister had married a "Navy lifer," Desmond said. Desmond went to public schools in Eugene, but never got around to taking out American citizenship.

"I was an immigrant with an immigrant's mentality," he told me. "I was three and a half years late registering for the draft. That's against the law. I could have served a jail sentence and been deported, or I could leave of my own free will. But I was hung up on the American way of life...so at 21 I joined the Army."

He went through basic training at Ft. Ord, Calif.; then radio communications training at Ft. Gordon, Ga.; then to Ft. Huachuca, Ari., for two months. From Arizona his unit was assigned to Vietnam. "I had enlisted to go to Europe, so the Army would have broken their contract if they'd sent me there."

This time a transfer worked--Desmond was assigned to Frankfurt in the Third Armored Division, as radio section chief for radio relay communications. He reached the rank of sergeant, was a non-com training officer, even graduated from the Non-Commissioned Officers' Academy. Desmond served in the U. S. Army for 31 months--"I left on 10 March 1968."

In training, Desmond said he "applied" himself, but gradually he began "to wake up to what the Army is about...I was in charge of men and had responsibility, and I began to see how the Army was screwing up men I cared about." One instance took place on Christmas Eve 1967--when "three hard guys got together to sing Christmas carols--we serenaded the duty sergeant. The crowd grew to more than a hundred, just singing in the barracks. But the duty sergeant called the MP's and said it was a riot." Desmond says it was anything but--just some lonely men away from home singing Christmas carols, "guys in shorts, t-shirts, shower slippers. The MP's came in and beat up some. They had a German riot squad sitting outside." And none of the brass even asked for an explanation, but the unit commander ordered a midnight bedcheck the next day "to prevent further occurrences."

By the time Desmond was selected by his superiors to go to the Non-Com Academy, he was already "anti-Army. They sent me against my will, but I couldn't disobey. I went through the torture course--they tortured me to show me what it would be like in the hands of the North Vietnamese--they thought I was a great soldier then because I know how to screw a guy up without his knowing it." (An Army release about this "escape and evasion" course offers details on concentration camp treatment "designed to psyche him out and shake his [the prisoner's] will: 15 minutes of holding an M14 at arm's length, a force-fed dose of nauseous cold green slop, medieval stocks, the sleeping-bag treatment--which isolates prisoners in the sweaty darkness of a zippered-tight flop sack spinning upside-down from a tree.")

Desmond said his "anti-Army" group of friends included a black, and they were all interested in the Black Power movement in the States. But some soldier started a rumor that the group were homosexuals. "The Army was ready to consider us guilty without any investigation, so we went to the chaplain and complained. The CID (Criminal Investigations Division) did an investigation and had a battalion inspection, but they reached no conclusion. So on our files it said, 'investigated for homosexuality but no conclusions.'" That open-ended remark was just as bad as if it were true, said Desmond.

There was another incident in which one of the soldiers in his unit had a bad trip on dope, and he needed to be hospitalized. But the sergeant-major refused. "He wanted to get out with his stripes, so he refused to take the rap." When the first sergeant was transferred and the word got out that a new first sergeant would be appointed from within the company, Desmond said it was "the guy with the most booze" who got the promotion.

Such incidents may sound like sour grapes to some who have had no close connection with the U. S. Army, but corruption and repression within the military is an old story, one that has kept the admittedly sensational watchdog newspaper The Overseas Weekly filled with similar legitimate gripes since 1950, and one that attracted international

attention in October 1969 when the Senate investigated Sgt. Major of the Army William O. Wooldridge and his cohorts in what one newsmagazine called "the khaki Cosa Nostra."

Even attempts at black humor were frowned upon in Desmond's company, he told me. When a GI thumbtacked the famous picture of the Saigon police chief with his revolver touching the temple of a Vietnamese woman next to a clip from an English magazine with the caption, "What did you do in the Great War?"--both clippings disappeared in short order.

Desmond's decision to desert to Sweden was partially the result of the Army's treatment of a pacifist friend. "He'd gone into the Army for the sake of comfort, just hoping he wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. He had already initiated interviews for conscientious objector status when his orders came through. He had seen the chaplain and the psychiatrist, but the company commander said he couldn't see him for two weeks. During all this time his 10/49 (request for transfer) lay unprocessed in the company clerk's basket."

"Robert decided to go to Sweden, so I typed him up two passes and forged the company clerk's signature. He checked out for a three-day weekend to see his cousin in Hanau (another "Army" town near Frankfurt.)We'd talked to the SDS in Frankfurt--they had a big campaign going supposedly to help deserters. They gave us a telephone number but there was no answer, and when we checked at this coffee house we found out they'd closed up shop." Desmond thinks the German leftist students cared less about helping the deserters than about using them for propaganda.

When his friend did not report for duty on Monday, the CID and military intelligence were called in. "I went through three interrogations, but I refused to give them any information about Robert--and very quickly I came down on orders (for Vietnam) too." One of the officers in his unit advised Desmond, "Don't go up to Sweden with all those Commies--they'll just use you."

Desmond said he'd had almost more than a stomachful of Army persuasion during a re-enlistment campaign three months earlier. Most of the guys in his unit were as dissatisfied as he, and there were "17 and 18-year-olds signing up for three more years, just to get out of the unit in Germany--I knew those kids wouldn't stand a chance in Vietnam. They weren't smart enough to duck." Seeing how the Army coerced his fellow GI's into re-enlistment and "then I saw what happened to Robert...and I said to hell with the American dream."

Since he was on orders for Vietnam, Desmond stayed around the base for 29 days with his bags packed, "and they pretty well knew I was going to desert. They tried to talk me out of it. The sergeant said, 'Go there and give it a chance.' I told him, 'Okay, and if I

don't like it, do I get to go home?'"

Desmond had requested money from his Army savings "to send to my mother since I was on my way to Vietnam." With this $1,000 he checked out on March 10, a Sunday morning, "to go to church." Instead he took a plane from the Frankfurt airport to Stockholm. Unlike some of the 300 to 400 GI deserters who have arrived in Sweden since 1967, Desmond had a relatively pleasant welcome, smoothed by Mr. Franck and the Swedish Committee for Vietnam, who sent him to stay temporarily with a well-to-do couple, both industrial psychologists, who live in a 12-room villa in Saltsjöbaden, a wealthy suburb of Stockholm.

Other deserters found the going rougher. Before an official Swedish government statement in February 1969 which clarified the policy on deserters, the Swedish Aliens' Commission was inconsistent--first tough, then easy--in its treatment of American deserters. "Decisions were changed back and forth. One deserter was treated differently from another. Deserters were sentenced to expulsion after very small crimes...many deserters had a very bad time," according to a paper on "The Legal Status of the American Deserters in Sweden" released by the Swedish Committee for Vietnam. (The Swedish Committee, by the way, is no fly-by-night organization, but one supported by 187 trade unions, political and peace groups, the Society of Friends and the Central Council of the Church of Sweden. Its chairman is Gunnar Myrdal.)

Curiously, the Swedes have never considered the deserters as political refugees, nor have they been particularly happy at the publicity the nation has received for its shelter of the runaway GI's. Prime Minister Olof Palme told the German magazine Der Spiegel some months ago that "we have 300 deserters, correct. In Canada they have 10,000. We also have 10,000 refugees from the East. If we treated these deserters any differently, we would be breaking our social-humanitarian policy. That would really be causing a scandal. We would be breaking our treaty with the U. S. A. if we extradited the deserters."

In fact, however, the American deserters are treated differently from refugees from the East since they have the status of "humanitarian asylum" as opposed to "political asylum." A political refugee, under Swedish law, is someone who in his home country is politically persecuted or politically prosecuted or is threatened by a stiff penalty after a political crime. A political refugee can only be expelled or deported under exceptional circumstances, for example if he is a danger to the national security or if he has committed very severe crimes. Under the "humanitarian asylum" status the GI receives a resident permit--even if he has no passport, money or a work permit (GI's seldom have a passport, and application for a work permit must ordinarily be made before entering Sweden)--with the stipulation that his case be reviewed by the Aliens' Commission every three or six (or later every six or twelve) months. The government statement in

February 1969 strengthened the "humanitarian asylum" status by adding these qualifications:

1) to achieve more security for the deserters the government declares that the mere fact that the fighting stops in Vietnam does not mean that the deserters shall be refused continued asylum,

2) the execution of decisions on expulsion shall be postponed,

3) deportation because of crimes will not be executed when there is a matter of more severe crimes,

4) applications to the Aliens' Commission shall be handled without delay,

5) special efforts will be made to give these immigrants instruction in the Swedish language, job training and so forth,

6) those who stand a risk of being sent to a battlefield will be granted this asylum.

The government declaration, says the Swedish Committee for Vietnam, "is a compromise. The government does not recognize the fact that desertion often is a political act in itself, and if there is a penalty stated, it is also a political crime."

Nonetheless, the government makes available to American deserters social aid which amounts to $16 to $20 per week plus a monthly sum of $30 to $40 to cover housing expenses. Medical insurance is granted upon presentation of an alien's passport (valid only in Sweden and not for traveling in other countries, or for re-entry into Sweden). Courses in the Swedish language are available free of charge, and GI deserters may also enroll in evening or folk high schools, or at a university if they have two years of college credits.

With the $1,000 he'd brought along, Desmond didn't need to sign up for social aid until three months after his arrival. He stayed with the family in Saltsjöbaden for a few days until he contacted his friend Robert. "You're on a natural high for the first two weeks," he recalled. "I listened to the birds and the kids and took long walks. On my second day in Sweden I signed up for a language course and waited two weeks for it to start." He and his friend rented a room in town, and spent as little money as possible. "I ate one meal a day. After my money ran out, the social bureau paid my rent and gave me $15 a week, but that didn't stretch--for two weeks we lived off jam and hard bread."

Desmond and his friend, who entered the university for his master's in philosophy after learning the language, were among the first deserters

to come to Sweden. "This was when not even the Swedes knew anything.". when there was no organization, no arrangements for integrating the deserters into the community. "I studied Swedish three hours a day, but I couldn't get a job because I had no residence permit--they were thinking I'd go on to England, I suppose, but I couldn't because I'd be turned over to the U. S. there." After he completed the first language course, he signed up for a more intensive labor union-sponsored language course, seven hours per day, which paid him $130 a month. "I stayed there until August 1968 when I enrolled in a folk high school--I wanted to get to know the Swedes. We studied Swedish history, civics, math, religion, singing," and he met his girl friend Annika, who also was a student there. Through Annika's theatrical connections, Desmond landed a job as a lighting technician at the Royal Dramatic Theater, where he worked until August 1969. Since then he has been studying computer programming and systems analysis.

Desmond told me he believes he made a quicker adjustment to Swedish life than other deserters because "I never wanted to go back to the U. S....after seven years I will apply for Swedish citizenship. I wasn't looking back, but some of them tried to create a community based on an emotional need, their natural isolation."

Some of the deserters, no question about it, were maladjusted and their motives may have been questionable. "Some are in debt, some have problems, some escape from the stockade, a lot say they oppose the war," a U. S. Army public relations spokesman in Heidelberg told me. "One of two deserters returning to New York last March was expelled from Sweden after serving a jail term in Sweden for theft." He could not tell me what happened to either of those returnees, but Pvt. Roy Ray Jones III, who returned to his unit in West Germany after fourteen months in Sweden, was sentenced to four months at hard labor.

There is no across-the-board penalty for desertion, since each case is handled by the unit involved. Penalties can range from a conviction of AWOL in a special court-martial (maximum, six months in confinement); AWOL conviction in a general court-martial (maximum, one year in confinement and dishonorable discharge); desertion with intent to remain away permanently (maximum, three years if involuntary return, two years if voluntary); to desertion with intent to shirk important service (maximum, five years). Most returnees to the U. S. Army Europe have been charged with AWOL, the Heidelberg office said, and sentences have ranged from three months to a year.

A civilian attorney who has handled several returning deserter cases told me the Army is not as forgiving of deserters as they would have it appear. The relatively light penalty in the Jones case, he said, "was an Army gimmick to entice other deserters back." Additionally, if deserters have taken part in political activities while they are absent from duty, these activities "would have a prejudicial effect" on a subsequent court-martial. Political activities on the part of deserters could be construed as subversion or aiding and

abetting the enemy, or could even lead to a charge of treason.

Desmond said he has been choosy about what kind of political activity he participates in in Sweden. He has written speeches, he spoke at one rally, but he found much of the political agitation too dogmatic. An example of what he terms counter-productive agitation is a movie made by two Swedes about the American deserter community in Stockholm and titled "Deserter USA." "Say the word manifesto to an American and he paints you red," he told me, "and that's all this movie was about...dogmatic and repelling symbols." A second movie, made by a deserter and involving just one guy on camera who'd been in Vietnam, he found worthwhile. It's called "Terry Whitmore, for Example."

As far as his own political ideas are concerned, Desmond calls himself a socialist. But he says he'll "never vote or take part in politics here until I have the right to be in parliament myself. I can understand why I won't be prime minister, but I should be able to hold other offices." He believes in working within the system--"I don't believe in the politics of the gun just yet. I feel many people in movements around the world just pick an allegiance like the answer to a multiple choice question--I'll be a Democrat, they say, and so they pattern themselves after these people and they use the literature to defend their choice."

I asked him what he thinks of the student movement in the U. S. "Eventually there's going to be another revolution in the United States," he said, "when the people see their own kids getting smeared by the government they voted for...there'll be a revolution." He spoke of a "tolerance level" being broken that in pre-Johnson days was "flexible, but now it is very brittle. The American people have been looking through a glass window to China, Russia, South America. All the symbols, everything they held sacred, are being questioned, and they see that the repression is in their own back yard." But he feels the American students are no longer the pacesetters in the student movement, that they've begun to take over European tactics.

Desmond believes his status as a deserter in Sweden demands a political responsibility, but "I take on here a political role I can realize...creating a climate for other deserters. I don't give myself up to the movement. I don't like studying what I'm studying, but it's an international job. I can leave here and I don't have to be a dishwasher." He said he feels the GI's have "set a precedent... I think there'll be other deserters from other wars. In 1955 when people deserted to Korea, there was shame. Now a deserter can walk around here and not be self-conscious." Nonetheless, he said about thirty percent of the American deserters in Sweden want to go back to the U. S. "It will probably reach 70 percent if an amnesty is given." But he doesn't expect amnesty to come soon--"as long as they have troops in Vietnam they won't give us amnesty--maybe they'll think about it in ten years."

His family in the United States has reacted variously to his act of desertion. "My mother supports my decision, my sister writes nice letters talking about all the furniture she's bought, and the trips she takes with her husband to Washington, D. C. And my brother ignores me. He's in college now and he probably can't face the situation."

Desmond has helped some West German deserters find their way to Finland, but in that country deserters don't yet have humanitarian asylum, only the permission to stay and work. "We have to work at the right time," said Desmond. Although the deserters in Sweden would prefer to be granted political asylum, which would give them the right to travel and alleviate the visa paperwork, Desmond said he and some of the other "old hands" are now applying for a lesser status called Bosättningstillstånd which would make them legal residents and offer the freedom to travel without asking for permission from the government.

Some measures which the Swedes have taken to assist the deserters have failed, he said. "The government set up a camp for deserters outside of Stockholm, but very few people go out there. They don't want to go back to the Army life when they just left." Nor do the Swedes understand the American mentality, the insistance on a high standard of living with hot and cold running water and other conveniences. "For other immigrants, Sweden has been a step up," Desmond said bluntly, "for us it's a step down." And the facilities for genuine integration of the immigrants are meager--"The Swedes aren't friendly, even to themselves. Contact is difficult and it has its levels."

Obviously, the community of deserters made mistakes too. "At first we took on a hippie Haight-Asbury look, and we were outside the system." Most people played up the differences instead of the similarities. "Unfortunately, we have some journalists who come up here and, for two bits, want us to stand up and talk for two hours like a nickelodeon." And because the deserters themselves are "exceptions, we run into exceptions...when you get here the only Swedes you meet are the leftists. You're the cocktail nigger for a month or so. At first you're oriented to those who speak English. But when you learn the language, when you learn to cuss and drink with them, then you learn more about the real Swede, who is just like the Americans."

"They have an apathetic attitude to anything other than their summer house and their two vacations. There's a great deal of comfort in all their motivations. The job they work at may not be comfortable, but that provides for the other comforts. There are hippies and straights just like any other society but they don't interact. All the Swedes are hip enough to know that the ethnic Swede is boring--the rage here is London, Paris, New York." And contrary to general opinion, said Desmond, there are also Swedes who support the American position in Vietnam. "I met a kid who wanted to join the U. S. Marines."

Desmond said he found Sweden a nation in which it is easy to relax, "but lonely...there's no trust between them." He offered a description of the typical Swedish life pattern: "At 18 or 19 you meet a girl, save until you get 30,000 crowns for a home--it costs that much if you want to live near town--then you save to furnish it, to get a car, to get a summer house, to get a boat. For the first 15 years you eat sausage and potatoes or sausage and rice and save all your money. But after you have all the material benefits you might change your political party. As you rise in class you become a conservative." Members of the higher classes "look down on those with social aid," he said, while the lower class has "a guts attitude about it." Some of the leveling "equality" programs of the government are not having the desired effect, said Desmond. "The doctors in Sweden are talking about immigration. I have a doctor friend whose salary was cut back from 125,000 to 57,000 crowns per year. The doctors are going into the black market, charging 80 crowns at night for a visit instead of the 7-crown visit during the day, when everybody goes, but it takes hours to see him."

Desmond thinks the Swedes are creating problems and they don't see how to cure them. He believes the solution to the narcotics traffic is to open more clubs for young people, with cheaper drinks. "They have social services set up for alcoholics and they can handle that."

The lack of social services designed especially for deserters has contributed to the bad reputation acquired by the deserter community in Sweden. In a letter accompanying my notes, Desmond included the following statistics from the Swedish Immigration Department about the crime rate among the deserters: 10 deserters have been convicted and sentenced to terms of one to 3.5 years for grave narcotic crimes (selling either LSD, hash or pills); 43 have been convicted and sentenced to one to four months for possession of narcotics; 32 have been fined for petty crimes such as shoplifting. He added a comment from the immigration official who handles the deserter cases: asked by a Se (a Swedish magazine) interviewer if there had not been several convictions for crimes among the deserters, Kristina Nystrom replied: "Yes, but most of the convicted deserters come from that group which came to Sweden before an organization was created to help them. They had it hard. They became involved in the narcotics group. And some of them today are deeply scared and don't care about anything."

There's reason for their fear. Gunnar Hubinette of the conservative party recently told the Swedish parliament that he thought deserters should be put through a more intensive examination upon entry into Sweden, that contact should be made with their military units to obtain a character history or an idea of what type of person they were letting into the country. He also advocated stricter controls over the actions and lives of deserters who have already been accepted into Sweden. Desmond comments: "Prior to the latest hate campaign, the deserters were treated as ordinary immigrants in the question of crime and the immigrant. An immigrant has to receive a conviction of a crime bringing

a sentence of a year or more before deportation comes into the discussion. But now the deserters are being treated as they were in the beginning...a sentence of six months or more results in automatic deportation for a deserter."

Realizing the growing sensitivity of the situation, some deserters and Swedes, Desmond writes, have "gotten together and in the past few weeks have accomplished a great deal. We have acquired the use of an old restaurant three days a week. We have received a grant of 60,000 Swedish crowns and with this we are opening a day center for deserters. It will have a very loose format, perhaps the only rule that will be followed from the first is that the center shall not be used in any way for furthering of formal political ideas or views. Informally, no one is going to stop political discussion, but the in-fighting has produced too many factions, and we really want this to be a place where people in need of contact can make that contact in an atmosphere where informal avenues of advice can be channeled in their direction. There will also be a soft-sell anti-drug campaign directed toward the clients."

The idea for an anti-drug campaign, said Desmond, made the project possible, since the money has been given by a Swedish foundation set up to inform the public and change the authorities' attitudes and the laws toward narcotics and those who use them. The foundation itself, however, "has taken no part in the actual creation of the center, for they are aware of the ethnic and cultural problems involved in the situation. They are also aware that there is a wealth of helpful people in the deserter community itself," writes Desmond, adding: "like help like: it's the only way."

Desmond said he will work six hours each week at the center and deal primarily with administrative functions. He adds this testimonial: "You know that I believe it is inconsistent to jeopardize the community here by using grass or hash. It smacks of anarchy, and although I have little contact with the community in general, I still feel an obligation to the reasons that brought me to this land: a conscious care for my fellow man and a total disregard for the power and authority of government bodies or their agencies that take my allegiance for granted, who count me as a member, supporter, when they did not give me the right to take back my allegience without being kicked out of the environment that fostered it. I use them to my own gains, well aware of what they exact from me by way of retribution."

Desmond Carraghan impressed me as a responsible, questioning, thinking young man--one who should not be penalized for his form of protest against the war in Vietnam. There are surely others like him among the deserters in Sweden and the deserters and draft dodgers in Canada, others who could contribute to the future of the United States if some legal solution allowed them to return home. Bringing them

back would help to make up for the 42,000 plus who have been killed in a war that is still being fought on questionable grounds, with increasingly negative results at home and in Indochina.

Sincerely,

Barbara Bright

Barbara Bright

Received in New York on June 1, 1970.