Spring 1952

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Recommended Citation

Walter A. Lunden, Military Service and Criminality, 42 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 766 (1951-1952)

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MILITARY SERVICE AND CRIMINALITY

Walter A. Lunden

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In the aftermath of every major war certain people and some organizations give considerable credence to the idea that military service tends to create criminality in the men who have served in the armed forces of the nation after they return to civilian life. In some instances novels and movies popularize the notion that military duty fosters crime and disorder among men in arms after a war. After World War I such novels and plays as "What Price Glory?", "They Put a Gun in My Hand", "All Quiet on the Western Front" and "The Road Back" more than suggested that soldiering resulted in crime. Since World War II there has been less evidence of this idea, but when newspapers report a crime committed by some ex-G.I. his war record often appears in the account in such a manner as to intimate that military duty had something to do with the violation.

Because of this over-simplification of the cause of crime (military duty) this question and related matters have been investigated and reported here in a brief summary manner. The problem has been analyzed from three phases; 1) the number of ex-service men in correctional institutions in eight Mid-western States, 2) the records of a number of former service men now in the Iowa State Reformatory at Anamosa, Iowa, and 3) the relative importance of military duty and crime as indicated by prison authorities and the prisoners themselves.¹

NUMBER OF FORMER SERVICE MEN COMMITTED TO PRISONS

In 11 penal and correctional institutions in eight of the Mid-western states in the upper Mississippi Valley, 5,599 of the total 16,895 men committed during 1947, 1948 and 1949 had served at some time in the Armed Forces in World War I or II. In other words about one-third (33.2 percent) of the men sentenced to these institutions in the three years were former service men. The number of service men and the total

1. In making this study the writer has had the cooperation of a number of prison wardens and correctional authorities, the Iowa State Board of Control and approximately 200 men in the Iowa State Reformatory. Warden Foss Davis aided in the Anamosa survey and two Iowa State College students, H. E. McKinney and K. McCrae, assisted in the tabulations. Director C. E. Hays of the Coordination Service of the Veterans Administration, Washington, D. C., gave valuable suggestions to the material.

number committed varied according to the character of the prison, whether for older or younger offenders.

The Wisconsin data show the variation in percentages within the same state. For the three year period mentioned, 52 percent of the men committed to the Wisconsin State Reformatory at Green Bay (age limits 16 to 30 years) had served in World War II whereas in the Waupun State Prison (for older felons) only 35.7 percent had a military record. The percentage for the Iowa Reformatory at Anamosa was 46.7 percent whereas at the Iowa State Prison in Ft. Madison it was 25.4 percent. In each case the percentage of service men in the various reformatories was higher than in the respective prisons. This difference in percentages points to one of the primary factors in crime—the *element of age*.

Crimes, in the main, and especially property crimes, are committed by young men. Crime appears to be a prerogative of youth. Of the 400,089 arrests reported by the FBI in 1949 (January to June only) 62 percent of the men were under 35 years of age. When this percentage is related to the fact that 78.1 percent of the male veterans who served in World War II were under 35 years of age as of June 30, 1949, there is little surprise that one-third of the men committed to the prisons were former service men.² These men committed their crimes not because they were veterans with military duty behind them but because they were young men with an average age of 23.8 years. The average age of these men was about six years less than all veterans. Age, therefore, as a selective element is the important factor in crime and not duty or time in the armed forces of the nation. These same men, because they were young men, would most likely have committed crimes had they never been in the military.

In analyzing the entire problem due consideration should be given to the prisoners who have never served in the forces. What about the two-thirds of the men committed in the same years who have not been in the armed forces of the nation? If military duty is to be considered as an important factor, how can it be explained that two-thirds of the men had never served the nation as a soldier, sailor or marine and yet had committed a crime serious enough to bring them into the same institutions? This fact is often overlooked.

2. These data on ages were obtained from the Veterans Administration (Washington, D. C.) and cover information for 14,434,000 veterans' records reproduced from official Armed Forces records. As of 1948 the average age of these veterans was 29.8 years. As of June 30, 1949, the average age of World War II veterans in civil life was 29.9 years.

PRE-MILITARY RECORD OF SERVICE MEN IN PRISONS

In order to appreciate the relationship between military service and criminality it will be necessary to determine the conduct of prisoners before they entered the armed forces. Did they have a police or institutional record before entering the army or navy? Available data from two states for a three year period show that 70 percent of the service men committed to the institutions had been in conflict with the law prior to entering the military. This means that almost three-fourths of these ex-G.I.s in prison had a "record" before entering the service. It also reveals that after discharge from the armed forces these men reverted to their old peace time habits of "mixing with the law." At this point it is important to indicate that during the war years a number of men in institutions and on parole were inducted directly into the various branches of the services. Complete data are not available for all states, but in New York State alone the Division of Parole reported 8,598 men had been released to the armed services as of December 31, 1946.³

In almost three-fourth of the cases, therefore, it was not the military services which caused these men to commit crimes after discharge but conditions prior to the war. Their pattern of conduct had been fixed before they put on the uniform. This is a significant factor which the average person overlooks in drawing hasty conclusions about the crimes of ex-service men. It may be natural to assume that men in uniform are a select group but it should be remembered that an army in war times is but a cross section of any given population, no better and no worse.

A WORD FROM THE WARDENS

In order to widen the scope of the investigation a number of wardens were asked to express their judgment on the following question.

Has military experience, circumstances of training or combat duty had any effect on the ex-service men in your prison which may be related to their crime? Can it be said that certain episodes, conditions or circumstances of war caused changes in these men which may have led them into crime after their discharge and return to civilian life?

The statements below are typical of the wardens' viewpoints.

Warden "A"

In remote cases, the physical or nervous condition of an individual might be attributed to some experience in military service but we do not attribute the criminal act to any particular effect of military service.

3. 17th Annual Report, Division of Parole, State of New York, Albany, New York, p. 138.

Warden "B"

I cannot believe that military experience, circumstances of training or combat duty could have too much effect on the ex-service man in this institution which may be related to their crimes. I think there are some who like to use this as an excuse.

Warden "C"

It is my opinion that military service either in training or in combat has nothing to do with a man getting into trouble or in prison. It may have a slight effect on the fact that they are well away from their moorings and home attachments, but otherwise I do not think it has anything to do with it.

Warden "D"

It is my notion that military experience, circumstances of training or combat duty, had little effect on the ex-service man in our prison which may be related to their crimes. I have a notion that hasty wartime marriages, long separations from their families, and the fact that the service man returned home to find his best girl married to some one else, or his wife had divorced him to marry some one else or had been carrying on in a disgraceful way may be an upsetting factor to the extent that it indirectly contributed to the man's coming to prison.

THE CASE RECORDS OF 156 EX-SERVICE MEN IN PRISON

From the above general information the analysis next turns to a study of the individual case records of 156 ex-service men who were in the Iowa State Reformatory, Anamosa, Iowa, some time during 1949. The data were obtained from two primary sources, the records in the files of the Iowa State Board of Control and from information supplied by the men themselves.

Of the 156 men, 106 (68 percent) had served in the army, 39 (25 percent) in the navy, five in the marines, two in the coast guard and four in the merchant marine. The length of service varied from less than one year to eight years. Of the total, 56 (35.9 percent) had served one year or less, 40 (25.6 percent) two years, and 21 (13.4 percent) three years. The average time was 28 months which is two months less than the average for all World War II veterans as reported by the Veterans Administration. About two-thirds (64.7 percent) of the men held an honorable discharge and one-third "other than honorable." In contrast to these percentages, 98.7 percent of all men discharged from the service between September 1940 and October 1948, received honorable, whereas only 1.3 percent dishonorable or other than honorable discharges.⁴ These differences are highly important in explaining the behavior of ex-service men in prison. In addition, 17 of the prisoners reported that they had been involved in serious quarrels or fights while

4. Information supplied by Veterans Administration in letter from C. E. Hayes. December 5, 1950.

in uniform and 50 had been court martialed for various causes, with A.W.O.L. as the main reason. As is to be expected, because of age, 75 percent of the men committed crimes after the war which were directly related to property, whereas only eight percent dealt with sex offenses. The largest percentage for any single offense was 23.0 percent for "forgery." About one-third (34.5 percent) of the men were repeaters (45, two time and six, three time losers). The time lapse between offenses averaged one year and six months. Also 16.8 percent had blood-relatives in some other correctional institution.

In terms of intelligence scores, 8.4 percent of the men were "defective mentally" (I.Q. scores below 70 points), 17.3 percent were "borderline" cases (scores of 70 to 79 points) and 12.8 percent were "dull normal" with ratings of 80 to 89 points. Thirty-five percent scored an I.Q. of 100 or above. Of the total number, 45.9 percent scored 90 or below.

EXTENT OF MILITARY SERVICE

Because certain information was not available for some of the men the sample was reduced to 125 ex-service men in the reformatory. Of these 125 men, 57 had served within the United States, seven in North Africa, 24 in Europe and 37 in the Pacific theatre. Of the 68 who had served in foreign theatres 31 had taken part in various campaigns. Two had fought through the Normandy Invasion, four in Northern France, seven in North Africa, five in Central Europe and 13 in various battles in the Pacific area. (The Philippines, Marianas, Guam, New Guinea, Okinawa and Iwo Jima.) None of the men had ever been taken prisoner of war and seven had been wounded. There were 22 decorations and citations distributed among those who had served abroad, five Purple Hearts, one Oak Leaf Cluster, three Bronze Stars, four Presidential Citations, five Good Conduct Awards and four with various Allied decorations. It is impossible to compare the records of these men with others in the service, but in general their record shows a "Good Report."

MILITARY EXPERIENCE AND CRIMES

Each of the ex-service men was asked the following question, among others:

In your judgment do you think that your experience in the armed forces in any way can be connected with the offense which you committed? If so, how?

Twenty-seven (27) percent of the men said "Yes" to this question, 63 percent replied "No" and 10 percent were "Undecided." Of the one-fourth who explained "How" the following are typical answers:

We were trained to fight. We took usually what we wanted. Gambling in camp too.

I never started drinking till I got in the army and never stole anything.

While I was in Korea there was not a place for swimming, the same movies were shown over and over, lack of fresh food and milk, lack of recreation facilities.

Wild life on pass and losing a person's wish to stay put. Not being able to readjust and settle down.

We were sent over to the South Pacific where we had to go without a lot of things and we were shoved around a lot more than what we would have if we were state side duty. And no entertainment.

In order to clarify the situation further the men were asked an additional question.

Some people think that the armed forces have made "hard boiled," "tough boys" out of good boys all of which may have caused them to commit crimes. What is your judgment of such an idea?

Of the total, 10 percent replied "Yes," 20.2 percent "Some," 3.7 percent stated "Not for most men," 38.5 percent replied "No" and 27.5 percent were "Undecided" about the matter. The following are a few of the replies:

In some cases yes, but for myself no. I believe I benefited a lot from being in the service.

It certainly didn't make any pansies of them.

It is not at all possible. I have 3 brothers serving. And they are always in the best of spirits. Even after being injured.

The service is a good place for a good man.

I was a thief before I ever went into the army.

I do not believe that the majority of the offenders can blame their past life in the service. There are so many more who went through the service and are not in prison.

That idea is foolish. In my opinion, you came out as you went in, in some cases, (More knowledge and older) those bad went in bad.

No, because the boys growing up today who were not in the service are just as bad as they were then.

The service accents and brings out whatever a man may be and changes one very little.

Another question, if answered at all, brought uniform replies:

In your judgment how can the Veterans Administration or some service organization help you now and when you are released.

A number of the men wanted to reinlist in the armed forces in order to "Clear up" their discharge and obtain a "Clean Record." A large number requested some type of vocational training while in the reformatory and after release. Not a few pointed out that the Veterans

Administration might help when the time came for their parole or release. Some of the men needed help in clearing up insurance and disability problems. A large number suggested that the Veterans Administration could help much if a representative interviewed the men in the reformatory in helping them to plan for the time after release "to live as a creditable part of the community." It may be that this is not the work of the Veterans Administration but 5,999 veterans in 11 institutions in eight different states in the upper-Mississippi Valley constitute no small problem. The respective institutions are doing what can be done within the limits of the prison, but it should not be forgotten that these men are "Veterans."

THE PURPLE HEARTS IN PRISON

A 35th Division Infantryman:

He is an Iowa born boy and a Des Moines high school graduate. He served in Southern France and Central Europe and was wounded on March 7, 1945 in Germany, after which he spent 72 days in the 203rd General Hospital in St. Cloud, France. He was awarded the Purple Heart, a Presidential Citation and a Bronze Star. While on active duty he was court marshalled once for being A.W.O.L. and given 30 days arrest and a fine. In December, 1945 he was honorably discharged and obtained a job as a truck driver earning \$40 a week one week after reaching home. He had earned \$45 a week before going into the army. After 18 months of service in the army as a private in three campaigns he said, "I'm not tough or hard boiled and military service is not connected with my crime—forgery." He has never drawn compensation and "I do not know enough about the V.A. to realize they can help me at all."

A Navy Purple Heart:

This boy came from Illinois whose parents moved six times before he was 16 years of age. Before enlisting in the navy he was earning \$38 a week. He took part in the North African operations and was wounded in the Invasion of Salerno. He was hospitalized "off and on" from then until he was discharged. While on duty he was court martialled once for being A.W.O.L. and given a 30 day sentence. After 28 months in the navy he received an honorable discharge and obtained a job 15 days later paying \$40 a week. Since then he has been arrested three times for grand larceny and once for breaking and entering which brought him to the Anamosa Reformatory. At one time he drew \$15 a month compensation. He believed that his military service was related to his crimes. "All the time in the service (as an Able Seaman) you are given orders. When I came out it was difficult for me to take orders and that is why I have given up some very good jobs."

A Bastonge Purple Heart:

Here is a boy from Missouri who was drafted into the army in 1943 after which he served almost three years. He took part in the campaign of Northern France and was wounded four miles north of Bastonge on December 30, 1944. He was evacuated to the 140th General Hospital in Blandford, England where he remained until May 1945. He was awarded the Purple Heart and Good Conduct. He reinlisted and was finally given a discharge "other than honorable" in 1949. He has drawn \$13.80 a month compensation. The next day after he

returned home he obtained a job as a truck driver earning \$35 a week. Later he was charged with bigamy and sentenced to the Anamosa Reformatory. In the service he had no court marshal record and was never "busted." He believes that his offense was due to "too much drinking." "A fellow learned a lot about guns and liquor in the army, but a man does not change because of these conditions." "The people in my town never knew there was a war on. All they knew was how much meat they did not get and cannot understand why a fellow raised a little Cain after discharge."

SUMMARY

It cannot be said with any degree of certainty that military experience causes service men to commit crimes after they return to civilian life, because:

1. More than two-thirds of the men committed in the years and institutions under investigation had no military record and yet they broke the law.
2. Almost three-fourths of the ex-service men in prisons had a police or crime record before entering the armed forces.
3. The age of the offender is far more important than his military experiences in accounting for his crime.
4. About one-third of the men had serious trouble while in the forces before they were discharged.
5. Conditions at home after their return from duty often played an important part in their conduct.
6. Two-thirds of the men, themselves, indicated that their own military experience was not related to their crimes.
7. All the wardens stated that military service and subsequent crimes have little or no connection.

It is possible that in 10 percent of the cases military experience may have had some connection with later civilian crimes. Finally, some governmental agency, service clubs or organizations could do much for a large number of imprisoned ex-service men. The Veterans Administration has Contact Service men in the seventy regional offices of the country but these operations often fail to reach the men in prison. Minnesota has a separate State Department of Veterans Affairs which has a complete file of each inmate in the several state mental and correctional institutions. If or when a veteran is committed to a state reformatory or prison the department compiles a complete report of the man's civil and military record. If such a program could be incorporated into the work of the federal and regional Veterans Administration more could be done to help the veteran "to live as a creditable part of the community" after release from prison.