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Combing the Draft for Slackers



The army is sifting through the 24,000,000 sheets of paper that comprise the story of the draft to enable the government to prosecute the selective service delinquents.

Officials Paralyzed by Task of Sorting 24,000,000 Selective Service Records, but Work Is Under Way

By ROGER WILLIAM RIIS

EGYPT had its plague of grasshoppers; Rome had its plague of Goths; Paris is just recovering from the plague of peace treaties; and Washington is in the throes of the plague of the selective service draft records.

This last plague, however, has some aspects of interest, particularly to members of The American Legion. Among the 24,000,000 sheets of paper that comprise the story of the draft are the inglorious names of some young men in whom the Legion is a little more than mildly interested—namely, the draft delinquents.

These valiant individuals, who retreated from the enemy even before battle was imminent, are to be sorted out of the enormous list; their names are to be published, and they are to be prosecuted. The army is combing the mass of records for the names of all men who dodged the draft, and it will proceed against them to the utmost of its ability. And thereby hangs a tale that may affect some who were not missing when the call was sounded.

State adjutants general and local boards reported 487,003 registrants as draft deserters. It is realized by The Adjutant General of the Army, however, that many of these names were mistakenly reported, because scores of men who did not answer their registration summons were already collecting service stripes in France. Before any action can be taken against the real deserters,

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the list must be cleared of the names of all the men who served elsewhere than in the original National Arm

So the list of nearly half a million names will be sent first to the War Department where the names of all "deserters" who served in the army will be eliminated. Then it will be sent to the Navy Department for similar action, and to the Marine Corps. When the list has been boiled down until The Adjutant General is certain that all the names thereon are genuine delinquents, it will be published for all to see, and the men will be prosecuted.

THE War Department will take care of actual deserters, the men who went into camp and then deserted. Such men are liable to prosecution at any time during their lives. The Department of Justice will get after the draft delinquents, who never answered the summons. At present they are liable only for a period of two years after the supposed date of their examination; and that period has passed for many. But a bill has recently been introduced in Congress to make these men liable for a period of six years after their offense was committed. This bill was drawn by a member of The American Legion and has been approved by its Legislative Committee. It merits prompt consideration by Congress, for it is doubtful justice that punishes the man who at least went as far as a camp, and passes up the man who lacked even that small amount of courage.

If a list of deserters and delinquents is to be made public, the compilers of that list must of course use every means to eliminate possibility of error. It wouldn't do to have General Pershing's name on the list, although beyond question he never appeared before a draft board. Then there was one man who was chasing U-boats in the North Sea when he got his pink card; he wired back to the board that he was on a fishing trip that could not be interrupted. His name may appear, and he may be haled before a court before he has time to take his Navy Cross off, which would prove embarrassing to everybody concerned.

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NOT long ago the War Department announced its intention of publishing this list, and warned all ex-service men that for safety's sake those who had not appeared before draft boards should notify The Adjutant General what other branch of the service they did serve in. Not a single man answered the warning.

There are curious features to the story of collecting these records. When the armistice had been signed, the Secretary of War sat in his office one day and thought back over the past few years. His reminiscences touched upon the draft, and of how he had been photographed in the act of groping in a big bowl for an elusive little capsule that would send some contented citizen into O. D. and discomfort for the duration. Next, he began to wonder what had become of all the elaborate statistics compiled by the draft boards, and then he decided that those statistics should be preserved for future use. They were the first wholesale survey of the nation's youth, physical, industrial, and

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social; they were also a good index of that youth's patriotism.

So on November 27, 1918, the Secretary of War directed that selective service organizations throughout the United States be closed, and that all records of draft boards and local headquarters be deposited in the office of The Adjutant General for safe keeping and reference. No sooner had the order gone out than there began to arrive in Washington a steady stream of boxes and crates, sent with suspicious alacrity by local and state boards. One hundred thousand cases poured into the capital, and army clerks began to scurry about looking for some place to keep them. Washington Barracks, the old engineer post, was finally chosen, and fourteen buildings were cleared for action.

FOR this was no affair of a single building or even two or three buildings. The boxes contained the records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, fifty-one state and territorial headquarters, 155 district boards, 4,648 local boards, 1,319 medical advisory boards, and 3,646 legal advisory boards. With file cases stacked five high, and the narrowest aisle space permissible for reasonable access (about four feet), records now occupy 168,000 square feet of floor space. Eight thousand tons of personalities have come to Washington to be overhauled.

The plague, you see, progresses. Starting with a few local posts more than two years ago, it now embraces official Washington. In the course of the above labor many army clerks and yeomen will doubtless perish among the files. Nor is that all. The Department of Labor has asked that it be permitted to use the records in order to assist in identifying men marked for deportation; and the Department of State will delve into them at the request of foreign governments hunting for deserters.

Colonel Frederick Wheeler, in charge of the records, chews savagely on the end of a cigar as he ponders over his problems. Five hundred and five clerks and laborers are at work on the papers now, but conservative estimates insist that double that number are needed. Where are they to come from? Only three and a half million dollars are available to run the whole proposition of keeping records, and there are all the clerks to pay, to say nothing of other expenses.

IT is the biggest filing task ever undertaken. The cases contain the registration papers of 24,000,000 men, and that's only half the story. Every paper is in duplicate, making 48,000,000 individual cases. The Adjutant General's Office believes it is absolutely necessary to check off the original cards against the duplicates in order to secure a reliable index. That means that 48,000,000 pieces of paper must be picked up, one by one, read and filed away; many of them must be corrected and copied. The present rate of progress per clerk is about 700 cards a day. And some folks believe the next war is only fifty years away.

In and out among the long aisles of steel file cases flit the haunted victims. There goes one, looking for the marriage certificate of Pete McGrady, who in excess of zeal to escape the draft sent in the original of that precious paper to the War Department. Now it must be ferreted out, although Pete has forgotten his draft number and has neglected to give the name of the county where he lives. There another haggard clerk is spending the second day of search for

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the papers in the case of Tony Nusco; he finds them at last, by chance, under Tony Unsko. An Italian or a Spaniard apparently never uses the same name twice if he can avoid it, which makes it difficult to pick his card out of 48,000,000. And here comes another victim, on the trail of the birth certificate of a man whose birth is doubted by some legal opponent. The certificate was turned over to a draft board in 1917 and is, perhaps, in Washington Barracks. That bent individual with the silver eagle on his shoulder is the man who is planning how to comply with the requests of the various states, which want complete records of their draftees in order to arrange their bonus payments. Minnesota, for example, denies a bonus to any man who at any time made claim for exemption as a conscientious objector. That means for the Washington Barracks force several more exhausted lives. And the incoming baskets are overflowing with thousands of untouched cases.

THUS the octopus sits in Washington, entwining more and more people every day. To be sure, the Secretary of War was right when he decided that the records would make a very valuable index of our nation's manhood; but then the Secretary did not have to file 48,000,000 papers. It is one thing to give an order and another thing to carry it out. The plague which struck the country when that first pellet was opened and the first number drawn is still with us. And it is spreading. Army officers are resigning, and as the writer of this story left Colonel Wheeler's office he heard an officer mutter, as he ran his hands wildly through his hair, "I don't even know who is going to pay for that load of coal we just had put in. The engineers are in the south, and they won't pay; this is their post, so The Adjutant General won't pay. And I'll be hanged if I'll pay myself. Tell 'em to take out the coal; I'd just as soon freeze to death as play with these records any more!"

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