



Inaptitude, Apathy, and Bed-wetting

DISCHARGE RECORDS

Walter Rose got out of the air force in 1961 with an honorable discharge. Like many other veterans, he found his discharge papers an asset in getting a job. He didn't know that the papers told employers more than they told him. The people who hired him understood a code number, SDN514, on the discharge papers which had been kept secret from Rose.

Several years later, Rose (not his real name) decided to change jobs. Honorable discharge papers in hand, he went for interviews. This time he got some funny looks. The code number on his discharge papers, SDN514, had meant a hardship discharge back in 1961. Now the air force had given it a new meaning; now it had been changed to mean homosexual.

SDN is the air force's acronym for Separation Designation Number. The army and navy equivalent is SPN, which stands for Separation Program Number. Every veteran discharged between 1955 and March 1974 has an SPN or SDN number on his discharge papers. Most of the 530 numbers used (see Appendix) were free of stigma. But in 1973 alone, 35,640 men who got out with honorable or general (under honorable conditions) discharges had "unsuitable" SPN numbers; 21,000 were coded as "character or behavior disorders"; another 10,000 were branded: "defective attitudes,

and an inability to expend effort consistently." Discharge codes said a veteran had "homosexual shirker" or was guilty of "disloyalty or acceptable conduct."

In all, about a million veterans have discharge codes. And, although the veterans know the meaning of the codes, the people at Firestone, Boeing, Chrysler, Standard Oil and other major employers did. They knew the veteran's discharge papers.

Before the meaning of some of these codes changed in March 1973, victimized veterans had a hard time. Publicity did not reach everyone affected. Many discharged veterans with stigmatizing numbers were mystified by the difficulties they have faced.

But the problem was not simply the secret labels themselves.

David Addlestone, the lawyer who directs the American Civil Liberties Rights Project, secured the first court order in February 1974. In a case challenging the discharge of soldiers in the European Command, Federal District Judge Gerhard Gesell said the government could go forward, "so long as evidence or the result of such procedures is not used as a basis for action, including judicial and nonjudicial action, under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and other than honorable discharge unaccompanied by SPN code or otherwise—of drug use or alcoholism."

Six weeks after Gesell's ruling the government announced it was abandoning SPN and SDN numbers. Unfavorable code numbers could now be used only for administrative purposes.

1. The list of the codes and their translation is reproduced on page 201.

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