

Just deserters? Just deserts?

*Operation Chaos:
The Vietnam Deserters Who Fought the CIA, the Brainwashers, and
Themselves*

Matthew Sweet

London: Picador, 2018; 351 pp., illustrations, notes

Anthony Frewin

There's a footnote to a footnote in the history of the Vietnam War, and that's the story of the deserters. It could be said to begin with the arrival in Stockholm in May 1968 of six deserters (Sweet's starting point) who had fled the fighting and had been ferried from Japan by a fishing vessel to a waiting Russian ship. After which they had been chaperoned and propagandised across the Soviet Union and ended up in Sweden, and were there welcomed by a country that prided itself on its progressive/liberal stance on all matters that counted. Many more soldiers followed. What could go wrong? Well, plenty, as Sweet demonstrates in exhaustive detail (and backed up by some 30 pages of notes that document every heartbeat).

The deserters' interaction with Swedish society seems to have been limited largely to girl-friends. But we should give them a break: there was an emergent Big Agenda that went beyond a mere fracas in south-east Asia. What was now on the table was World Revolution; and Capitalism – and its Power Structures – stood in the way.

Several deserters got involved in the politics of the American Deserters Committee that stirred up so much trouble many Swedes figured it was a CIA front. It could have been. Who knows? Even supposing there was no CIA involvement hereabouts, discord was sprouting up all over the place within the community anyway. As the ubiquitous Clancy Sigal said to Sweet: 'All deserters believed all other deserters were CIA.' Rather than let the deserters and their confrères squabble amongst themselves as they headed down the one way system to Sheol, the CIA did chip in with 'Operation Chaos', its attempt to counter domestic opposition to the Vietnam war. But this seems largely to have been as near a boondoggle as one can imagine. OK, it did produce a mountain

of paperwork, but¹

As the American Deserters Committee's membership declined, due to internal rifts and the changing climate, one of its co-founders was on the lookout for allies on the far left. This was the limpet-like Michael Vale.² He found an ally all right – and found one in spades as it were – in a Lyn Marcus, a.k.a. Lyndon La Rouche. Readers of *Lobster* will be familiar with this world class crazy and will not need a recital of his beliefs. Sweet's detailed account of the machinations here could have been condensed, but the Devil is in the detail.

Sweet has put himself in to the story and his *Quest for Corvo* approach makes some difficult and lengthy passages much more reader-friendly. This investigative study is a laudable achievement, but the publishers have let it down by not supplying an index. Naughty publishers!

¹ Sweet states (p. 95, *ex inf.* Frank Rafalko, former CIA) that 'Operation Chaos' was originally run from CIA HQ in rooms near to James Angleton's office in an area known as the Black Section, though, apparently, Angleton took little interest in it. According to Jefferson Morley, however, 'Chaos' had 40 employees and 'utilized' 130 agent sources – Jefferson Morley, *The Ghost: The Secret Life of CIA Spymaster James Jesus Angleton* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2017) pp. 218-9. Further, Morley contradicts Rafalko's claim.

² The Latin *vale* in the sense of goodbye, farewell, suits him admirably: always on the move, you never knew where he would pop up next.