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Exiled American Refused Pardon

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AP Photo

By ED McCULLOUGH, Associated Press Writer

STOCKHOLM, Sweden (AP) - Michael Bransome figured the harshest penalty for breaking the law to protest the Vietnam War would be a few years in jail, not a nearly lifelong separation from his mother, his family, his country.

On May 21, 1969 - a day he recalls was bathed in warm sunshine - he and two companions poured black paint over draft registration papers at the draft board in Silver Spring, Md. No one was injured. They politely waited to be arrested.

He was six days past his 18th birthday.

Tried and jailed, Bransome fled prison while on a furlough, in fear, he says, of death threats from other inmates. He fled his country, too, and now wants to go home. But appeals to the government have been rejected, and then-President Clinton ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) - whose pardons of higher-profile figures have raised controversy - never answered his plea for forgiveness.

"I had listened to Martin Luther King in person. I understood that civil disobedience was breaking the law for a purpose," says Bransome, now a 49-year-old physician. "I understood there would be punishment and I was ready to go to jail. ... I was willing to sacrifice part of my life if that meant some other young men wouldn't be sent to a war they didn't believe in."

Convicted of mutilating public records, Bransome was sentenced to three years in prison. In 1970, he was granted a furlough months ahead of a possible early release and ran away, making him a federal fugitive until that charge was dropped two decades later.

At 19, he sneaked into Canada, and a year later flew to Sweden. In Sweden, which offered sanctuary to hundreds of American war objectors, the dropout from Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, Md., learned a new language, started a business, studied and became a doctor, married, raised a family - and dreamed of returning home.

"My mother has been here once. One of my brothers has been here once," Bransome said. "I'm almost 50 years old. ... Being offered the possibility to go back to my own country is like being offered a trip to the moon."

He's afraid to go back because he doesn't know if he would be arrested and sent back to jail.

Soft-spoken, trim and energetic, Bransome has tried for years to get his sentence commuted by the Justice Department ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) or be pardoned by the president - as were 176 people, including fugitive financier Marc Rich ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) and convicted drug dealer Carlos Vignali, during Clinton's final days in office.

The Justice Department has a long-standing policy of not accepting pardon applications from nonresidents because it would be too hard to do the required background check, said a department spokeswoman, Susan Dryden.

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Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark said he filed a 1995 pardon request for Bransome and argues it should have been evaluated on its merits, not rejected simply because he was outside the country.

“The Michael Bransome story is a powerful story of justice and injustice, of war and peace and a young kid who got caught up in it all,” Clark said.

Bransome wrote to Clinton seeking clemency in December.

“I have followed your own path when it comes to Vietnam and would like to say that your words and ideas on the tragedy and the promise of Vietnam are very inspiring,” the letter said. “With your help, I can follow your entreaty to come home and offer my hands ‘to help bind the wounds, to heal and to build.’ ... Please, Mr. President, please bring me home.”

In the years since the Vietnam War, conditional amnesties have been granted for thousands of deserters and draft dodgers, and U.S. diplomatic ties have been renewed with the communist regime in Hanoi.

Prominent Swedish and American colleagues have written letters on Bransome's behalf, saying his life in Sweden has amply made up for his youthful act.

“After knowing Michael ... professionally and personally, it seems absurd to me that he still cannot go back to the United States,” said Urban Oesby, Bransome's supervisor at a research project on possible genetic roots of alcoholism.




Bransome says a pivotal event that shaped his life was the threat of violence in prison that he thought authorities could not prevent.

“If I had not been threatened, I would have returned” to jail, he says. “And my life would have turned out completely different. ... I wouldn't have come to Stockholm, or met my lovely wife, or have our two beautiful children. I wouldn't had had to wait 20 years to become a doctor.”

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