

Chapter 1

No Room for a CO

“Greetings.” The letter was from the President of the United States. On closer examination I discovered that the President had not written the letter at all, but that it was the voice of local Selective Service Board No. 5.

“Well, mom,” I said as casually as possible, handing her the letter, “this looks like the real thing.”

Mother did not answer after reading the notice. Folding the induction paper, she handed it back to me as she walked slowly toward the kitchen.

“You know,” I continued hopefully, “they might even reject me. It says here in fine print: ‘Persons reporting to the induction station in some instances may be rejected for physical or other reasons.’ It goes on to say you should ‘keep this in mind in arranging your affairs, to prevent any undue hardship if you are rejected at the induction station.’ Do you want me to read you some more?” I asked as I noticed her smiling.

“You don’t sound very patriotic to me.” She laughed softly.

“Well, I probably don’t sound too much like a flag waver, but you know very well that I’m as willing to go as is the next fellow.”

She nodded and went on drying dishes.

“We’ll talk about it later when your father comes home. Right now I wish you’d get me a little wood for the fire.”

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Out in the woodshed I mused to myself. “Undue hardships at being rejected - that’s a good one,” I said almost audibly. “Wouldn’t it be something if they did find a few things wrong? Maybe a hernia or some internal injury from sports. Who knows, maybe I’ll -”

“Is that wood on its way?” called mother impatiently.

“Coming.”

The screen door slammed behind me as I dropped the load of wood in the box. Mother eyed me suspiciously and then smiled in her usual knowing way. “No use daydreaming about it, son. You know very well you’ll have to go.”

Reluctantly I agreed. We had discussed this notification many times before, but now the dramatic moment seemed unreal. There were many problems connected with my being drafted that had been neglected until now. What about being a conscientious objector? Did I entertain these thoughts unnecessarily? Could I support my views with genuine will power when the test came?

In the midst of these thoughts dad stepped inside the door and gave me a pat on the shoulder.

“You look worried, son; what’s the trouble?”

Same old dad, I thought, home from the shop. He was kind and gentle with a clean, honest look, even though he was invariably greasy when he came home from work.

“Ah,” I complained, “they finally drafted me.”

He faced mother, and she nodded her confirmation.

There was something about the look on dad’s face that brought goose-pimples to my skin. “Dad, you make me feel that this’ll be the biggest thing in my life,” I said.

He smiled. “It might be, Jan. It might be.”

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That night after supper we all gathered around the fireplace to discuss the problem. My sister listened in on the conversation and stopped long enough to catch the gist of her older brother's situation.

Dad settled back in the easy chair and looked at me squarely through steel-gray eyes that seemed to read my thoughts. "Do you still feel the same about being a conscientious objector?" he asked.

The question was blunt and I liked it that way. There was no side-stepping the issue now. Did I really believe that it was wrong to take life? To be honest, I had not given the issue much thought; but now dad was forcing me to do some thinking.

"I don't see how a Christian could shoot someone," I answered, with the hope that this would lead him to do most of the talking.

"Neither do I, son. I was in the Navy during World War I, but since then I've changed my mind about this business of war."

This began a lengthy discussion on how to let the Army know that one did not believe in taking life. As I look back upon this family round table, I marvel at our general ignorance and lack of understanding of the tactical approach to the question. We had no idea as to the proper method of obtaining recognition for an objector status. I was able to obtain a letter from the good and understanding pastor of the church to which we belonged, a popular one. It read something like this:

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“TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

“Jan Doward has been examined and found to be a true conscientious objector. As his pastor I can personally testify that he believes in the teachings of Jesus to the extent that he will not take up the sword against his brother. With this in mind I suggest that he be placed in a noncombatant unit of service where he can manifest these teachings that he upholds.”

It was signed by the minister, with the hope that his suggestion would be accepted by my future superior officers.

If I was to be a “CO” I knew I must not be afraid of the future, and I don’t believe I was. The main trouble seemed to be that awful emptiness of leaving home and not knowing if I’d ever return. This thought bore down on me the night before I left for the reception center. The possible troubles that might occur over my beliefs or the potential trials that lurked in Army life did not bother me nearly as much as the thought of being where dad and mom could not give me comfort or cheer.

We had set up the card table that last evening to play a few games before bedtime. No one mentioned the next day. Something strange had happened to our happy family ever since I had returned from the induction center with the news that I was physically qualified for military service. We had a good time together that last evening - we always did; our family seemed to possess that indomitable spirit of producing a well-balanced program of wholesome laughter and genuine fun for all ages. Maybe it was the Irish blood or the type of home, but at any rate I am sure the one thing that held us close together was our sense of humor.

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“Good night, Jan,” called dad from his bedroom after the game was over. “Don’t stay awake and worry; everything will be all right.”

In the morning we had breakfast together as usual and then said our good-bys as if I were going to school. It all happened so quickly and unobtrusively that I felt as if I were in a dream. Dad took me to the railroad station, where I was to check in with the officers from Fort Lewis. I’m glad mother didn’t come along that morning, for the sight of other young men bidding their loved ones good-by would have been too much for her.

“By, dad.”

“Good-by, son,” he answered slowly. “If you need anything, be sure and call.”

I nodded and kissed him good-by.

“All right, men,” the officer in charge called. “Line up by the gate.”

After a brief roll call we hurried into the waiting cars. To be suddenly thrown into the company of fellows your own age yet from different backgrounds is a situation difficult to describe. The nearest thing to it, I suppose, is to imagine that you are on a crowded city bus and are suddenly told that you are to eat, sleep, and live together with the other passengers for the next few years. As the train pulled out of the Seattle station and headed toward Fort Lewis, the conversation seemed to dwindle into quiet undertones of speculation as to our immediate future.

“O.K., men, this is the end of the line,” called the officer. “Fall out on the double and line up on the platform.”

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“Fall out?” whispered a bewildered voice behind me. “He must be joking.”

From the platform we were whisked to waiting trucks and then to cold, impersonal barracks.

“Grab yourself a bunk and then fall out,” shouted a hoarse voice.

We all turned simultaneously and discovered ourselves face to face with a formidable one-striped individual who promptly informed us that he was the barracks leader. He sounded like a general, but I learned later that most Pfc’s conduct themselves that way at reception centers.

“Fall out on the double,” he barked again, this time sounding like an echo. In fact it seemed as if the first few hours of Army life were composed simply of echoes.

Outside the barracks we arranged ourselves somehow in the form of a line; however, the remarks of the Pfc seemed to disagree with our position and we began the milling process all over again.

“What’s the matter with you guys?” he growled. “Don’t you know a line from a circle?” This statement definitely destroyed what little order we had had.

“Never mind lining them up,” called another voice from the adjoining barracks. “The sergeant wants them over in the supply house right away.”

Like frightened sheep we huddled together waiting for someone to move. No one dared to whisper, although one brave soul did murmur something about the Army not being sure of its orders. In due time we were within the confines of the supply department receiving clothing and equipment faster than we could try them on. Perhaps this accounted for

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the misfits that paraded slowly back to the barracks. One poor fellow was rushed through so rapidly that his helmet almost covered his nose. Even the officers were ashamed of this monstrosity, and they promptly sent him back for a refit.

We were all burdened to the limit with clothing and equipment, and yet by slowly staggering back to our quarters we were able to say triumphantly to the still newer recruits, "We are outfitted."

"Fall out on the double," called the Pfc, as we hurried to put our clothes and equipment away.

I turned to the fellow bunking below me and sighed. "Haven't had time even to get things in order; have you?"

"Nope," he answered, trotting toward the door.

The term "fall out" can be taken very literally at a reception center. When the Pfc uttered the last "fall out" there was such a stampeding for the door that I waited timidly until the commotion was ended. By the time I reached the courtyard the other men were milling about in an unmilitary style that seemed to irk the Pfc. In due time, however, he was able to obtain a degree of order, followed by a new shout that needed no interpreting.

"At ease!"

There was silence among the men as a clumsy-looking gentleman with three stripes on his sleeve began to read the schedule we were to follow while stationed at the "center." An audible sigh rippled through the ranks when the time for reveille was announced.

"And believe me, men," he said sarcastically, "we'll see to it that you're up at 5:30 a.m., too."

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We all laughed, not at his words but at the clownish expression on his face. His fat jowls jiggled like a dish of jelly. We were glad for an opportunity to laugh, and we made the most of it while we could.

The next morning we discovered that the officers in charge were well equipped to keep their promises. Only those who have had the experience of being routed out of bed in the early gray dawn with scores of other men scrambling half naked in all directions can know what it means. How that Pfc could shout his threatening orders above the din and in less than twenty minutes have a barracksful of raw recruits dressed, shaved, showered, and standing in a semi perfect line for the first morning roll call will always remain a mystery to me.

“All right, men,” declared the sergeant, “we need about a dozen truck drivers who will volunteer for duty this morning. Any of you men who can drive a truck, step forward two paces.”

There was a shuffle as several dozen gullible newcomers stepped proudly forward to receive the “easy” task for the day. Somehow I was leery of this procedure and stood still. Then I smiled as the sergeant had a corporal march the volunteer “truck drivers” to the wheelbarrow shed, where they could be equipped for the day’s job of hauling rock and sod.

The amused expression soon disappeared from my face, however, as I was delegated to the “snipers” squad. I didn’t like picking up waste paper, but to spend the major portion of the day doing nothing more constructive than picking up cigarette butts became increasingly abhorrent as time passed.

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The first few days went by uneventfully, except perhaps the changes in work and the "shots." After my first series of punctures I was shivering under every available coat and blanket with all the symptoms of typhoid fever. For this the clinic placed in my trembling hands a packet of aspirin and an order to "be well by tomorrow." Somehow I was, too.

Whenever I think of those first few days in the Army, I can hear the calls of the other groups that were a few days ahead of ours in the process line. They always managed to shout, "You'll be sorry," regardless of where our straggling group was going. We realized they were right whenever we lined up at the door of the clinic.

The day finally arrived, as it inevitably does at all reception centers, when the recruits receive their aptitude tests and placement examinations. To the untutored rookie this is a day of endless rounds of questions and answers, but to those who have passed this way before it is nothing more than the day when bakers become clerks and cooks become well-qualified ambulance drivers. And to me this was the fateful day when I reluctantly declared that I was a conscientious objector. Why I did not tell sooner cannot be explained except by the valid excuse that I was ignorant. Anyway, it happened; and after it was said I knew there would be trouble. I could see it in the examining officer's eyes.

"One moment," he snapped. With this he stalked into an adjoining room and discussed the problem with his superior. I waited patiently; I had to, for there was nothing else to do but wait and pray.

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Reappearing as rapidly as he had departed, he ordered me to the next desk, where I was brusquely informed that I would be called in before the post chaplain within the next twenty-four hours.

In reality it was much less than twenty-four hours. The Pfc in charge of our barracks informed me at dawn that I was to hasten to the chaplain's office on the double.

I didn't feel like running at all, but, nevertheless, I had to wait outside the office a minute or two in order to catch my breath. Finally I managed to knock, and a deep voice from within told me to enter. I did so with all of the military stiffness I could muster and then saluted. The chaplain returned the salute hurriedly.

"Sit down," he said flatly.

This was a relief. I didn't think I could have stood stiff very long the way I was trembling.

"A CO, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's no such thing among Christians."

I tried to say something that would substantiate my belief, but my salivary glands utterly failed me at this juncture and I only managed to swallow.

"Let me tell you, soldier, the United States Army cannot tolerate weak, yellow-backed cowards and - "

Somehow I found the "letter" in my pocket and was able to cut off a further tirade. I did not need to explain that this was a letter from my pastor, for the chaplain had already jerked the paper from my hands and was reading it aloud. I thought he would nearly explode when he came to the part about placing me in a noncombatant unit.

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“He suggests a noncombatant outfit, does he? I’ll see to it that you get into the scrappiest outfit we can find. Do you know that Christ drove the money-changers from the temple with a whip? Jesus was no coward. He knew how to fight. Your pastor doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

With this statement came a brief but comprehensive deluge of remarks against a “minister who would have the gall to suggest there was such a thing as a conscientious objector.”

The chaplain dismissed me without further ceremony. I stood on the porch of the chapel and blinked. It had happened so fast that my heart was still pounding.