

A Conscientious Objector Looks Back

by Paul Brownfield

In 1969, his country deeply involved in the Vietnam War, Eric Edwards was working as an orderly at University Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. A 22-year-old Quaker and conscientious objector, Edwards cleaned bedpans, took blood and checked the vital signs of patients newly arrived to the emergency ward. He also worked on what the hospital referred to as "crash teams," administering CPR, and "Mr. Strong teams," orderlies charged with subduing psychiatric patients in the middle of violent episodes.

"You would hear the announcement over the intercom: 'Mr. Strong, please report to Hannah House, third Floor,' and all these orderlies would rush over to the psych ward," Edwards recalls. The preferred manner of restraining a patient was for two or three orderlies, using mattresses as shields against the blows, to pin the patient to the wall until he calmed down.

Edwards remembers certain incidents vividly. There was the patient who broke a pool cue in half and brandished it at anyone who came near him. Or the patient who hid in an examination room and threw glass IV bottles at passersby in the hall. By the time Edwards arrived on the scene, mattress in tow, the hallway was littered with broken glass. The man with the glass IV bottles was a tall, 6'6", and muscular, but Edwards and another orderly went at him with the mattress and got him up against the wall until his arms fell limp.

There is a heavy dose of irony in these recollections—a pacifist who stayed home during the Vietnam War, finding himself in a psychiatric ward battling pool cues and incoming IV bottles, a bor-

rowed mattress his only weapon. Edwards, finishing the story, seems to notice it.

"If you were a CO [Conscientious Objector], your draft board wanted to know you were doing something in the national interest," he says, a wry smile forming. "So I guess that qualified."

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Like hundreds of other Americans during the Vietnam War, Eric Edwards sought and obtained official classification as a conscientious objector from the United States Draft board. For religious reasons, he could not and would not take part in a violent conflict.

COs are often misunderstood. They are collectively thrown in with draft dodgers, and perceived as 'shirkers' of patriotic duty. But, as Edwards' life makes clear, it was not necessarily out of lack of courage nor disrespect for the country that COs objected to participation in the war. Becoming a conscientious objector was more than a matter of declaring distaste for the Vietnam War on a form and hoping the draft board would dismiss you from duty. You couldn't just claim to be a pacifist. It involved interviews, collecting and submitting references and providing testimonies—running the gamut of a military bureaucracy and the whims of a draft board.

It is difficult to unearth the actual numbers of conscientious objectors. Most government documents are more concerned with those individuals arrested for draft dodging who claimed CO status as their legal defense.

According to a 1972 Clemency Board report, 28 percent of draft-age men with college degrees applied for CO status, versus 19 percent of those with less education. The less educated applicants

were successful in 53 percent of their CO claims, while those with college degrees were successful in only 14 percent. The Clemency Board report attributes this wide disparity in success rate to the "fact that those with less education more often based their claims on religious grounds."

But, if it is difficult to get a handle on how many American men eligible for the draft during the Vietnam War (still called a "conflict" in official U.S. government documents) applied for CO status, then it is impossible to know how many wanted to but never did. Draft

boards tended to discourage the practice. The reasons were both symbolic and mundane. While public sentiment was still behind intervention in Vietnam, the federal government did not want to release a glut of conscientious objectors back into American civilian life—symbols of resistance to a war that, as the decade of the 1960s came to an end, was becoming increasingly unpopular back home. In addition, COs represented to draft boards mounds of paper work; files had to be kept, follow-up reports made on whether the CO was living up to his obligation of "alternative service in the national interest."

Edwards remembers that when he went for his Army physical in Boston, the doctor saw that he had applied for CO status and tried to convince him to go for a medical discharge, asking repeatedly if there was any history of illness in Edward's family, anything that might override the CO claim.

"The doctor sits me down, and he says, 'You're doing great on your physical. I see they're not going to draft you because you're a conscientious objector. Are you sure there's no history of illness in your family?'"

Those who applied for CO status had to meet three basic requirements to receive the designation. First, their objection had to be based on religious training and belief. This was a problematic stipu-

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lation that was originally equated with a belief in a Supreme Being—put simply, “Do you believe in God?” It would later be amended to a “sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by God.” This was thanks to a 1965 Supreme Court decision in the case of *U.S. v. Seeger*, an agnostic who successfully challenged the idea that a person’s objection to war had to be grounded in religious conviction.

tus, and that Eric Edwards remembers being the most important when he appeared before his draft board. But testimony given for Edwards clearly demonstrated sincerity. “I had this great reference from the Navy Commander I’d met in a coffeehouse and come to know. It said something to the effect of, ‘If I’ve ever met a pacifist, Eric Edwards is it.’” Edwards was further backed by Ken Morgan, his Quaker adviser in college.

“taking in a breath, filling yourself up with the world, then emptying.” It was about being “available to that inner voice.” Back in college, at those first Quaker meetings, Edwards had trouble sitting through the silence for a whole hour, often unable to focus and eliminate other thoughts. But now, he says, he finds that “inner space” in two minutes, driving in his jeep.

Edwards’ anti-war activities during college went no further than a few



[David Wysotski]

The Seeger decision broadened the requirement, but only to a point; a claim could be based on personal values—a moral code that guided your life unflinchingly—but not on political, sociological, or philosophical views. At best, the distinction is an esoteric one. It would seem that political and philosophical views are by their very nature personal. But perhaps sensing the floodgates of draft resisters if they opened the designation to those with conflicting political views, the Supreme Court disallowed CO designation based thereon.

The other two requirements were much more straightforward: the individual had to be opposed to war in any form—whether the enemy was Hitler, Japan, or the Vietcong. He had also to be sincere in his beliefs. This meant having a track record, a clear history of pacifism or the like. It is the sincerity question that deterred many from applying for CO sta-

Edwards relates how he found the Quakers, formally known as the Society of Friends, when he was a freshman at Colgate University, in Hamilton, New York. It was 1965. He was 18 years old and a 2S on his draft status (college deferment). The spectre of the Vietnam War was admittedly plaguing him.

“The Quakers represented for me a cessation of discussion, of weighing differences, ideologies, concerns. The approach in this culture [at a time of war] is not for people to weigh their options, but to do what’s patriotic. But the approach of the Quakers is that all war is horrible. I remember the chapel in Hamilton was in the middle of a field, and you had to walk up a sort of hill to get to it. Inside, you practiced silence, and waiting.”

Silence and waiting. It sounds, on the face of it, more like meditation than prayer, and in a sense it is—at least to hear Edwards describe it. He talks about

protests in Washington, one a march on the Pentagon. His fledgling Quakerism coincided and coalesced with the peace-driven “flower power” movement that was taking shape on college campuses and coffee houses in the mid-1960s. Edwards’ reflections on college life paint an almost idyllic picture, the happy marriage of two ideologies.

Once out of college, Edwards again found himself eligible for the draft, and it was then that he applied for conscientious objector status. Those granted the CO designation were given one of two classifications, I-A-O or I-O. The I-A-O designation reflected an opposition to killing in war and to bearing arms, but not an unwillingness to take a non-combatant assignment—working for the Army Medical Corps, say. I-O status was given to those who felt that they couldn’t participate in the war effort in any form.

Even though he could have been sent

overseas to offer medical assistance to wounded soldiers—not, on the face of it, outside the scope of Quaker practice—Edwards didn't register as an I-A-O.

"I couldn't belong to a system where conscience was secondary to laws," he says. "All laws have boundaries of conscience. The military has its own set of

me feel guilty that I hadn't gone," he says. "There were plenty of nurses who were unsympathetic. But I saw no incongruity with what I was doing in my life. My identification of myself with Quakerism was complete. I wasn't defining other people's choices, I was deciding what to do with my life."

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laws, designed to produce the most effective killing machine. As an institution, they ask you not to aid the enemy. Why couldn't I have been sent over as a medic? Because if all people are equal in the eyes of Quakers, how could I come upon a wounded Vietnamese soldier and leave him there to die? It would have been totally against everything I had come to believe."

Edwards was very quickly given the I-O classification. Since he was already working as an orderly at University Hospital in Cleveland by the time he was interviewed by the draft board, Edwards was allowed to return to the job to fulfill the I-O stipulation that he do work "contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest."

University Hospital was located not far from the Hough Ghetto, a stronghold of the Black Panthers, the militant African-American group born of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The Panthers would often escort stabbing and shooting victims to the hospital, and Edwards remembers them as "intimidating initially, cool, tough, wearing military garb." He admits to feeling some culture shock, a sense of dislocation, "a CO running around this hospital with a philosophy degree. People would ask me, 'What the Hell are you doing here?' But I saw it as a way to serve my country, without being in the military."

The doctors and nurses treated him with a mixture of contempt and compassion, depending on where the person's political views fell.

"Yeah, lots of people tried to make

In 1970, he moved to Boston, where Edwards would spend the remaining three years of the war at Massachusetts General Hospital, working surgical intensive care, assisting in the preparation of open heart surgeries. By this time anti-Vietnam War sentiment in the U.S. had built in intensity. Edwards continued to attend anti-war meetings and protests, but he is quick to distance himself from the more vigilant anti-war protestors. He remembers the deep-felt disappointment after going to anti-war meetings, where they would show films of B-52s going down, to wild cheers from the assembled protestors. They too, in their own way, did violence to the sanctity of all life that Edwards held dear.

"[Anti-war demonstrators] reinvented us vs. them," Edwards says plainly. "As a Quaker, you don't make that kind of distinction. The political power of the anti-war movement was never as a coherent peace movement. It was a group of mixed interests. And I think it quickly self-destructed, because it didn't have good leadership, or coordination."

The relationship between Quakers and anti-war protestors at times cast the former in the role of the wise and gentle father, the latter as petulant son. There is an anecdote in Daisy Newman's *A Procession of Friends: Quakers in America*, which episodically chronicles the Quakers' history of benevolent acts over the last several centuries.

It tells the story of a Friends Meetinghouse in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the summer of 1968, they found themselves the reluctant subject of consider-

able local attention for sheltering an Army officer who had gone AWOL in protest of the war in Vietnam. Quickly, anti-war protestors, sensing a developing flash point for their anger, descended on the Meetinghouse, and the Quakers absorbed them into the course of Meetinghouse life with typically hospitable aplomb.

But the alliance was, at the same time, uneasy. "Most of the young people who suddenly arrived didn't know what a Quaker was," Newman, writes. "Ordinarily, they wouldn't have been caught dead in a place of worship. They came because this was where the action was and they opposed the draft and the war. They claimed, as Friends do, that the state does not have authority over their consciences, but few of them would have relegated that authority, as Friends do, to God."

The tenuous alliance between the hosts and their obtrusive guests is illuminated during an exchange at dinner one night, when a Resistor complained loudly about the way the hippies had been treated when they were arrested on the Cambridge Common:

"'This is Fascism!' one fellow exclaimed.

The Friend clearing the dishes stood still. He had escaped from the Nazis in his youth. 'I've lived under Fascism,' he said, waving a plate in his emotion, 'and this,' he declared with authority, trying to keep his voice calm, 'is not Fascism.'"

Today, Eric Edwards, 46, delivers the mail in Falmouth, Massachusetts, the same sleepy town on Cape Cod where he grew up and now lives. He and his wife Rebecca live with their two children in a modest home at the circular end of a recent development. The neighborhood mirrors Edwards' personality—gentle and totally lacking in presumption. There is a calm, almost detached quality about him, whether he's addressing his children or the events of his life during the Vietnam War.

In his spare time Edwards acts in and directs local theater; his latest project was no less ambitious than a modern-day reworking of the Greek tragedy *Antigone*. He still flirts with poetry, having once studied at Boston University under the late Anne Sexton. When asked if he would like to go further with his various artistic pursuits he says, "Sure, of course," but there is a sense that he is in no hurry, that—as a Quaker and man of his conscience—he has been all that he can be. ●