

Another Kind of Courage

“We are members of the Civilian Public Service. We came here to render a constructive service as an alternative to the destruction . . . in the world today.”

So begins a newsletter written by a group of men from all over the country who found themselves in Brattleboro in February, 1944. As with soldiers in the South Pacific or air force nurses stationed in England, it was World War II that brought them here.

While many Americans volunteered for the military, more were needed. The government began to pick or draft single men in 1941 and fathers in 1944. This presented many men eligible for the draft with a hard choice.

Not all Americans agreed with their country's entry into the war. Some believed strongly that killing another human being was wrong, no matter what the reason. Because their objections to the war were acts of conscience, they were called conscientious objectors or COs.

In the troubled times of the war, many people did not understand why a person not want to fight. Many felt that COs were unpatriotic or lazy. Some people felt that it was not right for COs to be safe in America while other Americans were overseas. Some felt COs were cowards. However, it required great courage to oppose the war. It was a lonely position to take in a time when the whole world seemed to be at war.

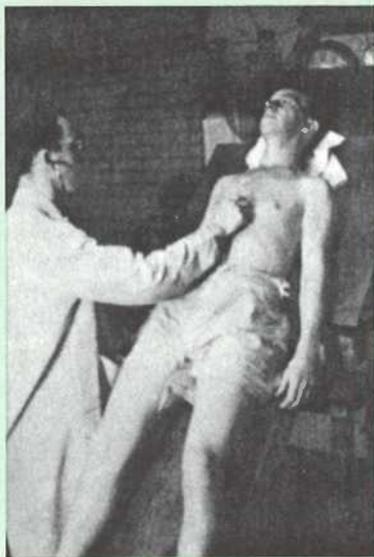
About 25,000 Americans refused to fight and worked in the army and navy. Many were corpsmen who took care of the wounded. Another 5,500 refused to have anything to do with the war and were put in prison. Most of these men were Jehovah's Witnesses, a Christian religious group.

Twelve thousand COs chose another alternative. They volunteered to do non-military work of national importance under the Civilian Public Service. They fought forest fires, built roads, planted trees, and dug irrigation ditches. Many worked as aides in mental hospitals, such as the Brattleboro Retreat, taking the places of men who were drafted. They were paid by

church groups, not by the government. Nor were their wives and children helped if they were hurt in the line of duty, as those of servicemen were.

Robert T. Dick, a CO who served part of the war at the Brattleboro Retreat, wrote about his reasons for joining the CPS: "I believe that the war is wrong; therefore I must refuse to have anything to do with it. I believe that each individual must decide what his course of action shall be — therefore I respect the boy who takes up arms. I am thoroughly convinced that what he is doing is wrong . . . But I respect his right to choose."

Mr. Dick was studying to be a minister and could have been exempted from the draft. Feeling that he had to "put up or shut up," he chose instead to become a CO. He was one of thirty-one COs at the Brattleboro Retreat. They worked twelve hours a day at the hospital, making beds, giving patients their medicine, washing floors, and serving meals. They also held meetings, religious services, and study groups about pacifism.



Robert T. Dick undergoing tests in the hot room, during his service in the "guinea pig" program. He also worked at the Brattleboro Retreat.

Guinea Pigs For Peace

Peter D. Watson, who lived in Greensboro, was also in the Civilian Public Service. In the fall of 1943, he transferred to the "guinea pig" project at the University of Rochester Medical School. There, CPS volunteers were used as "guinea pigs" in scientific experiments.

One study goal was to find a good, non-meat source of protein. Volunteers were fed different foods, such as soybeans, peanuts, sunflower seeds, and cottonseed oil for six to eight weeks. Changes in their bodies were monitored to see if they were getting enough protein. In another experiment, a "hot room" was heated to 130°F like the desert conditions where many U.S. troops were stationed. Volunteers stayed in this room for eight hours with nothing to eat or drink. They peddled exercise bikes and other machines to imitate outside work.

In another test, volunteers were put in a high altitude chamber to see how humans function with low amounts of oxygen. This showed scientists how high pilots could fly without blacking out.

All the tests were uncomfortable and some were dangerous. Peter Watson developed a severe stomach ulcer from the nutritional experiments.

What would you do if you were called upon to fight in a war? How would you feel toward someone who had a different opinion from yours? Do you think it takes courage to go against the majority view during a time of national crisis? Should people be allowed to do so?

If you find these questions hard, take heart. Our nation has often struggled with how it should treat those people who disagree with the government during difficult times.