BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD
Service and Sacrifice of Conscientious Objectors to World War II

World War II has been called the "good war," one pitting the Allies—champions of freedom, peace, and democracy—against the fascist and evil Axis powers. Popular images of the war—Allied troops storming the beaches of Normandy, Uncle Sam imploring American men to join the fight, Rosie the Riveter rolling up her sleeves—celebrate wartime service as brave, patriotic, and heroic. But what about those whose religious convictions called them to reject war and violence as solutions to the world's problems? These individuals were conscientious objectors, whose pacifist beliefs led them to oppose conscription and perform alternate work in non-combative roles or through civil service projects during the war.

Opting to abstain from military service was not a popular opinion, and conscientious objectors frequently faced disapproval from both their families and the public who questioned why they weren't in uniform. Students will listen to the experiences of five of these conscientious objectors, who explain their reasons for serving, the kinds of work they performed, and the consequences of opposing conscription. Through service and sacrifice in a number of roles—including work for the Forest Service, volunteering for semi-starvation experiments, or caring for patients on a mental health ward—conscientious objectors made unique and noteworthy contributions to the World War II Homefront.

FULL STORY TRANSCRIPTS

PACIFIST CONVICTIONS

The four narrators below were all practicing Methodists, a Protestant denomination whose church leadership in the 1940's strongly supported a pro-peace agenda and used annual National Methodist Youth Conferences across the country to organize and vocally campaign against a war they believed would create more problems than it would solve. Three men each describe the influence of this pacifist ideology on their decision to oppose conscription in the armed forces, whether through reading about pacifism in the World Book Encyclopedias, dispersing handbills on Labor Day at a youth conference, or—in the case of James Dyer—experiencing a vision of Christ in the mountains of Fresno, California.

Learning About Pacifism—Malcolm Nichols
"When I was a little boy, my folks had an encyclopedia of the world. And of course, I couldn't read a lot of it, but I got in on 'em, and I'd see the pictures, and I'd come to these pictures showing me different wars that were going on in different parts of the world. And I wondered, "How come?"

So, I became very interested in just people who would call themselves pacifists. At that time, I had never thought of it. So, I became very interested in Mahatma Gandhi when he was working for the independence of India from Great Britain. And, as you know, he helped get rid of the British government and give India its freedom."

A Vision of Christ—James Dyer
"My age brought me into the early '30s as a person out of work during the Depression. And I thought quite a bit about going into the Marines. A friend of mine with whom I played basketball was going into the Marines. But I never got around to signing up or anything like that.

Then, in November of 1935, I went to a conference of Methodist youth, with the western region of the Methodist church—that was the old Methodist Episcopal church at Fresno. At that time, I had been leading singing in a lot of groups, so I was leading singing up there, and one of the songs that we sang was "I Ain't Gonna Study War No More."

Then, on the Sunday while we marched down to the park, Dr. Roy L. Smith was the preacher, and he certainly challenged us as to the meaning of war and what it does to people. Also, it was very impressive, during this sermon of his, there was an overflight of B-17s—I think it was anyway, it was Army airplanes—flew over the park. In fact, he had to stop the sermon because of the noise. I didn't think much about it. There was a group of us that had gone up together from Whittier to Fresno, and my feeling was that, "Okay, so what? That's an idea."

But coming back south of Bakersfield—now, this may seem very strange, and it's still strange to me. I have no explanation for it; I do not believe that it was a mirage. But sitting in the front seat of the car, of Cliff Smith's car, I said to the fellas, "I've come to the decision that I must be a CO." And I didn't say why, but as we were going up the grade on old [Route] 99 up towards the Grapevine, on top of Mount Pinos, I saw a vision of the head of Christ. Nobody else saw it. But this made an impression on me, and led to my making that statement to those other five fellas in the car with us."

Opposing Conscription—Robert McCullagh
"I can recall in 1940, I was at Wynona Lake, Indiana, for a National Conference of Methodist Youth, I think it was, around Labor Day. Conscription was before Congress, as I recall. But during that conference we decided—somebody decided—that they would print up handbills, I think it was something like "Let Freedom Ring," urging people to contact Congress to oppose conscription.

They gave us these handbills that we dispersed around Labor Day. And on our way home, we were supposed to stop and hand these out in parks where people were meeting. So we did that on Labor Day in 1940, and that was an outgrowth of where the national Methodist Youth had a strong emphasis in opposition to war."

Becoming A Conscientious Objector—James Griffith
"There was a very active peace movement through the '30s. I've always been a lifelong Methodist, and in the Methodist youth program, in those days, the leadership was very strongly pro-peace and supporting the peace movements of that day. From the religious aspect, and my experiences both as a participant and in some leadership in the youth program of the Methodist Church at that time, I came to feel that, at that time, that the answer to the threats of war which were coming up would be for a stand against war; that war would not be a solution, it would only add another problem; that it would create great devastation, harm many people; and that there were other and better solutions to the international problems of that day.

And of course, in the ‘30s, this view was widely held by many people until and even after Germany invaded and started active war. Many people felt—and I was one of them—that the United States had no business in it; that the United States could do better as a peacemaker. As a religious objector, I felt that this was the stand that I should take, to say, “This is not for me.” It was not that I was unwilling to serve my country, but that I did not feel that I could in conscience serve by joining the armed forces that were focused upon the devastation that was involved.”

FACING DISAPPROVAL

The first step to becoming a conscientious objector was registering with the local draft board as a “4-E.” This designation was difficult to obtain and easily denied, requiring an additional appeals process through the Department of Justice. Securing the 4-E was only half of the battle. Especially after the attack on Pearl Harbor, conscientious objection was perceived as a means of avoiding the draft. James Dyer’s 4-E classification kept him from employment on two separate occasions. For Robert McCullagh and Malcolm Nichols, the 4-E status divided their families, causing tension with male relatives who had participated in or were currently enlisted in traditional military service.

Attitudes Toward Conscientious Objectors—James Dyer
“I was registered in Los Angeles in 1940 when they had everybody registered, everybody in the certain age groups. But my residence was in San Bernardino, and I held that residence so that my draft board was in San Bernardino rather than Los Angeles or even Whittier.

In 1941, I was director of a boy’s group at the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, and I had had an agricultural classification for a while. But then after or right around the time of Pearl Harbor, I was reclassified to 4-E. The classification, of course, came out on postcards, and the mail came into the front desk and everybody picked it up.

The manager, who was the manager of the church at that time, brought the mail in to me and said he disagreed with my stand. And he said, “As far as I’m concerned, you’ll not work here.” But he didn’t have the say. But I left at the end of the year. That was my first experience with that.

My second experience was that I had applied for a job later on, in early ’42, out of San Bernardino. And the chairman of the board for that job found out that I had not given up my CO position. She said, “Well, you can’t work for us.””

Trouble With the Draft Board—Robert McCullagh
“The board really did not want to classify me as a conscientious objector, and they didn’t. They told me that I wouldn’t be able to find a Methodist minister who would support me in my position. I was somewhat surprised at that statement because I thought that the pastor of the church would. And I was quite sure that I could have gotten at least a hundred ministers in the conference who knew me when I was president of the Conference Youth Organization, who would have at least said a good word for me.

But the local board did turn me down, and I had to appeal it. I went through an appeal process, ultimately going before, I think it was a Department of Justice hearing agent. And I had about an hour, hour-and-a-half conversation with him, and subsequently he apparently recommended that I be granted the 4-E classification."

Father's Disapproval of Conscientious Objection—Lawrence Miller
"But the process of the F.B.I. [investigating me]—oh, they went to visit my girlfriends, they went to visit my parents, they went to visit anybody they could get their hands on to try to determine whether I was sincere. It was rather interesting that they went to visit my father in his office on Wall Street. I have no idea exactly what he said; I know that he was in strong disagreement with me. But he was not an authoritarian sort of person. He was a very amiable person.

But it was a great, great shock [for my father] to have—it was actually two sons who were going through the same process, who wanted to be conscientious objectors. Because he'd been in World War I, he'd been wounded and everything, and it was unbelievable for him. But the F.B.I. visit was I think a help to him because the F.B.I. man apparently said to him, "As long as your son seems to be associated with the Quakers, then we as a government don't have to have any doubts about his sincerity. But have him stay away from some of these left groups, communist groups, and that kind of thing." Well, I had no interest in those groups. In fact, I had some experience at Antioch College with students who were, I thought, manipulating the democratic process and all that [for] student government. I didn't like that at all."

An Unpopular Opinion—Malcolm Nichols
"DN: *How did it feel to take a position that was so unpopular in World War II?*

Well, I never thought of it that way. I just thought that everyone has to take his own opinion upon the thing in war, how he *thinks* about it, and what he *feels* about it. I'd never think about what other people said. I never made fun of people who entered to the Army.

I know when my brother came out to camp to visit me, there were some boys in CPS camp that came to me and said, "Well Malcolm, I didn't know you had a killer in your family." And I looked at him kinda funny and wondering—at first I couldn't catch on to what they were talking about, see? And then I told them that my brother and I, we never argued over this issue. We each took what we felt was our responsibility."

"WORK OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE"

For James Dyer and Malcolm Nichols, forestry labor at Civilian Public Service camps—service typical for many conscientious objectors—was merely "made work" that kept men from utilizing their varied talents. James Griffith, Robert McCullagh, and Lawrence Miller deliberately sought work that reflected their interests and desire to serve their county in a meaningful capacity, even if it meant placing themselves in dangerous, life-threatening situations. Working in a violent mental health ward, volunteering for a semi-starvation experiment, and facing retaliation from

the KKK for painting schoolhouses in a black neighborhood wasn't seen as heroic as fighting fascism on the battlefields of Europe, but it required equal measures of courage and conviction.

Wasted Talent?—James Dyer
"I know that some people walked out of camp.

DN: *Why?*

Because they felt it was not using their talents. I mean, these are people who could've been used in many ways. They were college professors; they were ministerial students who could've been doing some good. I'm not talking about propagandizing in terms of peace, but using their talent. And the less they knew about them, the better off the Selective Service felt.

This is reflected, probably—when the program first started—why COs were to be placed anyplace. There was a shipload of them going to—I don't recall now; this is very dim in my mind—but they were going to serve overseas. I think some of them were going to China. And the Congress passed a bill saying that the COs could not serve outside of the territorial United States. So, they turned around the ship and brought them back. Well, one of those who was on board that ship became so disgusted with the whole thing that he changed his CO status and became an Army lieutenant."

Civilian Public Service and "Made Work"—Malcolm Nichols
"Now, if I had to do it over again, I don't know whether I would've.

DN: *Why?*

Because it was made work, a lot of it was. Because many times we didn't have the equipment and the government, CCC guys didn't have much left for most of it. And we had a hard time getting tools. Some of the boys went home and got their own tools. I came home and got a couple of tools. I was going to send back more, but they told me not to. It was a hammer, saw, and a few things like that.

But when it comes to working with governments, I just—I'm a skeptic. You have to go in through them."

Using Social Work Skills in a Mental Hospital—James Griffith
"I was interested in what I felt would be a more meaningful service, and when we were given an opportunity to volunteer to serve in mental hospitals, I felt that this would be something I could do better. After all, I had already had my Master's in social work—not that a ward attendant is social work—but I felt this would be something that would be more useful service. I applied for transfer to the mental hospital and was accepted for that. The mental hospital paid our transportation and gave us room and board and fifteen dollars a month.

DN: *Why did the mental hospitals ask for attendants?*

It was a lot cheaper. They had a manpower shortage. They paid low wages. A lot of their people had been drafted, and it was hard to get enough help. They had a shortage, and it cost them a lot less to pay for the COs who came and worked there than it did for their own employees. So it was a good break for them. To be fair, there was a computation of the value of the labor that was given, and that money put into a separate fund which, eventually, after the war was over, there was a resolution that this money would be given to some program that—I forget now—that the government maintained of a welfare-and-help nature for destitute people.

DN: *Now, what was the name of the hospital again?*

I was at the Connecticut State Hospital in Middletown, Connecticut.

DN: *So, you went to this hospital, and what did they ask you to do?*

Well, we were ward attendants. They didn't give us very much training. They just said, "Here's your keys, sign for the keys. You go into that ward down there. And watch out, that's the violent ward."

The Feeling of Starvation—Robert McCullagh
"Well, in starvation, I guess there was the awareness that—well, you knew you were losing weight, 'cause you had to weigh every day on scales. You did not have as much energy. Apparently, we noticed the cold more, although fortunately we were starving in the summer.

And you didn't concentrate as much. I recall that they had us working; they wanted us to work and do different things. And I worked in the lab as a statistician. I finally got to the point that I told them I said, "I have absolutely no confidence in what I'm doing. I don't know whether these figures are right or not. If you want to take them, okay!" And that really was not like me, but it just was at the point where I had just lost confidence in that I was concentrating on what I was doing.

Other individuals would express it in different ways. Some individuals collected cookbooks. They got obsessed with food. They couldn't eat it, so they would read about it."

Racial Tensions in Orlando—Lawrence Miller
"Some of the men were also working on helping paint some of the schoolhouses in the black districts. Seemingly the community was willing to tolerate conscientious objectors, but they were not willing to tolerate men who saw African Americans as equals. And we got into some real trouble, and there were Ku Klux Klan threats. It was especially hard on a black school principal, who with his wife came to have a meal with us, which these days seems like such an innocuous thing to have done, but was a great crime at that time. I honestly don't know whether he lost his job, but if he didn't, he was severely reprimanded.

Honestly, I was worried about the Ku Klux Klan coming down and just beating us up. There would have been nothing to prevent them. And this then became something of a motivation for me and some of the other men to volunteer for still another guinea pig experiment."

REFLECTING ON SERVICE

Conscientious objectors occupied a precarious position during the wartime years, tasked with carving out a space to engage in public service work that benefited their country without contributing to the violence of war they believed was inimical to solving the world's problems. At a time when service in the armed forces was seen as the pinnacle of patriotism for all able-bodied men, and as many of their friends and brothers answered this call and were deployed overseas, conscientious objectors found ways to—in the words of Malcolm Nichols—"live for their country" rather than die for it.

Becoming A Guinea Pig—Robert McCullagh

"I was in Lima [Ohio] for, it was about eight months at Lima through that summer. By that time, I'd done all the printing that they needed done. The print shop had been run by a patient prior to my coming there, and he apparently did not work too hard. And I didn't have any trouble doing all the work they needed.

That was after D-Day in Europe. I had friends who were in the invasion and were going through Europe at that time, and I really didn't feel I was doing much in the hospital in Lima. So I walked into the office of the CPS administrator—and we were a small unit, only about twelve men—and went in to him to tell him that I was at about the point where I would give up my 4-E classification, and that I would go as a noncombatant into military service, probably as a medical corpsman.

And before I could say anything to him about what I was thinking, he said, "We've got a letter from the [Mennonite] Central Committee. They want to know if you would be interested in being a guinea pig in an experiment?" So, I didn't say anything about what was on my mind. I said, "Well, what's the experiment?" And he said, "It's going to be done at the University of Minnesota, and they want to study semi-starvation." And so, I said, "Yeah, go ahead, send the papers through and see if they want me." So, in that sense, it was very fortunate that I was in a Mennonite camp because the Mennonites, really, actually volunteered me for the experiment. Whereas men in Quaker camps, there were all sorts of men who wanted to get into the units. There was real competition to get into the starvation."

Reflections on Conscientious Objection—Lawrence Miller

"I was so deeply embedded in the conviction that I was making a long-term and even a lifetime witness, and that I did not—I mean, I never had a feeling of hostility to those persons who did go in to the Armed Forces. I understood, especially when there was that argument about that we've got to get rid of Hitler and the Nazi persecution, and all of that, and the dreadful things that they were doing.

But I was not constantly churning over in my mind as to whether I had taken the right position for me. And I think that that was also influenced by an appreciation of my own psychological condition, which was that I—in no way could I have been aggressive to the point of even learning to fight in the Armed Forces. I think I intuitively knew that this could break me up, that this could break me up. That I could well have become a 4-F on mental grounds if I had said,

"Oh, well, yes, I'm going to do this, I'm going to make myself do this." I was sufficiently aware of some of my interior life that I didn't question my stand.

And haven't really questioned it, as some of my friends, colleagues so to speak, in CPS camp have. I have a very good friend of mine who has said in later years he thought he should have signed up. But he was a birthright Quaker. His family—unlike my family—his family was expecting him to be a CO, so that he didn't really seriously consider going into the Armed Forces."

From CO Service to Social Work—James Griffith
"Out of my experience, it led me into a certain area of professional service. The social service program that existed in the '40s, when I first started with the state mental health, and the program today is two or three worlds different. But at that time, that was where our society was at. I have always felt that my life in those professions and as a social worker with the schools, I have felt it was a rewarding life.

DN: *Do you feel that this work that you did in the Civilian Public Service was work of national importance, then?*

Yes, it was, because the manpower shortage was such that we were very much needed."

Live For My Country—Malcolm Nichols
"DN: *So, did people do anything to show that they were unhappy that you were a conscientious objector? I mean, some of the stories say that some people spit and, you know, were really rude.*

Well, they never said nothing too much about me. Only this one time I was washing windows, and this lady asked me when I was going to get drafted. She didn't realize I'd been hard of hearing all my life, see. But I was foreman in this company, a window washing company, and she asked me, "When are you gonna go?"

And I said, "Well, I haven't been called." "But if you go, where will you go?" And I said, "Civilian Public Service." She didn't even know what that meant. And when I explained to her, "It's for conscientious objectors to war." "Oh, you won't fight for your country?" I said, "I'm trying to *live* for my country.""

War and Forest Fires—Robert McCullagh
"I think that somebody has to make a statement that we've gotta find out other ways to solve these difficulties than going to war. War may stop things, but it doesn't solve the basic problems. And we just have to keep working at that, to see if we can't discover ways to solve these basic problems. And we do that in the—well, even in the Park Service, you work out ways of trying to prevent fires. You'd rather not fight the fires; it's better to work out something to prevent the fires. I think the same thing holds in the world situation, that we need to work out ways to prevent this from happening."

FEATURED STORIES TRANSCRIPTS

A Vision of Christ—James Dyer

"My age brought me into the early '30s as a person out of work during the Depression. And I thought quite a bit about going into the Marines. A friend of mine with whom I played basketball was going into the Marines. But I never got around to signing up or anything like that.

Then, in November of 1935, I went to a conference of Methodist youth, with the western region of the Methodist church—that was the old Methodist Episcopal church at Fresno. At that time, I had been leading singing in a lot of groups, so I was leading singing up there, and one of the songs that we sang was "I Ain't Gonna Study War No More."

Then, on the Sunday while we marched down to the park, Dr. Roy L. Smith was the preacher, and he certainly challenged us as to the meaning of war and what it does to people. Also, it was very impressive, during this sermon of his, there was an overflight of B-17s—I think it was anyway, it was Army airplanes—flew over the park. In fact, he had to stop the sermon because of the noise. I didn't think much about it. There was a group of us that had gone up together from Whittier to Fresno, and my feeling was that, "Okay, so what? That's an idea."

But coming back south of Bakersfield—now, this may seem very strange, and it's still strange to me. I have no explanation for it; I do not believe that it was a mirage. But sitting in the front seat of the car, of Cliff Smith's car, I said to the fellas, "I've come to the decision that I must be a CO." And I didn't say why, but as we were going up the grade on old [Route] 99 up towards the Grapevine, on top of Mount Pinos, I saw a vision of the head of Christ. Nobody else saw it. But this made an impression on me, and led to my making that statement to those other five fellas in the car with us."

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Additional Sources

From Our Narrators:
1. Photographs of the University of Michigan semi-starvation experiment, courtesy of Robert McCullagh: https://nationalhomefrontproject.org/mccullagh-robert/

2. Photographs of conscientious objectors building privies in Orlando, Florida, courtesy of Lawrence Miller: https://nationalhomefrontproject.org/miller-lawrence/

3. Courtesy of the Malcolm I. Nichols Peace Collection:
https://nationalhomefrontproject.org/nichols-malcolm/

- Photographs of conscientious objectors at a Civilian Public Service Camp in Oregon
- "They serve without weapons" a wartime publication about conscientious objectors by the American Friends Service Committee, Brethren Service Committee, and Mennonite Central Committee
- Letter diary of Malcolm Nichols and assorted correspondence with other conscientious objectors in the Civilian Public Service

Primary Sources:
1. Program for the National Council of Methodist Youth Conference at Lake Winona, 1940:
https://digital.library.temple.edu/digital/collection/p16002coll14/id/5489/rec/10

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3. University of California, Irvine online exhibit, "The War Within: Dissent During Crisis in America" featuring documents and pamphlets regarding conscientious objectors:
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2. 4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II, Master's thesis by Tiffany Leigh Smith, 2013: Chapter IV, "Disquiet at Home: 4-F Classification and the American Home Front": https://twu-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/11274/325/2013SmithTiffanyOCR.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

3. Description of the University of Minnesota semi-starvation experiment:
https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/10/hunger

Questions to Consider

Key Questions:
1. What motivated or compelled conscientious objectors to elect for non-combatant service?
2. What roles could conscientious objection take on within the Civilian Public Service?

3. In general, how were conscientious objectors perceived? Why might their patriotism have been questioned?

Extension Questions:
1. What led some men to feel fulfilled by the work they completed, while others felt it was "made work?"
2. Why might Pearl Harbor have crystallized animosity or resentment towards conscientious objectors? What other common experiences between 1942 and 1945 might have added to this resentment?
3. Based on these stories, how would you characterize relationships between conscientious objectors and servicemen? How might soldiers have felt toward conscientious objectors, both during the war and after they returned home?
4. Should conscientious objectors have been eligible for the same services available to World War II veterans, such as the GI Bill benefits? Why or why not?

Essay Questions:
1. How have conscientious objectors in other American wars—World War I, Vietnam—been treated or perceived? How do the kinds of service and experiences of World War II conscientious objectors compare and contrast?
2. Why isn't the service of conscientious objectors often discussed in standard textbooks? Do their experiences contradict what is usually taught about a united Homefront? Should they be included?