

Quiescent Objector

A reservist's feelings about Conscientious Objection and the Gulf War in 1991

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In 1990, on Christmas Day, I had a peace symbol tattooed on my back, a week after signing my will. I was 22 years old. Three weeks later, I met Sam Lwin. I was a United States marine, a reservist, and I had just been ordered to deploy to the Persian Gulf. Sam was a marine who had refused to fight. He had applied to become a conscientious objector along with two dozen other marines who all ended up with me at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.

My reserve unit, based in Des Moines, had been called to active duty a day after Thanksgiving, some three months after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. One week later, we flew to Lejeune, and spent December preparing to ship out. The night we arrived, a reservist in nearby barracks tried to commit suicide. We stood silent, listening to his screams at 3 a.m. as the military police struggled to carry him away.

We would be seeing action, our platoon sergeants told us, most likely on the front lines. We could very likely be attacked with chemical or biological gas. We had served under Gunnery Sergeant Brasher for years; he had taught us everything from marksmanship to what to do if there was a chemical attack -- and even he was sounding nervous. As members of the infantry, we would be among those at the greatest risk. But that's what you signed up for, our platoon sergeants said.

I joined the Marine Corps in 1986 for some \$5,000 in college money and to be one of the few and the proud. I accepted the recruiters' challenges as thousands of 19-year-olds do every year; I wanted to showcase my strength and will. By the end of boot camp, I was at the top of my platoon. As the honor man, I graduated in the coveted dress blues; later, I was recruited to become an officer. I was a living poster of all heroes Marine. But war? I would maybe see war games. Even during Vietnam, my reserve unit hadn't been activated, the recruiters had told me. Seeing action was about as abstract a thought as nuclear war.

No question that I had joined the Marines on that bet. Even by the time of our activation, I didn't expect to immediately see the gulf. Eleven months before, I injured my knee on a weekend drill and was declared unfit for duty. I didn't know it then, but that would give me an out. My company flew to Saudi Arabia just days after New Year's. I was detached to a medical platoon at Lejeune and told I would rejoin my company when I was fit.

Some 10 days after U.S. forces began bombing Iraq, I was assigned to barracks adjacent to the conscientious objectors' platoon. I was regularly ordered to take head counts of the group while they awaited trials for their military crimes. While it was not a crime to apply to be a C.O., it was criminal to refuse to obey orders -- in this case reporting for duty overseas. And Sam Lwin, my new superior told me, was trouble. When his reserve unit was activated, they said, Sam persuaded four others in his company to follow in his steps. He had a civilian support group ("Hands Off!") and high-profile attorneys and had questioned the authority of corporals like myself.

But over the next two months at Lejeune, Sam and I began to talk and play chess. I didn't see him as a criminal. I saw shades of myself and my doubts. I had heard of conscientious objection only once -- the day I joined the corps. All marines, on the day they enlist, must initial a statement swearing that they are not now nor have ever been C.O.'s. A footnote, really.

By February -- near the war's end -- an orthopedic specialist on the base gave me a choice. I could remain indefinitely on active duty with the medical platoon. Or I could end my service now. On March 21, 1991, in a small ceremony in front of my medical platoon, I was honorably discharged. I flew home to Iowa City the next day. Two months later, Sam was convicted of unauthorized absence and missing a troop movement. He was sentenced to four months in the brig.

We were cowards. That's the only way you'll ever hear it. That's the only way it will ever be told. We walked away when we were called to fight. I was given a choice, and I chose to excuse myself. Some marines understood. Others thought I should have swallowed the pain or at least stayed, even if it took months for my knee to heal. But Sam had no choice. He followed his conscience. I am now 34, though some days I hardly feel like a man. I hate myself for feeling manipulated; I hate myself for joining the Marines; and I hate myself for feeling like I chickened out.

My family and friends may think I'm a coward because I didn't fight. I think I'm a coward because I couldn't refuse. To this day, Sam tells me that he doesn't regret what he did. But I'm not so sure about myself. More than a decade ago, I didn't have the courage to be a conscientious objector. I was afraid -- afraid to kill, afraid to die. I had the same feelings as Sam; I just couldn't speak them aloud. But I knew. I wear the reminder every day on my left shoulder blade.

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