

# The Great Disappearance: Adventism and Noncombatancy

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

**I**t was the summer of 1961, in the midst of the Berlin Wall crisis, when I was threatened with a court martial by none other than a military chaplain. I was a trained infantry soldier who had up to that time been a confirmed agnostic. But throughout the first half of the year, I had become interested in Adventism and had become convinced that I should no longer carry arms or drill on Sabbath. I had come to appreciate the biblical logic undergirding the denomination's position even though I had not yet become a church member.

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But why would a young person who only had a brief and tenuous relationship with Adventism even know about the church's position on military service? The answer is simple and straightforward—the church had aggressively and consistently publicized its position and advised its pastors and young men on the topic.

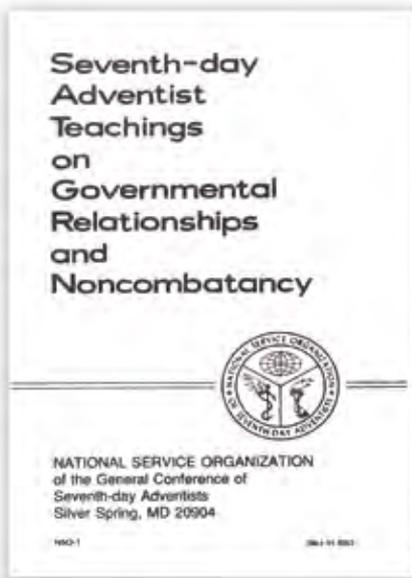
At the center of this aggressive publicity on the subject of noncombatancy was the National Service Organization of Seventh-day Adventists (NSO). Formed during World War I under the direction of Carlyle B. Haynes as the War Service Commission, it was reactivated in the face of renewed world conflict. Under Haynes and later Clark Smith, what evolved into the International Service Commission and then the NSO remained a vocal force for publicizing issues and fighting for the rights of service people, up into the 1970s.

The commission was active in promoting noncombatancy in the denomination's churches, schools, colleges,



and pastors' meetings. It also made an abundance of small pamphlets available to young people, their parents, and to pastors for distribution. Titles included "Why Seventh-day Adventists Are Noncombatants," "Questions and Answers for Those Facing the Draft," "Information and Instruction for Seventh-day Adventist Noncombatant Selective Service Registrants," "Filling Out the Special Form for Conscientious Objectors," and "Instruction for Service Pastors." That last title brings to mind the largely forgotten fact that local conferences appointed "service pastors" who had a special responsibility in relation to the military.

Even more visible to many Adventists was the Medical Cadet Corps, founded by Everett Dick of Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) in the 1930s. The position of the church since the Civil War had been that Adventist inductees could most easily serve both God and their country if



they could find their way into the medical corps, where they could perform acts of mercy and would not be required to carry weapons.

As war became more probable in the late 1930s, the denomination, under the urging of Professor Dick and others, decided to make it easier for Adventists to obtain medical positions. Its method was to give them extensive training along medical and military lines through the denominationally sponsored Medical Cadet Corps. The church provided the training at its colleges and secondary schools in place of physical education. By this method, thousands of young

Adventist males in World War II and the Korean conflict in both the United States and other countries found an easier road into acceptable military service than had their predecessors.<sup>1</sup>

By 1954, the U.S. Army, recognizing the contributions of programs like the Medical Cadet Corps, set up its own pro-

gram for the training of conscientious co-operators at Fort Sam Houston in Texas. Thousands of young Adventist inductees were trained there as non-arms-bearing medics between 1954 and the end of the draft at the conclusion of the Vietnam conflict. One authority reports that more than half the men who went through



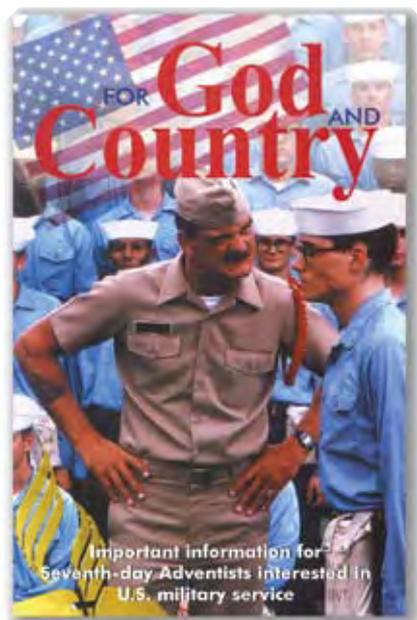
**Members of the Medical Cadet Corps practicing their drills on the northeast corner of the Union College campus in Lincoln, Nebraska, circa 1938. Everett Dick, front right, was named director of the MCC by the General Conference in 1940.**



**The author, Goerge R. Knight, as a young serviceman.**

training at “Fort Sam” were Seventh-day Adventists,<sup>2</sup> an indication that the denomination had taken such a strong and well-known position on the issue that it had even influenced the operations of the United States military.

Beyond the activities of the International Service Commission and the Medical Cadet Corps, the Adventist public was also kept aware of issues related to noncombatancy and military service by the lives of individuals who had made a



difference in one way or another. On one end of the spectrum were those Adventist service personnel court-martialed and imprisoned for their religious convictions, including some 35 serving prison sentences of from five to 25 years at the end of World War I and others who were imprisoned during World War II.<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the spectrum were such individuals as the ubiquitous Desmond T. Doss, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for having saved the lives of at least 75 wounded men in a World War II battle in Okinawa.<sup>4</sup> Doss, the hero of noncombatants, and the only one to ever receive the award, was a frequent featured speaker at Adventist



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colleges, schools, churches, and general gatherings. No one doubted the seriousness of Adventists regarding noncombatancy up through the end of the Vietnam War. On the other hand, most young Adventists today, including the majority of young pastors, do not even seem to think much about the topic. Most, in fact, may not even be aware of the church's historic position. For example, one American Adventist professor found that about 90 to 95 percent of the college/university-age Adventist

students he surveyed would be willing to serve as combatants.

Why the big change? It undoubtedly centers, at least in the United States, on one crucial event—the end of the draft in the early 1970s. With the all-volunteer military, it no longer seemed necessary to instruct the young on noncombatancy or publicize the topic. After all, so the logic ran, why educate and agitate where there is no need?

But eventually the unexpected began to happen. In the void of education on the

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topic and lack of information about the denomination's historic position against volunteering for military service,<sup>5</sup> slowly but steadily Adventist young people began to enlist. With its guard down and its focus on other issues, hardly anyone noticed what was happening. Gary R. Councill, associate director of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries, reports that in 2006, there were some 7,500 Adventists serving in the United States military, with virtually all of them having enlisted as combatants.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 21st century, the church is in danger of losing an important teaching related to the Christ who claimed that Christians must love their enemies, rather than be trained to kill them. The problem may not appear to be a crisis in

times of peace and “small wars,” but that could change in the event of world conflict. Many will discover that volunteers have fewer rights,<sup>7</sup> including the right to observe the Sabbath. Beyond that is the deeper issue of what it means to be like that Jesus who came to save lives rather than to destroy them.

What should we do about this loss of an important part of our Christian identity? The answer, as I see it, can be summed up in two words—educate and agitate. Collectively, we need to once again place noncombatancy, volunteering for service, and other military issues on the Adventist docket of issues worth living and dying for. Our church's history provides major hints at how to accomplish this neglected task. ✍

**World War II Memorial, Washington, D. C.**



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he is now semi-retired and writes from Rogue River, Oregon.

## **What Schools Can Do to Publicize Adventism's Historic Position on Noncombatancy**

1. Assign readings such as Booton Herndon's *The Unlikeliest Hero*, and Barbara Herrera's *Medics in Action*

2. Schedule viewings of *The Conscientious Objector: A True Story of an American Soldier* (Desmond T. Doss); use the book *Desmond Doss: Conscientious Objector* by Frances M. Doss (Pacific Press: 2005) as background material for a discussion.

3. Interview Adventist veterans who stood for the principle of noncombatancy—perhaps even under duress.

4. Insert segments on the historic position of the church in Adventist history courses.

5. Ask students to read “Noncombatancy” by Ekkehardt Mueller of the church's Biblical Research Institute (see <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/noncombatancy.htm>), and then discuss what they have read.

6. Contact Gary Councill in the Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries for the new DVD on what young people should know when considering military service (Gary.Councill@nad.adventist.org) or (301) 680-7684.

6. Devote time in Bible classes to discussing the issue in terms of the Sermon on the Mount, the life of Christ, and the Ten Commandments.

7. Have students role play in skits that present both sides of the issue.



## ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Everett N. Dick, “The Adventist Medical Cadet Corps as Seen by Its Founder,” *Adventist Heritage* 1:2 (July 1974), pp. 18-27.

2. Roger Guion Davis, *Conscientious Cooperators: The Seventh-day Adventists and Military Service, 1860-1945* (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1970), p. 222.

3. Everett N. Dick, “The Military Chaplaincy and Seventh-day Adventists: The Evolution of an Attitude,” *Adventist Heritage* 3:1 (Summer 1976), p. 34; P. Harold Pervis, Sr., *A Matter of Conscience: Court-Martialed for His Faith* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1998).

4. Booton Herndon, *The Unlikeliest Hero: The Story of Desmond T. Doss, Conscientious Objector Who Won His Nation's Highest Military Honor* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1967).

5. For more on the issue of volunteering and Adventism's historic position on noncombatancy, see Ginger Hanks Harwood's article on page 4, and “Peace Resources” on page 46.

6. Gary R. Councill to George R. Knight, December 10, 2006.

7. See Douglas Morgan's article, “Between Pacifism and Patriotism,” on pages 16-24 of the Summer 2003 issue of the *Journal of Adventist Education*, particularly the sidebar by Richard Stenbakken: <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/resource.phtml?leaf=5154>.