

II. THE BEGINNING

Everyone in my generation remembers indelibly where he was on December 7, 1941, when one of the most shocking acts of violence in modern-day America took place. On that Sunday I, soon to be 17 years old, was at home, which was Maplewood Farm in Woodstock, Vermont. I was not listening to the symphony broadcast on the radio, as so many were that afternoon. I was probably reading. It was the middle of one most difficult winters of my life, before or since, and I retreated to reading often. I don't recall if anyone was in the house with me, but I do remember that that the phone rang in the early afternoon and someone, probably my mother, who was having lunch at a neighbor's, told me that Pearl Harbor in Hawaii had been bombed by the Japanese, and that I should turn on the radio—which I did, and heard the beginning of it all.

I reflect now with some amazement that my life was not really affected very much by the war for a long time; over a year and a half was to elapse before it did. My hard Winter—which is not really a part of this tale—continued, and with Spring and early Summer of 1942 came high school graduation. Because of wartime travel restrictions we were denied our senior class trip—for which we blamed the principal! There was much talk about gasoline rationing, and a few older boys left school to join the services, but the war didn't really touch most of us—yet.

That summer I worked at the Woodstock Inn as a bellhop. Because of travel restrictions business was way off, and I believe the Inn—open only in the summers then—closed for the duration of the war at the end of that season. The bartender that summer was a Viennese opera singer refugee (he taught me how to play chess), and a self-professed Communist Englishman was working in the kitchen. Because of the concerns of an over-zealous house man, both were investigated by the FBI, and apparently both were cleared of whatever he thought they should be charged with. However, a male guest with a lot of luggage, who was apparently German, did not fare so well. He disappeared one night and was said to have been interned as an enemy national.

I went off to Yale that Fall, and here again near-normal conditions prevailed to a great extent—at first. However, the university was terribly over-crowded as young men tried to cram in as much education as possible before war overtook them. Classes were accelerated, and no one had gone home for the Summer. We lived in several different dormitories in the course of the year as we kept being displaced by the military, and by Spring most students were in uniform as the Navy V-12 program began a massive influx on the campus.

My 18th birthday was in March, and, in apparently normal physical condition, I seemed sure to be drafted. However, if 18-year olds in college joined the Army inactive reserve they were guaranteed inactive status until the end of the school year in June. I went to enlist – and flunked the physical! I weighed 128 pounds (at 6'-1" height) and had to be at least 135 pounds to be eligible. The doctor said I could have another chance if I could gain the weight in a month. After a month of milkshakes and bananas I was back—and now weighed 132 pounds! It seemed I was on the right track, so I was sworn in, with the admonition to continue over-eating. (I think I weighed about 123 three years later when I was discharged.) Sometimes I wonder what would have happened had I not been so eager. At the time it seemed the right, albeit rather easy at first, thing to do.

I was academically, socially, and emotionally unprepared for college, so I had been doing badly and not learning much except how to ingest alcohol. After my enlistment I ceased doing badly and did nothing at all in the ensuing weeks until the end of the academic year. Finally, in June 1943, after a couple of weeks of vacation at home, I reported for active duty at Fort Devens in Massachusetts, and my own personal "Good War" finally began.

III. THE ARMY