

# The Chaplain and the CO

by Dan Buttry

I grew up in a military family. My father, Lucas W. Buttry, had been an Air Force chaplain. We had lived on bases or in off-base housing as long as I could remember. My heroes were soldiers, sailors and pilots of World War II—including my Uncle Frank, who was the most decorated American Baptist chaplain in that war.

Uncle Frank had been wounded at St. Lo and was with Patton when he relieved Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. My Dad had served in combat intelligence with a B-17 group in England, and I dreamed of flying those bombers over Nazi Germany.

Then I had a run-in with Jesus in the gospels. The war in Vietnam was raging. Each year the draft lottery would nail the unlucky birthdays for those who would be called up. I was a student at Wheaton College, where all freshmen men had to be in ROTC (the Reserve Officers Training Corp) unless one was a CO (conscientious objector).

I had no problem being in ROTC, because if my eyes hadn't been so bad I would have tried for the Air Force Academy. One evening I got in an argument about war with Christie, from my

Bible study group, who kept saying, "What does Jesus say?" I read the gospels over and over in my dorm room and had my "second conversion." I became convinced that Christ called us to love our enemies, to be peacemakers. So, in that one night, I did a 180-degree turnaround and became a conscientious objector to war.

My birth-year was coming up for the draft lottery. I wanted to apply for CO status before the lottery, so I wouldn't be swayed by having a low or high number. I wanted my conscience to be clear and focused. But first I had to talk to Dad.

I was home on vacation in Iowa, where Dad had taken a pastorate at a Baptist church following his retirement from the Air Force. One evening Dad and I went into his office for a man-to-man talk. My mother waited outside that closed door, fearing that this war which had divided so many families was about to split her home.

Inside the office, a different story was unfolding. I told my father about my change of convictions and how my understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ had led me to become a conscientious objector.

But then I made a qualification. I told my Dad that I respected and honored his ministry. Southwest Iowa was very conservative country at that time. If having a son as a CO would harm my Dad's ministry, I was willing to register for the draft as "1-A0"—someone who could serve in the military, but in a non-combatant role such as a medic.

That's when my Dad got stern with me: "Don't you ever back down from your conscience. Stand up for what you believe in." He told me not to worry about what problems he might have for me to take a stand against the war. Even though he was in disagreement with me, we were never closer together than in those moments.

Luke Buttry was a good father, a good pastor and a good Baptist. He taught me the lived-out reality of soul liberty, and it was my Air Force Chaplain father who gave me the strength to be a conscientious objector and truly begin my peace-making journey.

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