I'm a conscientious objector to militarism

by Larry Johnson

It's not well known, but John F. Kennedy once said something like, "War will end when the conscientious objector has the same hero status as the Warrior." 'Hacksaw Ridge', the story of World War II conscientious objector medic Desmond Doss, is a small move in that direction. The movie has much more Hollywood battlefield violence than necessary, but the film definitely tells the story that C.O.s are not cowards, the standard accusation even from people who didn't serve. Not only does Doss refuse to cave on his position of weapons refusal, but he later risks his life repeatedly to save even fellow soldiers who beat him up physically and verbally.

I went to the movie the first day out because I served as a medic with no weapon, 1970-72. I was seriously working in the milieu that believed the Bible to be literally true, which included the need to kill godless heathen who might take our God-given freedoms. I was stunned, ethically and logically, with the discovery of equally conservative theology, the Mennonites and Church of the Brethren, continuing refusal to kill in warfare because the early Christians did that. I went through the C.O. process, writing a statement in the vein of John Prine's later "Jesus don't like killin', no matter what the reason for," but signed the blank that said if drafted, I would serve as a medic. That's what happened.

Leaders today don't want the kind of resistance forced by virtually everyone facing possible "service," so the draft is inactive. I conscientiously object to all militarism. The framers of the Constitution were opposed to a standing army, and I was asked to swear, when drafted, to support the constitution. I do, but I believe in total Universal Service, where all young people serve as "volunteers" for two years (as the military of old) at low pay, with housing and meals provided. If truly needed for defense, they can elect military service, particularly prevention of cyberattacks, treating climate change as a security issue, and nonviolent negotiation to eliminate the hypocrisy factor, e.g. "Why do you get to have nuclear weapons and we don't?" They can also choose social service, doing all the things that currently suffer because we constantly subsidize the massive portfolios of shareholders benefitting from the worldwide presence of the U.S. military. For those too old to serve, I support free enterprise guru Adam Smith's recommendation (virtually unknown, toward the end of his classic, Wealth of Nations). He said peace is more prosperous for all, and everyone should be taxed up front, as prevention, to pay for wars. If they know they have to pay, they won't get into war unnecessarily, or carry it on indefinitely.

I am conscientiously opposed to violations of the Geneva Conventions, as well as the so-called "Just War Theory." Both forbid harming civilians, today's main war casualties, and I actually believe nuclear weapons, landmines, and such should be judged illegal to manufacture, because they kill civilians. The Pope has just convened high level questioning of the viability of Just War Theory, and the Lutheran Church in Minnesota has passed a resolution asking for in-depth questioning of our perpetual warmaking. I applaud these large church bodies for taking this on at the top, since the original, individual C.O. status requires religious back-up. I think a lot of church hesitancy in these areas involves fear of losing big donors, but after World War I, Andrew Carnegie was donating vast sums to mechanisms for world peace. We ought to be able to get back to that, at least in churches.

I'm conscientiously opposed to the long history of covering up sexual assault in the military, and I applaud the brave women soldiers who have dared to speak out and make change. As a lifelong educator of children, I'm also conscientiously opposed to deploying parents, as I am to letting veterans come home to inadequate trauma treatment. The collective impact of these perpetuates dysfunction and violence into civilian family life as children grow up.

Finally, I'm conscientiously opposed to allowing guns to be sold as toys, as well as video games that let children kill for fun. Militainment, Inc. is a comprehensive study of the Pentagon's long involvement in funding "entertainment" like John Wayne war movies. Today it's the use of violent video games to overcome soldier resistance to killing, and that game spills over, accidentally or deliberately, into toy stores.

My book, Sixty-one, just published by Shipwreckt Books (www.shipwrecktbooks.com), is about this broader conscientious objection, sandwiched around my 2007 Sixty-one Mile Hike, done to end unjust war, create fewer veterans, and stop throwing them under unethical defense contracts when they return.