

JOHN WITMER

A World War I
Conscientious Objector

by James Witmer

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John M. Witmer was born April 20, 1897, the first child of Daniel C. Witmer and Annie Martin Witmer of Columbiana, Ohio. His father, Daniel, was a progressive farmer for his time and he was also known as one of the few honest horse traders in northeastern Ohio. He was greatly respected for his judgment of horses.¹ Later, Daniel was selected by lot and ordained to the ministry in the White Mennonite Church, about three miles north of Columbiana, Ohio. The ideals which his father supported and upheld provided a very pious home environment for the youthful John.

As a boy, John attended the one room Germantown School only during the winter months when the farm work was slow. Under his instructor, Estella Esterly, he proved to be especially adept at arithmetic and history. His report cards denote excellent work in these subjects. He also found reading a pleasurable pastime and, as he grew older, he spent a great deal of his leisure time in reading. Among many other books, the Bible was his preference.

John was baptized June 3, 1917, and became a member of the White Mennonite Church, upon his confession of faith and his belief in Jesus Christ.

On July 25, 1918, John received a notice from the United States War Department, Local Board for Ma-

honing County, Ohio, designating him as Order No. 149, Serial No. 296, and entitling him to a place in Class 1-A. By this time he had developed a concept of Jesus Christ as the God of love. To him the Gospel of Christ was a message of peace and good will.

His beliefs and convictions are expressed in a letter sent to a Mr. N. A. May of Youngstown, Ohio. Mr. May was a business friend of the Witmer family. He had sent a card to John explaining that his experience and excellent ability with horses would be of great benefit to him when he was drafted into the armed forces. John's letter of July 1, 1918, was an answer to this card. In his letter John thanked Mr. May for his card, then went on to suggest that Mr. May was not aware of the fact that his being a servant in Christ's kingdom meant that he could not fight. He called attention to John 18:36: "Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the

Jews." Matthew 6:15 was also suggested: "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." He went on to explain that the apostles were persecuted and martyred but they

¹ Interview with Edwin Weaver, December 23, 1962.

did not resort to fighting for revenge.²

Early the following month a card came from the Local Board for the War Department dated July 31, 1918, which read, "You are hereby notified that, as a result of your physical examination you have been found by the Local Board qualified for military service which leaves you in Class 1-A, subject to call in your order of call when the Government may have need of your services."³

Later a card post-marked August 29, 1918, brought the message, "Kindly be prepared to report for duty between the 3rd and 6th of September. Official notice will follow later."⁴

The official notice which came later requested John to report for service on September 6. This was the beginning of a new experience for the young farmer who had spent almost all his life in his rural home community. Order No. 149, of which John was a member, left Youngstown for Camp Sherman, Chillicothe, Ohio. John and a friend, Harvey Blosser, from Columbiana, were the only two among Order No. 149 who opposed military service for conscientious reasons.⁵ Officially the United States Government allowed for freedom of religion and respected individual conscientious beliefs, however, this official stand offered limited protection at the individual and local level. The consideration which the conscientious objectors received depended to a large extent upon the attitude of the

particular group to which they were assigned.⁶

Unfortunately, Order No. 149 held little regard for the two young conscientious objectors and in John's first letter home he reports: "The treatment that I get is not always what one would desire but we are looking for a City which hath foundation whose builder and maker is God." (Heb. 11:10).⁷

John and Harvey refused to wear the military uniforms or to carry a gun. Consequently, their civilian clothes were forcibly removed never to be seen again. This included their wallets containing money as well as other personal possessions. They were forced either to wear military uniforms or nothing at all.

Being arrayed in military uniforms posed another problem. They looked like all the rest of the men, so the soldiers could not easily identify them when they wanted to mock and to sneer at them. To solve this problem, a group of soldiers completely shaved their heads.

John was abused somewhat more than was Harvey because he had been baptized only a short time before he was called by the draft board. He was accused of being

² Card of July 1, 1918.

³ Card of July 31, 1918.

⁴ Card of August 29, 1918.

⁵ Letter of September 9, 1918.

⁶ Interview with Amos Weaver, December 27, 1962.

⁷ Letter of September 9, 1918.

baptized only to avoid the military service.⁸

In his next letter home John says: "We never know one minute what will happen next. Remember us in your prayers so we may hold fast the profession of our faith. Hebrews 10:23."⁹

Several days lapsed until John wrote again. When the letter finally came it began: "I guess you wondered why I did not write more but some of the threats were so horrible that I am glad that you dear folks at home were not near enough to see or hear what was going on."¹⁰

John and his friend, Harvey, were continually threatened to be shot if they did not drill with the rest of the soldiers. On one occasion they were both lined up together to be shot on the count of three unless they would consent to join the soldiers in drilling. They neither recanted their convictions, nor were they shot.¹¹

On another occasion, Harvey was late in leaving the barracks for lunch. Four other soldiers came back to join him. They dragged him upstairs and threatened to drop him head first on a cement platform several feet below. Three of the men held him out the window by his feet and the fourth ordered them to drop him on the count of four. He counted to three, stopped, and blurted out, "I am afraid to count four." The other three replied, "If you are afraid to count four, we are afraid to drop him." They hauled him back in and they all went to dinner.¹²

John's letter continues, "By Monday afternoon it began to go a little better. Harvey and I were told to get our Bibles which we gladly did. Two boxes were set on end in a public place where we were in sight of hundreds of soldiers and we were ordered to read it without taking our eyes off it for a moment. Our feet did not reach the ground when the box stood on end. Other times they would order us to stand and other times to lay the box down and sit on it. As the soldiers walked past us they would yell such things as 'slackers' and 'yellow'. Another favorite phrase was, 'We are educating them to preach the Kaiser's funeral.'"

Several days were spent on the box reading the Bible or following the officer around the training grounds carrying their Bibles.¹³

In closing, John says, "We certainly should continue to pray for peace and deliverance and thank God that we are yet permitted to enjoy religious freedom."¹⁴

Two days later John wrote again, "There are some officers here who are kind to us. There is a soldier

⁸ Interview with Harvey Blosser, December 23, 1962.

⁹ Letter of September 11, 1918.

¹⁰ Letter of September 15, 1918.

¹¹ Interview with Harvey Blosser, December 23, 1962.

¹² Interview with Harvey Blosser, December 23, 1962.

¹³ Letter of September 15, 1918.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

from Lawrence who treats us very nice but most of the soldiers try hard to get us to give up our faith."¹⁵

The next day John wrote, "I think I will get pretty good treatment now."¹⁶ In the rest of the letter he gave directions on how he wanted his farm managed. He had just begun farming before he was called by the draft board. His operations consisted of ninety acres, a small herd of cattle, and a team of horses.

"I am not feeling very well today," was the report of the letter of September 28.

One evening during the time when John was not feeling well, a group of soldiers gave him a cold shower in the drinking fountain while he was fully clothed. Since his civilian clothes had been taken and not returned, he had only his soaking wet military uniform. The single blanket which had been given to him did not provide sufficient warmth against the ground floor of his bedroom and the frosty autumn night. After this incident John's illness became increasingly more serious.

The third of October John wrote, "I am still very weak from my fever. I can walk around and take care of myself but it goes hard to eat anything This disease is over the whole camp. They think it is Spanish Influenza."

In the last letter that John wrote, he was in the camp for conscientious objectors. He explains that he had to walk a mile to the CO camp and when he got there his temperature was 103 degrees. He had not

been very well after that, although he said that he liked the company much better.

The letter which John's family received October 6 was not in John's handwriting. It read, "Your son is sick in the base hospital. He ask me to write for him. He says he does not suffer much. He thinks the nurses are very kind. He says he invites you to come as soon as you can to visit him and I will add that he is very sick and come if you can."

John's father went to see John immediately. The report which Mrs. Witmer received from her husband said, "John was so very glad to see us but his voice is so low that it is hard to understand him."

John talked in spite of his weak voice. He was especially interested in the church at home and he inquired about the last Sunday's services.

In concluding the letter John's father said, "I don't know when I will come home but it may not be for some time."

John's declaration, "We never know one minute what will happen next," was true. October 8, 1918, John went to that City for which he was looking: "A City which hath foundation whose builder and maker is God." (Hebrews 11:10).

The story of John Witmer remains as a monument to one who stood for Christian principles; to one who stood for what he knew to be truth.

¹⁵ Letter of September 16, 1918.

¹⁶ Letter of September 17, 1918.