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> From the earliest childhood, American boys are taught that it is wrong – the greatest wrong – to kill.
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> *Psychology for the Fighting Man, Prepared for the Fighting Man Himself*, Committee of the National Research Council with the Collaboration of Science Service as a Contribution to the War Effort, *The Infantry Journal*, Washington, DC (and Penguin Books, London), 1943, p. 349

At the end of the Great War of 1914–18, Private First Class William Weiss was departing France with a leg scarred by German bullets, lungs choked in poison gas and a plague of memories. While convalescing in a Catholic hospital near Tours, the Jewish-American doughboy fell in love with his French nurse. The romance, which sustained him for four months, ended when his 77th Infantry Division mustered at Brest for the voyage home to New York City. In April 1919, five months after the Armistice, New York held little promise for Weiss. The post-war economic recession was beginning, as weapons factories laid off workers and banks pressed for repayment of war debts. Many 77th Division troops had lost their jobs to civilians when they entered the United States Army. At least 25 per cent of them had no hope of work and expected nothing more at home than a grateful welcome. As they set sail across the Atlantic, even the welcome was cast into doubt.

To the surprise of the 77th Division's commanders, the Department of War declared that it would not accord the men a

traditional victory parade. Only one month earlier, the 27th Infantry Division, O'Ryan's Roughnecks, had marched proudly up Fifth Avenue to the acclaim of ecstatic crowds. The 27th and 77th were both New York divisions, about all they had in common. The all-volunteer, mostly Irish 27th were honest-to-God American Christian fighting men. The 77th was comprised of draftees and recent immigrants from Italy, Greece, Russia, Poland, Armenia, Syria and China. Thirty per cent were Jewish. Twelve thousand earned American citizenship while in uniform, making them, to most Washington politicians, not quite Americans.

When New Yorkers insisted on honouring the 77th anyway, the War Department advanced a series of pretexts to block them. It said the doughboys themselves did not want a parade. The men, once asked, were unanimously in favour. War Secretary Newton Baker then cited objections by Fifth Avenue shopkeepers to the erection of grandstands between 97th and 98th Streets. After the courts rejected the shopkeepers' injunction, the department claimed the parade would be too expensive – almost a million dollars, a figure soon lowered to $80,000. Finally, it said that disembarking 30,000 men at the same time would paralyse the docks.

War Department prevarications infuriated New York City. All of the 77th's boys came from the metropolis, whereas the 27th's National Guardsmen hailed from as far as Schenectady and Albany. Meetings assembled throughout Manhattan to lodge protests. The Welcome Committee for the Jewish Boys Returning from the War sent an urgent telegram to Secretary of War Baker: 'The East Side, which has contributed so large a quota to this division, is stirred at being deprived of the opportunity to pay tribute to this division … We strongly urge you to do everything within your power to make it possible that the parade shall take place. It will be an act of patriotism.' The next day, the Committee cabled President Woodrow Wilson 'as Commander in Chief of the US Army, to rescind the order prohibiting the parade of the 77th Division. The people of the east side have gladly given their sons to do battle in France for their country, and desire to pay loving tribute to the boys who are returning and to the memory of those who sleep on foreign soil.'

Charles Evans Hughes, a former Supreme Court justice and the Republicans' nominee for president in 1916, chaired a gathering of the Selective Service Boards that had conscripted the men of the 77th two years earlier. 'We want to do for the 77th what we did for the 27th,' Hughes declared. 'There should be no desire to discriminate against any of the boys who went to the front, from New York or any other place.'

No one contested the division's achievements: more than two thousand of its men had been killed, and another nine thousand wounded – more than double the casualties sustained by the 27th. They were one of the first American divisions sent into combat and the only one at the front every day of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. The *New York Times* wrote of the mostly immigrant troops: 'The 77th fought continuously from the time it entered the Lorraine sector in June [1918] until it stood at the gates of Sedan when the armistice was signed. It drove the Germans back from the Vesle to the Aisne River. It rooted them out of the very heart of the Argonne Forest. And it ranked seventh among the [twenty-nine] divisions that led in the number of Distinguished Service Crosses awarded for gallantry in action.' When they launched an assault against the Germans along the River Vesle, called by the troops 'the hellhole of the Vesle', General Erich Ludendorff unleashed the phosgene and mustard gas that blinded and crippled thousands of Allied soldiers. William Weiss was one of them, taken out of the front with eyes bandaged from the stinging pain of the poisons and his leg nearly shot off by German rifle fire.

The heroism of New Yorkers like Private Weiss gave the lie to military orthodoxy, as stated in the US Army's official *Manual of Instruction for Medical Advisory Boards* in 1917, that 'the foreign-born, and especially the Jews, are more apt to malinger than the native-born'. Dr William T. Manning, chairman of the Home Auxiliary Association, told a meeting in New York that soldiers' families felt their sons were victims of racial discrimination. Woodrow Wilson, a Southern gentleman whose administration had introduced segregation by race into the federal civil service in 1913, was impervious to accusations of bias. In his State of the Union Address for 1915, the

Democratic president had said, 'There are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life; who have sought to bring the authority and good name of our Government into contempt … Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out.' Neither the all-black 369th Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, nor the mostly foreign-born 77th Infantry Division won the president's admiration, although both had earned more decorations than most all-white, 'all-American' units.

Public clamour grew so loud that the War Department backed down. The division's troopships docked at the end of April, and on 6 May the men assembled downtown for one of the biggest parades in New York history. Schools closed, and workers came out of their bakeries, laundries and garment shops to lionize the boys who had won the war to end all wars. With rifles on shoulders and tin hats on heads, the men of the 77th marched five miles up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to 110th Street past more than a million well-wishers. Usually called the Liberty Division for their Statue of Liberty shoulder patches, and sometimes the Metropolitan Division, they were now 'New York's Own'. 'Every building had its windows full of spectators, waving flags or thrown out [sic] torn paper, candies, fruit, or smokes,' the *New York Times* reported. 'Most of the store windows were tenanted by wounded veterans or their relatives, while park benches were placed at choice sites for men from the convalescent hospitals.' Some of the 5,000 wounded rode in open cars provided by local charities, while others moved on crutches and in wheelchairs. Lest the 2,356 buried in France be forgotten, the procession included a symbolic cortège of Companies of the Dead.

Only the deserters, a mere 21,282 among the whole American Expeditionary Force of more than a million men, went unacknowledged. Most were in army stockades or on the run from the Military Police in France. Of the twenty-four American soldiers condemned to death for desertion, President Wilson commuted all of their sentences. The Great War had a lower rate of desertion, despite its unpopularity

in many quarters, than any previous American conflict. More British and French soldiers had run from battle, but their four years in the trenches outdid the Americans' one. Britain shot 304 soldiers for deserting or cowardice and France more than 600. In the 77th Division, only a few men had left their posts in the face of the enemy. Perhaps out of shame, the division referred to most of them as Missing in Action.

When the parade ended at 110th Street, the 77th's commander, Major General Robert Alexander, declared, 'The time has come to beat the swords into plowshares, and these men will now do as well in civil life as they did for their country in France.'

Not all of the men would do as well in civilian life as they had in France. The division's most decorated hero, Medal of Honor winner Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey, committed suicide in 1921, a belated casualty of the war. Others died of their wounds after they came home, and some would remain crippled or in mental institutions for the rest of their lives. Many enlisted men, unable to find work, drifted west. Among them was William Weiss, who at the age of twenty-seven left home as much to forget the war as to earn a living. The wounded veteran worked as a farmhand in the Kansas wheat fields, then followed the oil boom to Oklahoma and Texas as a roustabout. This led to a stint with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, which had been subsumed into the Treasury Department's Prohibition Unit in 1920. Among the unit's duties was the interdiction from Mexico of newly illegal drugs like marijuana and alcohol. Something happened in El Paso that compelled Weiss to resign, an episode that he concealed even from his family. He moved back to New York, where he married a young woman named Jean Seidman in 1923. On 3 October 1925, the couple had a son, Stephen James. The family called him Steve, but his mother nicknamed him 'Lucky Jim'. Five years later, the boy was followed by a daughter, Helen Ruth.

Steve and Helen grew up in a redbrick apartment at 275 Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, opposite Prospect Park. 'The neighborhood was calm and leafy,' Steve Weiss remembered years later. 'The inhabitants were hard-working and white middle class. Most of us

were Dodger fans.' Many, like the Weisses, had moved from tenements in Manhattan's lower east side. William Weiss was an aloof and undemonstrative father. Every Armistice Day, he would lock himself away from the family and stay alone in his room for an hour or so. 'I didn't know who he was,' Steve Weiss said. William worked at a succession of odd jobs, usually as a watchman. His unreliability created tension between father and son. 'My father would not pay the electricity bill,' he recalled. 'He would gamble with the money.' Yet Steve had good memories of the old man. 'He was very entertaining, a good story teller. He never grew up.' When the Depression hit, William Weiss advised other veterans on ways to obtain pensions and benefits from their years of military service. He even won some money for himself, which the family used to take its first summer vacation away from home, in Poughkeepsie.

In June 1942, six months after the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the Second World War, Steve graduated from Lafayette High School in Brooklyn. He was sixteen, two years younger than most of his classmates. Tall for his generation at five foot eleven inches, he weighed a healthy 160 pounds and had a full head of curly auburn hair. He continued his education at night, taking college-level courses in psychology, pathology and chemistry. During the day, the government's new Office of War Information (OWI) at 221 West 57th Street in Manhattan employed him as a photolithographer. His task was to make plates from photographs to print OWI propaganda periodicals and posters. Steve Weiss wanted to do more by serving overseas in the army's Psychological Warfare Branch, whose objective in Europe was the same as the OWI's at home: to engender public support for the Allied cause.

The only way into Psychological Warfare was to enlist in the United States Army. Aged 17, Steve needed his father's permission. He brought the enlistment papers home, but William Weiss refused to sign. The older man stared at his son 'with a combination of shock and regret,' before telling the boy, 'Real war isn't like the movies.' Steve's Psychological Warfare aspirations were fading. If he waited until his eighteenth birthday in October, the Selective Service Board would draft him. Draftees without college degrees had a good chance

of ending up as infantry riflemen, probably the most dangerous and thankless job in the armed forces.

Steve pleaded with his father, who remained impassive. 'Seems like yesterday,' William explained to him for the first time, 'but in the spring of 1918, I was wounded and gassed near Fismes and those experiences still tick over in my head. I've spent most of my life trying to recover, starting with four months in a French hospital near Tours and at least two years recuperating out West.' William Weiss then revealed the secret he had kept since he left Texas: 'I accidentally shot a man on the streets of El Paso working as a federal narcotics agent. Did you know that? Since then, I've never had any energy left for ambition. Too scared to try.' Seventeen-year-old Steve could only stammer, 'Dad, I …'

'Forget about the flags, the bands and the parades,' his father said. 'That's seduction! To increase enlistments. War's about killing, terrible suffering and broken spirit.'

'Are you trying to frighten me?' Steve asked.

'No,' his father said. 'I'm just asking you not to make any sudden moves. If the army needs you, it will find you soon enough.' When the youngster wouldn't listen, William appealed to his conscience. 'Look at all your mother and I have done for you. Even during the Depression, you and your sister never went without. I worked at odd jobs, and your mother worked at Macy's day in, day out, as a sales-girl doing everything to keep the family together. On a shoestring! Doesn't that mean something?'

'Dad,' Steve said, 'if you don't sign the papers, I'll forge your name and run away.' Reluctantly, William Weiss signed his teenage son over to the care of the United States Army.