



War and Peace

Edgar Peara's ideas of duty have evolved since D-Day.

Edgar Peara was a student at Iowa State College on Dec. 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was attacked. He volunteered for the Army the following week, and within a year, he was in North Africa, in the first U.S. campaign of World War II. Less than two years after that, on June 6, 1944, he was on the beaches of Normandy, working as a combat engineer in the D-Day campaign.

The front lines of World War II might seem an unlikely location for a young soldier to embrace peace, but for Peara, the terrors of invasion and destruction did exactly that. When he joined the service, 20 years old and fresh from a high school military academy education, Peara says he felt a strong sense of duty toward his country. But by the time the North Africa campaign began, his idea of duty changed.

"I realized the enemy was not individual German, Italian or Japanese soldiers, as it was the philosophy of national socialism, Italian fascism, or Japanese imperialism," he says. "I thought if I fought them in my mind, I would not have to fight them with weapons." During Peara's entire military career, he maintains that he never injured anyone and his unit never lost a troop. "In my childhood religious education, I more or less lived in the Commandments and the Beatitudes," he says. "And the commandment says, 'Thou shall not kill.'"

More than 60 years later, Peara, who turns 84 in July, has held onto the ideals he developed on the battlefield, transforming his beliefs about violence and destruction into a fully formed philosophy. "Everybody knows the first instinct is survival. Secondly, it's to seek happiness, and number three, everything that lives, grows," he says. "Violence and war, destruction and killing, is the antithesis of every one of those — survival, happiness and growth."

Instead, Peara believes the basis of life is compassionate, nonviolent love. As a Navy chaplain during the Korean War, and later, as

a Unitarian Universalist minister in Illinois and New Zealand, he combined this belief in love with his religious work, encouraging his congregation to lead peaceful lives.

But Peara's work has also been overtly political; during the Vietnam War he remembers bringing his four sons — the youngest small enough to ride atop his shoulders — to protests and rallies. During the Gulf War, he organized a demonstration at a different Chicago-area federal building each Saturday until the fighting stopped.

Today, in the midst of the Iraq occupation and the "War on Terror," Peara, who retired in Eugene a few years back, is still an advocate for peace. Last month, at a Memorial Day event at the Lane County Veterans Memorial, he gave a short speech every hour from 8 am to 6 pm. Using the holiday to honor not just fallen soldiers, but also the thousands of civilians who've died in Iraq, he told the crowd that supporting nonviolence is the best way to observe the holiday.

"Most people think that war is just a part of life," he says. "Just like pre-Civil War, people thought that slavery was a part of life." But in truth, war is neither necessary nor effective, he says — and in Iraq, it's been a disaster.

"To me, the biggest disappointment was not Bush declaring war against a country that was no threat to us; it was the huge majority of the American people who favored it when it started," he says. "The propaganda was that the country would be a pushover, that we'd go in there, and the war would last a few days like the first Gulf War."

Although peace in Iraq is still a dream, Peara cites recent polls showing waning support for the war as proof positive of a turning tide. "To me, a graph of evolution toward peace would be represented by a line like this," he says, gesturing a jagged incline with his hand. "It goes up and down, but the overall trend is upward." The U.S. may be on a downward slope now, but as always, he has faith that love will win out in the end. **EW**

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