

Why Ain't They in Uniform?

Everybody overseas asks that about the young civilians at home. Here are a few of their answers to the big question.

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PROVIDENCE, R. I.—“How many guys are there still left in civilian clothes back home?” and “Why?” are two questions servicemen overseas ask sooner or later.

I've often wanted to stop some rugged-looking character in civilian clothes and ask those questions myself. Recently I had the chance. With a photographer big enough to take care of any situation that might arise if some character figured I was calling him a draft dodger, I came here to Providence, stood on one of the busiest street corners in town for an hour and talked with the first male civilians of draft age who came along.

The corner was at Dorrance and Washington Streets, in the downtown section.

The first man who came along was Anthony Gentile, a tall, worried-looking man with glasses. He's 27 years old and a former bartender and lives in Providence. He's a 4-F because he has a punctured eardrum.

“Listen,” he said, “you think it's easy for a guy my age not to be in the Army? You think I'm having a good time? Every place I go people spit on me, like. I didn't ask they shouldn't put me in. They said to me, ‘Go home, you're no good to us.’ That's a fine thing to tell a guy. I didn't even know I got a punctured eardrum. It don't bother me at all, I tell them, but they don't want to listen to me. They say I should go home.”

Some time ago bartenders, along with other workers like perfume salesmen and attendants in men's rooms, were declared by the War Manpower Commission to be unessential to the war effort.

“All right, so I'm not essential,” said Gentile. “So I go out and get a job in a war plant. I can make a pretty good Martini and draw a neat glass of beer, but about other things I don't know. So I get a job as a floorman. That's what they call it, but it turns out to be pushing a wheelbarrow. Lemme tell you, a guy don't get the feeling he's killing Germans or Japs just pushing a wheelbarrow around. And every place you go, if you ain't wearing a uniform, they spit on you, like. I keep going back to my draft board asking them they should take me in, but they just laugh at me and say I should go home.”

A young, healthy-looking fellow wearing a good topcoat and carrying a brief case came down Dorrance Street. He would have looked good in a uniform. He laughed when I asked him how come he wasn't wearing one. He threw open his coat and on the lapel of his blue-serge suit there was a winged discharge button.

“I wore a uniform for 26 months,” he said, “and then they wanted it back so I gave it to them, because who am I to quarrel with them?”

He was Stewart Kent, 25 years old, of East Providence. He's a former tech sergeant with the Fifteenth Air Force, which used him as a gunner and radio operator in Italy and North Africa.

“I made 48 missions,” he said, “and then I guess my nerves gave out on me or something, and they sent me back home.” He came back with the Air Medal and nine Oak Leaf Clusters. He's working as a paint salesman now and doing pretty good.

“It's no wonder you stopped me,” he said, “because there are a lot of guys who are out and don't wear their discharge buttons too conspicuously. It gives me a laugh sometimes when I see people looking at me as if they're wondering why I'm not in uniform.”

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The next man along looked within the draft age. He turned out to be Fred E. Magee, 44 years old but younger looking. He proved Stewart Kent's point about discharge buttons by flipping back his overcoat. There was a gold emblem on his suit too. "I enlisted in the Navy in 1942 and I was a QM2c in the Admiralty Islands, the Solomons and Guadalcanal in the Pacific," he said.

Magee got out on a dependency discharge and now works for the Pullman Company here.

A husky youngster walked up. "Hey, soldier," he said, "d'ya happen to know where the Navy Recruiting Office is?"

He wanted Navy Recruiting, he said, because he was going to enlist. He was Ernest Dube of Providence. "I was 17 years old last June and I got permission from my mother and father to enlist," he said.

"I been a rigger at the Newport Torpedo Station for 18 months. Why? Because I wanted to do what I could to help win the war, that's why. I was going to enlist last June, as soon as I got to be 17, but I broke my leg and I couldn't. My leg is fine now; it's stronger than the other one. Then I was gonna enlist two months ago, but geez, I couldn't get a day off to go to the recruiting office."

James Dallas, who is 27 and lives in West Haven, Conn., came along Dorrance Street. He's married and has a child.

"Right after Pearl Harbor," he said, "I went to the Navy and asked to be put into the Seabees. I'm an electrical expert, and I inspect electrical material for the New Haven Railroad. My brother-in-law went to the Navy with me. They took him, but they turned me down because my teeth weren't good enough."

Dallas has a couple of plates and the Navy told him to go home and wait. If the war continued, they told him, maybe his draft board would call him; anyway, the Navy didn't want him then. When his draft board did call him, the New Haven Railroad got him a deferment. Every six months after that, when the draft board called Dallas again, the railroad got him another deferment.

"I didn't want them to," he said, "but the railroad officials kept telling me that I was doing an important war job and that the railroad needed me and that without railroads the country couldn't fight a war. Well, I guess that's so, all right, but even so, a fellow my age doesn't feel right about staying out. Men older than myself have been called.

"My last deferment has until May yet, but last January my draft board called me and put me in 1-A, and I've just taken my physical and this time it doesn't matter about my teeth. I'm going in in a couple of weeks, and I'm glad about it. I only hope I can get into the Seabees, because I think that's where I can do the most good."

The next civilian to come along was Guido Lorenzo, 29. "Listen Mac," he said, "whaddaya mean why ain't I in uniform?" He flipped open his coat. He had a discharge button on his suit. "Know what that is?"

He had been in the Air Force, with the 326th Fighter Squadron at Santa Rosa, Calif., for almost two years, until July 1944, when they gave him a medical discharge. He's now working in Providence as a maintenance man for the New England Butt Company, which is engaged in the manufacture of war materiel.

Just as the hour was up, a lanky young fellow ambled up to the corner. He said his name was Victor Gold. "Why haven't I got a uniform on?" he repeated in amazement. "Gee whiz," he said, "I'm not old enough. People keep asking me all the time why I'm not in the Army or Navy. I'm only 16 years old."

Victor is in 11-A at Hope High School, where he is studying aeronautics and drafting. "Because in April I'm going to be 17," he said, "and then I'll be old enough to get in the Navy with my parents' permission. All my friends are in, and it's awful lonesome."

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James Dallas was changed from "deferred" to 1-A.



Stewart Kent is a discharged combat veteran.



Anthony Gentile, 27, is a 4-F with a punctured eardrum.