

“This Might Apply to You”

Capt Chris Goodale, USMC

Dr. Marcus Hedahl, US Naval Academy

The chaplain looked pensively at the young Ensign sitting across from him. Pushing back from his office desk, the chaplain drew toward a filing cabinet, opened it, and began thumbing through some documents. “I think...” he said, as he pulled out a folder, “this might apply to you. Have you ever heard of conscientious objection?”

The chaplain handed ENS Izbicki the folder. Izbicki began flipping through it as the chaplain explained to him what a conscientious objector is—an individual who refuses to participate in warfare due to deeply held moral or religious beliefs. In the five years since he began his military career at the U.S. Naval Academy, ENS Izbicki had never heard of the term. Yet as the chaplain explained more to him about conscientious objection, a lot of doubts that he had been harboring about his chosen career path—the same doubts that had led him to this meeting with the chaplain in the first place—began to finally make sense. “Why don’t you take the application home with you and look it over,” the chaplain offered. “Take some time and think about it.”

That night, as he returned to his room, ENS Izbicki began to reflect upon everything that had brought him to this point. He recalled the excitement he had felt after being accepted into the Academy, the resolve he had had to become the best naval officer that he could be, and the doubts—at first small, but eventually growing large enough to pervade his every thought—about whether he could live with himself if he were to fulfill his military obligations. His path to become a submarine officer would put him in charge of a small arsenal of nuclear weapons, each of which had power to decimate an entire city. If he were to receive the order to launch, could he, in good conscience, be able to do so? Sitting at his dining room table, ENS Izbicki flipped open the folder, pulled out the application, and began to write.

Early Years

Like many Naval Academy Midshipmen, Izbicki had wanted to join the military since he was young. Both of his grandfathers had served in World War II—one in the Army, one in the Navy—and he grew up in San Clemente, California, not far from the gates of Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps Base. In school, many of his classmates were the sons and daughters of active duty Marines. Sometimes his YMCA basketball coach, who happened to be a Marine, would even take his team to the shooting range on base after practice. When Izbicki was six, the United States conducted Operation Desert Storm. He later remembered admiring the might of his nation and the bravery shown by its troops. All these experiences fueled Izbicki’s desire to one day serve his country.

In terms of his faith, Izbicki grew up with a Catholic father and an Episcopalian mother, neither of whom imposed their religious beliefs on their three children. The family attended church only once in a while. In high school, however, Izbicki began attending church on his own, getting involved with a local youth group. As he developed in his own Christian faith, he started making a habit out of reading the Bible and praying regularly. Not surprisingly given its location, the church that Izbicki started to attend, Pacific Coast Church, had a significant number of churchgoers who were active-duty service members.

During his sophomore year of high school, Izbicki watched with the rest of the nation as the twin towers fell on September 11th, 2001. Witnessing such a terrible attack against the United States only increased his desire to serve. He began contemplating his next steps after high school, and decided that to apply to the service academies. While Izbicki's mother and father held typical parental reservations about sending their child off to a military career, they expressed nothing but support. The congregation of Pacific Coast Church was also highly supportive of his decision, believing that military service was a way of serving God and making a positive difference in the world.

During this time, Izbicki sought the advice of his church pastor, himself a Marine veteran, on what challenges his future as a service member would hold. While he wholeheartedly supported Izbicki's choice, the pastor warned that to pursue a career in the military can be a challenging path to walk as a Christian. The pastor warned of a military culture that was often full of cursing and crude sexual humor—aspects of the military that he believed would be the most difficult for a Christian to deal with. Curiously, these were the lengths of the pastor's concerns for Izbicki's future as a Christian soldier; despite being a combat veteran himself, the pastor didn't discuss the potential obligation that Izbicki could have to take the lives of other human beings, an obligation that Izbicki would eventually regard as deeply at odds with his own Christian beliefs.

The Naval Academy - A Desire to Serve Honorably

In the fall of 2003, those difficulties were not at all evident as Izbicki received an appointment to join the Naval Academy Class of 2008. He was overwhelmingly excited for a career of naval service. His experience entering the Naval Academy was fairly typical for a midshipman. Plebe summer was arduous, but he worked hard to memorize rates, square his corners, and keep his eyes in the boat. That summer Izbicki wrote to his mother regularly, expressing confidence that the military was where he belonged and that his life was on the right path.

Izbicki welcomed the typical newfound freedoms as Plebe Summer transitioned into the Academic Year. He joined 27th Company and settled on majoring in computer science. He started to develop a close friend group, hanging out mainly with other Christian midshipmen. Surrounding himself with other Christians insulated him from

what he perceived as the less savory aspects of Brigade culture—the cursing and sexual humor his pastor had warned him about. As a Plebe he also began attending services at a Baptist church off the Yard. Later, he began occasionally attending meetings of the Catholic Midshipman Club with his friends. Through all these experiences he continued to develop his Christian faith, something that was becoming an increasingly important part of his identity.

Like every midshipman, during his Youngster year Izbicki took NE 203: Moral Reasoning for Naval Leaders. His instructor taught the Constitutional Paradigm, the concept that through their Oath of Office service members are duty-bound to serve a hierarchy of obligations: Constitution, Mission, Service, Ship, Shipmate, Self. Through the NE 203 course Izbicki also gained a general understanding of Just War Theory. He learned the difference between lawful and unlawful orders and the importance of rules of engagement in combat. He read Dave Grossman's *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. But with over two years left before commissioning, the potential duty to kill felt more like a distant possibility than a hard reality. Having grown up in the time of Desert Storm and the Global War on Terror, it never occurred to Izbicki that anyone—especially Christians in the United States—would view war as an inherently inappropriate or unjust. As a midshipman, he simply assumed that war was an inevitability that service members like him would face, and that his best course of action was to determine how he could participate honorably in it.

Through it all, Midshipman Izbicki was resolute in his commitment to become the best Naval officer that he could be. In his experiences with summer cruises and an internship at the National Security Agency, he developed a drive to select a service assignment that would be technical in nature. At the time, submarines seemed like a perfect fit.

From Graduate School to Power School - Doubts Arise

In 2008, Ensign Izbicki graduated from the Naval Academy with a double major in computer science and mathematics, and was commissioned as a submarine officer. Academically, ENS Izbicki had performed well enough to earn the opportunity to work on a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University, starting the program in his last semester as a Midshipman and finishing in his first six months as an Ensign. His coursework was relatively light during the fall after commissioning, so he spent much of his free time deepening his faith by reading books on Christianity. It was during this time that Izbicki first encountered the idea of Christian pacifism: the contention that violence, including violence in war, is always and everywhere unjustifiable and contradictory with Christianity. Izbicki was surprised to learn that for the first several hundred years of the church nearly all Christians were deeply opposed to violence in any form, and he was astonished to discover that there continue to be a significant number of Christians who believe that participating in war is antithetical to Christian faith.

In December 2008, ENS Izbicki reported to Charleston, South Carolina, to begin the first stage of his submarine officer training. The six-month course was designed to provide submarine officers with the requisite technical knowledge to capably stand all watch positions on a submarine. This training included an introduction on the Weapons Officer, a position that was directly responsible for launching the nuclear weapons from a ballistic missile submarine. In this new training environment, the idea that he could be directly responsible for the launch of a nuclear weapon—with the potential to kill hundreds of thousands instantaneously—became a much more tangible possibility for ENS Izbicki than when he first pondered the idea of becoming a submarine officer at the Naval Academy.

As Izbicki went through the training pipeline, doubts began to surface in his mind as to whether he would be able to actually fulfill his military duties. He felt uneasy with the idea that he may be put in a position to launch a nuclear weapon with only a bare order to do so—no background information as to why it was being launched or who the intended target would be. Being in such a position would require complete moral trust in whoever was sending the order. ENS Izbicki wasn't sure that he could blindly give such trust without endangering his character, his sense of self—perhaps even his soul.

ENS Izbicki also began to develop a new perspective that questioned the employment of these kinds of weapons. Inevitably, the effects of such a weapon would be devastating to anyone within a given radius of its detonation, whether combatant or not. Izbicki began to question whether the use of nuclear weapons could ever be a morally just way to wage war.

In that concern, Izbicki is far from alone. In fact, coming to terms with the ethics of employing nuclear weapons is the part of being a submarine officer with which many feel most ill prepared—even for some of those who have successfully completed underway tours. In thermonuclear war, there is simply no historical data to help us comprehend the full effect of modern nuclear weapons, no reference of actual employment beyond those bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II (Hart, 2022). These two events—as devastating as they were—offer only a starting point for understating the potential destructive force of modern nuclear weapons; for less than a decade after their employment in 1945, newer fusion-based weapons had already been developed whose explosive potential was orders of magnitude more powerful (Quinlan, 2009, p. 9). For a weapons officer in control of dozens of nuclear weapons on a singular ballistic submarine, it is a real possibility that if they receive and execute the order to launch, they may later surface to find that there is nothing left of their family, their community, or their nation in the wake of a chain-reaction nuclear exchange (Hart, 2022). Even if the worst-case scenario hasn't been realized, these Navy men and women will almost assuredly have played a central and significant role in the deaths of millions—perhaps even hundreds

of millions of people—many of them innocent civilians.

Despite the massive moral responsibility placed on the shoulders of submarine officers, the community at-large generally does not discuss the ethics surrounding the duties that they are assigned to fulfill (Hart, 2022). They practice drills for employing these weapons by pulling a red trigger on a joystick that would initiate launch—doing so up to 4,000 times over the course of a department head's career (Hart, 2022). Yet they have no way to connect this action to the unmatched destructive power that lies at their fingertips (Hart, 2022). They are not encouraged to reflect about the enormous consequences that such a trivial physical movement could bring about (Hart, 2022).

Given his concerns, Izbicki was drawn back to contemplating Just War Theory. He knew that in order for the war to be considered just, it had to adhere to the principles of discrimination and proportionality; it must be conducted in a way that would allow for its participants to effectively discriminate targeting combatants while avoiding as much as possible noncombatant casualties. Considering the devastating and indiscrete potential of nuclear weapons, Izbicki wondered how their use could ever be justified. He questioned what possible circumstances could make their employment proportionate. Most importantly, he wondered whether he could agree to launch them without sufficient information to know those criteria had been met.

As ENS Izbicki thought through the moral implications of nuclear weapons, he began to extend this questioning to the Navy's conventional weapons as well: the torpedoes, the Tomahawk missiles, and the rest. There were certainly a host of relevant differences, but conventional weapons could still be employed to take countless lives. From a moral perspective, Izbicki wondered whether there was a difference between lives taken by nuclear weapons and lives taken by conventional ones. At what point, he wondered, did the line exist between weapons whose use he could justify, and those whose use he could not?

Izbicki thought back to the initial in-briefings at his command, when his class had been shown a motivational video that was meant to get them excited for training. The video depicted missiles striking enemy vehicles, utterly destroying them. Izbicki watched silently as his classmates cheered. It seemed to Izbicki that his classmates derived some excitement from the notion of killing an enemy, a sentiment that he no longer shared. He thought back to the commanding officer of his Power School saying, "If you aren't enjoying the work that you're doing, then you shouldn't be here." Up to that point, Izbicki had felt so confident that his life was on the right path. Now, he wasn't so sure.

The Psychological Test

In early 2009, ENS Izbicki and his classmates took a routine psychological test. One of the questions asked whether he would be willing to turn the key to launch a nuclear

missile. Izbicki paused, staring at the question. He knew the answer that the command was looking for; he knew what his superiors considered the “right” answer. But as hard as he tried to talk himself into writing “yes,” he could not bring himself to do so. He answered “no.”

Though uncommon, this response wasn’t particularly unusual: Of the 200 junior officers in Izbicki’s class, four of them had responded “no” to this question. The answer automatically triggered a meeting with a psychologist, who evaluated ENS Izbicki and then told him that his wrestling with this question was a normal reaction. Observing no psychological issues in Izbicki, the psychologist recommended that he continue with his training. Yet ENS Izbicki himself felt dissatisfied with this outcome. How could he be expected to continue to train toward something he wasn’t sure he could do?

Izbicki decided to meet with a chaplain to discuss how uncomfortable he was becoming. It was at this point that the chaplain shared that Izbicki might be a conscientious objector, a service member with “a firm, fixed, and sincere objection to participation in war in any form ... by reason of religious training and/or belief” (DOD 1300.06). He may simply believe that killing another human being was everywhere and always morally wrong. Handing Izbicki an application, the chaplain encouraged him to take the time to think about whether applying for status as a conscientious objector might be the right choice for him.

At first, Izbicki considered applying for noncombatant status, perhaps to become a military doctor or join the chaplaincy. This option would have allowed him to continue to serve his country in uniform—a desire that he still strongly held—but not in a combat role. For Izbicki, however, these possibilities had their own issues. As a doctor in the Navy, Izbicki’s primary duty would be to enhance America’s warfighting capabilities, ensuring that its sailors were fit for combat. The possibility of serving as a Chaplain seemed to speak more directly to where he found himself in his spiritual journey, but a much more fundamental problem arose: How could he counsel a service member who may be struggling with the same reticence to kill?

Given his doubts, his questions, and his concerns, in October 2009, Izbicki decided to submit an application as a conscientious objector.

The Application

Izbicki was surprised at the amount of push-back he received from his command in Charleston. They seemed to drag their feet with his application, and Izbicki had to remind them several times about the next steps in the process. Eventually, he was assigned an investigating officer to interview him and review his application. Izbicki felt an air of hostility from the investigator, who made it clear that he was skeptical of

Izbicki's intentions. Izbicki felt that he was being perceived as a cheater, as someone who was trying to defraud the system. This reaction frustrated Izbicki, who had tried to make it as clear as he could that his goal was to find a way to continue to be of service to his country. He found it strange that the Navy had extended automatic trust to him to fulfill consequential duties on a multi-billion-dollar submarine, but that after vocalizing his doubts about his ability to fulfill those duties, the same trust was noticeably absent. All in all, the application process took six months, eventually resulting in a denial.

This decision left ENS Izbicki feeling confused about how he could be expected to fulfill his duties as a submarine officer after he had notified his superiors that he felt unable to do so. Izbicki decided he needed help, so he reached out to the GI Rights Hotline, who connected him with lawyers to assist him in preparing a second application. Meanwhile, ENS Izbicki continued through his training pipeline, graduating from Charleston and heading to his next training command in Groton, Connecticut. Shortly after the move, in March 2010, he submitted his second application and moved into St. Francis House, a Franciscan Christian community whose residents included two Franciscan brothers, a number of AmeriCorps workers, and a Native American shaman. While living in this pacifist Christian community, Izbicki devoted himself to regular prayer, either by himself or with fellow residents.

ENS Izbicki's second application was also denied. His lawyers then helped him file a petition in federal court to challenge the decision, but he would have to wait even longer before receiving a ruling. In the meantime, he continued to live at St. Francis House and served as the Security Officer of the submarine base in Groton, where he oversaw accountability of base keys and processed security clearances.

The Court Ruling and Life After the Navy

In February 2011, a federal court finally ruled that the Navy had not followed its own procedures in assessing ENS Izbicki's religious beliefs. He was granted an honorable discharge from the Navy and, within a week, he had completed the discharge process. He would not be eligible to receive any VA or GI benefits, and he was required to pay back approximately \$100,000 to the Naval Academy, based on time left in his original, five-year commitment. If the Navy had merely approved his original application in 2009, Izbicki's financial commitment would have been twice as large.

After leaving the Navy, Izbicki earned a Ph.D. in computer science through the University of California and is now a professor of computer science at Claremont McKenna College. He has remained convinced that he wants to make the world a better place, seeing education as the best path for him to do so. In 2015, Izbicki began working on academic exchanges between the United States and other, more traditionally adversarial nations in an attempt to foster peace. Since being discharged, he has counseled nearly 30 other service members who wanted to apply for status as

conscientious objectors.

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