

“Then Came the War,” by James M. Becker

Introduction: World War II, or the Second World War, was a worldwide conflict fought from 1939 until 1945. It was the largest armed conflict the world has ever seen. The U.S. officially entered the war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

For 21 years life had been much as it might have been predicted for this Minnesota farm boy. At age 22 all that would change. The take-it-for-granted conditions under which I had grown up were quickly and completely swept away by events over which I had no control.

From June 1937, when I graduated from high school, until September 1941, when I enrolled as a college freshman at St. Thomas College in St. Paul, Minnesota, my father and I and a variety of hired men ran the Becker farm. The farm was a modern, successful [business], and it had been in the family since 1875 when my grandfather purchased the land. He and Grandma Becker had lived with us, a condition which contributed to my notions of stability as a normal condition of family life. When my brother Ed graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1942 and returned to the farm, I became a college student determined to pursue a career other than farming. After a brief three months in college, it became apparent that the predictability that had characterized my life to that time was about to change.

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon on the Becker family farm. The radio was tuned to the Sunday Afternoon Concert Hour. Home from college for the weekend, I was half-asleep on the living room couch musing about college life when the Concert Hour was interrupted for a special news bulletin. "Today, December 7, 1941 the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor." Later that day I returned to college, but circumstances [for young men like me] had changed.

On May 4, 1942 after kissing my mother goodbye and boarding a bus with a number of other local fellows, I was headed for Fort Snelling, St. Paul, Minnesota. There we would be given a physical exam and if found fit, be inducted into the United States Army.