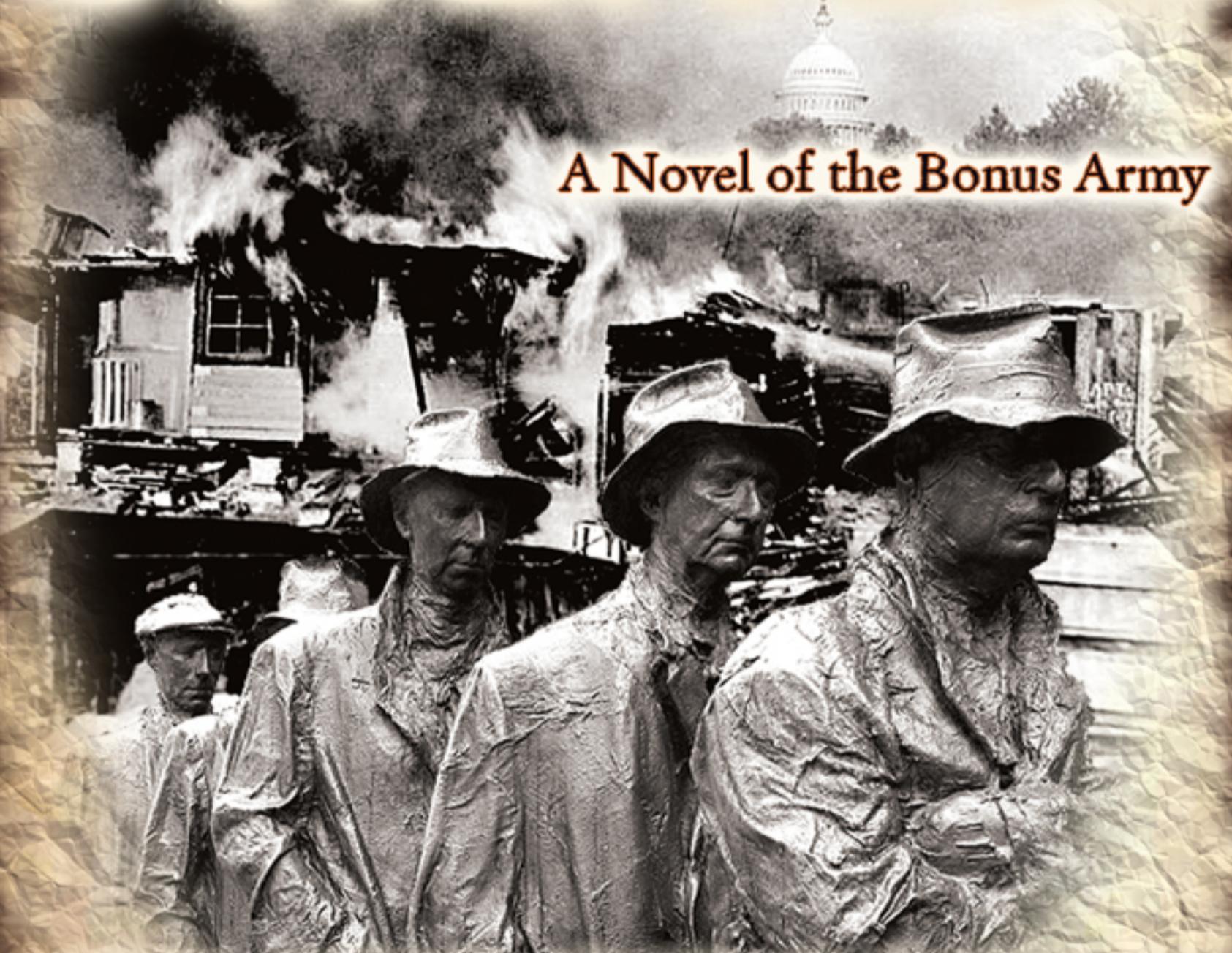


**THE
YANKS
ARE
STARVING**

A Novel of the Bonus Army



GLEN CRANEY

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BRIGID'S FIRE PRESS

Here were they at the King's gates, and on every side environing them were many hostile cities and tribes of men. Who was there now to furnish them with a market? ... Haunted by such thoughts, and with hearts full of despair, but few of them tasted food that evening; but few of them kindled even a fire, and many never came into camp at all that night, but took their rest where each chanced to be.

— Xenophon, *Anabasis*

PROLOGUE



NORMAN, OKLAHOMA DECEMBER 1941

“**G**et this chickenshit sluice t-t-trough moving! If you don’t put a gitty-up on, the damn war’s gonna be over b-b-before we fire a shot!”

Lt. John Keyes shook his head at that pathetic yelp of false courage. He had heard similar boasts from many of the farm boys who had lined up that week at his induction station, but none sputtered with such an unstrung stammer. The way he sized it, anyone from around these parts trying to join the Navy had to be a little yellow anyway. Most of these dust-grimed crackers in overalls hadn’t seen a body of water larger than a washbasin, and half of them couldn’t swim. All of this Midwestern bragging about steamrolling across the Pacific to Tokyo was just a cover to avoid the infantry.

“What’s the d-d-damn hold-up anyway?”

The officer didn’t bother to look up from the stack of NGCT intelligence tests that he was grading. “Keep your powder dry, cowboy. There’ll still be plenty of bullets to go around.”

Ignored, the impatient recruit bit off a couple of incoherent curses.

The lieutenant leaned back in his metal chair to take a break from the paperwork. Chilled to the bone, he yawned and pushed his aviator sunglasses up the bridge of his red nose for cover, hoping to warm his feet with the memory of Norfolk’s sunny beaches. Crackerjack shore duty that had been, until the Japs had to go bomb Pearl Harbor and get him transferred to this Okie Siberia to process enlistments. He closed his eyes and smiled at those Virginia dolls in their skimpy swimsuits, frolicking in the waves—

A frigid blast of prairie air walloped him harder than a Joe Louis left hook.

Rousted from his daydream, he returned to the test forms, and now his damn pen was frozen. If those pogue geniuses in Washington thought this country was ready to fight a war, they should bunk down a couple of nights at this cattle lick being passed off for a service base. Hell, the whole damn place

was falling apart. Just that morning, wind gusts had collapsed a section of the Naval Training School's armory roof, forcing him to move this human cattle drive outside on the parade ground until repairs could be made. Disgusted with the dead-end assignment, he took out his frustration by thumping the pen's congealed tip against his desk. When its cheap casing splintered, he tossed the pen over his shoulder and, wiping his ink-smeared hands on the brown grass, muttered a prediction that they'd all be eating out of rice bowls soon if those new anti-aircraft guns didn't last longer than these—

"Those Nips'll be in Frisco by the t-t-time you get us on the boats!"

His patience spent, the lieutenant shot to his feet to read the riot act to the dribble-mouthed hothead who kept hectoring him. His jaw dropped at what stood before him: a gaunt old codger sported a frayed khaki brownshirt, flared cavalry jodhpurs dappled with mud stains, and scuffed black jackboots that reached to his knees. The tall, lanky fellow seemed to be a nervous sort, constantly brushing his shocks of graying blond hair across his mottled head with fingers stained yellow from a chain of cigarette butts trailing behind him.

An ensign down the line stopped passing out medical forms and raised his arms in mock surrender. "You'd better sound all-hands-on-deck, sir. I think we've just been invaded by Mussolini."

The lieutenant stood grinning at the sodbuster's ridiculous Fascist get-up. "Nah, he doesn't have enough flesh on the bone to be *El Duce*. I'm thinking he's the *Fuhrer* in spy disguise. He must have cut off his mustache and painted his hair white."

The ensign fingered a rusty trench whistle hanging from a lanyard around the fellow's gizzard neck. He blew a couple of razzing toots on it. "You auditioning for the talkies, old-timer? I hear the Signal Corps is looking for a Hitler stand-in to make their movies for the war bonds campaign."

The craggy-faced volunteer glared damnation at the two officers through his steel-blue eyes. "You jabbering harebrains wouldn't have lasted a da-da-day in my army."

"*Your* army?" The lieutenant motioned up the other recruits to his desk. "Take a look, boys. Stonewall Jackson has apparently risen from the dead."

The geezer waited stoically for the serenade of rebel yells behind him to fade. Then, he challenged the two chortling officers. "You g-g-gonna get on with this? Or you g-g-gonna keep performing your Abbott and Co-co-costello routine till the war's lost?"

The lieutenant wiped a tear of laughter from his cheek before it could freeze. "How old are you, gramps?"

The man cupped an unsteady hand to his hairy ear. "What's that?"

“Your age!”

“Forty-three.”

That claim drew puffs of disbelief from the young bucks around him.

The lieutenant realized that the half-deaf yarn spinner was dead serious about joining up. He put a stop to the taunts and warned the man, “Lying under oath on a recruitment form is a federal offense.”

The jittery volunteer pointed at a blank sheet of paper on the officer’s desk. “W-w-write ‘er down in duplicate. S-s-send one to Hirohito.”

The lieutenant circled the odd fellow to determine if he looked as gimpy from behind as he did from the front. “What in God’s name happened to you, partner? Appears you got one step in the grave already.”

“I’ve been th-th-through a few rough patches with my health. But I can still fire an Enfield.”

“What kind of rough patches?”

The volunteer kept staring at the ground. “It d-d-don’t matter none.”

“It matters to the U.S. Navy,” the lieutenant said. “We’re not going let some jag-off slip in just to freeload medical care. A lot of bums are trying to sponge off the government these days.”

The man clasped his right hand to stifle a spasm in his fingers. “There’s more bums *in* the g-g-government these days, from what I’ve seen.”

“You got the palsy?”

In a near whisper, the man admitted, “I was gassed.”

“Did you say *gassed*? You forget to turn off your stove, or what?”

“On the Meuse.”

Stealing a look of disbelief at his ensign, the lieutenant scoffed at the codger, “You really expect us to believe that *you* fought in France?”

“Hundred F-f-forty-Sixth Field Artillery.”

“And you were discharged?”

“Honorable.”

The tale was getting so tall, the lieutenant could hardly see over it. “I suppose you had a rank, too.”

“Sergeant.”

The lieutenant knew the half-senile crank was just making it all up. Hell of a mess the Army would have to be in to promote such a clipped-winged cull to anything higher than a mess cook. He decided to let him down gently. “Sorry, doughboy, but you’re just a bit over the age limit.”

“I know my rights. The Navy is t-t-taking men up to age fifty. I ain’t moving from this spot until I put my John Hancock on one of those killing contracts.”

“Now listen here—”

"I'll go over your head to the goddam stripe in charge of this playground!"

The lieutenant reddened. "You won't pass the physical anyway, and you know it."

The gimpy veteran just glared at the two officers, as if debating another revelation. Finally, he tried negotiating his way in. "What if I f-f-fought in another war *after* France?"

The lieutenant rolled his eyes. "We don't have time for this nonsense. The country hasn't been in a war since 1918."

"The hell it ain't."

One of the boys in the rear of the line yelled up, "Hey, if we're not getting in today, I gotta catch the Greyhound back to Chickasha!"

Lt. Keyes thrummed his fingers on the desk while debating how to get rid of this pest. He was already behind again on the inductions, and the last thing he needed was to piss off the brass by not meeting the daily quota. This ornery buzzard seemed just trigger-happy enough to raise a holy ruckus if he ordered the MPs to haul him out. He decided to let him make an even bigger fool of himself in the hope that the humiliation would finally drive him off on his own accord. He ordered the other volunteers into a semi-circle around him and played along by handing the fellow a form. "All right, *son*, what's your name?"

"Waters ... Walter Waters. Some f-f-folks call me Dubya-Dubya for short. But that ain't quite accurate, because my m-m-middle name is Warfield. Dubya-Dubya-Dubya would possess more authenticity. But I'll answer to any of the three appellations that b-b-begin with Dubya."

The lieutenant licked his chapped lips, eager to send the blowhard out the gate with his tail dragging. "Sergeant Waters here—"

"Commander Waters."

"So now you're a commander? We'd better get this roll-call finished before you become emperor."

Waters cracked his gnarled knuckles, itching to throw down. "You're a regular Will Rogers with all the j-j-jokes."

The lieutenant shook his head, amazed at the vast and varied lunacies produced by the human race. He told the other recruits, "Commander Waters here is gonna tell us how he fought in the Great War of His Imagination." Then, he asked the man, "Who'd you square off against? Hannibal or Napoleon?"

Waters didn't even blink. "Mac."

One of the recruits yelled out, "General McClellan?"

Waters spun on the lippy Okie. "There's only one Mac, god-da-da-damn it! And you god da-da-da-damn know who he is!"

Motioning the recruits to silence, the lieutenant shammed an interest. "You *fought* MacArthur. You fight *for* the Germans, did you, Herr Dubya-Dubya?"

The veteran's hard eyes filmed over, and he turned a woebegone gaze toward the railroad tracks the distance. "Nah, I led the best da-da-damned American army ever took the field. Worst thing about this c-c-country is it ain't got no memory for the important things that happen to it."

Baffled by this hillbilly prophet's cryptic lament, the lieutenant glanced across the field and saw several drill squads looking over to see what all the commotion was about. He decided he'd better cut this little charade short before word started spreading downwind that he had lost control of his station. "Listen, Mr. Waters, or whoever you are. I'm going to have to order you to run along now. Or I'll have to call the mental hospital in town and—"

"I'll prove it."

The recruiter set his hands on his hips. "You're going to prove to me that you fought General Douglas MacArthur with an American army? How exactly do you plan to do that?"

Waters puffed out his sunken consumptive chest to display two threaded military ribbons pinned to his breast pocket. "If I demonstrate my *bona fides* on the matter, will you let me t-t-take the oath?"

His first plan having backfired, the lieutenant reluctantly decided that letting the man blather his two cents worth was probably the only way to get rid of him now. "You got five minutes before lunch call. Make it fast."

The other recruits moaned, forced to stay out in the cold even longer now. The sniggering ensign piled more logs onto the fire in the oil drum.

Before the lieutenant could intercept him, Waters commandeered the chair from behind the desk and situated himself in front of the fire. Flicking away the butt of his last Lucky Strike coffin nail, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a plug of tobacco, and stuffed it into his cheek. Satisfied at last with his preparations, he waved the recruits forward. "Come on closer, maggots. I ain't g-g-gonna strip the gears in my throat educating your ignorance."

While the grouching recruits stepped in around him, he began singing the tune that had always helped calm the hitch in his words, an old big-band number by that top-hatted medicine man of jazz, Ted Lewis:

"There's a new day coming,
As sure as you're born,
A new day coming,
Start tootin' your horn,
The cobbler'll shoe, the baker'll bake,
When the brewer brews, folks,
We'll all get a break.
There's a new day coming,
Coming soon."

Finishing his jingle, he creaked up to his feet again and pointed toward the pole that towered over the camp. "In my army, we always c-c-commenced proceedings by honoring the g-g-glorious Stars and Stripes."

The lieutenant nodded for the slouching recruits to humor the pompous veteran, and they twitched off a few shivering, half-hearted salutes to the flag.

Forced to be satisfied with their lackadaisical effort, Waters sat back down and scooted his chair closer to the crackling logs to warm his rheumy knees. When the recruits had finally huddled down on their haunches around him, he prefaced his story with a condition. "Now listen up, shavetails. You're g-g-gonna promise me one thing."

"What's that, grandpa? You need a latrine break already?"

Waters ran a warning finger across the seated ranks. "None of you's are gonna b-b-back out of serving after you hear what I got to say."

Trading confused glances, the recruits finally nodded their agreement, just to get on with whatever it was they were about to endure.

Waters wiped a seep of chaw spittle from the corner of his mouth. "You ever heard those rich b-b-birds on Wall Street say teach a man to fish and you f-f-feed him forever?"

The recruits didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

"That d-d-day in Galilee, when the Good Lord gave His Sermon on the Mount, how c-c-come He d-d-didn't teach the m-m-multitudes to fish and bake bread, instead of just c-c-conjuring up those loaves and filets of sole for them?"

The lieutenant was worried that the dotty vet was going start blaspheming on government property. He tapped on his wristwatch, signaling for him to tighten the reins and get on with it.

But Waters refused to be prodded off the winding trail of his sermon. "You figure Christ was a c-c-communist, do you? Not following the c-c-capitalist way? Distributing the d-d-dole like that to anyone who would listen to him?"

"Hell, no!" shouted a recruit. "The Almighty ain't some goddamn Red!"

Waters picked out a stick from the kindling pile and began whittling it with a pocketknife. "What if the Great Shepherd had fed all the Romans in the world, but left his own d-d-disciples in want? You think the Galileans woulda f-f-followed Him to Jerusalem *then*?"

The recruits watched the oscillating pocketknife with alarm, half expecting the shaky veteran to slice off a finger. One of them complained, "This ain't Sunday school, pops! You ever gonna get to the point of this campfire story?"

Waters was sending the chips flying now. "There once was such a man. A titan of history who f-f-fed a thousand times more multitudes than Christ did. But he c-c-couldn't bring himself to give sustenance to his own hungry folk."

“Some Bolshevik, was he?” asked one of the recruits.

Overcome by the memories, Waters brushed away the chips on the ground with his boot in a play to recover his voice. When he had swallowed the frog in his throat, he stiffened his neck and insisted, “Farthest thing from it. Turned out he was just an orphan boy with a b-b-big heart. But he came to be surrounded by a d-d-dozen Judases for apostles.”

“What was his name?”

“Hoover.”

“You talking about the suction sweeper fella?”

Waters aim the point of his pocketknife at the numbskull who had just asked that boneheaded question. “No, junior. I am referring to the man who p-p-put all that Okie dirt *in* your momma’s rug, not the one who took it out.”

“*President* Hoover?”

Waters nodded. “But long b-b-before the dust twisters b-b-blew ‘ol Herbert into the White House, he found himself in another shit storm another halfway across the world. That’s where it all s-s-started. With the great Quaker surrounded by millions of starving Chinamen.”

Now even more mystified, the recruits just sat staring up at the veteran.

The lieutenant figured he’d regret it, but he went ahead and asked, “*What* started?”

Water ballooned his cheeks and shot a black jet of tobacco juice at the ground, nearly splattering the volunteers in the front row. “The fight that came within a hare’s breath of sparking off another American Revolution, *that’s* what.”

Principal Characters

(occupations and ages when first appearing in the main story)

Joe Angelo

Son of a miner in Hazleton, Pennsylvania; 14

Floyd Gibbons

Reporter for the *Minneapolis Daily News*; 20

Pelham Glassford

Plebe at West Point Military Academy; 17

Herbert Hoover

Engineer and mining agent; 26

Douglas MacArthur

Yearling at West Point Military Academy; 19

Anna Raber

Daughter of a Mennonite pastor in Indiana; 16

Ozzie Taylor

Street musician in Harlem; 12

Walter W. Waters

Son of an Idaho laborer and land agent; 10

PART ONE



NO MAN'S LAND 1900 - 1919

*Don't fear, all is clear
That's the life of a stroll
When you take a patrol
Out in No Man's Land
Ain't it grand?
Out in No Man's Land*

— lyrics by James Reese Europe and Noble Sissle,
369th Infantry U.S. Regiment