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By Jean Schaefer

One—five—eight.” The aristocratic voice of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt intoned the three words somberly, slowly, into the battery of microphones before him. And the first peacetime draft in America’s history was under way. The chilling possibility of a Nazi victory in Europe had spurred the passage of the controversial Selective Service Act.

The time: noon on Oct. 29, 1940. The setting: the blue and gold Departmental Auditorium on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. Cabinet members, congressional leaders, the press, radio network people and plain spectators crowded the hall to witness the historic moment. Then the Marine Corps Band struck up the stirring national anthem.

At the center of the stage on a mahogany table rested an enormous glass bowl, the same bowl that had been used for the 1917 World War I draft. It held 9,000 bright blue capsules, each containing a slip of paper with a number on it. Alongside the bowl lay a wooden ladle, carved from a beam in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall, with which to stir the capsules. Even the blindfold worn by Secretary of War Stimson had its origins in history; it was a swatch of upholstery from a chair used by the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

When Secretary Stimson stepped forward, dipped his hand into the bowl, drew out the first blue capsule and handed it to the president to read, the nation held its collective breath. Thousands of anxious young men and their equally anxious parents followed the ceremony via their radios as the suspense intensified.

Each man had been given a serial number when he registered for the draft, and the order in which the serial numbers were drawn from the glass bowl

would determine the order in which holders of that number would be called up. When FDR read off “One—five—eight,” 6,175 youths throughout America who held that number knew they were their country’s first choice for the draft.

The token drawing ceremony lasted only through the selection of several more numbers. Then the dignitaries withdrew, and staff members of the Selective Service Administration continued the lottery until all the capsules had been drawn and all numbers recorded. It was dawn the following day before they completed their task. But radio networks stayed with the proceedings throughout the long night, as did many a young man and his family.

Just two weeks before, on Oct. 16, all men between the ages of 21 and 36 had flocked to nearby schools, firehouses, police stations and church basements in their hometown

communities to register for the draft as prescribed by the new law. From dawn until well after dark they came—16,316,908 of them—until all were signed up. The mood of the youths, reported the *New York Times*, “seemed to be one of philosophical resignation, and in lesser degree, an obvious eagerness for military training.”

The Selective Service Act contained two limitations of interest to us today: Terms of service were for one year only, and inductees were prohibited from serving outside the Western Hemisphere.

As a result of the Selective Service Act of 1940, millions of young American men received a terse letter from the president that had more impact on their futures than any other piece of mail they would ever receive. It began: “Greetings. You are hereby ordered to report for induction into the armed forces of the United States. ...” ❖



Fred and Jean Schaefer, 1943.