

Canadian Run

Ruby Green

2008

Jon R., a semi-retired North Dakotan farmer in his late 60s, eased his big, beat-up pickup truck off to the side of the dirt road and turned off the ignition. He turned in his seat and pointed to low wire fence running through the heavily-wooded field to the right.

"Usually, I would try to get here right before midnight. That fence is a good guide in the dark. You stay on the other side and follow that all the way to the corner of the field; straight ahead is an old fieldstone wall that you need to follow west until you find a small stream. You go upstream there for about two hours. Then you bed down for the night. I tell them 'No fires at night. Dress warm, eat some food, fill your canteen at the stream, but no fires. Stay there until sunrise.' Then I need to give them the compass readings..."

Jon R. quickly recounts his compass settings and goes through hiking directions that lead between some hills, through a grove of white birch trees, and across the back of some farmland to an old tractor trail. From there, hikers are instructed to head northward on the trail to train tracks and to follow that rail line northwest for "two or three hours." By then, the hiker "will be in a gully and facing one of them highway drainage culverts. There's a paved road above the culvert. Climb up that hill and you're in Manitoba, about two miles from Route 200, which you can use to get a ride to Altona, and then from there, to Winnipeg."

Jon R. is not a talkative guy, but he does say that he's shown this route to four "hikers" in the last three years, all of whom have been hunted by police and sheriffs for ducking out of active duty and refusing to go to Occupied Iraq. Two were from Minnesota, one from Wisconsin, and the fourth from "somewhere near Chicago." When the heat came down, they tried to disappear; but once the cops get your name from the US Department of War, border-crossing checkpoints are out of the question. It was word of mouth that had put these four on an underground railroad that led them to a bus station in Grand Forks and eventually to this dirt road in Jon R.'s pickup truck.

They are told to get outfitted at a hunting supply store before coming to North Dakota-luminescent compass, wristwatch, rucksack, canteen, camping food packs, a knife, a light blanket, gloves, and a good pair of hiking boots. "The kid from Chicago was scared of the woods at night. I could tell," Jon R. said. "He told me that he could read a compass, but I doubt it. For all I know, he's still wandering around on that hill." He says he expects two more runaways at the end of the month and worries about how the snows will complicate the task of getting refuseniks across the border. When asked what role his own political views play in his decision to help GIs go AWOL, Jon R. gets a little angry. "Let's keep the goddamn conversation clean, okay? Politics is for liars and the jackasses who believe them. I don't know what they teach you kids in school about the Vietnam War, but that should be 'Lesson #1,'" he says firmly.

He starts up the truck again and turns it around for the long ride home. "The war is wrong and the government is crooked. Let's leave it at that." Jon R. is quiet for a while as he drives, and then he clears his throat and says: "More people need to take things into their own hands and do what they can themselves. If they don't, then they've only got themselves to blame for the mess we're in."

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