**Clarion Review**

General

**The Court-Martial of Charlie Newell**
Gerard Shirar
iUniverse
978-0-595-44491-5
Five Stars (out of Five)

*The Court-Martial of Charlie Newell* a novel by Massachusetts lawyer Gerard Shirar is a compelling read about a young black man's battle against army bureaucracy racial and religious prejudice and societal indifference during the tail end of the "war to end all wars." The story according to Shirar is a fictional account based on a 1918 court-martial of a conscientious objector at Fort Caswell in North Carolina. In Shirar's hands it becomes a poignant powerful story of the price one man paid for adhering to his religious principles as an untrained minimally educated soldier refusing to work on Saturday his Sabbath but more than willing to do his duty on Sunday the US Army's Sabbath. It is also a chilling indictment of "man's inhumanity to man" and of the individuals who stood idly by as prejudice and injustices took place during the several years of the story.

Charlie's troubles begin in August 1917 when he and two of his brethren in the Church of God and the Saints of Christ are taken from the impoverished community of Holly Ridge North Carolina and incarcerated as conscientious objectors at Fort Caswell. They escalate when he refuses to work on Saturdays claiming Saturday as the Sabbath for his religion. The conflict over his beliefs and the Army's determination to have Charlie conform leads to a multiplicity of opportunities for Shirar to expose the bigotry of the day in the ways that Negro soldiers conscientious objectors or not were mistreated by the military justice system and eventually brutalized in the stockades at Fort Jay Leavenworth and Alcatraz. The caste systems among the prisoners are depicted as well and so are the incidents of harassment and physical and sexual abuse leading even the most mild-mannered such as Charlie to rebel and turn to make-shift weapons for self-protection. And while Charlie is mistreated legal reviewers of his case and his superiors who know better remain aloof rather than tackle the rampant prejudices around them. Even Charlie has his breaking point though and when his wife is raped and murdered he

questions his religious convictions and whether his years of incarceration have been worth the suffering. Then however as others have twinges of conscience and changes of heart Charlie is released and thrust unexpectedly back into a world where it appears he might be able to recapture his faith and return to his seven-year-old son in Holly Ridge. But for the star-crossed Charlie such is not to be; he becomes ensnared in a case of mistaken identity in a rape case in which he discovers that rough justice can occur in the civilian courts of 1920s main street America as easily as in its military prisons.

Shirar delivers his story in a blunt straightforward style ideally suited to its subject matter. The clipped staccato responses during Charlie's court martial and his civilian trial provide an elastic band tension that threatens at any moment to snap. The dialogue between the characters is equally gripping and scenes of prison life are horrific and riveting. The tragic death of Charlie's wife is a scene instantly embedded in the imagination and one that cries out for justice both for her and for Charlie. Despite his shortcomings Charlie is a sympathetic protagonist and his criminal court lawyer the Jewish Isaiah Goldstein is a character worthy of an Academy Award. An outstanding cover in both design and color adds to an exceptional story.