Chapter 4

Some 400 men out of 16,000 who regarded themselves as conscientious objectors were granted absolute exemption; 6,500 COs were given conditional exemption from military service and told to perform 'alternative service' by finding 'work of national importance'; 5,000 were granted non-combatant status and enlisted in the Non-Combatant Corps, while about 2,500 applications from COs were turned down completely resulting in forcible enlistment in a combatant regiment.

1,200 men refused even to apply to a Tribunal and about 6,000 of the 16,000 men who did apply refused to accept the Tribunals' decisions - and as a result spent much of the war in prison. This Chapter looks at what life was like for COs doing alternative service, those in the army as non-combatants and those who were imprisoned.

4.1 work of national importance - the alternativists

Most conscientious objectors who did work of 'national importance' or 'alternative service' worked on the land doing farming or forestry work. Others worked in medical units such as the Friends Ambulance Unit, helping injured soldiers and civilians.

There was much debate amongst COs about whether it was right to do alternative service. For many COs, alternative service was a good way to help other people and they could live with a clear conscience, knowing they were not harming anyone. Others, particularly absolutist COs, were concerned that it was helping the war effort and believed doing alternative service was taking the job of another man who could then be sent to fight in the trenches - to kill or be killed. It was one of the many dilemmas which COs faced.

land work

R.B. Scott describes his time as a conscientious objector doing alternative service on the land.

'The great compensation of farm-work is that it is in the open air. Thinking of it now makes me long for the sunshine, wind, and rain of my brief spell on the land; and I feel I should like to be back on it again. It is far from a holiday, and it would be foolish to neglect the seamy side. A few weeks of wet, chaff-cutting, the mud and cold of winter, some twelve-hour days of harvesting, and other trials of this kind, are by no means pleasant. At the harvest-time, when we were reaping the blown corn with reap-hooks, life just consisted of eating, sleeping and working.

I found my fellow COs on the farm very pleasant mates. We were generally put to work together, and our tongues and brains had plenty of work, when the opportunity offered. Moreover, they were quite old hands by the time I joined them, and they could not have been more considerate than they were to the newcomer. I think permanent friendships have been formed in this way, and our mental and spiritual outlooks have been widened by the helpful discussions which ensue when people of widely different outlooks meet. We always had the one thing in common - the hatred of warfare and the determination to have nothing to do with it. This bond unites us in a happy comradeship.

We had companions of widely different character. The staff was divided roughly into three equal parties - old men, soldiers, and COs. The soldiers were certainly the more friendly, and seemed to feel very little bitterness against us. Some of the old men growled and cursed a bit at that - nay, we should expect it when we consider the position of comparative safety in which we were placed. The natural feeling is one of jealousy, and persecution is bound to take place under the circumstances.'

Harry Wilson also worked on the land doing alternative service. His role was as an agricultural adviser in Lincolnshire, helping farmers to produce the most food possi-

ble. He was concerned that people would go hungry because so many who had previously worked in food production were being sent to fight in France.

'If you want to be nationally important, impress on all you meet the necessity of keeping men in agriculture. At present there's hopeless rivalry between the Board of Agriculture and the War Office for men. We shall have a far worse famine than we are going to have if skilled men don't stick in agriculture. In my opinion, a lot of people in the Board of Agriculture have not been outside their own front or back doors.'

20 March, 1917. Harry Wilson.

Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU)

The Friends Ambulance Unit was started by a small group of young Quakers shortly after the war started. It was an independent voluntary organisation - not under the control of the British military authorities or even the Society of Friends, although it was mostly paid for by donations from individual Quakers.

Keen to help the wounded and to relieve suffering, Cedric Vipont Brown recorded in his diary how he first started working for the Friends Ambulance Unit in 1915 - before conscription was introduced. He continued to work in the FAU, and after the war he became a doctor.

'Jan 29, 1915: Having sailed from Dover, I arrived at Dunkirk, and proceeded to the Kursaal. While there, for the first five weeks I was put on the 8am to 4pm shift at the Hospital, St. Pierre, in A Ward under Sister Robinson. The work consisted of the usual orderly work - sweeping the ward, feeding and attending to the patients, and helping with the dressings.

April 25: Poperinghe clearing station. It was at the time of the 2nd Battle of Ypres when, by the use of gas for the first time, the Germans broke through, but the situation was saved by the Canadians and British Troops filling up the gap. Ypres was bombarded very heavily indeed, causing the civilians to flee from the stricken city. At that time also, the Sacre Coeur was evacuated. Pandemonium reigned in Poperinghe, the streets being full of artillery wagons and other military transport.

There was found, then, the opportunity for the FAU to take over a clearing station, situated at the junction of the Rue de Cimetière and Rue d'Ypres. Arriving there in the morning, I was put to work on clearing out an outhouse for use as a ward.

During the afternoon a few small shells came into town, and later on, we received some of the wounded civilians. The sight of some fifteen badly wounded persons, men, women and children, lying in a row in what used to be a stable, is a sight I will never forget. It is war stripped of all its glory, leaving its cruel, bloody and repulsive self. As it was, I was detailed to help Reginald Curnock in dressing the patients. To make matters worse, we had only just moved into the station, and everything had to be sought for from inconvenient places. Still, by evening they were all dressed. Some of the wounds were indescribable - suffice it that they left an impression which I shall never forget.

April 26: The next day I was in a 'ward' attending to soldiers wounded in the severe battle that was then being fought, the noise of which was unceasing. In the afternoon we were surprised by the arrival of about a dozen shells of exceedingly large calibre (about 12ins.) It being my first experience of shells, I found it most terrifying and unnerving, made worse by the fact that I was tied to the ward and could not move, but had to stay and look at the houses blow up around.'

1915. Cedric Vipont Brown.

Cedric Brown in his FAU uniform

Corder Catchpool also volunteered to work in the Friends Ambulance Unit before conscription was introduced. He wanted to help relieve suffering but often there was nothing he could do other than provide a little comfort. *'The poor men are so*

grateful for the little service one can render - sometimes it is merely to make them more comfortable to die, or the even humbler service of making them a little cleaner.' The FAU cared for all wounded people, including Germans - '*One has to help the latter mostly by stealth, but it is lovely to be able to do so now and then'*.

Corder was among the first FAU members to go to France in October 1914 and would become one of its leading members by the time conscription came in 1916. He wrote a letter home describing the task the FAU found on arrival in Dunkirk:

'I shall never in my life forget the sight and sounds that met us. Figure two huge goods sheds, semi-dark, every inch of floor space - quays, rails, everywhere covered with the flimsy French stretchers, so that in places you had to step on them to get about - and on each stretcher a wounded man - desperately wounded, nearly every one. The air heavy with the stench of putrid flesh, and thick with groans and cries. Four hundred of these wounded, and one French medical student to attend to them - an English staff officer and an English naval officer helping voluntarily. Half dead as we were with fatigue, we flung ourselves into this work throughout the night, the need was so great. Consider this man, both thighs broken, and he has travelled twenty kilometres, sitting on the seat of a crowded railway carriage. Or this one, with his arm hanging by a shred of biceps - or this, with bits of bone floating in a pool of pus that fills up a great hole in his flesh, laughing bitterly when I turn away to vomit, overcome by the stench of sepsis - he may well laugh bitterly - he has lain eight days on the filthy floor in an outhouse of some farm near the front. Or all these, case after case with bullet wounds through the abdomen, septic, fatal - so we work on through the night, hurrying from one side to the next...'

1914. Corder Catchpool.

The FAU set up dozens of hospitals in France, manned dressing stations on the front line, gave vaccinations against typhoid. They had hundreds of motor ambulances which moved 260,000 sick and wounded away from the front, had four ambulance trains which moved half a million wounded, and had two hospital ships which took 33,000 men back to Britain. They also fed and clothed refugees, distributed milk and purified water, and set up recreation huts.

Soon the FAU and the British army were working very closely together - too closely for some. Corder Catchpool was among those who thought the FAU was working so closely with the army that it was indirectly supporting the war effort rather than simply relieving the suffering of the wounded.

In some cases the FAU worked under direct military orders, and the army came to rely on them so much that it no longer accepted new applicants to army medical units (such as the Royal Army Medical Corps) because it knew the FAU would fill the gap. On one occasion when 110 members of the FAU arrived at a military hospital to offer help, they were met by a hostile demonstration from the orderlies already working there, fearing their jobs would be taken by the FAU volunteers and leaving them open to being sent to the trenches to fight.

'Voluntary units were either dispensed with, or practically absorbed into the regular armies. The wounded no longer lacked help, the Royal Army Medical Corps being often closed to applicants. Men displaced by the services taken over by the [Friends Ambulance] Unit were often drafted to the firing line, and complained bitterly that I and my colleagues had sent them there.'

When conscription came in 1916 most of the 1,400 members of the FAU applied to the Tribunals for exemption from military service on grounds of conscience. Most were granted conditional exemption and were told to do their 'alternative service' by continuing to work in the FAU. Some, though, including Corder Catchpool were happy to be volunteers but refused to be ordered to do work which they now

believed was helping the war effort more than the wounded. For this, Corder spent a long time in prison.

Those who did alternative service and work of national importance frequently had to decide where to draw the line between helping people who were suffering and helping the war effort by assisting the military authorities to wage war. The dilemmas they faced were rarely easy to answer.

4.2 the Non-Combatant Corps - nonviolent soldiers

The Non-Combatant Corps was set up in March, 1916, as an army unit specifically for conscientious objectors. Although the officers were not conscientious objectors all the other men of the NCC were. All members had to wear a military uniform - khaki - and were subject to the usual military rules and discipline. They would not, however, be required to handle weapons or fight.

The War Office said the NCC would be used for 'the repair of roads and railways, sanitation, the provision of huts and baths for soldiers coming out of the trenches, and the manufacture and provision of many necessaries of life'.

Conscientious objectors in the NCC had mixed feelings about their role. Many religious objectors felt at ease knowing they would be able to obey the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. Many other COs, however, felt uncomfortable because they would be acting under military orders and would be helping other soldiers to fight and kill. Some COs, the absolutists, simply refused to obey any military orders at all and were punished harshly for their disobedience.

Horace Eaton was a conscientious objector who had applied for absolute exemption from military service. He was granted exemption only from combatant duties at his Tribunal and was ordered to join the NCC. He did not want to work under military rule, and so it took him some time to decide whether to go to the NCC or go on the run.

'A non-combatant corps had been formed by the military authorities for Conscientious Objectors. It was understood at first that their duties would be to bury the dead on the battlefields and other unpleasant tasks in the trenches. So here was another big problem! Should I refuse all service to the country in which I had been brought up - and thus be sent to prison - or should I undertake non-combatant duties!

For over a fortnight I pondered over the matter but could not definitely decide which was the right path for me to take. Much of my time was spent outdoors as I was liable to arrest any day as an absentee. I seemed to be led to the conclusion that the right way was to undertake any service I could conscientiously perform which would not take the life or assist to take the life of another. So accordingly I called at the recruiting office on Friday June 16, 1916.

The first Sunday night away was spent in a tram-shed called a barracks. I tried to sleep without success on the rough blankets and bed-boards provided. It was such a big change from the comfortable bed at home and the place was also filled with other young fellows who seemed to have gone mad. It was as though they had been released from some chains - whereas if they had only realised it they had entered into a kind of slavery.'

Horace Eaton

After a medical examination and trying on his uniform Horace was sent to Richmond Castle in North Yorkshire, where his company would train and work alongside regular soldiers. Their work consisted of building stables for army horses, preparing fields to be used as airstrips, moving supplies and preparing accommodation for the regular soldiers.

disobeying orders

Many of the conscientious objectors who were sent to work in the Non-Combatant Corps refused to obey orders or work under military authority because they felt they would be helping other soldiers to fight.

Usually the first orders they received were to sign a document (a receipt for either pay or equipment), put on a military uniform (known as 'khaki' because of the colour) or to go for a medical examination.

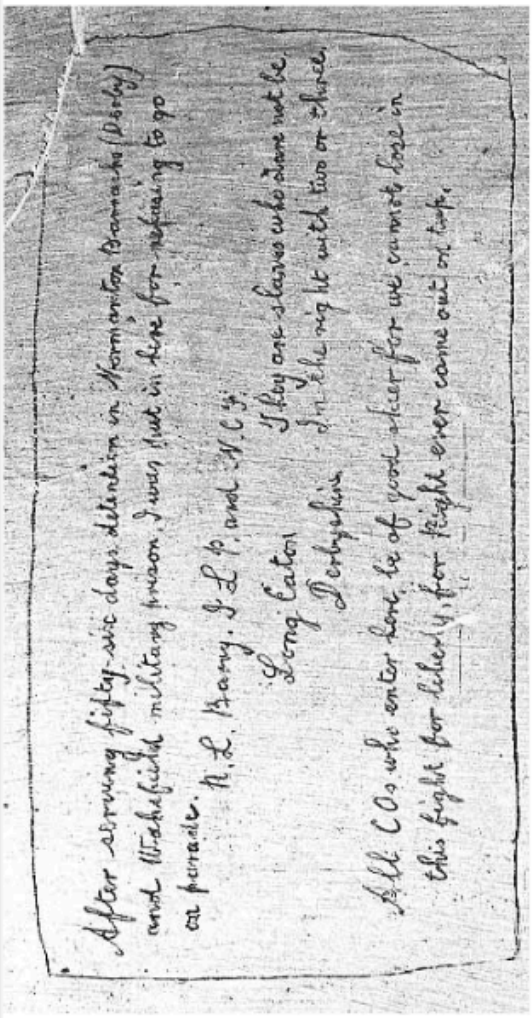
'Many conscientious objectors were sent to Richmond who refused to put on khaki. Although I had not quite the same outlook as these young fellows I admired their courageous stand and attitude against the bullying methods of militarism. The methods adopted to try to make these fellows into non-combatants or soldiers often made one's blood boil with indignation.

One young fellow who refused to put on khaki was stripped and left on the parade ground with only a shirt for a good while. Two NCC chaps took off their caps to him as a sign of admiration and one said, 'stick it, lad'. A Captain overheard the remark and ordered his arrest under the Defence of the Realm Act and he was put in prison for fourteen days. I have seen several of them knocked about, pushed along and kicked on the heels to try to make them march. These things are hard to witness and made it very difficult to control one's self.

One fine looking young fellow was brought in on Tuesday by two soldiers - handcuffed and a very heavy kit-bag containing all his things and heavy boots were fastened about his neck nearly choking him. He was pushed about and finally put in the cold cells where he nearly collapsed.'

Horace Eaton

■ Writing on the wall in the cells in Richmond castle.



Horace Twilley experienced violent treatment himself when he refused to obey military orders in the NCC.

'Friday: Refused to sign papers before Sergeant. Again refused before Major. Again refused before Captain.

Saturday: Brought before C.O. [Commanding Officer]. Again refused. Remanded till Monday.

Monday: 9.20am, brought before Colonel. Told him I was opposed to war; I could not obey military orders. Sentenced to 28 days' field punishment. After leaving office, Sergeant gripped me by collar and said that punishment would 'break my b----- spirit'. 3.30pm, Refused orderly work (part of punishment) and was out in irons for two hours. Corporal told me he hoped to be one of the shooting party when my time came.

Tuesday morning: Fetched out forcibly and rushed to the parade ground. Hauled around for an hour by one soldier after another, until exhausted - scores of soldiers laughing at the fun. Afternoon, again dragged out of room, and dragged with other conscientious objectors round the parade ground. One burly Sergeant caught me by collar and in the small of the back and propelled me thus for about a hundred yards. Then placed between two soldiers, and the same thing repeated as in the morning. (My friends Grant and Harry Adkins had similar treatment.)

After this I was put in irons for two hours, and am told this will be done every one of the 28 days 'to tame me', as they have put it. I have been sworn at repeatedly, and this is only the second day of sentence.

This morning, Wednesday, I have been told that there will be no more Court-martial cases - 'We are going to make you soldiers not prisoners, my lad'.'

June, 1916. Horace Twilley

moving munitions

One of the common tasks for men in the NCC was to move supplies for the regular soldiers. This involved loading and unloading trains, and driving trucks to supply depots and barracks. Other than being boring, heavy work, this task did not usually cause problems for conscientious objectors.

'One day a part of our company were sent to the railway station to unload a railway van for another company of soldiers. They moved almost everything except some rifles and ammunition and these they refused to handle. Regular soldiers had to be called upon to finish the work.'

'A large number of an NCC at Newhaven about this time (21 June, 1917) refused to load munitions and were court-martialled. Thirty-eight were sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour. This for obeying conscience! Oh Christian (?) England, the home of the free?'

Horace Eaton.

bayonet practice

To make ordinary men kill other ordinary men a lot of training was required by the army. NCC soldiers worked and trained alongside regular soldiers, and although they did not have to do so themselves, NCC soldiers trained alongside regular soldiers practising to kill with bayonets.

'The war meant teaching hatred and murder - thus fostering evil things and establishing many things we had sought to overturn. War is the greatest curse and hindrance to the progress of mankind. Until war is prevented or made impossible men will not be able to enjoy real freedom or attain those heights of happiness and character which are possible. How often I thought over the question as to what I should do as a Christian for the country in which I resided... On one thing, however, I was absolutely convinced that I could not take up arms to kill. No, it was impossible for me to think of taking life - however worthy the cause may be. I also realised what a horrible thing war is and had no desire to take any part in it.'

Horace Eaton

Human beings do not naturally or easily take up arms and systematically kill one another. If they did we would all be in a permanent state of war. Only a very small minority of people kill others on purpose - and these people are usually regarded as criminals or insane.

'The practice of bayonet fighting alone is utterly detestable and disgusting. The young fellows I have seen being trained in this way - or most of them - were evidently sickened and shocked at such methods. They had generally to be cursed or bullied into it. A rousing up of their spirits by bad language etc. from the NCOs had to be done before they could become efficient in this ghastly business.

Is there any wonder at a nation's morals being lower when young men have all the finer points of their characters so blunted and the spiritual life deadened by such military education in murder?

In this military camp many [regular] soldiers were evidently in sympathy with our [COs] ideals and we had talks with a great many of them. In fact one did not find many in khaki who wanted or gloried in the war - this was left generally to many who were in civilian life.'

Horace Eaton

Bayonet practice was particularly difficult for many regular soldiers. Killing or being killed with a bayonet is so up-close and personal that it made soldiers face up to the reality of what they were training for. Unlike killing people with a bomb or bullet, a

bayonet requires combatants to be literally within arm's reach. It would be impossible to ignore the sound, the smell, the terror and the reality of the action compared with pulling a trigger from 100 metres away, or firing a missile from hundreds of miles.

'Eli Ward found himself in the Army without realising what had happened to him. He was given a rifle and a bayonet and instructed at the beginning of his training to run along a field to where a number of straw-filled sacks dangled and stab one with his bayonet.

Eli was a simple soul, but this procedure stopped him in his tracks. When the officer in charge bellowed at him, he turned round and questioned 'Is that meant to be a man?' When he was told 'Yes, get on with it' he refused to do it, was put on a charge and found himself in the cells.

He met other men who were refusing to bear weapons and to his surprise, he was told that, like them, he was a conscientious objector.

He served a prison sentence like my father and so many others did.

This was one of the many stories my father, Jack Sadler, told me when I was a little girl.'

November, 1998. Dorothy Morley, daughter of Jack Sadler.

punishments

Some COs in the NCC continued to disobey orders despite extremely harsh punishments at the hands of the military.

In Harwich Redoubt, a fortress built inside a hill to house French prisoners from the Napoleonic wars, conscientious objectors were strapped up in straitjackets and stood against the wall in the hot sun for hours. Other COs were kept in punishment cells if they disobeyed orders. Harry Stanton was kept in a punishment cell overrun with rats and without food for three days:

'It seemed impossible to keep warm. The three punishment cells were built end to end, into the hill, and the only light which reached the second cell came through a filthy window in the dividing wall between it and number one. The third cell depended solely on a similar window in the wall of number two. At no time during the day could one see to read in number three; moisture trickled down the walls, and the floor was rotten and broken through here and there. Number two cell was rather better - not so damp; not quite so many holes in the floor - and by standing on tip-toe under the window it was possible to read for a short time each day. Number one, in comparison, was quite a desirable apartment; still dampish but much lighter. I had been put into the middle cell, and I found it almost impossible to sleep, so bitter was the cold. I welcomed the dim light which marked the coming of daylight outside, and the prospect of change.'

May 1916. Harry Stanton.

Punishments could be even worse for those who continued to disobey while on active service outside Britain. J.B. Saunders was arrested as a deserter in May, 1916, for failing to answer his call-up papers. He was taken to Edinburgh where he gave in to the military authorities, joined the Royal Scots Fusiliers and was eventually promoted to Lance-Corporal.

His belief that it would be wrong for him to take human life had never left him, in fact it had become stronger. When he was sent home on leave in October 1916 he did not return and was arrested again and taken to Portobello, Edinburgh. He was sentenced by Court-martial to one year's detention. He served 3 months at Barlinnie Military Detention Barracks, Glasgow, was returned to Portobello, and from there was sent to France.

He was Court-martialled again in France for refusing to carry equipment and given

7 days detention and sent to Alexandria in Egypt. He arrived in Egypt on 14 April, 1917 where he was Court-martialled again, sentenced to 6 months hard labour and sent to Gabaree Prison. Shortly after he was released, still in a British Army Camp in Egypt, he wrote to his wife:

14 September 1917

'I was kicked out of Gabaree Prison on Saturday, 18th August, and since then I have been in this Camp. I want you to understand once and for all that I am doing nothing here. I will not submit to conscription. Therefore I am in the same position I was in on that memorable Thursday when I left Walpole, and I am confidently waiting for the military to re-imprison me on another false charge. Please understand I will never give in.

The authorities here now admit that I am a C.O., and I am offered Non-Combatant work. This I refuse absolutely, for two reasons. I was sent out here in irons by the most despicable methods anyone can conceive. I was put into handcuffs and chained to another soldier. When the handcuffs were taken off on board ship, I was locked in the cells until the ship was well out to sea, and I was also in the cells below ship across the Mediterranean. I was escorted by Sergt. Williams and Corpl. Findlay, of the 103rd Training Reserve, Portobello. I was told at Barlinnie that I was to be flattened out. I was told by a friendly N.C.O. on board to bolt as soon as I arrived at Alexandria. I was told at Gabaree that I was to be finished off.

You remember I said I would face the music. You may believe me when I say that I am not afraid of anything the military can do. I have been in chains and handcuffs, crucified to a tree full in this broiling sun nearly every morning and evening, for five months bread and water and solitary confinement. I refused to do any work whatever, so I leave you to guess what five months alone in a cell, doing nothing, is like. Seven times I went down with dysentery, and seven times I managed to get on my feet and face the music. I fainted, and had to be driven away in a barrow.

This tropical sun and chaining up nearly drove me mad. I stuck it, and got finally bowled out, and was sent to 19th General School Hospital for 17 days. I was offered R.A.M.C. [Royal Army Medical Corps] work. I refused it, and asked to be sent back to prison to do full six months. I left hospital next day, and was doing seven days Field Punishment] No. 1 chained up in the sun etc., when suddenly I had the chains taken off and I was released.

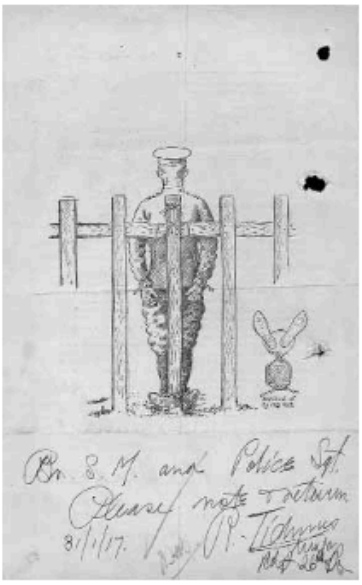
They have discovered at last that they cannot break me. They failed at Barlinnie and I intend to make them fail here. I am determined to sacrifice all rather than give in. Many times I thought I should hang in the sun and die. I pleaded with the sentry to shoot me. I cannot tell you the misery of it... I'll die fifty times rather than endorse the wicked thing. I have several friends here. If I am to be flattened out, they can do it in jail.

They can have my body, my mind I will destroy rather than allow the military cult to take it. I was flooded for weeks in my cell with water, two buckets of creosol were thrown in, and I was gassed. I was naked for several days and nights in chains. I had to lie on the concrete floor. However, I believe the doctor stopped these horrible proceedings. To chain a man up in the tropical sun is illegal...

I was 9st. 12lbs. when I went into Hospital (11st. 8lbs. is my proper weight), so you may guess I was a skeleton. However, I put on flesh quickly in Hospital, and I am now by the sea hoping soon to feel my old self again. If my letters suddenly cease I shall be in prison in Gabaree. Don't misunderstand me. I am determined to do nothing out here.'

20 September, 1917. The Tribunal.

J.B. Saunders experienced one of the harshest legal military punishments - Field Punishment No. 1 - in which the soldier is tied or chained to a tree, fence or cart



■ This simple drawing, issued by the War Office in 1916, gives little indication of the discomfort and pain such a punishment caused. The very precise instructions accompanying this illustration (allowing freedom of movement and so on) suggest that this method of punishment had become excessive, amounting to torture.

wheel with arms spread wide like a crucifixion. Soldiers were punished like this for several hours every day, often over a period of several weeks, often in extreme heat or cold, and often in full view of passers by and within range of enemy guns.

death sentences

Despite punishments and awful conditions, absolutist conscientious objectors continued to disobey any military orders. The army, however, was determined to make an example of them and wanted to frighten them into submission. Groups of absolutist COs from Richmond Castle, Harwich Redoubt and Seaford (about 50 altogether) were sent, against their will, via Boulogne to Henriville Camp in northern France. If they disobeyed orders while on active service they could face the firing squad.

'At Henriville Camp the O.C. told us that as we were now on active service the penalty for refusing to obey orders was death. He would give us 24 hours to think it over...' John Brocklesby.

The COs or 'Frenchmen' as they had become known, refused again to obey military orders, were Court-martialled, found guilty and awaited their sentences.

'Our sentences were read out on 24 June. The Non-Combatant Corps to which we nominally belonged, was lined up on three sides of a square, while we from the Henriville guardroom made a single line along the fourth side. The captain read out the promulgation...

'The accused were tried by Field General Court-martial on the 13th day of June, had been found guilty and sentenced to death. The sentence had been confirmed by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig ... [there was a long pause] ... and commuted to ten years' penal servitude.'

I remember, as the officer read out these sentences, that my mind worked at high speed. After the name of the Field Marshal and before the commutation there seemed a considerable pause, but whether the captain had to take a breath or no I am sure it was my excitement that prolonged the pause; the captain himself was very considerate and admitted to one of our visitors that he thought we were very brave men. It is, I think, a long standing tradition in the army to acknowledge the courage of the enemy' John Brocklesby.

Thirty-five of them were sentenced this way. Others had lesser sentences. The 'Frenchmen' COs breathed a sigh of relief. They were transported to Rouen Military Prison in France to start their ten year sentences. They continued to disobey further orders:

'We were all put on three days bread and water. We were also put three to a cell, so we had plenty of society - too much when it came to performing our natural functions in the shallow bucket. My two friends were helpful and persuasive, and I at last made the attempt. Suddenly, the door opened and the aristocratic governor bustled in to make his routine inspection. He fell back as though struck in the face and made his exit quicker than Fred did from his office the previous day. '

John Brocklesby.

After some days they were taken back to British prisons.

4.3 prison - an absolutist's lot

Absolutist COs refused to do anything which they considered to be helping the war effort. As a result they endured months, and in some cases several years, in prison. The usual sentence was between 112 days and two years 'hard labour'. Even though the sentences were by a military court (a Court-martial) for a 'crime' which did not exist in civilian life, the sentences were served in civilian prisons alongside 'ordinary' criminals. Conscientious objectors, peaceful men jailed for refusing to fight or kill,

would find themselves sharing prisons with men convicted of murder and other violent crimes.

Absolutist COs preferred to have their own human rights denied than to deprive others of their lives. They could endure the harsh environment of prison and work camps but they could not take another life or assist others to fight or kill. Seventy-three conscientious objectors died as a result of the conditions they were kept in.

The mother of one CO wrote a poem about the treatment her son and other COs received in prison. The poem, later published in The Tribunal, indicates some of the treatment prisoners could expect to experience.

C.O.'s in prison

Who PUT them in prison?
'We' say the Court Martial-
'Our judgement is partial,-
Our job will be gone,
And we shan't carry on
If we listen to conscience
And that sort of nonsense.
Away with their tale!
Just clap them in jail,-
At the horrors we hear of the stoutest will quail!'

Who'll STARVE them, in prison?
'Oh, we!' say the warders,
'For such is our orders,-
Reducing the ration
Is now all the fashion
And ill-flavoured gruel
Is left,- something cruel!
Blackbeetles and Mice
Spoil the oatmeal and rice,
And the 'Objects' ob-ject, they're fearfully nice!'

Who sees them DIE?
'Not I,' says the Nation,
'A pure fabrication!
They've lost weight, we know-
A few stones, or so,-
And some have gone mad
With the tortures they've had-
But if some have died
Such cases we hide-
And no one, you'll notice, for Murder is tried!'

Who'll HELP the C.O.'s?
'I can't,' says the Church-
'My scutcheon 'twould smirch,-
All war I abhor, it is not in my line,
But this war is diff'rent, it's holy, it's fine!
Now I can't explain, but you'll see, in a minute-
Although it's so holy, why I am not in it;
The Government thought it would look very ill
The Cause notwithstanding, for Clergy to kill!
So this kind of exemption of course I requite
By 'talking up' fighting, -although I don't fight!
Thus you will perceive, though I feel for their woes
That I can't say a word for the dear C.O.'s!'

By the mother of a CO. 25 October, 1917

'Funny. You're in for murder and I'm in here for refusing to.

The first month in prison was especially hard. No communication was allowed at all from outside the prison - no letters, no newspapers and no visits. The bed consisted of a plank of wood or just a slab of stone for the first month of a sentence with hard labour. Regulations were relaxed a little after the first month, and a thin mattress was allowed, but prisoners could still be punished by taking away their mattress, disallowing letters, being put into solitary confinement or having a diet of just bread and water. This weakened prisoners mentally and physically and made them susceptible to illness and disease.

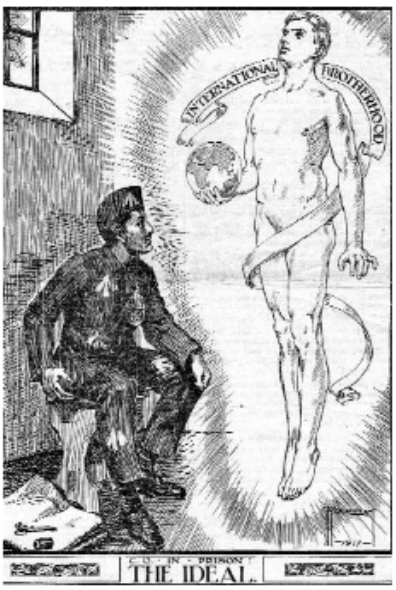
After two months, prisoners were allowed one visitor a month and could write and receive one letter. Pencils and paper were given out to write letters but carefully collected in afterwards. The only other writing materials allowed were a slate and crayon. Hubert Peet, a Quaker journalist, spent three years in prison and his wife and young children missed him terribly. After a while he was able to draw a picture of his cell to send to his wife and children, as well as a description of his surroundings, so his children could start to understand why he was not at home.

'Now I want to tell you about the little room in prison in which I have been living. It is about as big as the scullery at Peak Hill with an iron door with no handle on the inside and a little window with iron bars on it high up in the wall. All it has is a little table, a stool, a few pots and a wooden bed without any legs. This is put up against the wall during the day with the bedclothes over it. I have a spoon to eat with, a funny tin knife, a tin plate and a mug which I wash up myself after every meal. For breakfast and supper I just have porridge and brown bread and that's all. No butter or jam or cake. Then for dinner I get bread and potatoes and sometimes suet pudding, sometimes soup and sometimes a little bit of meat.'

During very warm or cold weather conditions were terrible for prisoners because their cells had little ventilation or heating. In warm weather when their cell door was opened in the morning prisoners would be found lying on the floor of their cell after fainting because of the heat. The guards would leave them there as though they had not seen. Cold, damp conditions contributed to colds, influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis and a range of other diseases. The wife of one conscientious objector wrote about seeing her husband as he came out of prison.

'When I met my husband coming out of prison on February 10th last, I was horrified to see how very badly he was suffering from the cold. His face showed this very much, and in addition to this his hands were literally covered with chilblains and the prison doctor had painted them with iodine. I was still more disturbed when he said that was nothing to what they had been. He also told me that for the last few weeks it had been so cold that he had been quite unable to read at all - he could only pace up and down his cell. I might say that normally he does not feel cold at all, and I have never known him to have a chilblain on his hands before.'

■ Illustration from a COs newsletter circulated in the Home Office work centres. 1917.



silence & secret papers

One rule that was difficult for all prisoners to endure was the silence rule. Prisoners were not allowed to speak unless spoken to by a warder, even while working, during exercise times and meals.

The silence rule drove many prisoners to the edge of insanity, and some over the edge. Fenner Brockway, one of the leading members of the No-Conscription Fellowship, after several months in prison, actively disobeyed the silence rule.

'We found the prison system was absolutely inhuman and denying human rights. We were not even allowed to speak to each other. Of course we did but we always had the sense of doing something which was prohibited and which if we were found doing it would lead to punishment - bread and water, solitary confinement.

But a point came when many of us felt that it was undignified and humiliating to accept the system itself and we decided openly to resist it. For ten glorious days sixty of us ran our own hall in prison. Speaking openly on the exercise ground instead of marching five steps behind each other and not saying a word - round and round. We took arms, we played games, we organised concerts every night. We were shut in our cells but at a window - we had lots of Welsh boys who could sing beautifully - they would sing at the window and everyone down the side would hear. But the effect became disastrous in Walton Prison, Liverpool, because not only did our boys hear but the ordinary prisoners heard as well. And so the five leaders were isolated and then we were transferred to other prisons.

I was transferred to Lincoln Prison. I had eight months solitary confinement at Lincoln Prison. Three months bread and water treatment until the doctor wouldn't allow more. And yet one had a sense of freedom which I can't describe. I mean the Governor would summon me into his presence, but instead of going in and standing at attention and everything else, I'd say, 'Good morning Governor. Nice morning isn't it.' One had an extraordinary sense of personal liberty, personal freedom.'

Fenner Brockway.

One day Fenner was secretly given a sheet of toilet paper by another prisoner who bumped into him in the corridor. On it was written the prisoners' secret 'telephone code' - a kind of Morse code with dots and dashes to represent letters. The 'telephone' was the hot water pipe that ran from cell to cell. Using their cell numbers as their telephone numbers prisoners communicated by tapping messages on the pipe. Because it was in the cell, separated from the corridor by thick doors and walls, the warders could not hear any of the secret communications going on between prisoners. New prisoners quickly learnt the code and soon they could play chess, get news of the No-Conscription Fellowship and hold meetings and discussions on the 'telephone'.

Other than the paper given out for writing letters, which was carefully controlled, the only other paper prisoners had was toilet paper, which each prisoner was given a daily ration of. Prisoners were only allowed writing materials when they were allowed to write letters, though, and the pencil or pen and ink was taken back when the letter was finished. If they saved up pieces of toilet paper - which was against the rules - they could write notes, letters and poems and help to stay sane and in communication with each other and the outside world.

In some prisons, candles were hollowed out to use as secret inkwells, undetectable by the prison guards. The No-Conscription Fellowship also came up with a clever way to smuggle pencil leads into prisons. Every NCF member who was waiting to be arrested was given a small sticking plaster and a packet of pencil leads. Prisoners were stripped, searched, bathed and disinfected on entry to prison so there were very few places to hide the pencil leads. The soles of the feet were the only place warders did not look so NCF members about to go into prison would use the plaster to stick the leads to the bottom of their feet. One CO was almost caught out when the leads started to turn the bath water purple but he convinced the guard it was just an excess of disinfectant.

In many prisons conscientious objectors secretly produced tiny 'newspapers'. Written on toilet paper and passed from prisoner to prisoner they included short articles, cartoons, jokes, poetry and mock advertisements by different prisoners. Titles included the *Winchester Whisperer*, the *Winchester Court Martial,* the *Walton Leader*, the *Canterbury Clinker* and *the Joyland Journal*, depending on which prison they were produced in.

In the *Winchester Court Martial*', the following humorous article appeared:

'News from the back of the Front'

■ The Winchester Whisperer, one of the many clandestine magazines produced in prisons by COs on lavatory paper. Using smuggled pencil lead and home made ink such magazines amused and informed in the bleak and lonely prison conditions. The one illustrated here is bound in sacking.

'Our special correspondent at the back of the front reports that in the early hours of Sunday last the British captured a cowshed. Our losses were only 10,000. The enemy losses must be at least 100,000.

It is hoped that this splendid victory will stop the cry for peace, which seems to have taken hold of a large section of the British people.

(Later) In the early hours of Monday the enemy made a strong counterattack and recaptured the above cowshed. Their losses are estimated at 250,000; our casualties were practically nil. The cowshed is of no military value.'

Fenner Brockway produced the *Walton Leader* twice per week with each issue consisting of up to forty pieces of toilet paper. It was kept behind the cistern in the toilets and other prisoners paid a fee of one clean sheet of toilet paper to read it. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the days the newspaper was ready, there was often a long queue at the toilets to read it. This led the prison governor to ask the medical officer to look into what food was provided the evenings before publication days. Before he could do so, however, the newspaper was discovered and Fenner was punished with a bread and water diet for six days.

The *Walton Leader* included articles on the Russian Revolution (which took place in 1917) as well as a report of the battle of Passchendaele which spoke of wave after wave of men being sent 'over the top' as 'cannon fodder'. Regular newspapers were not allowed to carry such reports so the prison newspapers were truly radical for their time.

war work

Prison work usually consisted of sewing mailbags, mat-making or stone-breaking. Breaking stones all day is heavy physical work and for those prisoners who were not used to manual work it was a very tough job. Even for those who were used to manual work, the prison diet gave them so little nourishment that they had no strength at all.

In one prison conscientious objectors were told to stuff canvas bags with pieces of cork. The prisoners discovered these bags were to be used as fenders for naval ships and realised they were, therefore, contributing to the war effort. As a result some conscientious objectors, including Harold Blake, refused to work. For this he was kept in solitary confinement for eight months, during which time his health failed.

'I asked to see the governor and then acquainted him with my decision, explaining that I no longer trusted the authorities to respect my scruples in connection with war work. I was determined that I would not participate in war in any capacity, the only means by which I could be sure of remaining unentangled in such service was to refuse to do any work whatsoever so long as I was kept in prison...

It was towards the autumn of 1917 that my internal organs were becoming deranged, I suffered from spasms of extremely severe pain across my middle as though I were being screwed up in a vice. At first these spasms were separated by fairly long intervals of time, but gradually they became more and more frequent. The attack culminated in a violent turn of vomiting, and altogether feeling used up. I was then better until the next attack...

I remember at one time during this period, I existed for four days on one potato. I simply could not swallow food, and naturally it was only to be expected that my strength should fail. ...the slightest exertion beyond the most slow and leisurely movements occasioned me considerable discomfort and caused me to gasp for breath... I was in fact so weak that I had not the strength to carry myself upright but stood and walked with drooping head and bowed shoulders.'

Harold Blake. October, 1917.

The same tube was used on all eleven men without being washed or cleaned.

'One comrade had a disease of the nose and suffered terrible agony through the doctor trying to force the tube up his nostril; another had a tear vein burst through the violence of the operation; all bled profusely from the nose and throat, so roughly were they handled. Moreover, on one occasion the doctor pulled a handful of hair out of a man's head in his anger, and frequently used epithets such as 'dirty filthy scoundrel' and the like.'

Force-feeding produces an intense thirst but in Wandsworth Prison the doctor reduced the amount of drinking water available to a prisoner after force-feeding. He also made sure there was already soap in the water allowed for washing so that it could not be drunk.

W.E. Burns, a conscientious objector from Manchester went on hunger strike in Hull Prison. He was force-fed for three days and on the fourth day the doctor used a tube that was not long enough. As a result the mixture of milk and cocoa he was being force-fed with was poured into his lungs instead of his stomach. He choked to death. He was just one of 73 conscientious objectors who died as a result of the treatment they received in prisons and work camps.

The government was worried about the bad publicity if too many conscientious objectors died in prison. To avoid embarrassment and unwanted publicity the government decided in late 1917 to temporarily release prisoners who were dangerously ill. This idea was first used with imprisoned suffragette women on hunger strike. As soon as the prisoner was a little healthier they would be taken back to prison, thus attempting to avoid further deaths in prison.

'cat & mouse treatment'

After serving a first term of hard labour, conscientious objectors were 'released' back to the military unit they had originally been ordered to serve with. They would find themselves back in the same situation that had caused their imprisonment in the first place - they would again be given a military order and would again have to decide whether or not to obey. If they disobeyed they would be Court-martialled again and put in prison again. This repeated return to prison was known as the 'cat and mouse treatment'.

At least 5,973 conscientious objectors were Court-martialled and sent to prison. Of these, 655 were Court-martialled twice, 521 three times, 319 four times, 50 five times and three men went before Courts-martial six times. 843 conscientious objectors spent over two years in prison.

Jack Gray was 'released' from prison to go back to his regiment and suffered appallingly in the hands of the army.

'I have just been informed that Jack Gray was recently released from Wormwood Scrubbs and returned to his regiment at Hornsea. He had been before the Central Tribunal and had refused the Scheme. Upon returning to his regiment he was frog-marched, put in a sack and thrown into a pond eight times, and pulled out by a rope around his body; under this torture he has given in. I am also told that a squad of eight men who were put to break him in, refused to torture him further.'

2 June, 1917. Robert Long. Northern Friends' Peace Board.

'Re 58641 Pte. J. Gray, 84th T.R. Battery, Northcliffe Camp, Hornsea, nr. Hull.

I have visited the above C.O. at his camp and ascertained from him that he has been subjected to the most brutal treatment yet heard of. It is marvellous to me that the poor fellow retained his reason; as it is, he is in a state of utter despair at the position he finds himself in... At the time he gave in he did not know what he was doing, having been thrown into a pond nine times.

He was stripped naked in the bitter wind, dragged across a field, after being immersed in a pond into which drainage and other foul matter ran, he was put into a sack. It is a harrowing and revolting story.

W. E. Machford. 13 June 1917

Three brothers, Charles, Fred and Henry Walker, Stroud Green, London also suffered the cat and mouse treatment. On 16 May, 1916, they were arrested, charged and sent to Mill Hill Barracks and then on to Chatham, where they suffered their first attack. Each time they were released from prison they were severely beaten to force them to submit to military authority.

Charles Walker managed to send a letter to their sister, Annie, later the same week to describe their treatment.

'Dear Annie,

We have not been down here very long, but the moments have been crowded with incidents. The Military authorities have given us little rest - for refusing to come to parade before we were put in the guard room. I should have mentioned that as soon as we arrived here we had an interview with three officers, explaining our position. We are the first COs that have been down here and the officers were interested to know our views. After about 10 minutes argument he said that the military did not want us, but as the authorities had handed us over we had to obey.

Well, we were very soon taken to the parade ground, or rather pushed. We declined to drill or march and our limbs were moved, in the absence of our wills, by a soldier. You must understand that all this, at all times, was punctuated with abusive remarks and bad language. The details of abuse, entreaty, and physical violence are too numerous to mention. We were the laughing stock of the company. The process of drill was again performed in the afternoon with the same result. We were then made to stand at attention by ourselves for about one and a half or two hours under a broiling sun. Harry tottered and fainted.

Yesterday morning we were again brought to the parade ground but, declining to drill were marched to the back of the barracks and were driven and kicked up and down a narrow path. After breakfast we were again taken to the same spot and were this time roughly handled for about an hour or more. We were separated, I being taken to a quiet spot and made to stand in the sun until I fainted. What a strange feeling of relief. I lay in the grass in a short and peaceful sleep but I awoke and beheld the grass and blue sky and was in a happy dream. I wondered where I was, until the presence of two figures bending over me, recalled the overbearing military despotism. I was taken to the spot where Harry and Fred were and partially restored.

Harry was in a sad state, having been punched on the jaw by one of the strongest men in the barracks. I should say here that none of us were inclined to eat and we had been practically fasting. Fred had a very rough time indeed. Ordered to turn etc. and refusing, he was punched right and left on the jaw several times, his face bearing ample witness to the severity of the blows. The heel of the puncher was stamped and screwed on Fred's foot as though to crush the toes. Threats were given all the time that if we did not give in, we should be more severely treated until we did....

Today we have had peace (Sunday - no duties)... We have been very careful not to retaliate by unkind word or deed, however severe the treatment. We have not persuaded the soldiers against their profession. They constantly question us on our position and we spend a good deal of time in conversation with them.

As I was standing on the parade a soldier asked me what I should do if he hit me in the face. I replied that I should not hit him back and should forgive him. He seemed very much affected at the time. About a day after someone that I did not know did me a much valued kindness. I do not know, but I think it may have been the man who

spoke to me on the parade ground...

There are one or two more COs down here I am told, though I have not seen them. One young fellow was in tears shortly after arrival, so I heard. Does it not seem cruel to force these young men to perform a service against which their best instincts rebel.

Love to Ma and you all,

Charlie.

P.S. We have no small number of friends among the soldiers; their kindness has seemed wonderful to us all.

Sunday 21 May, 1916. 6th Middlesex Guard Barracks, Chatham.

Fred Walker's third Court-martial took place in Chatham on 6 October, 1917. By this time he had refused orders and been beaten on three separate occasions and had spent almost one and a half years in prison.

'Gentlemen, this is my third appearance before a Court Martial on the charge of disobedience. My defence on this occasion is the same in substance as that advanced by me on the previous trials. I said then that I did not consider myself a soldier and therefore did not consider myself morally bound to obey military orders. I stated that I had a Conscientious Objection to Military Service on Christian grounds. In consequence of that attitude I have served two terms of imprisonment with Hard Labour, but the confinement has not served to alter my convictions.

I have had opportunities for reflection and the more I consider my position the more I am convinced of its rightness. I have strong objection to becoming a soldier as I am certain that warlike methods will never end war. A peace imposed upon a vanquished people is not likely to last. 'Peace' under these circumstances is simply a period used in preparation for further violence.

I believe that when the peoples of the world understand each other they will see that wars are unnecessary. I cannot see that nations will be reformed by shrapnel but by the application of Christian principles. Those principles demand in my opinion the absence of violence. Violence tends to separate and create misunderstandings, whereas on the other hand, love creates an atmosphere of confidence and regard. It is because of my belief in the latter method that I resist attempts to make me a soldier.'

6 October, 1917. Frederick Walker - Court Martial Chatham.

By the autumn of 1917 there was rising public concern about what was happening to COs in prison. Even in the newspapers that usually had little sympathy for conscientious objectors there were calls for them to be released.

'When a man has deliberately refused to avail himself of two alternative ways of escape from prison labour; when he has, more than once, of his own deliberate choice, gone back to gaol; when he shows himself resolute to go back again and again rather than submit to that military service against which he asserts that his conscience raises for him an insuperable barrier - when he thus proves repeatedly his readiness to suffer for what he proclaims to be his beliefs, is it either justifiable or politic to go on with the punishment? '

25 October, 1917.The Times.

4.4 the Home Office Scheme

The number of COs in prison was an embarrassment to the government. On 28 June, 1916 the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, announced that all conscientious objectors who had been Court-martialled and imprisoned would be interviewed to see if they were genuine in their beliefs.

Conscientious objectors found to be genuine would be released from prison if they agreed to 'perform work of national importance under civil control' at special Work Centres and Camps. Any COs in prison found not to be genuine would remain there until the end of their sentence and then be returned to the military to suffer the 'cat and mouse treatment'.

'When we'd done our 112 days hard labour at Wormwood Scrubs we were offered a choice of going to a place where we could do work of what was called 'national importance' and have a certain amount of liberty there as long as we stayed in one of these centres like Dartmoor or Wakefield where they had made special arrangements for that, but there were a certain number of COs who refused to accept that. They said this was collaborating with a wicked government who was running an immoral war and they became known as the absolutists and they were sent back to prison again and had a very hard time of it.'

Eric Dott.

■ Group of COs at Dyce quarry.

The Home Office Scheme was yet another dilemma for COs to deal with. Should they accept the 'work of national importance' they were offered under the Home Office Scheme or reject it as another way of helping the war effort?

At first many imprisoned COs accepted the Home Office Scheme - 4,126 conscientious objectors worked at one time or another under the Scheme. Leaving the harsh conditions of prison was very appealing and had the advantage of more letters and visits from family members. Some refused though. Hubert Peet, a Quaker journalist, was one of the absolutists who refused. He chose to remain in prison and wrote to his three young children to explain why he was not at home.

'I expect it is difficult for you to understand why I am not at home with you all, I would be if I could, but I am not allowed to. Someday you will understand all about it, but I will try and tell you something now. The English People and the German People have got angry with each other like two children who want the same toys,

and hundreds of men are now trying to kill each other. Now Daddy and Mummy and lots of other people think it is wrong even if another person gets angry with you, for you to get angry with them. The only thing to do, even if they try to hurt you, is to love them and love them all the more. That is what God does if we are naughty, as we sometimes are when we forget. We hope that the other people will, because we are still kind to them, see what God is like and then feel sorry.

This is why your Daddy says he cannot be a soldier and go and try and kill the daddies of little German boys and girls. Most people think he ought to go and because he will not and he thinks it is wrong, they are shutting him up in prison this afternoon. There are a lot of other men there who think like Daddy that it is wrong to fight, and believe that people outside will come to see that's why it is that we won't get angry with the Germans, because we believe that even if they began the quarrel this time it is better to go on loving them than trying to hurt them, and that they will then stop being soldiers and fighting and we shall come out of prison.'

Dyce Work Camp

One of the Work Camps was near the village of Dyce, 5 miles outside Aberdeen. When the first 250 COs (including 23 of the men who had been sentenced to death in France) arrived there, direct from prison in the summer of 1916 they were very happy to be in the fresh air and beautiful countryside of Scotland. They stayed in old army tents and immediately set to work.

■ Walter was the first CO to die as a result of his treatment.

However, when the weather turned in the autumn the camp ground at Dyce became a quagmire. The ground was churned up into muddy pools and water running down the hillside went straight through the camp. The tents, which had at first been sufficient, leaked badly and soon the men were sleeping on damp floors, with damp bedding and clothes. With nowhere to dry their clothes or to warm themselves up, everyone was soon suffering from coughs and colds.

One of the COs, Walter Roberts, had arrived at Dyce in a state of exhaustion after four months' hard labour in prison. After two weeks of working in the quarry he collapsed. He dictated a letter to his mother.

'As I anticipated, it has only been a matter of time for the damp conditions prevailing here to get to me. Bartle Wild is now writing to my dictation, as I am too weak to handle a pen myself. I don't want you to worry yourself because doctor says I have only got a severe chill, but it has reduced me very much. All the fellows here are exceedingly kind and are looking after me like bricks, so there is no reason why I should not be strong in a day or two, when I will write personally and more fully.'

Walter died two days later in his damp and leaking tent. His death shocked his fellow COs and caused panic in the Home Office. It also shattered the myth in the press that COs were having an easy time. After only ten weeks the camp at Dyce was closed down.

'Here is this country at death grips with an enemy fighting for its existence in a way it has never had to do before, and it ought to make every one of us bend our backs to do the work we can do... These men do not want comfortable beds; they do not want better food; they do not want shorter hours; they do not want easier work. They want to be put to something in which they feel they can put their heart and in regard to which they can feel that it is work that is really useful to the State.'

19 October, 1916. Ramsay MacDonald MP

Dartmoor - Princetown Work Centre

In March 1917 several smaller Work Camps and Centres were closed down and the COs there were transferred to Princetown Work Centre in Dartmoor Prison. The prison had originally been built to imprison French soldiers during the Napoleonic

Wars and was later used to house American prisoners during the war between Britain and America from 1812-14. Ironically, it would now be used for British prisoners who refused to be soldiers.

Many people living near Princetown Work Centre got on very well with the COs there and would invite them to speak at their church services, or just invite them to their houses to enjoy some home comforts. The popular press and some locals, however, resented the COs and claimed they were 'slackers' doing no work. On several occasions COs were attacked and beaten by members of the public as they made their way to and from their places of work.

'The Shame of Princetown: Worms having the times of their lives.

Almost indescribable are the stories that come from Princetown, where about 900 conscientious objectors, the scum of the nation, are supposed to be in prison. Much of the time they are out of it. When there, they turn up their noses at the lightest task that is set them, and the prison staff, who know how to deal with recalcitrant convicts, seem without power to enforce the rules upon these cowardly worms.

Says one observer: 'They have not done three pennies-worth of work for every pound sterling they have cost the country.' They are supposed to be, at last, put on the national diet, but this is not credited. They are regularly supplied with potatoes, while good citizens can get none, and they are allowed outside in restaurants and shops, to buy as much food as they can gorge... These invertebrates, devoid of citizenship, bloodless, deaf to the cry of humanity, sneering at soldiers, laughing at the murders of men, women and children, denying their country, do not belong to the nation at all. They do not deserve its protection, far less its pampering.'

c March-April 1917. John Bull.

The COs at Princetown held a meeting and wrote a statement in response to accusations of idleness.

'This meeting repudiates the charge that the policy of slacking is, or has been, pursued at this Settlement, and declares that the men here are prepared to perform the work provided in a reasonable spirit, but protests against the penal character of the work imposed by the Home Office Committee and demands civil work of real importance with full civil rights.'

The COs also denied they were 'pampered'. They may not have suffered as much as soldiers on the front line but some had a very hard time, including Henry Firth who was forced to work while seriously ill, denied medical treatment and died alone in his cell on 6 February 1918.

Twenty-seven conscientious objectors died and three were certified insane while on the Home Office Scheme. The Scheme only ran for 33 months. Although the COs on the scheme were rarely given any work of real importance to the country, as far as the government was concerned the Home Office Scheme was a success because it reduced the number of absolutist COs in prison and military detention to under 1,000.

'No one shall be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

4.5 human rights focus - prisoners of conscience

Conscientious objectors were put in prison because they refused to be made into soldiers, believing it wrong to fight, kill or take part in war. People imprisoned because of their beliefs are sometimes known as 'prisoners of conscience'.

During the First World War prisoners of conscience shared civilian prisons with men convicted of a range of crimes from petty theft to murder. Civilian prisons were very harsh places for prisoners of conscience and convicted criminals alike. Some COs were kept in military detention, however, and they also had to deal with very severe punishments as well as direct physical violence from regular soldiers.

Whatever the reason someone is imprisoned, whether they are in civilian prison or military detention, all prisoners deserve to be treated humanely. Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says:

'No one shall be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

Prisoners of all kinds during the First World War regularly suffered cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment though and some COs in military detention also suffered torture. For example:

Accommodation - Prison cells were often too hot, too cold, damp or had poor ventilation. Lack of light made reading difficult and prisoners on sentences of hard labour had to sleep on bare boards without a mattress.

Food - The prison diet was barely enough to keep prisoners alive and healthy. Many became ill and suffered from stomach cramps, chilblains, failing eyesight or serious diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza and pneumonia.

Medical care - This was frequently too little, too late, or nothing at all. One sick CO, Arthur Horton, died of pneumonia after being underfed and banned from using a blanket to keep warm. The only medical treatment he received was some cough medicine.

Human contact - Unable to talk to other prisoners and rarely allowed to see visitors, some prisoners suffered severe mental problems. It was particularly difficult for prisoners with wives, girlfriends or children outside. The silence rule was one of the harshest regulations in prisons, leading to psychological problems long after some prisoners were released.

Punishments - Direct physical violence was rare in civilian prisons but punishments like solitary confinement or a diet of bread and water for weeks on end can be just as cruel. COs in military detention sometimes suffered terrible beatings at the hands of regular soldiers, and often on the orders of a superior officer. Punishments like Field Punishment No. 1 were literally torture.

prisoners of conscience improve human rights for all

After the First World War the prison system changed greatly. Many of the changes were because of the work of Fenner Brockway and Stephen Hobhouse, who both spent several years in prison as COs. Although no COs remained in prison, they were very concerned for the other prisoners and wanted to improve conditions for them. After the war they were asked to produce a report for the government 's Prison System Enquiry Committee.

Their report made many recommendations for reform of the prison system and the result was a great improvement in the human rights of prisoners:

The silence rule was relaxed and prisoners were allowed regular visits from outside.

Prisoners had more access to books and educational facilities were available.

Prisoners no longer had their hair closely cropped and did not have to wear uniforms covered in arrows.

Rules on hard labour were dropped so prisoners could sleep on a mattress from the start of their sentence.

Prison work changed so prisoners could learn skills to help get a job once released.

The changes signalled a move away from prison simply being a punishment and towards prisons for the rehabilitation and education of criminals. It was a major step on the way to the current prison system which now, in general at least, upholds the human rights of prisoners and respects Article 5 of the Universal Declaration.

In later years further improvements were made so prisoners had proper medical treatment, better food, and could socialise and exercise regularly. Now, physical punishment is not allowed, nor is withholding food, and prisoners can only be kept in solitary confinement for a short period of time.

the importance of prisoners' human rights

It is important to respect everyone's human rights, including prisoners'. Not only for the well-being of individual prisoners but also because the way we treat prisoners and others in our care is a sign of how much we, as a society, respect human dignity.

At a personal level we should treat others in the way we want to be treated ourselves. The same is also true at a national and global level. If we abuse prisoners' human rights it becomes difficult to demand that other countries respect human rights.

When cases of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners are revealed it reflects badly on a country as a whole. Some people react to this by demanding greater respect for human rights and the rule of law - but others seek revenge or see it as a green light to abuse other people's human rights.

For example, photographs of prisoners blindfolded and chained in cages at the US military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, caused an international outcry. When further photographs of US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad were revealed in 2005 many people's views hardened against the US. There is little doubt that more people have taken up arms against the US military as a result of these human rights abuses, making the world less safe for everyone.

Everyone in prison is entitled to human rights, regardless of why they are in prison. Certainly nobody should be imprisoned just for their beliefs and all prisoners of conscience should be released. Some groups, such as Amnesty International, do important work for the release of prisoners of conscience and to uphold the human rights of all prisoners. Their work helps to build a world with greater freedom, justice and peace for everyone.