

Unsung Heroes

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Auckland Unitarian Church

It was December 1, 1969. A day I remember well. It was during my third year of university. My roommates and I were gathered around the radio as was every American male born between 1946 and 1950. It was the first draft lottery. For each day of the year one of 366 numbers would be drawn. If a number lower than 195 was assigned to your birthday it meant you would be conscripted in the next year or as soon as your student deferment ended to fight in an unpopular war in Southeast Asia. My roommate, who was also destined to become a minister one day, and I had both applied for Conscientious Objector status. Not being from traditionally pacifist churches such as the Quakers, Brethren and Seventh Day Adventists our chances were not good. My roommate's number was 128; mine was 313. It was a day of muted relief for me, for although I was in the clear, he was not. My only regret was that I would never learn if I could have convinced the draft board to grant me CO status.

To apply for CO status was for me not done lightly or easily. I was not raised in a pacifist family. My father enlisted in World War II, lying about his age to do so. He was conscripted during the Korean War, but was struck down with polio shortly after being inducted. My church did not teach pacifist principles and was closely associated with the power of the state. It always had an American flag carried in processions to be posted near the altar. My first experience of war was the first one to be broadcast nightly on the news, Vietnam.

There was nothing about this undeclared war I could support. Fighting in it was out of the question. My reasons were intuitive and not well defined. I had not yet had my views shaped by living through Reagan's war against Grenada, Bush Senior's war against Iraq, Clinton's war in Serbia, W's war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now Obama's drone wars in various places in Africa and the Middle East. Nor had I yet studied and debated in seminary whether the concept of a Just War was possible or resolved my natural inclination to want to defend the weak and vulnerable. At the age of 20, I simply knew that as a matter of conscience war was immoral. However, I doubted I would be successful in convincing the draft board of my position. If not, I did hope I would have the courage to resist. I never found out, but many conscientious objectors in many wars in many countries have. It is those from New Zealand I am thinking about this weekend as New Zealand commemorates the centenary of Gallipoli this ANZAC Day Weekend.

I am conflicted about Remembrance Day, ANZAC Day and, in the US, Memorial Day. While I wish to mourn the senseless loss of life on both sides in war, the damaged lives of those who return mentally and physically wounded, the families of those soldiers whose lives have been irretrievably altered for the worse, and the nation that has lost whatever the dead and wounded might have contributed to its common good, these events too often feel like celebrations. Military uniforms, brass bands, parades, and horrible "church speak" quotes about "no greater love than one who lays down his life for a friend" do not speak to mourning. I experience them as glorifying or, at the very least, sanctioning war. And in the midst of the pomp and circumstance, those who stood up for peace are forgotten or, if remembered, too often reviled. This morning I remember them, lest we forget. There are a lot of them to remember.

Over 2600 New Zealanders sought exemption as conscientious objectors. Only 73 were exempted. At the end of the war 273 were still in jail. All 2600 lost civil rights including the right to vote for ten years as well as being barred from working for the government or local bodies. While the majority were Quakers and Brethren who could claim religious reasons, some were Unitarians, such as Norman Murray Bell and Rhys Morrish, who claimed a rational, not religious, reason for their objection. These numbers do not include those who were convicted of sedition for speaking out against the war. The times were such that even people of privilege were not spared. Future Prime Minister Peter Fraser, an MP at the time, served twelve months for sedition, as did four other MPs who would later serve in future labour cabinets. One other imprisoned for sedition would later serve off and on as a minister in this church, the Rev James Chappell, who founded a Unitarian church in Timaru and served the Christchurch Unitarian congregation for many years.

At the time New Zealand was staunchly pro-war and, more importantly, pro-Britain. During the 1899 to 1902 Boer War, proportionally more New Zealanders went to fight than from Australia and Canada. It was time of intense loyalty to Britain. Historians explain this as a time of re-colonisation. To resolve their identity crisis, Kiwis sought to be better British than those back home. One way of expressing British identity was to back Britain in its imperialistic military quests to the hilt.

This was definitely not a good time to be an opponent of war or a conscientious objector. In 1914, during the first week of the war over 14,000 men enlisted with the belief it would be over by Christmas. Enthusiasm for waging war began to wane as the death toll rose and the growing number of maimed and wounded returned home with no end to the fighting in sight. Perhaps the turning point was Winston Churchill's ill-conceived Gallipoli campaign, using ANZAC troops as cannon fodder. 2779 New Zealanders were buried on the beach at Gallipoli and 5212 were returned home wounded. Our Australian neighbour lost 8709 men with over 19,000 wounded. In total, at Gallipoli, on both sides, 130,842 men died.

As a result, enlistments declined 30%, so in 1916 Parliament passed with only four objections the Military Service Act, which introduced conscription to provide reinforcements. This made conscientious objection to conscription a major issue. While at first only Pakeha were conscripted, eventually so were Maori who frequently objected to fighting for a king who had deprived them of their land. Besides, as Te Herangi, granddaughter of a Maori King, famously said, "We already have a King."

Pakeha general sentiment still supported "king and country" and looked with disdain on those Prime Minister William Massey described as "shirkers." White feathers were pinned on them denoting cowardice. Sports clubs blackballed them as members or refused to play another team that fielded an objector. In spite of the opprobrium of the public many did resist. The Irish, after the British crushed the Easter Rising in 1916, were less than enthusiastic about serving an English king. Unions protested the act with miners on the West Coast going on strike.

Those convicted of failure to report for duty were punished methodically and harshly. Military authorities believed that if objectors were not broken in their resolve the war effort would be hampered. If the punishments failed to break them the objectors were court-martialled and sentenced to 2 years and 11 months. If they still refused to serve they were court-martialled again. Unitarian Rhys Morrish served 3 such terms.

Some were imprisoned and then sent forcibly to the front. The most famous of those cases was Archibald Baxter, the father of poet J K Baxter.

Baxter was denied exemption because he was not a member of a church that had, before the outbreak of war, declared military service 'contrary to divine revelation'. By the end of 1917 Baxter was in the prison attached to Trentham Military Camp near Wellington.

Minister of Defence James Allen was adamant that men such as Baxter should be sent to war. In July 1917, the Trentham camp commander, decided to deal with the overcrowding in the prison by sending 14 of his most recalcitrant objectors to Britain. Among those sent were Archibald Baxter and his brothers Alexander and John.

Aboard ship the objectors were stripped, placed in uniform and locked in a small cabin with no open portholes. Upon arrival in England, they refused to carry out gardening work and were placed in solitary confinement. The commander of New Zealand forces in Britain wanted them confined, given field punishment and then sent into the trenches – even if they had to be carried on stretchers.

In October 1917, 10 objectors were sent to France and warned that they would be shot if they continued to refuse to submit. Several relented and agreed to become stretcher bearers, while three were sentenced to hard labour. The commanding officer was determined to break Archibald Baxter's resolve. He and others were subjected to repeated sentences of Field Punishment, part of which included what was known as 'the crucifixion'. This involved being tied to a post in the open, with their hands bound tightly behind their backs and their knees and feet bound. They were held in this position for up to four hours a day in all weathers.

Baxter and two others survived this punishment only to be forced into the trenches. Baxter was sent to a part of the front that was being heavily shelled. He was beaten and denied food. In April 1918 he was taken to hospital in Boulogne, and he was diagnosed as having 'mental weakness and confusional insanity'. Three weeks later a British medical board confirmed the diagnosis of insanity, although it suggested that this may have been exaggerated so that Baxter could not be court martialled by the New Zealand army. He was taken to a British hospital for mentally disturbed soldiers, and he was sent home in August 1918. Only he and one other of the original 14 objectors held out to the end.

One would like to think that the devastating consequences of WWI would have altered New Zealand attitudes about war and conscientious objectors by the time of WWII, but that was not the case. When the war began, pacifists were small in number – fewer than 700 belonged to peace groups such as the No More War Movement.

When conscription was introduced in July 1940, conscientious objectors could appeal their military service. But the Appeal Boards were made up of older, conventional men, many of whom had served in WWI, and the government expected them to 'prevent the coward and the slacker from sheltering under a convenient conscience'. In New Zealand, of the 3000 appeals against conscription on conscience grounds, only 600 were allowed. Most of those turned down gave in to the law and served as required, but 800 refused to comply. As lawbreakers, with no right of appeal, they

were sentenced to detention – a 'scheme of concentration camps designed to be less comfortable than the army, but less punitive than gaol'. The term of their confinement was an indefinite sentence, while the war lasted.

One of these 800 was Owen Hansen. His Danish grandfather found his way to New Zealand to avoid conscription during the Prussian War. Our first minister of this congregation, William Jellie, married his mother and father. His father describes the values Owen grew up with, "As for religion, we parents are free thinkers. We adhere to the good points in all religions and reject any portion of each religion which conscience or reason repels." While growing up in the Waikato Owen records in his diary that he listened to the evening Auckland Unitarian service on the radio. One other influence on his thinking was that his family was vegetarian. He wrote, "Part of vegetarianism is the belief that you shouldn't kill animals unnecessarily. In a way this consideration for others is similar with Christian values of life." At this time vegetarianism and pacifism became closely allied due to their common acceptance of the unity of life.

In 1942, aged 19, Owen was called up for military service. Having passed the medical Owen decided not to report for duty at Hamilton. He appealed against military service on the grounds that he was a conscientious objector, but the appeal was declined and he was ordered to report for non-combatant service in the medical corp. When he failed to report for duty he was sentenced to a detention camp for the remainder of the war. All five of his brothers who were deemed fit for service ended up in detention camps. Similar to such camps in WWI punishments were harsh, food without meat was hard to get, and hard labour was imposed. Owen spent three months in solitary confinement with 52 days of bread and water punishment. He was not released until nine months after the war in the Pacific ended.

In 1960 Owen began attending services here several times a year making the long drive from Orini. He would continue doing so for the next 40 years.ⁱ

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once observed, "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."

It is thanks to the likes of Owen Hansen, Archibald Baxter, Rhys Morrish, Norman Bell, James Chappell, Peter Frasier, Te Puea Herangi, Union Miners, and the 2600 conscientious objectors in WWI and the 802 in WWII who endured the first two stages that New Zealand has become more accepting of the truth that war is not a solution. That we would become a nuclear free nation that maintains only a small military, primarily for peace-keeping and humanitarian purposes would greatly surprise our early 20th century ancestors. That many denounce our admittedly limited involvement in Iraq ostensibly to stay on good terms with the US would astound them.

It is their courage that humbles me this ANZAC Day. I have no idea if my own ideals could have withstood the recriminations and punishments they endured. They are the heroes I wish to honour. I invite you stand if you are able for one minute of silence giving thanks for their sacrifice.

i From an unpublished paper by Wayne Facer