



East African Union Committee, 1938. Back row left to right: W. Raitt, R. Carey, M. C. Murdoch, G. Lewis, S. Beardsell. Front row: Dr. G. Madgwick, Grace Clarke. Spencer George Maxwell, W. W. Armstrong, F. H. Thomas.

Photo courtesy of the British Union Conference.

Armstrong, Walter Wesley (1895–1970)

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Walter Wesley Armstrong, the grandson of one of the earliest Adventist families in the British Isles, served the church as a missionary, district pastor, and conference and union president.

Early Life and World War I

Born into an Adventist family in Holloway, North London, in 1895, Walter Wesley Armstrong was baptized in 1910.¹

He decided to study theology at Stanborough College (the forerunner of Newbold College). Unfortunately, World War I interrupted his studies in 1916. On May 23, 1916, 16 Seventh-day Adventist men from the Watford area were conscripted into the Third East Non-Combatant Corp (3rd East NCC) at Bedford Barracks². After a short stay, they shipped out to France where they would join the war. While on the ship to France, every man received a rifle. W.W. Armstrong and his fellow Adventists refused to carry them.³ On reaching the French port of Le Havre in northern France, the sergeant in charge separated the Adventist men from the others and forced them to stand on one side of the dock. As a punishment for refusing to carry their rifles, he then ordered the tallest and strongest, which included W. W. Armstrong, to carry large rocks from one end of the dock to the other and back again⁴

Authorities initially granted them Sabbath as a day off, and in the days to come, they worked on the docks where they helped unload the ships. However, June 17, 1916, W. W. Armstrong and one of his fellow Adventists received orders to carry out their usual work on the docks on a Sabbath.⁵ They went to the docks as ordered but refused to work. As a punishment, they had to stand in front of the other workers while being ridiculed for their disobedience in the hope that if their fellow workers taunted them, they would eventually start working. But that did not happen. After an hour and a half, they were taken back to the camp and sentenced to 14 days field punishment, which involved hard labor during the day followed by two hours of Field Punishment No 1, often nicknamed "crucifixion." In it they would be tied back to back to a gun carriage or tree in a position that placed the body under stress. Usually a medical examination of the men had to be carried out prior to the punishment, but as no doctor was available, it went ahead without one. The two men stood bound together until the next day, when they were taken down and eventually given the Sabbath off in return for making up their hours on the other days. Following the permission to observe the Sabbath, the men would have regular worships in their hut on Sabbaths.⁶

Life, however, became more difficult when a change in command took place on November 23, 1917⁷. The men received orders to continue working after sunset on Fridays and their Sabbath privilege canceled. W.W. Armstrong and the other Adventist men in the camp, refused to work on Sabbath on the grounds of their religious beliefs. Officers pointed out to them that under section 9, note 7, of the Army Act, religious scruples were not an excuse for disobedience. When they still refused to continue working, they were immediately court-martialed and sentenced to six months hard labor at the military prison in Le Havre⁸.

Arriving at the prison, the men immediately presented their Sabbath case, only to be told that everyone had to work seven days a week without exception.⁹ Prison officials confiscated the men's Bibles, but one Adventist managed to smuggle in the Gospel of John, which they divided into scraps of paper.¹⁰ During their stay, they endured hours of hard labor, whippings, beatings from the prison guards, and had to wear heavy iron chains.¹¹

In an attempt to break their spirits, the prison staff kept the Adventist men separated during their time at Le Havre. The cells were small with iron walls and concrete floors. Despite the fact that it was winter and freezing cold, they had no heat. If punished, the men had to place their hands behind their backs which were then locked into an extremely painful figure eight position.¹²

Fellow Adventist Albert Penson wrote an account of the suffering that W. W. Armstrong endured at Le Havre: "I can see him now, after we had spent the night in the cells for our defiance. With two eyes punched to a pulp by the military police ... I saw him dropping exhausted under his burden of forty pounds of concrete slung around his neck, with his arms pinioned behind him, being made to march up and down a corridor. Never shall I forget how he dropped unconscious, the guards picking him up and literally flinging him down on a stone floor of the cell and throwing dirty contents of a fire bucket over him."¹³ After the ordeal, the prison head granted W. W. Armstrong his blankets. At 4:00 p.m. he received six ounces of bread, the first food he had had in more than 24 hours. That night he remained in his cell and stayed until noon the next day, enduring the entire ordeal without any medical attention.¹⁴

After a month, the case of the 14 Adventist men kept at Le Havre came to the attention of higher authorities, raising awkward questions. Finally released on December 22, 1917, they went to Wormwood Scrubbs prison in England.¹⁵ After a hearing at the central tribunal, the court released them from military and civil prison and transferred them to the Knutsford Work Centre under the Home Office Scheme.¹⁶

In January 1918 the British Union Conference voted to protest to the War Office about the ill treatment of their young men during their military service. As a result, in July 1918 the authorities released all 14 men back into civilian life.¹⁷

The mental and physical effects of the punishments at Le Havre caused Armstrong a lot of suffering later in life. One of the physical consequences of his ill treatment was the development of a heart condition that afflicted him for the rest of his life.¹⁸

Life after the War and Africa

After he returned to civilian life, he returned to his studies and graduated with a degree in theology in 1919.¹⁹ That same year the church assigned him to mission work in Wales.²⁰ In 1920 he married Miss Madge Brett.²¹

The British East Africa Mission opened in 1906, leading the way for missionary work to begin in Kenya near Kendu Bay on the shores of Lake Victoria Nyanza.²² At the time, Kenya was part of the British Empire, which resulted in a significant influx of British missionaries to that part of Africa. Just after getting married, Armstrong and his wife, Madge, went as missionaries to Kenya in 1920. They began their work among the Luo people, followed by the Kikuyu in the Lake District of Kenya. By 1928 he was the superintendent of the Kenya Mission with its headquarters in Kisii.²³

By 1934 word from the East African Union had reached Britain that Armstrong suffered from severe hay fever, rendering him unable to work. The mission requested that he be granted furlough to England, with the possibility that he might never return to East Africa.²⁴ But it was put on hold as injections received from Kenyan government laboratory experts gave Armstrong relief from his hay fever and hope of a permanent return to work.²⁵ However, his health problems did not stop. In 1939 a medical report advised him to return to England for an urgent operation in London. Leadership voted that he and his wife would travel home to England immediately.²⁶

Medical advice from the East African Union, supported by the medical report from the specialist in London, stated that the condition of Armstrong's health would not allow him to continue under the difficult conditions found in the tropics. On September 6, 1939, the church voted to release him from future service in the Kenya Union and that he would be recommended to the British Union Conference for work in England.²⁷ W. W. Armstrong then started as a pastor in the South England Conference. During the years his churches included Ealing, Chiswick, Richmond, and the Stanborough Park congregations. He pastored from 1939 to 1946.²⁸

Work in England and Later Life

In 1946 W.W. Armstrong became president of the South England Conference²⁹ and in 1950 president of the British Union Conference.³⁰ On October 17, 1950, the British Union Conference voted to grant him his ministerial credentials.³¹

On January 21, 1958, at an emergency meeting of the British Union Conference, Armstrong submitted a letter in which he stated that his present health condition made it impossible for him, at least for the time being, to carry on with his duties as president of the British Union Conference.³² A second letter from his physician, Dr. A. H. Williams, dated January 20, 1958, reported that Armstrong was suffering from extreme exhaustion, slight depression, sleeping problems, and slightly raised blood pressure. He advised two to three weeks of complete rest and to be relieved of any duties for the time being.³³ Taking both letters into consideration, the committee voted to relieve him temporarily of all presidential duties and that a short-term arrangement be found to carry out his presidential duties during his absence.³⁴ Later that year, ill health forced him to retire, and it only became worse as the year went by. On October 21, 1958, the Trans-European Division voted that on recommendation from the British Union Conference, Armstrong was to be granted sustention as from October 1, 1958.³⁵

On November 26, 1958, the British Union Conference voted to grant him honorary ministerial credentials.³⁶

W. W. Armstrong died Thursday morning April 16, 1970, at his home in Holland Gardens, Garston, Watford, England. The day before, he and his wife had celebrated their Golden Wedding anniversary. The funeral service took place April 20, 1970, at the Stanborough Park Church in Watford. He was buried at the North Watford cemetery.³⁷

His obituary referred to Armstrong as a man known for his deep faith, dedication to service, humility, and active interest in the various areas of his work.³⁸

Legacy

W. W. Armstrong left a legacy and example of strong faith and endurance even in the hardest of times. Despite the suffering he went through during World War I and the health problems later in life, he kept on believing in God and only stopped working for the church when his health would no longer permit it.

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