



Conscientious objectors: British Seventh-day Adventist youth who refused to take up arms in the First World War in this photo taken in 1917.

Standing the tallest in the middle is 22-year-old Walter W Armstrong who, in 1920, became a missionary in Kenya. He was posted to Kanyadoto where he remained until 1928 making major contributions to the work in South Nyanza.

Photo courtesy of Stanborough Press Archive.

British Conscientious Objectors in World War I

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Within a year of the outbreak of World War I the British government recognized that voluntary enlistment to the armed forces would be insufficient to sustain the needed personnel for the war against Germany.

In January 1916 they introduced the Military Service Act, which enforced conscription for single men between the ages of 18 and 41. In May 1916 the act was extended to include married men. There were a few exceptions that included clergy, teachers, the medically unfit, and certain classes of industrial workers.¹

The act had serious consequences for Seventh-day Adventist men who, almost unanimously, took a non-combatant stance.² It made more serious the resolution passed by the British Union Conference in Session in July 1914: "That Special prayer be made in all our churches on Sabbath, August 8th, that the forces of strife may be restrained in Europe, and that the lives of our brethren and the interests of the cause may be divinely guarded."³

A letter, approved by the British Union Conference Executive Committee was sent to the Prime Minister, The Rt. Hon. H. H. Asquith, M.P. on January 12, 1916.⁴ The letter noted that "As a church we are opposed to war," and that in the U.S.A., Australia, and South Africa, members had been recognized as noncombatants and "granted exemption from combatant duties and from general work on the Sabbath." The request to the Prime Minister was for assurance that "our young men would be assigned to noncombatant duties, and that, so far as the demands of mercy and absolute necessity required, they would be free to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest."

Lloyd George, Secretary for War, stated in the House of Commons on July 26, 1916: "Of those who object to the shedding of blood, the traditional policy of the country is to respect this view."⁵ That, however, was a token respect and, while the Adventist Church in the UK was still small at the time, numbering 2,571 in July 1914, around 130 men were directly affected by conscription.⁷ These fell into four main groups:

1. Adventist men working in essential industries
2. Adventist men who were conscripted but were given noncombatant roles in essential industries
3. Adventist men who were conscripted and refused to serve
4. Adventist men who were conscripted and gave service in noncombatant roles within the army.

This article focuses principally on the latter two groups with particular regard to those who ended up incarcerated. However, brief mention is made to the first two groups.

Reasons for Conscientious Objection

Following the precedent of Adventist attitudes to combatancy during the American Civil war, Adventists in Britain upheld the principle of the sacredness of life and equally had strong views on Sabbath observance.⁸ These two views were taken into account, at least to some degree, by the tribunals or by commanding officers. Their third reason was given short shrift.

William George Chappell, a colporteur in Brynmawr, South Wales, appealed to his tribunal ruling on the basis that, "I believe the personal Second Coming of Christ is near by the many signs fulfilling the Bible which tells that the spirits of devils are going forth to the kings of the earth and of the whole world to gather them together to the last great battle of Armageddon." Quoting Daniel 11 and John 18:36, plus the example of the Old Testament Levites who were exempt from fighting, he stated that "I feel that I should not be taken from the work of warning people to prepare to meet their Savior, to engage in worldly warfare when so many are perishing bodily and spiritually for the need of help the gospel will give them."⁹ Unsurprisingly, the Tribunal Appeal decision, dated March 20, stated, "Appeal dismissed. Certificate of Exemption from Combatant Service *only* to be granted."¹⁰

Pastor Bartlett, one of the co-signatories of the letter to the Prime Minister, noted that as the government had made no official response to the letter, local tribunals decided that Adventists should enter the noncombatant corps. Some accepted this, others refused, preferring prison than to put on a uniform.¹¹

1. Adventist Men Working in Essential Industries

In the main, men working in essential industries were able to continue with their duties but had to appear before an increasingly strict tribunal every three months.

John Benefield was a baker, considered as an essential industry. His granddaughter, Elizabeth Yap, recalled that, "My grandfather attended 13 of these tribunals during the course of the war, leaving his wife and six children at home to pray for a good result."¹² At each tribunal it grew more difficult, and if conscripted he would have left straight for war direct from the tribunal with no opportunity to say goodbye to wife or children.

2. Adventist Men Who Were Conscripted but Were Given Noncombatant Roles in Essential Industries Such as Agriculture

Several reports in *The Missionary Worker* mention Adventist young men who had been conscripted but were serving in the UK in noncombatant roles. Significantly, many of them seemed to use their being conscripted to other parts of the country as an opportunity for witness.

The Missionary Worker of February 1917 briefly mentions a group of Adventists from the Non-Combabant Corp [NCC] stationed in Darlington in the North of England. It does not report on their work but states that "they are staying in the town, conducting meetings each week. We rejoice that God has made this possible."¹³

Adventists NCC's stationed in Ireland were also a witness. "Two English soldier brethren who are located at the Curragh Camp, about 30 miles from Dublin would have gone forward in baptism," the *The Missionary Worker* of November 1917 reports. Unfortunately, they could not get a pass for the weekend, but the report showed that faith could grow even in difficult circumstances.¹⁴

T. G. Belton wrote about his experience in Ireland together with a fellow soldier, identified only as brother Elias. He recounted answers to prayer allowing them to observe the Sabbath, and to witness to their fellow soldiers. In addition, on their days off they spent time selling literature and developing interests in the local town, and even running evangelistic meetings on a Sunday evening.¹⁵

Others, such as Alfred Hulbert, were not so fortunate. He was a colporteur who was sent to work as a horticulturalist. However, because of his refusal to work on Saturdays, he was court martialed and spent time in Wormwood Scrubs prison.¹⁶

3. Adventist Men Who Were Conscripted and Refused to Serve

As mentioned by Bartlett, a number of Adventist men totally refused to serve or to wear uniform. These spent the war in 'work centers' such as Wormwood Scrubs or the notorious Dartmoor Prison.

Norman Tew writes, "My father (Charles Henry Tew) was first in Wormwood Scrubs then on to Dartmoor... At Dartmoor he was involved in vegetable growing, but everything was done in a most difficult way possible. They did not have wheelbarrows, two men had to carry boxes with handles [on] each end. One person worked out that each cabbage they grew was worth 2/6d in view of the amount of man-hours involved."¹⁷

At least seventeen Adventists, such as Pastor Hector Bull and Charles Meredith, spent time in Dartmoor prison—some better treated than others—but in a harsh regime. Conscientious objection was not to be seen as an 'easy option.' Garth Till, whose father was one of those who ended up court-martialed and in a military prison in France simply stated that prison "had to be worse than the trenches simply to discourage deserters."¹⁸

The subject of the harsh treatment at Dartmoor prison was debated in the House of Lords on April 30, 1918. Lord Parmoor moved a resolution which stated that the noncombatant work of conscientious objectors should be service of national value and not merely of a penal character. He described, during the debate, the work at Dartmoor, where "two bodies of conscientious objectors who were in two adjoining courts. In one court they were taking up the stones and in the next court they were putting them down; and then they were changed across from one to the other."¹⁹

However, in later years Charles Meredith told his son Glynn that if you worked hard there you were respected. He was one of those that broke up large granite blocks with a sledge hammer to use for road building. On

Sabbaths he was given freedom to walk 15 miles each way from prison to Plymouth church.

Even in the harsh conditions of prison, the men found opportunity for witness.

Grandfather Dando was incarcerated in Dartmoor Prison. Whilst he was there he became acquainted with another prisoner who was a SDA. They were not allowed to speak to each other, I gather, but both 'happened' to clean the others cell. As a result my grandfather was able to leave 'notes' of chalky stone written on the brick walls in this man's cell. This arrangement enabled grandfather to ask questions about the Sabbath, which his friend was free to answer in the same way, in my grandfather's cell. As a result, grandfather became convicted of the Sabbath and, once the war was over, both my grandparents became Seventh day Adventist²⁰

Adventist Men Who Were Conscripted and Gave Service in Noncombatant Roles Within the Army

Throughout the years *The Missionary Worker* regularly carried reports from 'Our boys overseas.' These included stories both of witness but also of hardship. They all had noncombatant status, but that did not give them Sabbath privileges. However, very often they managed to work that out.

Bernard Belton was on his own as an Adventist in France with some 80 other noncombatants. He reported both the miracle that his commanding officer changed his mind and allowed him Sabbath privileges, but also that he was able to share Bible studies with his fellow soldiers. He wrote, "I believe the Lord is using the extraordinary conditions of these days to spread His truth. Men here who have never heard the Message have now come to some knowledge of it. They stood amazed when they knew I had been granted full leave on the Sabbath."²¹

The largest group of Adventist NCC's were sixteen students from Stanborough Training College—the forerunner to the present-day Newbold College and the Training Centre for British Adventism. They were conscripted into the Third Eastern Non-Combatant Corps at Bedford Barracks on May 23, 1916, and soon after were sent to France.

According to Till, trouble started even on the boat crossing the English Channel. Perhaps testing their resolve as NCC's, once on the boat they were handed rifles. They refused to take them. At Le Harve they were made to stand at one side on the docks. After a while, to try and break their resistance, the tallest and strongest of them, and therefore perceived to be the ringleader, was tasked with carrying large rocks from one end of the dock to the other. When he had completed this task, he was made to carry them back.²²

Till's father only spoke of his wartime experiences once. It was just before Christmas 1938 and with the fear of another world war looming. Till was only nine-years-old at the time and remembered it well. He stated that his aunt had scolded his father, "war is coming, you need to tell us what happened, What lessons we need to learn." Willie Till spent an afternoon and evening telling a horrific story that included inhumanely cruel punishment. He

suffered trauma and nightmares for the following month as a result.

The dock ordeal was a mild foretaste of what was to come, but for some 18 months the "16 Stanborough boys," as they called themselves, worked hard and were generally well respected by their peers and their senior officers. They are asked to explain their beliefs and were generally accommodated.²³ At times they were not only witnesses but temperance workers as they encouraged their fellow soldiers to give up smoking.²⁴

Miracles also happened. In July 1916 they reported that they had been arrested and were to face the severe 'crucifixion punishment' for refusing to work on Sabbath. This involved being tied back to back in a crucifixion position against a gun carriage wheel or a tree following a full day of hard labor. After a couple of hours, the pain would be excruciating! The punishment would be repeated daily for two weeks.

W Worsley Armstrong wrote, "Since being here we have been brought before the captain four times with reference to the Sabbath."²⁵ He reported how they were arrested at 6:30 Sabbath morning for refusing to go to work and how eventually they were sent for a medical checkup to see if they were healthy enough to endure the 14 days of punishment.

They were marched to two locations, but at both, the doctors were away on assignment. The prisoners were then ordered to the guard room for the night but found that the guard room was already full. As such they were returned to barracks.

The next morning, we were up and ready to be medically examined, preparatory to going to prison. We were all pronounced "fit," and to our surprise, marched back again to the hut for another hour. It all seemed so strange. At the command "Attention," three officers entered, and the camp commandant spoke. At first he seemed firm, as he said, "I understand you have refused to obey orders by not working yesterday. Let me tell you," he continued, "there is no bargaining in the army. When an order is given it must be obeyed, or else, certain severe punishment follows. Let me repeat, there is no bargaining," and he emphasized the word "bargaining." Changing his tone somewhat he continued, "Now you boys are an intelligent set and the reports of your work are excellent. You are the best set we have down at the docks. It seems too bad that there should be such an unfortunate hitch in your work. I, with the other officers, have considered your cases, and have decided to offer you the Sabbath off on condition that you make up the time during the week."²⁶

A positive if tough working relationship continued from then until November 1917 despite changes in working locations and commanding officers. For instance, in a letter dated February 1917 they recounted the challenges of working in a timber yard and sleeping in tents mid-winter.²⁷ They reported sharing Week of Prayer reading together by the light of just four candles, and their rejoicing at finally being moved to wooden huts, despite that reducing their opportunities for more open worship.

All that changed in November 1917. For 20 months they had worked hard, sometimes including on Sundays or at night, and had a positive relationship with their captain. In November 1917 this senior officer was replaced

with a younger man who told them that this arrangement would no longer continue. They would need to work on Sabbath.²⁸

Refusal to work meant a court martial and a sentence to six months hard labor at military prison #3 in Le Havre. The conditions were atrocious and were recounted in detail in the April 4, 1918, edition of *The Tribunal*,²⁹ a newspaper published by the "No-Conscription Fellowship" and written to inform the public about the Military Service Act and the conscientious objectors who fell foul of it. Firsthand accounts were written in later years by two of the young men, W. W. Armstrong in a 1957 letter to a young man enquiring about the war³⁰ and in a 1973 Messenger article by H. W. Lowe.³¹ Piecing together their accounts, together with the memories of various descendants of the 14 men, gives a picture of horror and courage.

The men were frog-marched to the prison to begin their sentence of hard-labor, which included working seven days a week with no opportunity for Sabbath keeping. The accounts talk about bullying, breaking men's hearts, and that the prison authorities used severe physical means to achieve their objectives.

Despite it being illegal, they had their Bibles removed from them³² although, according to Till, they managed to divide up a copy of the Gospel of John and hide it in their forage caps.

On that first Friday afternoon, in the prison courtyard, the Adventists downed tools at 4 pm in preparation for Sabbath. The sergeants were ready, armed with sticks, revolvers, and boots. Following severe beatings to every part of their body, they were left in their cells, "figures of eight" irons tightly clamped on their wrists, digging into their flesh, their hands behind their backs.

Such mistreatment and worse continued the next day. For instance, after a series of beatings, a night in the figure of 8 manacles and no food, Armstrong was forced to quick march up and down the corridor outside his cell with 35-pound cement blocks strapped around his neck across his cheek and back. He collapsed and states that he remained in a fit for about an hour.

Armstrong's personal letter 40 years later demonstrates the spirit and determination of the young men.

When the Sabbath morning came, I remember hearing the door of the cell to my right being opened and the sergeant giving instructions to one of our young men to go to work. I could not hear his reply, but I did hear him leave the cell, and the door was bolted.

The same thing happened to the youth on the other side, and I was left by myself. I heard other doors opened and bolted in the same way and finally the door to my cell was opened, and I was commanded to go to work. I refused to do this in a courteous way, explaining once more the reason for my refusal. I fully expected to be thrashed and beaten ... but to my surprise the sergeant was quite affable. He told me not to be a fool; that all the other young men had come to their senses, and they had all gone to work as good Britishers should and that I would only get into further trouble if I was stubborn.

This news, of course, surprised me, and I could hardly believe it, but I remember making the statement that whatever my brethren might do, I must remain firm to the truth of God, and I endeavored to get some sort of spiritual understanding into the mid of that gross sergeant. I learned later, however, that all our young men in the cells remained faithful."

The sergeant's attitude then changed, and the inevitable beating came. But Armstrong recounts a beautiful experience that confounded the sergeants.

A short while afterwards a little way down the corridor I heard somebody whistling one of our well-known hymns – although I cannot remember just which one it was. I was surprised to hear this because to whistle or sing was counted as gross insubordination, but to my surprise I heard a voice singing with the whistling, and it was only a question of seconds before many other voices were singing this hymn, and I found myself spontaneously joining in the singing of that good old hymn.

Armstrong noted that "the singing of that hymn brought wonderful comfort and strength to us as we were there in that prison." It had an effect on the sergeant and other noncommissioned officers who gathered in the corridor and didn't know what to do. They became very subdued, and, Armstrong reports, "We finished that hymn in an atmosphere of absolute quiet."

Lowe gives a slightly different account but identifies the hymn as, "The Lord is my light; then why should I fear? By day and by night His presence is near; He is my salvation from sorrow and sin; This blessed persuasion the Spirit brings in."

While much of the horrors of that time fell away over the years, that moment remained. Even forty years on Armstrong could state with clarity, "There was something in the hymn itself as well as the spirit in which it was sung which affected those brutal men, for brutal they were to the extreme, and although we did experience considerable persecution subsequently, I felt that these men had far more respect for us after they had heard our singing."

They were in the military prison for just one month, but the severe and cruel treatment shortened the lives of at least two of the young men. Alfred Bird died in 1944 at the early age of forty-seven, partly as a result of ill health resulting from his appalling treatment. His daughter said the marks of the irons digging into his wrists could be seen until the day he died.³³ Armstrong developed a heart condition, even in prison, and lived with the serious consequences of his treatment for all his life.

A chaplain from a neighboring camp was passing the prison one day and heard shrieks from the cells. He entered the prison and asked to see the Adventists. He knew they were there—but his request was refused—and moreover, he wasn't allowed inside the prison again even though he had held a service there once a week.³⁴ Lowe states that it was this chaplain, together with a Plymouth Brethren friend from the nearby YMCA, who raised the alarm with higher authorities back in Britain, eventually with questions even being asked in

parliament.³⁵

On December 22³⁶ they were marched to the docks in Le Harve, returned to England, and spent Christmas in Wormwood Scrubs prison. This, the daughter of Alfred Bird described as being "a delight compared with the treatment meted out to them in France." They were shortly released from the Army and sent to Knutsford Work Centre. By July 1918 all 14 were released to civilian life.³⁷ Part of that early release was due to questions about their treatment being raised in parliament.³⁸

Such treatment might have scarred these men for life, but while they had physical effects, and to a large degree refused to talk to their families about it, their experience deepened their dependence on God. Returning to civilian life, these fourteen men became pastors, church administrators, missionaries, and faithful servants of God. The same is true for many of the others who struggled to balance service to country with service to God.

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NOTES

1. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/conscription/>.
2. The only Adventist combatant that we are aware of is M J Nicholls, a former evangelist from Aberdare who joined the Herefordshire Light Infantry regiment. Source: Brian Phillips, Adventist historian, Wales.
3. "Resolution 17," *Missionary Worker*, August 17, 1914, 110.
4. Francis McLellan Wilcox, "BUC Minutes 12 January 1916," *Seventh-day Adventists In Time of War* (Review and Herald Publishing Assn. Takoma Park, Washington D.C., 1936), 256, 257.
5. Lloyd George in debate on the "Consolidated Fund (no.4) Bill," *Hansard*, July 26, 1916, column 1758 (<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1916/jul/26/consolidated-fund-no-4-bill>).
6. W. J. Fitzgerald, "President's Biennial Report," *Missionary Worker*, August 17, 1914, 112.
7. The number of 130 is an estimate based on the authors interactions with the children of WWI Adventist CO's, together with the records of at least 82 Adventists that are among the 16,636 in the Pearce list of Conscientious Objectors originally compiled by Cyril Pearce, former Senior Lecturer at the University of Leeds.
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14. Robert Whitesides, "Irish Mission Field," *Missionary Worker*, November 1, 1917, 123.
15. T. G. Belton "Our-Brethren in the Army," *Missionary Worker*, May 5, 1917, 52.
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17. Norman Tew, "Comments on WW1" <https://adventist.uk/wwi-and-the-adventist-church/comments-on-wwi/>.
18. Interview with Garth Till, April 9, 2014.
19. Lord Parmoor, "Conscientious Objectors" *Hansard*, April 30, 1918, column 900 (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1918-04-30/debates/2bea02a9-4f9e-48d3-b3e0-7eaaa5771c2f/ConscientiousObjectors>).
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22. Gath Till interview with Victor Hulbert.
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24. W. W. Armstrong, "Our boys at the front – letter home," *Missionary Worker* November 1, 1916, p. 139.
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26. Ibid.
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28. H W Lowe, "Valiant for Truth," *British Advent Messenger*, December 28, 1973, 2-4.
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33. Written statement from Romola Combridge to Victor Hulbert, February 24, 2014.
34. *The Tribunal*, 4.
35. H. W. Lowe, "Valiant for Truth," *British Advent Messenger*, December 28, 1973, 4.
36. This date confirmed by H. W. Lowe personal statement to government enquiry, February 16, 1918.
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38. Hansard, CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS, HC Deb 28 May 1918 vol 106 c661 [661](#), HC Deb 10 June 1918 vol 106 cc1852-3 [1852](#) & HC Deb 11 July 1918 vol 108 c480 [480](#).

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