

Bert's War

Bert was from the South Yorkshire mining village of Conisbrough. His family were grocers by trade and Methodists by faith - pillars of the community. His father, was a preacher and magistrate, and his children were educated, cultured and aspirational. Bert was a talented musician who played the organ in church and trained as teacher, but was also sporty, funny and everyone liked him. At the age of 25 he had the world at his feet but, where he most wanted to go was to Africa, as a missionary down to his strong religious faith.

When war was declared his father ran the local War Fund Committee and had the job of swearing in new Army recruits. The town's recruiting office was right next to the family shop, and Bert could have taken two steps to sign up. At first he was tempted as everyone around him was swept up in nationalism. Priests used passages from the Bible, urging people to enlist but Bert was confused how war could be encouraged when considering the commandment 'thou shalt not kill'. Bert decided to ask God whether he should enlist and then tossed a coin to get his answer. A remarkable run of 12 tails in a row told him he could not go to war.

Reaction in his community was instant and unpleasant. He preached a sermon against the war and was never allowed to speak again. His father was urged by stalwarts of the town to send him packing. Bert stayed within the law and a free man as long as joining-up was voluntary. In February 1916, to feed the Army's constant need of men, came conscription – forced enlisting. Now "slackers" and 'skunks', as people like Bert were called, could not escape. But still he would not go, and was called to explain himself before a tribunal. Its chairman, a military man, tried to argue with Bert but he maintained "I would certainly not strike them down. No man is justified in taking life." The official asked "if you could save 500 poor women and children by fighting, would you not help them?" Bert said: "I would do my best to save life, but not by taking life."

Elsewhere, one conscientious objector was told that, as a socialist, he could not have a conscience; another that "there is only one ground of exemption before this tribunal and that is death." Another was informed that he was a traitor and "only fit to be on the point of a German bayonet". In Bert's home town, the mood was getting vicious, too. The local paper demanded his sacking as a teacher. Once again, his father was urged to show his son the door. Old Brock told them: "I would rather Bert be shot for his beliefs than abandon them."



The police came for Bert one afternoon in May 1916 and he was taken to a jail in Richmond Castle. The tribunal had turned down his plea to be exempted from military service and ordered him to join the ranks of the Non-Combatant Corps. This was a unit set up to allow conscientious objectors to be drafted for work on non-military projects. But Bert was in the hardcore of objectors who believed that almost anything he was asked to do would aid the war effort.

His refusals had him sent to those dark medieval cells where the only light came through a narrow slit in the walls. Alone and on a punishment diet of bread and water, he and the other objectors imprisoned with him sang "Nearer my God to thee" and other hymns. All the time the pressure, physical and psychological, grew.

They were kicked and beaten, other officers tried to goad them with horror stories about Germans. But some senior Army figures wanted nothing less than their heads worrying it would lead to revolt in the army. If they were allowed to "get away with it", then more men would walk away from the fighting, the Army would collapse and the war would be lost.

While they were in England the objectors, though often brutally treated, were relatively safe. But then the order came to ship 36 of them –including Bert - to France. Once there, they were technically on the battlefield, and the penalty for disobedience was death. In France, some objectors salved their consciences by working in ambulance units and as stretcher-bearers, and did so bravely but still weren't happy as one put it: "We were just re-fitting men to take their places again in the trenches." It was impossible not to be sucked into the war.

Bert refused all of it. To him, even clearing out stables or cleaning broom handles to sweep the barrack yard had a war-like purpose behind it. And he maintained his pacifism in the face of much taunting. He never hit back at his persecutors or put up a physical fight, as some were tempted to do. "We must rely on spiritual force. They can take me where they will, even into the frontline trenches, but they will never get me to raise my hand against my fellow men."

Under Army regulations, they were now subject to field punishment for disobeying orders, one of which was "crucifixion" - outstretched arms tied to a beam for hours at a time. They were crammed into makeshift cells, 11ft-square lean-tos of wooden planks. Their hands were handcuffed behind their backs during the day and at the front at night.

From these they were taken before a court-martial, knowing the penalty if guilty was death. Their judges went through the motions, but the men could not - would not - deny they had refused orders. They waited a week for the verdict, all the time surrounded by guards taunting them as 'dead men'. Then one day the entire contingent of non-combatants stationed in Boulogne was turned out on the parade ground - 600 men lined up in ranks. One at a time, a name was called out and each of the objectors was marched forward. Then the sentence was pronounced: "When on active service refusal to obey an order. "Tried by court martial and found guilty. Sentenced to death by shooting."

Then the adjutant continued: "This sentence has been confirmed by the commander in chief, General Sir Douglas Haig" but afterwards postponed by him to penal servitude for ten years." Bert was very relieved. But others were angered that the objectors sentenced to death had escaped. As they returned to England from France, their arrival at Winchester station coincided with the departure of a troop train. Word went swiftly through the crowd of relatives seeing off their loved ones that "conchies" were around.

"The air was electric, emotions at fever pitch," Bert recalled. "People hissed at us and hurled insults." He sang hymns to himself to steady his nerves.

He served his time in civilian prisons. He would sew mail bags for the Post Office but not coal bags for the Navy. He was constantly in trouble and still hounded for his beliefs. The prison chaplain told him he was "a disgrace to humanity". But there was some sympathy for his cause, and, significantly, it was in high places.

Leading Liberals in the government had been uneasy about conscription and forcing men to fight, but had bowed to the demands of the Army. When told of their treatment, the Prime Minister declared it "Abominable" and ordered that no conscientious objector in France was to be shot for refusal to obey orders. It was this that had saved Bert from facing a firing squad. He saw out the war at Maidstone jail, was released in 1919 and went home.

His father stood at the door to greet him.

The same could not be said for the townsfolk of Conisbrough. "I was surprised how bitter local feeling was against me," Bert said. "I had proved myself sincere and I thought they would give me credit for it. But no." No school would give him a teaching job and he had to move away to find work. His conscience then led him to Austria to help victims of the war.

But when Bert said he was going to help the people who had killed her brother, the loyal lass, once a soprano in his church choir, realised they were now reading from different song sheets. Their engagement was over. She married a war hero. Bert became a missionary in Africa, then returned to teaching in England.

He never lost his convictions and was marching in a Ban The Bomb protest shortly before he died aged 73.

[Account adapted from:](#)

Brothers At War (Tony Rendell, Mailonline)

We Will Not Fight (Will Ellsworth-Jones, Aurum Press)