A Matter of Conscience: Adventist Heroes in World War 1

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"We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history." (Ellen White *LS*196)

Sometimes we do well to fear for the future. We live in an uncertain world. Syria, Iraq, the Ukraine, the iron and clay of the EU, the uncertainty of the economy, the growing challenge of secularism – and its implications for freedom of religious expression, all of these give cause for concern. But let me give you the full quote before I share a piece of Adventist history. "Praise God! As I see what the Lord has wrought, I am filled with astonishment, and with confidence with Christ as leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history."

It might have been difficult to say 'Praise God' in 1914 as 400 Seventh-day Adventist delegates to the British Union Session met in Battersea Town Hall the very weekend that WWI broke out. In their special prayer sessions that weekend it was not so much 'praise God', but 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".[1] They were fearful for what the future might hold. And, particularly for their young men, they had good reason to fear.

Ministerial workers at the 1914 BUC Meetings at Battersea Town Hall

Even before conscription arrived life was difficult. Dr Hugh Dunton was a conscientious objector in WWII, following his father's example in the Great War. Only born in 1922 he still remembered the scornful calls of 'conchie' poured on him at school or even walking through his village streets many years after the war had ended.[2] Lord Kitchener's propaganda machine made 'conchies' very unpopular people. It was no joke to be given the white feather of a coward by a young lady in the street.

In January 1916, conscription was enforced. Thousands more troops were needed to fight in the trenches of the western front. Soon 130 young Adventists were called up for military service. At least one fought: M J Nicholls – a former evangelist from Aberdare joined the Herefordshire Light Infantry regiment. However, most upheld the principle of the sacredness of life, and equally had strong views on Sabbath observance.

We could tell the stories of many. Seventeen young men, 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-martialled and in military prison in France simply stated that prison "had to be worse than the trenches simply to discourage deserters."[3]

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[1] Souvenir *Messenger*, 1902 – 1992, p10-11
[2] Interview with David Trim, 18 March 2014
[3] Interview with Garth Till, 9 April 2014

The subject of treatment at Dartmoor prison was debated in the House of Lords on 30 April 1918. Lord Parmoor moved a resolution which stated that the non-combatant 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, which consisted of men building a wall only to be followed by another group of men taking the wall down.

However, Charles Meredith told his son Glynn, (still alive and living near Carmarthen), 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.

Conscientious objectors heading out from prison for a day's work

If we want to focus on Adventist heroes, our attention needs to turn to sixteen students at Stanborough Training College – the forerunner to the present day Newbold College and the Training Centre for British Adventism. These sixteen were conscripted into the 3rd Eastern Non Combatant Corps at Bedford Barracks on 23 May 1916, and soon after, fourteen were sent to France.

It was on the boat that trouble started. They had been handed out their uniforms. On the ship to France they were handed rifles. The fourteen refused. At Le Harve they were put to one side on the docks… and after a while, to try and break the resistance, the tallest and strongest of them, and therefore perceived to be the ring-leader, was tasked with carrying large rocks from one end of the dock to the other. When he had completed his task he was made to carry them back.[4]

However, despite that bad start, accommodations were made and for 18 months the Adventist group worked mainly as stevedores, unloading ships on the docks at Le Harve and elsewhere. Serving in this non-combatant role, and with the ability to keep the Sabbath, they appeared to do alright. There is even a photo in Romola Combridge's collection, of the group in fancy dress in some kind of social setting. (Romola, a Stanborough Park member, is the daughter of Alfred F Bird, another of the group of 14.)

Things changed in 1917. They were moved to a new area with a new commandeer. They were told they would have to work on Sabbath. This they jointly refused to do. It had serious consequences. A court martial ensued and they were sentenced to six months hard labour.

On 23 November 1917 they entered Military Prison #3 in Le Harve. Writing years later to a young man who asked about the experience, Worsley Armstrong wrote,

"I will not go into the details of the horrible treatment we received, but finally each one of us was cast into a small cell, approximately 7 foot by 4 foot with iron walls and a concrete floor. It was mid-winter. There, after punishment, our hands were placed behind our backs and locked with what were called 'Figures of eights'. This was very painful."[5]

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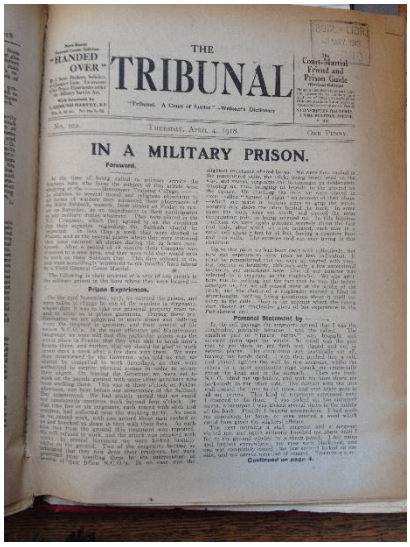
[4] Gath Till interview

[5] W W Armstrong letter to S Cannon, 25 January 1957

Alfred Bird died early, in 1944, partly as a result of ill health resulting from this appalling treatment. His daughter says the marks of these irons digging into his wrists could be seen until the day he died.[6] Armstrong developed a heart condition, even in prison, and lived with the serious consequences of his treatment for all his life.

I've talked with the children of a number of these characters. Their parents did not talk after the war. They would talk to each other but keep silent with their families.

Willie Till broke that rule just one – just before Christmas 1938. Garth, his then nine-year-old son, remembered it well. Willie's sister had scolded him, "war is coming, you need to tell us what happened. What lessons we need to learn." Willie spent an afternoon and evening telling his story. He suffered trauma and nightmares for the following month as a result.



THE
"HANDED OVER"
TRIBUNAL
"Tribunal. A Court of Justice."—Webster's Dictionary
The Court-Martial Friend and Prison Guide.
No. 102. TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 1918. ONE PENNY.

IN A MILITARY PRISON.

Foreword.

Prison Experiences.

Personal Statement by

Continued on page 4.

I'm not going to give you those nightmares. The fullest account is in the 4 April 1918 edition of the clandestine paper, *The Tribunal*. The Bodleian Library in Oxford kindly emailed me a photo of one of only two copies still extant.

Suffice it to say that in the account it talks about bullying, breaking men's hearts, and that they were authorised to use physical means to achieve their objectives. 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, according to the account in *The Tribunal*, but it is actually W W Armstrong's personal letter, 40 years later, that inspires me. Let me read you a section.

"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.

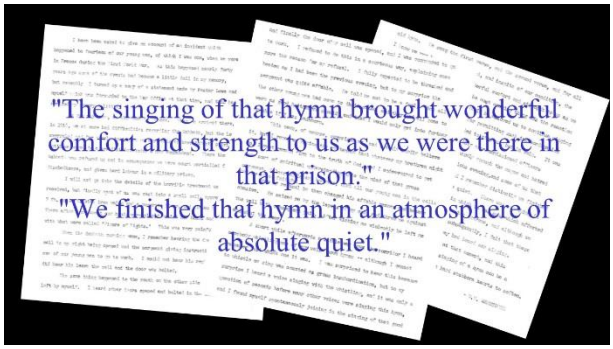
The same thing happened to the youth on the other side, and I was left by myself. I heard other doors opened and bolted in the same way and finally the door to my cell was opened, and I was commanded to go to work. I refused to do this in a courteous way, explaining once more the reason for my refusal. 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 endeavoured 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."

[6] Written statement from Romola Combridge, 24 February 2014

The sergeant's attitude then changed and the inevitable beating came. But that was not the end of the story.

Armstrong writes, "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 non-commissioned 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."

While much of the horrors of that time fell away over the years, that moment remained. Even forty years on he 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."

The men were not allowed Bibles – they were confiscated on entering the prison. However, one of them managed to secrete a copy of the gospel of John, which they then divided up between them and hid in their caps.[7]

A chaplain from a neighbouring 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.[8] According to H W Lowe, recalling the events years later in a moving 1973 Messenger article, it was this chaplain, together with a Plymouth Brethren friend from the nearby YMCA that raised the alarm with higher authorities back in Britain – with questions even being asked in Parliament.[9]

By January 1918 the BUC committee voted to protest to the War Office about the treatment. They were told the matter had already been investigated and the officers responsible punished. Thankfully their detention in Military Prison #3 lasted not much more than a month. They were released

[7] Garth Till interview
[8] *The Tribunal*, p4
[9] *British Advent Messenger*, 28 December 1973, p4.

from the Army and sent to Knutsford Work Centre. By July all 14 were released to civilian life.[10]

Lives of at least two of them were shortened because of the cruel punishment they received – and yet many of these conscientious and faithful Seventh-day Adventists went on to lead the Church both in this country and overseas following the end of the war. H W Lowe was British Union President before and during WWII. W W Armstrong also served as Union President after the war. Jessie Clifford and Willie Till both went as missionaries to West Africa. G Norris became manager of Granose Foods and later a pioneer factory builder in South America. A F Bird, J McGeachy and others served as local pastors – and became valiant spokesmen on behalf of the Church – particularly as the issue of conscription raised its head again at the beginning of WWII. These are men who had made the choice to "stand for the right though the heaven's fall."[11]

We may never know the full story but all of us sometime, somewhere, have to make difficult choices. The story of these young men reminds me of the challenge faced by another timid young man back in the days of the Judges. In Judges 6 we read the call of Gideon. A scared young man, hiding in a wine press trying to thresh some corn out of sight of the enemy. But the angel of the Lord appears to him and calls him, "The LORD is with you, you valiant warrior." Judges 6:12 (ISV). In the KJV it is translated, "Thou mighty man of valour."

Was he? When you read the story it doesn't look like it. He questions God in verse 13, confesses his family's weakness in verse 15, asks for a miracle in verse 17, – and while builds up some courage – he still has to tear down the altar to Baal at night so no one can see him. Then by the end of the chapter he sets two more tests for God – and God humours him.

God humours him because He knows He can use him. God also challenges him, reducing his army of 32,000 men down to 10,000 and then to 300. God can do mighty things with three hundred men. He could do mighty things with 14 young men in France. He can do mighty things with you – and with me.

Those 14 young men who stood by their principles in France have to be admired. The many more who served time in Dartmoor, Wakefield or Knutsford prisons – and who stood firm despite Lord Kitchener's pressure that 'Your country needs you', must be respected.

It was not easy for them. One of those young men was my great uncle. I didn't even know that when I started the research, but when I discovered that it really brought the story home to me. I hold him, and the other 13, in the highest admiration. I hold them as Adventist heroes.

And so, as we conclude, a thought for our future. It may be difficult to know what choices may have to be made in the future – but whether or not you agree with Worsley Armstrong and his colleagues, what is, perhaps more important, is for me to think through the moral issues influenced by my faith. To be making positive choices now. To be so much living my faith that I can claim the words of the angel to Gideon. "The Lord is with you, you valiant warrior."

"We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history."

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[10] http://www.adventisthistory.org.uk/documents/souvenirmessenger1902-1992.pdf, p11

[11] Ellen G White, *Education*, p57