

Letters home from First World War objector revealed

Letters home written by a conscientious objector who was made to fight in the First World War after admitting he would defend his wife if a German attacked her have been revealed by his family.

By Richard Savill

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Donald McNair, a pacifist, registered as an objector but was conscripted after being asked the "trick" question by an appeal tribunal.

When he replied "yes" to the question he was told that if he was willing to defend his wife he could defend his country.

He had recently married and was sent to fight against the Turks in Palestine, from where he sent long letters home to his wife Janie.

Seven of the letters have now been published for the first time by his son after he found them in a dusty folder in a cupboard in his home.

The letters show McNair was shocked by the coarseness of his fellow soldiers and suggest he made a point of never firing a shot at the enemy.

One said: "The beds are as hard as iron. The most respectable looking of the men was a youngish fat chap with spectacles and breeches and stockings.

"He was in bursting spirits and was the life of the place. His torrent of pure and unadulterated swearing, punctuated with incessant blasphemies, was unique: yet he was quite a nice chap in his way and in very genial spirits."

He was also unenthusiastic about his kit. In another letter, he wrote: "The boots are impossible; the collar of the coat is hot and hurts beyond description; the cap hurts at every step.

"I feel a 'gawk' and a loony'. I cannot salute any more than I can fire a gun."

On each posting he went to see the colonel of the regiment and explained his position. Some were sympathetic and allowed him duties guarding ammunition while others branded him a coward and ordered him over the top.

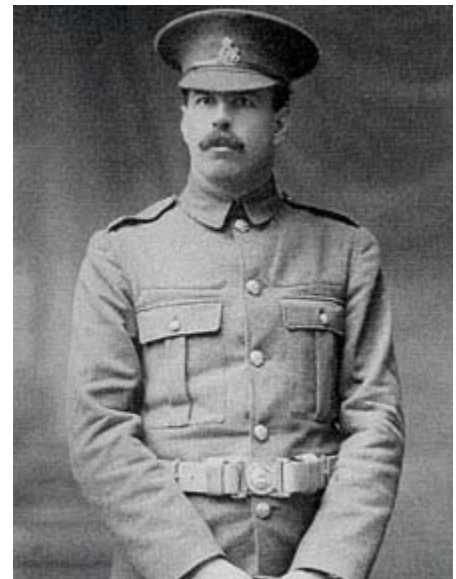
The unwilling soldier bemused his comrades by adding a heavy bible to his already overloaded kit.

McNair was a member of the Exclusive Brethren, an Evangelical Protestant Christian church related to the Christian or Open Brethren which dates back to the 19th century.

Members follow a rigid code of conduct based very strictly on Bible teaching and focussed on a strong family unit.

He was 33 and married to Janie for only weeks when he was conscripted in 1916. He survived the war and died in 1975, aged 87.

His initial registration as a conscientious objector was accepted but the Army objected and he was called before a second



Donald McNair who was conscripted to serve in the First World War said: "I feel a 'gawk' and a loony'. I cannot salute any more than I can fire a gun" Photo: EXETER PICTURES

tribunal, chaired by a local squire and magistrate Sir Ian Heathcoat-Amory.

Sir Ian told McNair: "You don't look like a Conchie" and then asked him the loaded question about protecting his wife.

McNair replied he would defend her "against German and Englishman alike" but it was not enough to save him from enlistment.

His son Philip McNair, 84, who has had them published in a book *A Pacifist at War*, said: "They are very long, descriptive letters and tell how he was called up. I think it was a bit of a trick question which caught him out."

A Pacifist at War is published by Anastasia Press of Much Hadham, Herts

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