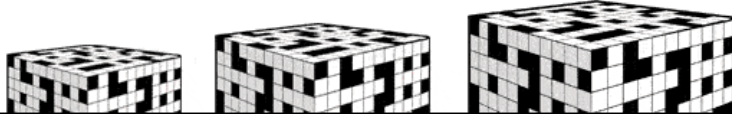


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## Lost letters of objector tricked into fighting

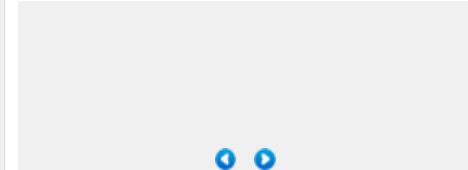
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The anguish of a First World War soldier who was forced to fight despite being a conscientious objector has come to light after seven letters he wrote home were found in a dusty cupboard.

Donald McNair was a member of the Plymouth Brethren who registered as a conscientious objector when conscription was introduced in 1916. As a member of the Exclusive Brethren, a branch of the Plymouth Brethren, McNair avoided the temptations of society. He never went to the cinema or theatre, never danced, and did not vote.



He was called before a tribunal but was tricked into giving an answer that led to his finding himself on the front line. He was asked what he would do if he found a German attacking his wife, to which he replied: "I would defend her against German and Englishman alike". This was taken as an indication that he was prepared to fight to defend his country. He was posted to Palestine to fight the Turks with the 8th Battalion, the Hampshire Regiment, but told officers that he did not intend to fight. Some were understanding and assigned him duties behind the lines. Others warned him that he faced execution if he disobeyed.

In one of the letters, which were sent to his new wife, Janie, McNair recounts a conversation with his colonel in which he asked to be excused. The officer warned him: "I'm afraid there is no question as to the result of that out here; there was a man shot the other day."



### Times Archive, 1916: A policy for conscientious objectors

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However, the officer asked the NCOs to find McNair work carrying water or as a camel guide.

Others were less sympathetic. A Captain Fox, described by McNair as a "godless and aggressively fearless man", regarded him as a shirker.

McNair wrote: "He . . . said I was a coward at the bottom and he had no sympathy whatever with conscientious objectors; that I was enrolled as a soldier and would do as I was told; and because I was in a place of danger I had evidently got frightened and my conscience had therefore begun to assert itself . . . he said when the men went over the top I would go over the top with them."

The letters had lain in the cupboard since McNair's death in 1975 at 87. His son Philip, 84, said: "I am sure my father was not a coward but he never shot at anybody even though he was in the front line and in the trenches."

A *Pacifist at War*, comprising the letters, is published by Anastasia Press of Much Hadham, Hertfordshire.

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