

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Robb, Linsey (2018) The 'Conchie Corps': Conflict, Compromise and Conscientious Objection in the British Army, 1940 - 1945. *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (3). pp. 411-434. ISSN 0955-2359

Published by: Oxford University Press

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwy002> <<https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwy002>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/33557/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

The ‘Conchie Corps’: Conflict, Compromise and Conscientious Objection in the British Army, 1940 – 1945

During the Second World War the distinct line between civilian and combatant was blurred to an extent never seen before in Britain. The British populace faced the Luftwaffe’s bombs. The civilian population took on Civil Defence duties fighting fires and tackling the injuries caused by air raids, facing the horrors of warfare historically reserved for the military. 1.5 million civilian men and women in the Home Guard pledged to defend Britain with arms in the event of invasion. Yet, for much of the war the majority of Britain’s armed forces were stationed in Britain fighting a defensive war. Moreover, only a quarter of the British armed services saw active combat.¹ The Non-Combatant Corps (NCC), the focus of this article, was an extreme example of that blurred line. The men who served within it were in a unique position: conscientious objectors conscripted to serve within the Army. Men in uniform, in wartime society, epitomised idealised masculinity. Yet these conscientious objectors refused to bear arms and in doing so refused to conform to that idealised masculine role. In the words of conscientious objector Denis Hayes in his post-war history of objection: ‘The way of the NCC was no easy one: theirs was the worst of both worlds. To the Army they were suspect, while many a pacifist eyebrow was raised at the mention of the NCC.’²

The Second World War British conscientious objector has, to a remarkable degree, been omitted from both the popular narrative and the historiography of Britain’s war experience. Much, however, has been written about the treatment, and mistreatment, of his First World War counterpart. Nearly 60,000 men, one per cent of all men conscripted, applied for objector status during the six years of the Second World War, in comparison to 16,000 men who applied

¹ John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London, 2009), 156-7.

² Denis Hayes, *A Challenge of Conscience* (London, 1949), 131-2.

in the two years of conscription during the First World War. However, the objector fits poorly with the British popular conception of the Second World War as a 'just' and 'good' war. By contrast, the First World War objector can be cast as a brave hero resisting a bloody and unjust imperial war and so his presence fits much more comfortably within dominant ideas of the 'Great War'.

The focus on the objector of the First World War is in some ways understandable. Treatment of conscientious objectors between 1916 and 1918 was often, to modern eyes at least, harsh and cruel. One third of the 16,000 men who objected were imprisoned during the war. In comparison only 300, half a per cent, were imprisoned during the Second World War. In May 1916 around fifty objectors were sent to France. Once there, around thirty-five were court martialled and sentenced to death for disobeying orders. Although these sentences were immediately commuted to ten years imprisonment such treatment reflects the harsh reality for many who objected during the First World War.³ There was also, famously, a campaign of white feathers, a traditional symbol of cowardice, against those out of uniform. This campaign of shame was fanned by government propaganda which emphasised the essential cowardice, and indeed unmanliness, of those who rejected military service with slogans such as 'Men of Britain will you stand this?' and 'Daddy what did you do in the Great War?'

Such actions were not repeated during the Second World War. Public pressure to fight was certainly not as virulent. Yet it was still felt by many that a young man should be, or at least want to be, in uniform defending his country. Sonya Rose argues for, as she terms it, a 'temperate masculinity' as the cultural ideal which centred on the military hero. In Britain the uniformed man was portrayed as heroic, brave and strong, all typical martial traits. Yet he was

³ Will Ellsworth-Jones, *We Will Not Fight...: The Untold Story of World War One Conscientious Objectors* (London, 2008), 1.

also 'ordinary'. He had strong bonds to his family and friends and was kind. He fought out of necessity not out of desire. As Rose argues this ideal was drawn very much in comparison to the demonised Nazi and his much-publicised bloodlust.⁴

Corinna Peniston-Bird argues that 'Men did not have a choice whether to conform or reject hegemonic masculinity: they positioned themselves in relation to it.'⁵ The ideal of the military hero was pervasive. However, successive recent works have shown that lived masculinities on the British home front were complex and diverse. For example, Martin Francis's seminal study of the RAF *The Flyer* presents a fully rounded image of life in the air force by examining not just traditional military subjects, such as military hierarchies and uniforms, but also love and domestic life.⁶ In recent years, studies of the male experience of the Second World War have proliferated in this vein, examining, for example, homosexuality and disability as well as distinct groupings such as the Home Guard, Civil Defence and reserved occupations.⁷ Indeed, these works have shown, despite the primacy of the military ideal, that

⁴ Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 196.

⁵ Corinna Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men In and Out of Uniform', *Body and Society*, 9(4) (2003), 45.

⁶ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2008)

⁷ See for example, Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and The Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007); Emma Vickers, *Queen and Country: Same-sex desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939-45* (Manchester, 2013); Emma Newlands, *Civilians into Soldiers: War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939-45* (Manchester, 2014); Linsey Robb, *Men at Work: The Working Man in British Culture, 1939 - 1945* (Basingstoke, 2015); Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor and Linsey Robb, *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinities during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2017).

men continued to value other 'traditional' masculine traits such as being the family breadwinner or finding pleasure in the domestic. Yet these wartime studies focus on the men who were willing, even eager, to participate in the war effort. Despite a growing interest in the variety of roles men played during the war, and the concomitant effects this had on men's masculinity and sense of self, the conscientious objector is conspicuously absent from these social and gendered histories of the period.

Despite the wartime dominance of the military masculine ideal, the British peace movement had enjoyed relative popularity in the inter-war years. The Peace Pledge Union (PPU) boasted over 100,000 members in the late 1930s. Moreover, despite the departure of some high-profile members when war began in 1939 the PPU saw an initial increase in support.⁸ However, enthusiasm for pacifism soon waned. By the end of the war only 0.2 per cent of all conscripts sought to conscientiously object.⁹ Moreover, by 1947 the PPU's membership had shrunk to just 16,000.¹⁰ This rise and fall of the inter-war peace movement is well documented. Yet, for the most part, these histories focus on the movement as a whole with little concentrated focus on the rank and file membership.¹¹ Similar emphasis is seen in histories of the wartime objector. In what research there has been historians have focused on the state's treatment of objectors, rather than lived experiences. Rachel Barker's *Conscience, Government and War* and the work of Tobias Kelly have focused on the process of objection and the underpinning reasons for objection rather than considering the wider experience of the

⁸ Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914 - 1945* (Oxford, 1980), 294-5.

⁹ Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain*, 301.

¹⁰ Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain*, 313.

¹¹ See, for example: Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945* and Martin Ceadel, *Semi-detached Idealists: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford, 2000).

objector.¹² There is little focus on these men as men rather than simply participants in a much larger movement. Indeed, the voice of the conscientious objector himself is absent in much scholarly work. Yet, as Lois Bibbings notes of the First World War, conscientious objectors were not a unified group.¹³ During both wars there were vast differences in both the reasons for objecting and the levels to which individual men and women sought to distance themselves from the war machine. As such their experiences as objectors and the social consequences of their objection could vary greatly as this article will demonstrate.

The National Service (Armed Services) Act 1939 allowed for men to conscientiously object to service subject to a successful civilian tribunal.¹⁴ The majority of those who objected claimed religious objection although there were those, mainly on the left, who objected on political grounds. Although not a homogenous group many were from the middle and lower-middle classes with a higher than average level of education.¹⁵ Of those who professed a conscientious objection 12,204 were turned down completely. Those rejected during the Second World War was proportionally nearly double those rejected during the First World War.¹⁶ Only 3,577 men were granted complete exemption. 45,000 men, the overwhelming majority, were directed to take up work which was deemed of 'national importance'. 28,720 of

¹² Rachel Barker, *Conscience, Government and War: Conscientious objection in Great Britain 1939 – 1945* (London, 1982); Tobias Kelly 'Citizenship, Cowardice and Freedom of Conscience: British Pacifists in the Second World War', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57(3) (2015).

¹³ Lois Bibbings, *Telling Tales About Men* (Manchester, 2009), 38-9.

¹⁴ Military tribunals had been used in the First World War. Moreover, the processes instituted in 1939 continued largely unaltered until the end of enlistment for National Service in 1960.

¹⁵ Barker, *Conscience, Government and War*, 116.

¹⁶ Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914 – 1945*, 302.

those were granted conditional exemption on the condition of approved work, either in their original job or specifically mandated war work such as agricultural work or with a civilian ambulance service. The remaining 14,691 men were placed, both voluntarily and by direction, into the Army to perform non-combatant duties, work that is often forgotten.¹⁷ Some served alongside regular soldiers in the Pay Corps, Bomb Disposal and the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), a very popular choice for objectors for humanitarian reasons. However, almost 7,000 men were conscripted into the British Army's Non-Combatant Corps, the 'conchie corps', during the Second World War.

The Corps was formed in 1940 for the employment of those who conscientiously objected to the war. The NCC had first been used in the First World War when 3,300 men who claimed conscientious objection were enlisted into the army.¹⁸ The Second World War Corps was formally attached to the Pioneer Corps. Many of the nominally combatant men in the Pioneer Corps were men who had been granted medical ratings which precluded them from service in other units. These men did a variety of jobs in the army including, for example, stretcher bearing and railway construction. The officers and NCOs for the Non-Combatant Corps all came from the Pioneer Corps and were not themselves non-combatant. At the peak of employment, the Non-Combatant Corps had fourteen companies of men at work.¹⁹ The Non-Combatant Corps were employed on similar duties to the Pioneer Corps, although with additional stipulations to ensure the work was, as far as possible, distant from combatant duties. The official duties of the Corps were listed as:

¹⁷ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991), 76.

¹⁸ Peter Brock, 'Weaponless in the British Armed Forces: The Non-Combatant Corps in the First World War' in Peter Brock, *Against the Draft: Essays on Conscientious Objection from the Radical Reformation to the Second World War* (Toronto, 2006), 251.

¹⁹ Although individual numbers varied an army company generally has between 100 and 250 men.

- (a) Construction and maintenance of hospitals, barracks, camps, railways, roads and recreation grounds
- (b) Care of burial grounds
- (c) Employment at baths and laundries
- (d) Passive air defence
- (e) Quarrying, timber-cutting and the filling in of trenches
- (f) General duties not including the handling of military material of an aggressive nature.²⁰

The training too for the Corps was distinct from 'normal' military training and was tailored to the men's non-combatant status and included such tasks as 'Foot drill, without arms', 'Passive air defence' and 'Anti-gas measures'.²¹

This article examines the experiences of these objectors in uniform. Sources available are diverse. Company diaries exist for each company of the Non-Combatant Corps. These diaries are a useful, if somewhat problematic, source. They are one of the few sources which contain the voice of the commanding officers who have neither written memoirs nor been subjected to oral history interview. However, these diaries are often perfunctory and can present a frustratingly partial view of events. They are also reliant on the diligence of the commanding officer with some reporting more fully than others. The main body of evidence for this work comes from the Imperial War Museum's archived oral history interviews with the men who served in the NCC. The interviews used in this article were conducted between 1981 and 2003 as part of the museum's ongoing project of recording the memories of those who experienced warfare. While no oral history sample can ever be truly representative the

²⁰ The National Archives: Public Record Office, Kew. LAB 6/355, 'General arrangements for the formation of a non-combatant corps'.

²¹ TNA:PRO. LAB 6/355, 'General arrangements for the formation of a non-combatant corps'.

cohort used in this article includes men from across the age-range liable for conscription as well as a broad geographical spread. However, the interviews do reflect the research agenda of the Imperial War Museum, and its researchers, with the interviews being generally more focused on why men objected and formal state processes rather than the emotional or social effects of professing a conscientious objection. Yet, given the frequency of reflection on these effects in interview, this lack of direct interrogation on the topic validates the importance of these issues in men's own memories of the war. While now largely a mainstream research methodology, a traditional criticism levelled at the use of oral history centres on memory: that these are mutated and partial reflections and therefore of dubious reliability for historical research. However, while it is true that oral testimony is the product of memory and thus liable to mediation by dominant cultural narratives, this traditional criticism assumes that the object of oral history is to obtain an absolute objective truth which it very rarely is. Oral testimony, as it is used in this article, is much more revealing of how interviewees felt about, and understood, the events they are reflecting on. Oral testimony is, therefore, an unparalleled resource to access the experiences of those who served as non-combatants, especially to move beyond official policies and tribunal records to understand the lived experiences and social consequences of those who objected to war. This article, therefore presents the experience of those conscripted into the Non-Combatant Corps in their own words. By examining their willing and unwilling entries into the military, their attitudes to the work to be done and the reactions of their military superiors and the wider public this article nuances and deepens our understanding of what it meant to be a conscientious objector in Britain during the Second World War. It argues that the experiences of these men illuminate important ideas of manliness and duty which were at play during the Second World War. However, it will show that these ideas had become relaxed since the First World War. The official toleration of conscientious objectors, even in the army, blurred the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable

masculine behaviour leaving the men conscripted to the NCC, and their superiors, to negotiate this moral boundary. Indeed, despite tensions between these pacifist soldiers and the rest of the Army, and the rest of Britain, the experiences of those within the NCC were, in general, typified more by compromise than conflict.

Rejecting the ‘military machine’.

The act of placing conscientious objectors into the military, unsurprisingly, bred conflict. Some men directed to the corps refused entirely. G.C. Field, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bristol and member of the South-Western tribunal, believed that reasons for refusal to serve in the NCC were diffuse: ‘Some objected to the symbolism of wearing a uniform. Others objected specially to being under the orders of army officers, and others, more generally, to being “part of the military machine”.’²² Quaker Eric Ambrose Bedell refused his medical examination and was sentenced to three months’ imprisonment. Upon release, he was granted an appellate tribunal, to which he explained that while he would undertake humanitarian work under civilian control, non-combatant duties were as essential to the war as combatant and he could not undertake them.²³ Such arguments were so common that one tribunal judge, using casually racist language, declared: ‘That is simply nigger minstrels’ patter. We have heard it so often it means nothing.’²⁴ Others accepted the tribunals rulings but went AWOL [absent without leave] after presenting for duty.²⁵

²² G.C. Field, *Pacifism and Conscientious Objection* (Cambridge, 1945), 103-4.

²³ *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 April 1942, 6.

²⁴ *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 August 1940, 8.

²⁵ *The Manchester Guardian*, 12 Jun 1942, 7.

Some men entered the Corps hesitantly. F.R. Davies came from a Quaker family with a history of objecting. In his memoirs he wrote of the difficult decision he faced when conscripted to the NCC rather than his preferred RAMC:

I was shattered and considered refusing. My mother was even more distressed. She rang up her brother, my Uncle Barry, asking his advice. He said that his own time in Prison as a conscientious objector in the first war had ruined his digestion for life, and he advised against refusal. So I went.²⁶

For Davies the First World War loomed large in his perceived understandings of treatment of conscientious objectors and it was ultimately this which pushed him in to accepting his assigned role; an assumption which underpinned many of the decisions made by conscientious objectors. Moreover, Davies's frustration at being posted to the NCC rather than the RAMC was shared by many of his fellow conscripts. Many conscientious objectors sought service in the RAMC for humanitarian reasons. Early in the war many objectors were placed in the RAMC. However, it quickly became apparent that only men with medical skills would be required. Despite this, tribunals continued to recommend those willing to serve in a medical capacity for service in the RAMC, a recommendation which bore no weight.²⁷ Consternation at being sent to the NCC was a common reaction for many who accepted non-combatant duties as Mass Observation diarist, and NCC conscript, Denis Argent observed in his April 1941 diary. Despite being a medical orderly within the NCC Argent wrote wistfully of his jealousy of those serving in the RAMC, admitting that those who 'find themselves wielding pick and shovel in a muddy trench' were even more dissatisfied.²⁸

²⁶ F.R. Davies, *Some Blessed Hope: Memories of a Next to Nobody* (Lewes, 1996), 37.

²⁷ Barker, *Conscience, Government and War*, 25.

²⁸ Mass Observation Archive, D 5010, Diary for April 1941, p.8.

For those men who refused to submit to army discipline, life could be harsh. There were several reported instances of physical mistreatment of men in the Corps. In a post-war history of objection Joseph Brayshaw described the mistreatment of men in the NCC, at Dingle Vale camp near Liverpool, who had refused their service and had been brought in by the military police:

Every man's hands seemed against them. They were half-starved, beaten, kicked. Their heads were shaved, that they might be known and recognised as legitimate targets. They were cast into dark cells, and wakened at intervals in the night to do menial tasks or drill on the parade-ground. They were cut off from the outside world, to which messages had to be smuggled secretly. The authorities seemed determined to prevent COs claiming a court-martial for disobeying orders. A court-martial might ensure them the legal right to a review Tribunal, and lead to their release from the Army. Instead they must be made to soldier. So threat and terror were employed against them.²⁹

There were repeated examples of abuse at this camp. In September 1940 five men were forced to run for more than an hour while being subjected to kicks and jeers. Two men collapsed and were revived with cold water. After a ten-minute reprieve all five men were forced to repeat the drill for a further half an hour. William Jordan, who experienced this, later wrote:

I felt rather weak that morning, and was soon stumbling over the sandbags, unable to continue, whereupon I was punched in the face and neck and kicked until I was laid out almost unconscious. A bucket full of water was thrown over

²⁹ As cited in Hayes, *A Challenge of Conscience*, 91-2.

me revived me [sic] so that the process could be repeated... and I was then taken back to the cellar.³⁰

At the end of this ordeal four out of the five men began to follow military orders. This process was repeated in October 1940 with ten men. As Emma Newlands notes punishment drill was a conventional and regular tactic of army discipline.³¹ While, in general, violence towards conscientious objectors appears to have been rare, the events at Dingle Vale went far beyond conventional punishment drill. However, such treatment, and responses to it, highlight the ire which conscientious objection could still provoke. The punishment, which as Brayshaw noted was clearly designed to force the objector in to submission, bears striking resemblance to the treatment of objectors during the First World War. Indeed, members of the NCC during the First World War were regularly subjected to physical field punishments and sentenced to hard labour in prison.³² One officer and five NCOs were prosecuted for the events at Dingle Vale. While records on the case are incomplete at least two of the six accused were acquitted seemingly because of a lack of both brutality and evidence.³³ In his closing remarks the trial judge declared:

There are a number of young men who are not prepared to fight or serve their country except in the way they wish. There has been in the witness box man after man who is not prepared to take that responsibility which has to be shouldered by others. If it is not shouldered by the whole Empire everything we stand for will crack. On the other hand we have in the dock a man who gives

³⁰ Hayes, *A Challenge of Conscience*, 93.

³¹ Newlands, *Civilians into Soldiers*, 68.

³² Brock, 'Weaponless in the British Armed Forces', 247

³³ *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1941, 6.

service to his country and is prepared to give his life for it – a man who we cannot do without if this country is to survive.³⁴

This speech is telling. His words underline the sentiments felt by many Britons: a worthy man was prepared to do his duty for his country and ‘shoulder’ his share of the burden. By contrast a conscientious objector expected his burden to be carried by someone else. While not condoning the violence the judge clearly had little sympathy for the men who did not fulfil their ‘responsibility’ to the nation. Public shaming of those out of uniform, as seen and encouraged during the First World War, had gone but the man who objected to warfare was still subject to suspicion. For many he was still a shirker or a coward who had not ‘shouldered’ his true share of the responsibility of warfare and, for some, was worthy of punishment.

However, rather than mistreatment of uncooperative recruits, many in command used more discreet pressure to achieve acquiescence. Those who rebelled from within the military often adopted simple refusal as their course of action. Major Hayes, an officer of the NCC, declared during the appellate tribunal of an NCC conscript that ‘there is a group of these men and they have more or less got the definite purpose of making themselves a nuisance.’³⁵ Unwilling NCC conscript Arthur McMillan, for example, discussed this course of action in detail in letters to his wife Muriel.³⁶ Upon arrival at Dingle Vale camp Arthur was issued with a uniform which he refused to wear. This led to a meeting with the unit Chaplain who ‘for about twenty minutes told me I was a sinner’.³⁷ His sergeant major then proceeded to ‘lecture

³⁴ *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 March 1941, 10.

³⁵ *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 August 1941, 2.

³⁶ These letters were relayed to the IWM in an interview with McMillan’s wife. The letters in their entirety are not in the museum.

³⁷ Imperial War Museum, London. Sound Archive. (From here IWM SA) 4829. Muriel ‘Babs’ McMillan. 10 April 1981.

me in a childish sort of way' on the righteous and Christian basis for fighting the war, an argument McMillan called 'hopelessly muddled', before being returned to his barracks to think about his further actions. Such moral pressure and cajoling was a frequent tactic for the leadership of the NCC. In June 1940 the company diaries of the Second Company noted: 'Capt. Dunn and Vrendenberg attempted to persuade the three strong objectors to follow example of rest of company and to become amenable to discipline: The methods employed had been successful in previous instances but failed to produce the desired result in these three cases.'³⁸ That these methods had worked in 'previous instances' hints at a general use of moral and mental coercion with individual dissenters. Arthur McMillan, however, was resistant to control. He continued to refuse orders despite the pressure placed upon him by his military superiors, eventually having to be dressed in his uniform by his sergeant: 'I did not help him at all. He had to take off my clothes and dress me in the uniform. I obviously couldn't refuse to put on my trousers when he had put on the army underwear, but he received very little help from me in a friendly manner.'³⁹ The next day McMillan was forced to 'march' with his compatriots by being pushed repeatedly in their direction. However, despite his persistent refusal to acquiesce, McMillan's military superiors were slow in moving to formally punish him. It is difficult to ascertain the scale of such diversion from prescribed protocol. Company diaries are generally very detailed when recording work and accommodation, for example, but the issue of discipline is much more irregularly included. Discovering the scale of both crime and punishment is, therefore, a difficult task. Such omissions may suggest commanding officers were underplaying the amount of dissension in the official records or, alternatively, unwilling to record their recourse to informal punishment methods. Indeed, McMillan's plight

³⁸ TNA:PRO. WO 166/5832, "NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 Company."

³⁹ IWM SA 4829. Muriel 'Babs' McMillan, 10 March 1981.

was not a unique one. *The Manchester Guardian*, for example, reported in November 1941 that four NCC soldiers were not court-martialled, despite their own insistence, for persistent refusal to obey orders as it was inconvenient as the company was due to move location.⁴⁰ However, for McMillan, at least, a campaign of resistance paid off. He was eventually court martialled and sentenced to twenty-eight days imprisonment, a sentence which led to an appellate tribunal and his eventual release.

For some men such punishment began a revolving door process of convictions and imprisonments. While 716 men from the NCC were court martialled once, over 200 went through the process twice. More than 100 were court martialled three times and one man was court martialled six times.⁴¹ After punishment these men were returned to serve within the NCC. However, a court martial could also start men down a path to release. A court martial sentence of imprisonment, not detention, of ninety days or more led to the right to an appellate tribunal. By the end of 1948 808 men from the Non-Combatant Corps had been through this process with only 210 being turned down for release to civilian life. While some court martial hearings purposefully gave sentences of just shy of 90 days in 1943 it was decreed that three court martial sentences resulted automatically in release from the army.⁴² Such systems may partially explain the reluctance to record misbehaviour and punish dissension. As seen above there were those in the military who sought to punish conscientious objectors. However, official punishment now potentially became reward and withholding proper court martial procedures kept men in the army, which for some objectors was the greater punishment. However, this ninety-day ruling was also used explicitly to allow men a chance to escape the military. For example, in September 1941, in the official diary of the Fourth Company, it was

⁴⁰ *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 November 1941, 2.

⁴¹ Barker, *Conscience, Government and War*, 86-7.

⁴² Barker, *Conscience, Government and War*, 86-7.

recorded that five privates had been court martialled for disobeying orders on, as the defendants claimed, conscientious grounds. The men were found guilty. Their 93-day sentences in Strangeways Prison were recorded in the diary with the note that ‘this indicates the court accepted their genuineness and granted a sentence exceeding three months which will entitle each man to appear before an appellate tribunal.’⁴³ Such overt emphasis on ensuring appellate tribunals makes apparent that officers could collude with their recalcitrant soldiers to ensure their removal from the military.

The ‘odd lot’: Internal and External Attitudes to the Non-Combatant Corps

Relations between the officers and men of the NCC could be fractious. The officer class for the Corps was drawn from the, rather lowly, Pioneer Corps and men of the Non-Combatant Corps were often disparaging regarding these men. Ronald Petts described the Pioneer Corps as ‘the most despised’ of units and declared it as the destination of ‘C3 men’.⁴⁴ A C3 man had been graded only suitable for home service and with evidence of physical disability or past disease. As Corinna Peniston-Bird argues these classifications, which quickly moved in to common parlance, had significant impact on bolstering or undermining a man’s masculine sense of self, the strong fit body being a key measure of masculinity in this period.⁴⁵ As such by declaring his superior officers as ‘C3’, despite his general disavowal of militarism, Petts was knowingly using the army’s terminology to insult their physical and mental abilities. Similarly, Ronald Pinfield described the men of the Pioneer Corps and the officers in the NCC as ‘riff raff’, a clearer statement than his initial declaration that they ‘lacked polish’. When asked to expand on this statement he declared ‘Shall we say lower type of working class and

⁴³ TNA:PRO. WO 166/5834 NON COMBATANT CORPS: 4 Company.

⁴⁴ IWM SA 9732. Ronald Petts. 2 March 1987.

⁴⁵ Corinna Peniston-Bird, ‘Classifying the Body in the Second World War’, 36.

some of them were not shall we say, you had to watch your money and things like that. The Pioneer Corps, it was looked down on by quite a number of regiments at that time.’⁴⁶ Pinfield, like Petts, paints his superior officers as unmanly, again using the hierarchies of the army against those employed within it, perhaps highlighting that both men were more inculcated into the army’s specific ideals than they would have cared to admit.

These feelings of animosity were reciprocated. Official company diary entries hint at the frustrations officers in charge of the Non-Combatant Corps felt. The Second Company diary on 12 June 1940 noted: ‘Continuous difficulties experienced by Company Officers and NCOs through verbal expression of opinion regarding conscientious objectors made by combatant unit officers and ORs [other ranks] as well as general public in Yarmouth. Considerable tact required in handling situation.’ Similarly, a note beside the entries for 14-17 June 1940 read ‘Divergence of opinion and frequent discussions amongst officers attached to NCC on policy on handling men of NCC. Disappointment expressed that attitude towards NCC of personnel of combatant units in general practically ostracised the officers and NCOs of the company.’⁴⁷ There were clear hierarchies of service within the military with combatants generally more feted than, for example, engineering or clerical staff.⁴⁸ Taken from a lowly, albeit technically combatant, unit and put in charge of non-combatants and then, seemingly, tarred with the same brush of cowardliness and shame as the objectors, it is unsurprising that these men often felt some irritation at the situation in which they had been placed. During the trial of several officers accused of mistreating their charges, discussed previously, several men openly admitted this. According to *The Manchester Guardian* Second Lieutenant WD Cook argued ‘He wasn’t a non-combatant. None of the officers was. He had joined the army to fight

⁴⁶ IWM SA. 10236. Ronald Pinfield. 18 April 1988.

⁴⁷ TNA:PRO WO 166/5832, “NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 Company.”

⁴⁸ For discussion of this see, for example, Francis, *The Flyer*.

and hoped he would not always be with the non-combatant unit.’ Similarly, in the same article, it was reported that Lieutenant Fargher ‘explained that no officer wanted to go to the Non-Combatant Unit. They all went much against their wills and wanted to get out of it. They all regarded it very much as punishment.’⁴⁹ The men in their charge echoed these sentiments. Leonard Clark stated of his officers:

[they] were people who would like to have had commissions in more glamorous units I suspect and the non-commissioned officers were people who in civilian life would have been foremen in a factory or some ... perhaps been in one of the public services, had a stall in the market, people who did manual work I suppose. They were of course not as, they had a rather poorer educational background than the people they were in charge of.⁵⁰

Clark is correct in stating that, compared to the average soldier, conscientious objectors tended to be well educated and generally highly religious. Indeed, some members of the Corps recall slurs along these lines from their superiors. F.R. Davies recalled that during his training: ‘The Captain sneeringly said: ‘According to your consciences you can’t defend yourselves, so someone must look after you. The NCOs will carry rifles as a protection against low-flying aircraft.’ Similarly, Ronald Petts described his officers as ‘pretty horrible’ men who enjoyed bullying:

Constant insults really, I thought I’d knocked about the world, but I wasn’t used to ... ‘You might think you’re fucking good boys but in the army ...’ You might think you’re your mother’s darling boys but you’re’ in the so and so army now’ and so on, this constant pouring of abuse.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1941, 6.

⁵⁰ IWM SA 13286. Leonard Clark. 29 July 1993.

⁵¹ IWM SA. 9732. Ronald Petts. 2 March 1987.

The notion of objectors being ‘mothers’ darlings’ was so endemic that NCC conscript Denis Argent railed against the term in his Mass Observation diary, arguing the term was a ‘ridiculous description’ because: ‘that’s exactly what the average conchie is not. He’s independent to the point of obstinacy, the sort of resolutely non-conforming awkward person who just won’t fit into a family framework. More often than not, blokes’ parents hold very different views from their conchie sons.’⁵² However, this persistent emphasis on the men being ‘good boys’ and ‘mother’s darling boys’ does suggest differing conceptions of proper male conduct. Both Clark and Pett’s memories suggest a culture clash between the privates of the Corps and their officers. As Sonya Rose notes, conscientious objectors espoused a very different idea of manly duty than the hegemonic ideal, often claiming allegiance to a higher authority than the state.⁵³ Such competing values are clearly seen here. Indeed, a significant proportion of the NCOs in the Pioneer Corps were men who came from the working classes and, presumably, from communities where a ‘hard man’ masculinity or a masculine identity derived from hard labour was prized over the intellectual and seemingly effete notion of manly duty espoused by many conscientious objectors.⁵⁴ As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that a certain amount of animosity was felt on both sides.

The Non-Combatant Corps found adversaries in other parts of the army. Mass observation diarist Leonard England noted in late 1944 that ‘hardly anybody has a good word

⁵² Mass Observation Archive, D 5010, Diary for April 1941, p.67.

⁵³ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, 172.

⁵⁴ See for example A. McIvor and R. Johnstone, ‘Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries’ in *Labour History Review* 69(2) 2004.

to say for them' and that there was 'quite a fuss' when his own unit had to eat in the same dining tent as the NCC. He argued this was, in addition to the NCC being an 'odd lot', because:

The men in the army think that the N.C.C. are getting out of things. Nobody likes war and fighting and life being generally unpleasant and everybody would much prefer not to be in the thick of things. But they are and there is the end of it. The N.C.C. say they won't fight and that's the end of it. The men in the army feel that they are getting away with it.⁵⁵

Others were similarly at odds with the 'conchie corps'. Frederick White, an NCO in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, discussed his experiences of meeting the NCC in an oral history interview for the Imperial War Museum: 'God there was some fights between us and them [laughs hard]. There was a pub there ... They used to put the pub out of bounds to us one night and out of bounds to the Non-Combatant Corps the next ...'⁵⁶ White's testimony does suggest that he looked back on these 'fights' somewhat fondly. However, that the military hierarchy sought to actively divide the non-combatants from combatant units suggests that relations between these different groups of soldiers could be so untenable as to merit permanent separation.

The men of the Non-Combatant Corps not only faced opposition from those inside the military. The public also made their strong feelings about conscientious objectors known. While not subject to the ire directed towards objectors during the First World War, the objector was still objectionable to many. The conscientious objector was perennially mistrusted and unfavourably compared to the military man. Indeed, many men who were in reserved occupations, or other prescribed civilian work, feared that they would be mistaken for a

⁵⁵ *Attitudes in the Forces (Army) to Conscientious Objectors 26.11.44 (Len England)*, Mass Observation, Topic Collection 6-2-E. Miscellaneous.

⁵⁶ Frederick White, interview, 15 August 2000 (IWM SA 20591).

‘conchie’ and thus be thought a coward. Bevin Boy Tom Myles, for example, recalled the slurs aimed against him at home in Falkirk:

There’s a young able-bodied eighteen-year- old walking in the streets. ‘Why are you no in the army, why are you no doing this, why are you no doing that?’ You know, and it did not sit well with me . . . But to be called a conscientious objector, and the Government made no move to advise people...⁵⁷

Much of the work of the NCC took place not in the tightly controlled military sphere but rather in civilian areas as units were used as, for example, hospital orderlies and farm workers. They were also often billeted in or near small communities for extended periods. There were, therefore, frequent opportunities for tension. In September 1940 the company diary of the Second Company recorded that: ‘Villagers of Gamlingay are antagonistic to NCC and openly say so.’⁵⁸ This open shunning underlines that conscientious objectors were still not accepted by broad swathes of the British public. NCC conscript Ernest Spring recorded in his diary the regular jibes he suffered while wearing his NCC uniform. On one occasion, he was refused service in a café with the proprietor stating: ‘We don’t serve the NCCs here. It’s the missus, not me. She lost a brother in the last war and would rather put the shutters up than take money from anyone who wears your badge.’⁵⁹ Similarly, when attempting to hitchhike back to camp two of his fellow ‘non-coms’ were refused by one lorry driver for being ‘in the wrong battalion’.⁶⁰ Such ill feeling was also recalled by Ronald Pinfield:

⁵⁷ Scottish Oral History Centre. 050/ 02. Tom Myles. 6 November 2008.

⁵⁸ TNA:PRO. WO 166/5832, “NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 Company.”

⁵⁹ Ernest Spring, *‘Conchie’: The Wartime Experiences of a Conscientious Objector* (London, 1975),

⁶⁰ Spring, *‘Conchie’*, 50.

We were sort of regarded as not quite soldiers because we didn't fight you see ...Wherever we went as a company people began to accept us. I think it was the fact that you were in the army you see, you were wearing the uniform, therefore you were doing something. I think that gradually came on with people but when they asked what NCC was on your cap badge, Non-Combatant Corps, we had to explain that we were pacifists really and of course then we got a little opposition from the fact we weren't quite soldiers.⁶¹

It is important to emphasise here, as Pinfield makes plain, antagonism was only ever part of the story. Even in Gamlingay, the hotspot of tensions noted above, the men of the Second Company found friends. In the winter of 1940, just a few months after the diary entry cited previously, the men of the Corps were invited regularly to whist drives and dances, especially by the Girton branch of the Women's Institute, and even held a Christmas pantomime for the children of the village.⁶²

Those they worked alongside were often even more pleased with the men of the Corps. In April 1941 Denis Argent noted in his Mass Observation diary that his NCC company had received a letter from the mayor of Swansea in thanks for their work when the city was bombed: 'it's a change to have the Conchie Corps getting a spot of praise on equal terms with the combatants.'⁶³ However, this was not a singular event. In November 1940 the Third Company were presented to the King, alongside combatant units, in recognition of their work during air raids on Bristol which was described as 'very good work at a total disregard of personal

⁶¹ IWM SA. 10236. Ronald Pinfield. 18 April 1988.

⁶² TNA:PRO. WO 166/5832, "NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 Company."

⁶³ Mass Observation Archive, D 5010, diary for April 1941, p.37.

safety.’⁶⁴ Similarly, the Medical Superintendent of White Lodge Hospital in Newmarket wrote to the Second Company Captain in February 1941:

I wish to place on record my appreciation of the splendid work by the detachment of your Unit, who are attached to the Hospital on the 18th/19th February, 1941, when a large number of Air Raid Casualties were received. They, including the NCO, all worked straight for about 13 hours, some helping in theatre and resuscitation, the majority being employed in the heavy work of carrying patients, many of them upstairs to and from wards to operation theatre and back.⁶⁵

In what was surely a coincidence, these men of the NCC ended up performing the task so many of them longed for: giving aid in a time of need. While nursing and care work in general was often perceived as feminine work, the superintendent here emphasises the hard physical labour the men endured ensuring that their labours are portrayed as suitably masculine and vital. Clearly while they were not always willing soldiers the men of the Non-Combatant Corps were also not always useless or unwanted.

A ‘spirit of understanding and comradeship’: compromising within the British army.

While the Non-Combatant Corps was a site of conflict it could also be a site of compromise for the men conscripted and the military itself. Not all men who entered the Non-Combatant Corps did so unwillingly. Indeed, members of the Plymouth Brethren objected only to the taking of life so were able to conscientiously take a role in the Non-Combatant Corps in both world wars. Similarly, Seventh Day Adventists were called upon by their leaders to choose

⁶⁴ TNA:PRO. WO 166/5833, “NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 COMPANY”

⁶⁵ TNA:PRO. WO 166/5832, “NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 Company.”

service in the NCC upon conscription.⁶⁶ However, some conscripted men admitted that their participation in the military was a compromise of their own beliefs. Leonard Day stated: ‘You can’t avoid compromising in some respects but that doesn’t alter the fact that I think war is evil and wrong and for ME to participate or hate people is anti-Christian and without doubt I’m not perfect but I do try as far as possible to carry out the principles I believe in.’⁶⁷ Similarly, in a way which found resonance with many in the wider objecting community, Ronald Pinfield, when asked in interview about his ‘obvious compromise’, argued that it was immoral to stay completely distant from the war: ‘It refers back to “if my disciples were of this world would they fight” but we were in it, we were in it. We’ve got to play our part. We can’t stand ourselves aloof. I’ve never been with a monastery attitude to life. I think a Christian should play his or her part in life constructively.’⁶⁸ In fact, Pinfield’s desire to be useful in time of war made him actively choose service in the Non-Combatant Corps. At his initial tribunal Pinfield was granted conditional exemption with the provision that he remained in his job making telephones. However, his position began to weigh upon him:

But I began to feel a little uneasy in myself as to my pals were getting killed ...
All these were my friends and I thought ‘there must be something you can do’
and then I heard about this non-combatant ... So I wrote to them [the Central
Board for Conscientious Objectors] and they accepted me on to the military
register as a non-combatant.⁶⁹

Pinfield displays many of the traits which were common to other men of his generation. It was a common desire amongst young men to ‘do their bit’ and many felt an internalised pressure

⁶⁶ Brock, ‘Weaponless in the British Armed Forces’, 246.

⁶⁷ IWM SA. 10236. Ronald Pinfield. 18 April 1988.

⁶⁸ IWM SA. 10236. Ronald Pinfield. 18 April 1988.

⁶⁹ IWM SA. 10236. Ronald Pinfield. 18 April 1988.

to actively contribute to the war effort. As Pattinson, McIvor and Robb have shown this desire often drove men in reserved occupations to try to enlist despite their obvious value on the home front.⁷⁰ Regardless of his pacifism, Pinfield was clearly not immune to this internalised pressure.

Nor was Pinfield alone. Ronald Petts felt a similar crisis of confidence when working on the land after his initial tribunal:

I had an increasing sense of being absolutely isolated. And while I never thought cowardice played any part in this I also had the thought you can't guarantee any feeling that is a weak feeling that you are way out of the mess ... and there is one part of you unsatisfied because you hadn't become, you hadn't gone into, you'd had to face a lot of acceptance and pain but you hadn't taken the yoke at all that other people had had to take in the great mess of Europe and you may think this is rather difficult to understand ... I had a great sense, and I couldn't explain it any more now, that I was catching up with something to go deep into the awful mess.⁷¹

Like Pinfield, Petts felt that he 'hadn't taken the yoke' in working on the land and sought to make a more obvious contribution to the war effort.

Compromise was a common attitude during the Second World War within the wider objecting community. Unlike in the First World War the state policy was not one of repression. While this had been harsh, this stringent response, as Martin Ceadel argues, in many ways validated COs decisions to reject conscription.⁷² Ceadel further argues that the awareness of the 'special privilege' granted to them encouraged many Second World War COs to respond

⁷⁰ Pattinson, McIvor and Robb, *Men in Reserve*, 95.

⁷¹ IWM SA. 9732. Ronald Petts. 2 March 1987.

⁷² Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914 – 1945*, 303.

with a 'desire to repay their debt by social service.'⁷³ Indeed, Tegla Davies, a member of the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU), wrote in 1947:

When the war had come upon them, the State had treated them with surprising leniency. Some conscientious objectors, some members of the Unit, went to prison, but for the majority the battle of the prisons had been won by the steadfastness of their fathers in the previous war. Now they felt that pacifism, having been recognised by the state, should show in action what it could do to relieve the suffering and agony which years of war were bound to produce.⁷⁴

1,300 men joined the Quaker-affiliated FAU during the Second World War with most professing a desire to be 'useful' and were willing, and in some cases even eager, to work alongside the military to aid military casualties.⁷⁵ Increased cooperation may reflect the nature of the war. Nazism was, to many, an obvious evil resulting in intense suffering across Europe and beyond, leaving many objectors to feel that while to fight was immoral, it was also immoral to not seek to help in some way. As objector Deryck Moore argued 'To languish in a jail is not sensible. To languish in a jail is not acceptable when someone else is giving his life to protect your environment as a soldier... There was so much work to be done generally in the world and I think that would have been a wrong thing.'⁷⁶ Cooperation was, although not universal,

⁷³ Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914 – 1945*, 305.

⁷⁴ A. Tegla Davies, *Friends Ambulance Unit: The Story of the FAU in the Second World War 1939 – 1946* (London, 1947), 2.

⁷⁵ See, for example, IWM SA. 10883. Michael Rowntree. 7 August 1989 and IWM SA. 10051 Michael Cadbury. 27 November 1987.

⁷⁶ IWM SA 10884. Deryck Moore. 9 August 1989.

common. Yet men of the Non-Combatant Corps were the extreme end of that spectrum; willing as they were to be of service to the most anti-pacifist of organisations: the army.

The decision to compromise, however, was not always a philosophical one. Practical concerns could also hold precedence over ideals. Leonard Clark noted that his decision to join the Non-Combatant Corps was motivated more by financial and familial concerns than by his conscience. He stated:

I was working for a public authority [as a clerk] and the conditions of the authority were such that if I accepted conditional service in a non-combatant service or in civilian work, in other words if I accepted direction, then my pay would be made up during the war. And as my parents were dependent on me financially that was a factor which led to me deciding not to take my resistance along the lines which would have meant presumably I would have gone to prison and they would have got no benefit during that period. Not a decision I'm very proud about.⁷⁷

Such a focus on provision was often a key part of idealised masculinities in this period: breadwinner masculinity was a powerful ideal for many men regardless of class. As such Clark's actions highlight that other masculine concerns could take precedence over pacifist ideals. Again, this finds parallels in other male wartime occupations. Some of those in reserved occupations actively preferred their civilian status as it allowed them to garner high wages in order to support their families.⁷⁸ Moreover, concern for loved ones was a familiar anxiety for all those conscripted, regardless of unit, and Clark's worries were echoed by Leonard Day. He declared: 'The only doubt I ever had was whether by opting for non-combatant duties I hadn't

⁷⁷ IWM SA. 13286. Leonard Clark. 29 July 1993.

⁷⁸ Pattinson et al, *Men in Reserve*, 150.

compromised too much. That's the only doubt.'⁷⁹ In discussing his decision to actually put on the uniform Day admitted that his wife 'was prepared to support my compromise' but was unhappy about 'anything further'. Later in the interview Day admitted that he would have been willing to go to prison had it not been for his wife.⁸⁰ These reminiscences demonstrate that for many men their conscientious objection could not be an entirely morally-driven decision. Few men, even young men, were free of responsibilities and as such had to compromise to find an acceptable solution to their moral conundrum.

As most entered the Corps willingly, if not necessarily happily, it is logical that most men largely acquiesced to military control. As Denis Hayes noted there was 'little practical protest from men in the Corps.'⁸¹ Indeed, only 716 men of the 7,000 in the Corps faced court martial action. That is not to say these obviously idealistic and strong-willed men simply rolled over in the face of authority. Instead, protests were often understated rather than outright refusals. For example, Leonard Day discussed how he and his fellow unarmed soldiers 'passively resisted' by turning their backs on a session teaching unarmed combat: 'We went and were present, but we didn't really learn how to gouge somebody's eyes out.'⁸² Day clearly faced an obvious example of an activity which contravened the spirit of the Non-Combatant Corps. However, what did and did not comprise non-combatant work was the most obvious point of contention between men and their superiors and confusingly, despite a list of prescribed duties, there was no conclusive definition.⁸³ Indeed, individual members of the NCC often differed on what was and was not acceptable. As Hayes notes, even pre-approved duties

⁷⁹ IWM SA. 34004. Leonard Day. 12 February 1983.

⁸⁰ IWM SA. 34004. Leonard Day. 12 February 1983.

⁸¹ Hayes, *A Challenge of Conscience*, 125.

⁸² IWM SA. 34004. Leonard Day. 12 February 1983.

⁸³ Barker, *Conscience, Government and War*, 79.

could come close to violating the spirit of a non-combatant unit, citing passive air defence as an obvious site for contention.⁸⁴ The construction and maintenance of ammunition dumps, in addition to other military facilities, also proved to be fertile ground for conflict. F.R. Davies recalled that:

One day we staged what almost amounted to a mutiny. We were ordered to construct an assault course to be used by NCOs from our unit and from other units in the same company. We refused this as being work which non-combatants should not be required to do...I was put forward as spokesman. I told Baldy [the lieutenant] that we were refusing. He was very angry and threatened court martial and all sorts of things.⁸⁵

Eventually, however, military superiors acquiesced to their demands. Similar events were recorded in the Second Company's diary for November 1942:

One further NCC private remanded for trial by FGCM [Field General Court Martial] for refusal to work on road making through 24 ammunition supply depot RASC [Royal Army Service Corps], Edwinstone. Total men awaiting trial on this charge – 6. Many other protests from conscientious objectors actually working that the task is not non-combatant. ACI 456/1940 justifies the employment of NCC on roads and railways. No material of any aggressive nature is being handled.⁸⁶

In this case, while the men were court martialled, the judge acquitted them as they were being asked to do work which was outwith the remit of the NCC.

⁸⁴ Hayes, *A Challenge of Conscience*, 125.

⁸⁵ Davies, *Some Blessed Hope*, 45.

⁸⁶ TNA:PRO. WO 166/5832, "NON COMBATANT CORPS: 2 Company."

The army displayed a large degree of willingness to compromise with the men placed in the Non-Combatant Corps. Ernest Spring recalled an incident when he refused to work on railway lines used solely for an ammunition dump. Although previously amenable to discipline, and a volunteer for the NCC, Spring refused this specific task stating to his major: 'this is an ammunition dump, and by helping to maintain the lines I should be facilitating the transport of ammunition, and there is no essential difference between this and handling munitions.' Although his major reminded Spring he could face court martial he allowed Spring, and subsequently two others, to perform duties in camp in lieu of working on the railway, an act which Spring called a 'fair deal'.⁸⁷ Similarly, the Third Company diary of October 1942 recorded the following regarding the introduction of Sunday working hours:

24 men protest against working on the Lord's Day except in the case of extreme necessity or acts of mercy. These men were anxious to work extra time during the week and on Saturday afternoons in order that they would be free to attend divine service on a Sunday and as a token as a sincerity of their motive some dozen men put in writing their willingness to refund all pay drawn for Sunday since the date of their enlistment.⁸⁸

Their demands were met. It was noted in the company diary the following day that, where possible, men would be able to work extra time on a Saturday to allow a full day off on a Sunday.

Co-operation and toleration was the official War Office advice. In a War Office memorandum from April 1940 it was written of the Non-Combatant Corps:

⁸⁷ Spring, 'Conchie', 92-5.

⁸⁸ TNA:PRO. WO 166/10273 "3 Coy."

All ranks are equally serving their country according to their consciences and to the best of their ability in their own way. At the same time, there must be no relaxation of discipline for any reason connected with conscientious objection. Officers and NCOs must do their best to understand the point of view of the members of this Corps, and this can be done without in any way surrendering their own. This will enable the maintenance of that spirit of understanding and comradeship which will be as essential in this Corps as in any other.⁸⁹

As well as a relaxation of attitudes towards conscientious objectors this may reflect simple pragmatism on the part of the military. In a war where the balance of manpower was under constant scrutiny and debate, arguably it was a waste of resources to place a man in detention or military prison. Compromise, then, became a central tactic to ensure continued work. As has been shown, unity was not constant but for many men, and their superiors, the Non-Combatant Corps became not a site of conflict but one of compromise.

Conclusions.

This article has told the story of the men of the Non-Combatant Corps for the first time. In doing so it has furthered our understanding of both Second World War conscientious objection and wartime masculinity. In seeking to understand conscientious objection, and pacifism more generally, it is imperative that, as this research has done, we begin to look beyond the overarching organisations and systems and begin to understand the choices made, as well as the consequences of these choices, on an individual level. This research, therefore, is an important step in understanding the lived experiences of Britain's Second World War conscientious objectors. Despite the official tolerance of the state, the conscientious objector

⁸⁹ As cited in Hayes, *A Challenge of Conscience*, 123-4.

was still a figure of suspicion for large swathes of the British public, both inside and outside the army. There were echoes of the treatment and attitudes of the First World War. There were those who sought to punish objectors and communities often shunned the pacifist soldiers working in their midst. For many they were still shirkers and cowards who had fundamentally rejected a key part of their male duty. For others the objector's seeming desire to choose only the palatable parts of wartime service seemed palpably unfair. Yet this is only a small part of the NCC story. It is clear the Second World War objector, despite his fears, faced experiences and attitudes markedly different from their First World War counterparts. By examining their willing and unwilling entries into the military, their attitudes to the work to be done and the reactions of their military superiors it is apparent that conscripting conscientious objectors created a complex set of outcomes and responses. Men entered the Non-Combatant Corps as volunteers far more than by force. Moreover, their experience and testimonies are marked by knowing negotiation, their own and the army's, far more than by hostility. Indeed, by moving away from a process imbued with open tension, as seen in the First World War, the state created a more fluid boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, leaving Non-Combatant Corps conscripts and volunteers, and their superiors, to negotiate their own moral boundaries, often choosing compromise over conflict.

Moreover, by allowing the men of the NCC to speak for themselves, this article adds important knowledge to the historiography of masculinities and the male experience of the Second World War. Given the diverse nature of objection the men who served with the NCC are not representative of all British conscientious objectors. However, they are highly indicative of the attitudes of many of their counterparts. Therefore, while there is obviously more work to be done on objection, this research adds vital information to the complex, and growing, web of knowledge regarding lived and idealised masculinities seen in Britain during the Second World War. Fundamentally, this research highlights the masculine ideals of those

who were not supportive of the war who, to date, have been omitted from the gendered studies of this period. It is apparent that most conscientious objectors had a different conception of masculine duty than their peers: generally prioritising adherence to their faith or pacifist ideals. However, that does not mean they were immune to other masculine pressures. While those who served willingly in the NCC may have been peculiarly pliant for objectors, as they were prepared to serve within the military, it is also clear that their experiences mirror and reflect the expectations of compromise seen within the wider objecting community. Moreover, it becomes apparent that despite conflict between the men of the NCC and the wider military, and indeed the wider world, these pacifist soldiers had a great deal in common with their peers, often navigating similar pressures and conflicts. Like men eager to serve in the armed services, the concept and language of ‘doing your bit’, although differently conceived, was a key driving factor in decisions about how best to pursue a course of conscientious objection. Moreover, their relationships with their superior officers suggest that, at least partly, they were inculcated in to the military’s particular hierarchies and masculine ideals. Furthermore, like their counterparts in other occupations, civilian and military, they too had to negotiate other aspects of male duty. It is clear COs were not exempt from the masculine pressures to be a breadwinner or to fulfil one’s domestic duty as husband or son. Indeed, such seemingly prosaic concerns could impact heavily upon decisions made about ostensibly pacifist matters. Therefore, this ‘odd lot’ of ‘non-conforming awkward’ ‘mother’s darlings’ were more characteristic of the men of their generation than pacifists and non-pacifists alike would have cared to admit.

TOTAL WORD COUNT – 10,444