

peace pledge union

OPPOSITION TO CONSCRIPTION

BACKGROUND

The Military Service Act 1916

This was introduced by Prime Minister Asquith in January 1916 and it came into force on 2 March 1916. In June 1916 conscription was extended to married men between 18 and 41 and later extended to all men up to 51.

The No Conscription Fellowship (NCF)

The NCF was formed to support those who objected to taking up arms in the First World War. These men became known as “Conscientious Objectors”.

Grounds for Objection

There were varied grounds for objection including:

- Religious e.g. Quakers
- Political e.g. Socialists and Internationalists
- Humanitarian

Military Losses

Despite the millions who had volunteered in 1914 unprecedented military losses before 1916 meant more men were needed for the army and it was also recognised that the war was going to last a long time.

The work of the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF)

- Keeping records of all Conscientious Objectors
- Visited camps, barracks and prisons
- Picketing of prisons
- Published leaflets and pamphlets
- Produced a weekly newspaper, The Tribunal, which the government tried to suppress
- Briefed MPs and Ministers

Treatment of Conscientious Objectors (COs)

- Labelled “conchies”
- Isolated in barracks, army camps and prisons
- Some sentenced to death later commuted to 10 years imprisonment
- 73 men died after arrest
- 40 suffered mental breakdowns
- 20000 refused to fight and 6312 were arrested
- Over 800 served more than 2 years in prison

Alternative Service

Some COs refused to bear arms but accepted in:

- Ambulance units
- Friends Relief Committee
- “Work of national importance”

Women and the NCF

- Women relatives of COs faced hostility from family and neighbours
- Some women workers in the NCF were jailed for their activities

LEARNER ACTIVITIES

Individually or in small groups consider the postcard below which was printed in 1916.

What image is being presented of the Conscientious Objectors?

What image is being presented of the German Soldiers?

Why are they both being presented in such a way?



Conscientious Objectors were often described as “Conchies” and portrayed as **cowardly**. We hear a lot about heroes and acts of heroism and they are often associated with the activities of soldiers when they are involved in self sacrifice in dangerous wartime activities but they may also be associated with situations where people are standing up for their principles also in potentially very difficult and dangerous situations.

1. Write down all the characteristics that you think could make up an act or acts of heroism.

2. When you have done that make up a template (or use the one provided below) and then apply this template to two case studies provided below (either A and B or C and D).

The Heroism Template				
Characteristics	Conscientious Objector (A or C)		Soldier (B or D)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Self sacrifice				
Standing up for others				
Difficult and dangerous situation(s)				
Dangerous consequences				
Using your own mind				
Fearless despite understanding or awareness of the consequence of actions				
Physical bravery and courage				
Mental bravery and courage				
Ignoring your own well being for a cause in which you believe				
Indomitable				
Exemplar for others				
“Sticking to your guns” and principles				

3. When you have completed your analysis work out which person has been allocated the most characteristics. Does this make them the bigger hero?

4. Are you surprised at the outcomes of this exercise? Use the results of this exercise to help inform a full classroom discussion.

5. Why do you think that one received a medal of gallantry and the other one was treated very differently?

It could be argued that people involved in the case studies all behaved bravely and heroically, though in different ways, there are a number of reasons why they were treated differently.

The soldiers were acting heroically in support of the aims and actions of those in power and were therefore examples that would be used to persuade others to follow suit and not question the use of military activities.

Conscientious Objectors, on the other hand, although brave and heroic maintained a different set of principles from those in power. If their bravery had been acknowledged it could potentially undermine the support that the government required from ordinary people as it pursued its stated war aims and accompanying military actions.

6. Can you think of any other people that you know about or have heard about who may also be “hidden” heroes? Examples might be young people who stand up to bullies, people who refuse to join gangs, young men and women who refuse to accept sexist or homophobic behaviour and those who stand up for their rights.

7. Could your template be applied to them?

Case Study A

Henry (Harry) W Scullard

Address: Lyndhurst, Warwick Road, Sutton, Surrey

Born: 1890 **Age:** 26 (in 1916) **Died:** 1964

Harry had a religious objection to taking life and was totally opposed to war. At his Tribunal hearing in Sutton it was judged that he was not a genuine Conscientious Objector (CO) with the right to be exempted from all military service, so it was refused.

Harry was arrested, fined and sent to the military regardless of his beliefs. He completely refused to have anything to do with the military machine - not signing any paperwork, refusing to have a medical exam and even going so far as to refuse to give his personal details to the army.

This refusal of military orders incensed the officers he encountered and Harry, alongside around 40 other COs, was sent to France in May 1916, where they were told that, as "soldiers" overseas, refusal to obey an order was a crime punishable by death.

In France, the COs were marshalled with a group of soldiers undergoing military punishments and told to march. The 16 COs present stood their ground as the soldiers marched away - earning them another threat of death from the officers giving orders.

Later, fed only on a "punishment diet" of bread and water, he was given the dreaded Field Punishment Number One. For 28 days, Harry was tied with his arms outstretched to a barbed wire fence, incapable of moving any part of his body and left to the elements. Many COs were subject to this kind of punishment, often alongside beatings and death threats.

Soldiers, up for court martial and punishment for military crimes were astounded at the strength of belief needed by Harry and other COs to withstand such terrible punishments.

Harry was told that he would be faced with the death penalty, and that a last few days were being given in order to think it over - the choice was simple: join the army, betray his principles and fight to kill or face death. Not a single CO (Harry included) chose to join the army, even to save their own lives.

Following a court martial on 7 June, 1916 he was, on 15 June, marched with the other COs in front of massed ranks of soldiers, and their sentence was read out:

"The Accused were tried by Field General Court-Martial, had been found guilty and sentenced to death. The sentence has been confirmed by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig"

"...and commuted to ten years penal servitude".

Harry was sent back to prison in England, spending several months in Winchester prison before being moved to a Work Camp set up as a marginally less harsh alternative to prison. For the next three years, shuffled between camps, he would work at back-breaking, pointless manual labour until well after the end of the war, when he was finally released in 1919.

Case Study B

Sidney Godley

Address: Imberhorne Lane, East Grinstead

Born: 1889 **Age:** 25 (in August 1914) **Died:** 1957

Sidney Godley, the son of a painter and decorator, left school at the age of 14 to begin work at an ironmonger's shop but with a desire for a more exciting life he joined the army in 1909. On the outbreak of the First World War he, as Royal Fusilier, was sent to France to help stop the advancing German army by being moved forward to Mons in Belgium.

By the time they reached Nimy they were have great difficulty in holding the Germans and it was decided to retreat to the River Marne.

The Royal Fusiliers were ordered to hold 2 bridges over a canal while the rest of the British army retreated. Two machine guns were set up on the bridge and the Germans directed their fire at the two machine gunners and as soon as a machine gunner was killed, another soldier moved forward to take over.

Eventually it was decided by the commanding officer that his men would have to retreat and before they left he asked for 2 volunteers to man the machine guns. Godley and another man called Dease volunteered and within a few minutes of taking over the gun, Dease was killed. Godley was hit by a piece of shrapnel but he continued to fire at the Germans trying to cross the bridge. Godley's single-handed defence of the bridge for 2 hours gave the other men enough time to retreat.

A bullet hit him in the head and he was eventually captured and taken to a German field hospital where surgeons removed shrapnel from his back and a bullet from his skull.

Godley recovered in a German prisoner of war camp and he was presented with the Victoria Cross in 1919.

After the War he became a school caretaker; he died in 1957 and is buried at Loughton Cemetery.

Case Study C

Thomas Corder Pettifor Catchpool

Address: Ronceval, The Green, Wanstead, Essex

Born: 1883 **Age:** 31(in 1916) **Died:** 1952

Corder Catchpool was a dedicated member of the Society of Friends (Quakers), he volunteered for the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) at the outbreak of war at 29 along with his brother, Henry. Leaving Wanstead and his younger brother Jack (who would join the FAU in 1915) behind, he went to work in France in June 1914.

While in France, he worked with the FAU on an ambulance convoy, transporting wounded men rearward for treatment. During his time in France he wrote extensively on what he believed to be his calling - to work to save lives where he could, rather than volunteer to fight and kill in the carnage of the Western Front.

When Conscription was introduced in 1916 however, Corder began to change his mind about his work now believing that to continue working with the FAU would be a betrayal of his "loyalty to Pacifism and the Society of Friends" and so he resigned from the unit.

By September 1916, Corder had been called up for Military Service and faced the Wanstead Military Service Tribunal. Interestingly, due to his work with the FAU, he had been awarded the Mons Medal, and wore it during his Tribunal hearing. It was, however, to no avail and his claim of Absolute Exemption was turned down. Instead, the Wanstead Tribunal gave him exemption from Combatant Service only.

This was unacceptable to Corder, who had realised that any form of Military Service, non-combatant or not, was providing help to the war machine. Determined to resist all forms of war and militarism, Corder willingly turned down all alternative service and was sentenced to two years hard labour in prison.

Like many Conscientious Objectors (COs) from late 1916 onwards Corder found himself caught in a vicious and pointless cycle. After serving a prison sentence, he would be released back to the army and, upon disobeying military orders, would find himself back in prison with a fresh sentence. In all, he would serve four separate sentences from 1917 to January 1919 - almost exactly two years in total.

Corder saw the First World War as an avoidable, tragic and unnecessary slaughter without heroism, valour or reason.

Case Study D

John Cornwell

Address: Alverston Road, East Ham

Born: 1900 **Aged:** 16.5 years **Died:** June 1916

John Cornwell left school at the age of 14 and found employment as a delivery boy. On the outbreak of the First World War his father joined the British Army. His older brother, Arthur Cornwell, also joined the army and served on the Western front.

In October 1915 John Cornwell joined the Royal Navy as a boy sailor. After receiving his basic training at Plymouth he joined HMS Chester at Rosyth, Scotland.

After the outbreak of the First World War, attempts were made to draw the smaller German Navy into the North Sea for a major battle but it was only in May 1916 that the Admiral in charge of the German Fleet decided he would take on the British fleet.

In May 1916 the battle of Jutland took place when a British fleet of ships engaged with a German fleet in the North Sea. The two fleets opened fire at a range of 15 kilometres. During this exchange of fire John Cornwell was severely wounded. He remained at his post until HMS Chester retired from the action with only one main gun still working. According to one report: "Cornwell was found to be sole survivor at his gun, shards of steel penetrating his chest, looking at the gun sights and still waiting for orders".

Cornwell was taken to Grimsby General Hospital and his family were informed that he was seriously wounded. John Cornwell died of his wounds on 2 June 1916 and was buried at Manor Park Cemetery in London. John Cornwell was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross later in 1916.