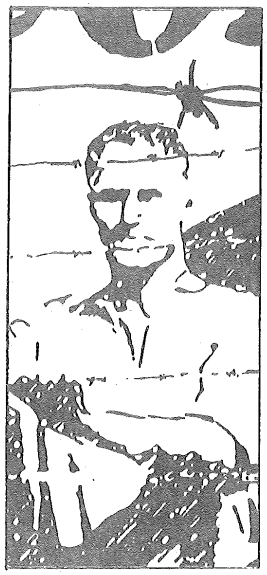

Behind barbed wire — from the cover picture of a recently published book about the conscientious objectors, "Out in the Cold" by David Grant.

'CONSHIES' GET-TOGETHER

—war-time comrades with a difference recall their battles

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By GARRY ARTHUR

Men who were reviled, ostracised, and imprisoned for their refusal to fight in the Second World War — but who were in their own way just as brave as those who took up arms — are holding a reunion in Christchurch on Saturday, October 25, 40 years on.

These were the pacifists and conscientious objectors who appealed against military service, going against the overwhelming tide of public opinion and often ending up in prison doing hard labour, followed by detention in a Military Defaulters' Camp for the remaining years of the war.

In all, about 1200 New Zealand men appealed against conscription for military service during the war, about a third had their appeals allowed. The other 823 spent the war years in detention camps and prisons.

"Humanitarian principles were behind most of us, coupled with a deep religious sense in most cases," says Bruce Gilmore, organiser of the "conshies" reunion. In his own case, he was appalled that his own church, the Catholic, supported the war — while calling women murderers for using contraception.

He was also disgusted that Bob Semple, Minister of the Armed Forces, who was jailed for his anti-war views in 1914-18, drew the first marble of the conscription ballot.

Other Ministers in the wartime Labour Government had also been opposed to war, and the conshies feel that they were treated so severely became of the niggling consciences of those politicians. "People who change their minds are always tougher," says Connie Summers, an anti-war activist who was jailed for her acivities.

During their imprisonment, there was a standing invitation to all conscientious objectors to join up, and one or two did change their minds. Some of the Communist prisoners joined up after Hitler invaded Russia.

"The number of fellows who caved in under the conditions — the monotony, the boredom, the tedium — was minute," says Bruce Gilmore. "You could count them on the fingers of one hand. I only met one, a Christchurch chap. I think he was getting a bit of pressure from outside."

They were all swimming against the current, but there were one or two especially strange cases among them. Bruce Gilmore remembers one chap who was quite willing to go into the Army, but adamantly refused to have his varicose veins fixed first — an operation that would have made him fit for service. Another was willing to fight, but only if he could be in the Air Force. Both were imprisoned.

One Christchurch man, Keith Duffield, was totally non-cooperative about the war. He had a withered leg and would never have passed the medical anyway, but he refused even to get to the point of being medically examined. He spent the whole war in prison, mostly in solitary confinement for his refusal to work, until his release on medical grounds.

Others too, who could have avoided both the war and detention, endured imprisonment for their principles. Two "conchies," for example, whose occupations as coalminers would have excused them, refused either to work in the mines or fight in the war.

"Conchies'" families had a hard time. "We could morally support each other in the camps," says Bruce Gilmore. "But my wife was treated as a complete stranger and had to put up with the odd snide remark. My mother got a bit of it, too."

As in the First World War, some of the more jingoistic citizens accused the "conshies" of cowardice, and handed out symbolic white feathers to those they considered chicken-hearted.

Violent public outrage

"It was a highly charged time," says Bruce McAlpine. "Ninety-nine per cent of the population was against us. People were going overseas and soldiers were dying, so it was quite natural. But because I was locked away I didn't really know what these feelings were."

Connie Summers did, however. A Christian Pacifist, she was active throughout the war at anti-war meetings and demonstrations, and ran into the violence of public outrage when she walked around wearing a sandwich board with anti-war slogans. People punched her.

But she gives her employer credit for being without rancour. He gave her a testimonial which she has always treasured, and offered her a job again when she came out of prison. She did three months hard labour for holding an illegal meeting and obstructing a constable.

One of her brothers had his appeal allowed and the other did a month in Paparua Prison for refusing to join the Home Guard. Connie's husband, John Summers, was a Quaker, but decided to participate in the war, doing non-combatant duties only.

Bruce McAlpine was teaching near Gisborne, in "the heart of Maori Battalion country," when he appealed against his call-up, on wide-ranging grounds. He was given the option of doing alternative military sevice but refused, saying that whether it was cooking or driving an ambulance, it was all part of the war machine.

When his appeal failed, he was sacked from his school, and was sent to Paparua for three months.

While at Balmoral, Bruce McAlpine refused to work as a protest against the indefinite nature of his imprisonment. He got a further three months and then wound up at Hautu detention camp. Still refusing to work, he was put in the "red compound" for punishment.

Between eight and 10 men were crammed into each 6ft by 4ft hut, from which they were allowed out for just 30 minutes' exercise each day. They were given only half-rations.

"We seemed to get on their nerves a bit," he recalls. "We were resentenced to prison for the duration." Still refusing to work, he spent long periods on bread-and-water, then began a hunger strike with five others.

War-time "conshies," 40 years on. From left, Connie Summers, Bruce McAlpine, Jack Rogers, Bruce Gilmore, and Colin Curtis.

After a while they were transferred from Waikune to Mount Eden Prison by dead of night, but they continued their hunger strike, one for 36 days, another for 20, and Bruce McAlpine "somewhere in between." Their strike attracted considerable publicity and procedures were instituted to review sentences.

Finally, Bruce McAlpine appealed again, and was released. He remembers that some "conshies" refused to appeal because they held that their consciences were not up for judgment.

After the war he was unable to get a teaching job in spite of his qualifications. "We all had our civil rights taken away for 10 years," says Bruce Gilmore. "We were not allowed to vote or hold a government or local body job."

Colin Curtis says there is still prejudice in the community against pacifists. "Not many people like you really." The other "conchies" disagree, but Curtis says it depends who you mix with.

"I mix in a working class world — drinkers and gamblers. I'm not a Christian. My friends don't read the 'Listener,' or the letters in 'The Press.' They read the 'Truth'." He says they regard pacifists as worse than cranks, and they support the nuclear deterrent.

But Bruce McAlpine thinks his friend is a pessimist. "Things are changing, particularly in the young generation."

When Colin Curtis appealed against his conscription it was not on religious grounds. "I just did not want to kill anyone." When he was 19 he joined the Peace Pledge Union, pledged to renounce war and to refuse to participate in any wars. He also belonged to the No More War movement.

His appeal succeeded, and he believes he was lucky to have had it heard in Christchurch, where appeals succeeded at twice the rate of the national average.

He was an active anti-war worker throughout the conflict. On the first day of conscription he and his friends took the names from the newspaper and delivered a letter to each conscript, telling them their rights and offering help.

Jack Rogers came from a Methodist family and says he had known since he was small that killing and violence were wrong. He was well read in such anti-war works as "All Quiet on the Western Front" and the poems of Wilfrid Owen, Seigfried Sassoon, and Stoddart Kennedy.

His father was Mayor of Wan-

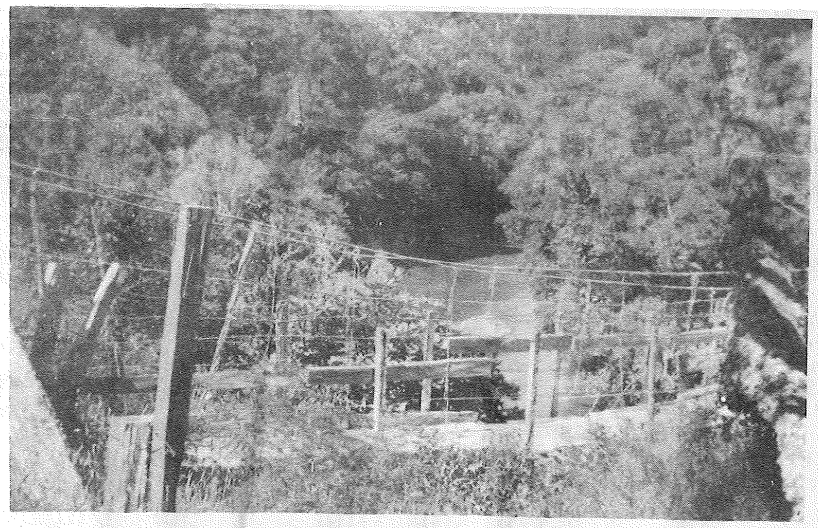
"I had to get out through three lots of barbed wire under the floodlights and then jog for five or six miles through the scrub to a place where we had hidden a golden-syrup tin under the pine needles. It was like 'Hogan's Heroes'," he says.

They used the secret mail drop to help the Rangipo prisoners smuggle out letters to M.P.s, church leaders, and leaders of the peace movement.

Jack Rogers says it was not until years after the war that he learned that his mother had been subjected to abusive telephone calls late at night. "God knows what my father went through," he adds.

Not unexpectedly, the events of the last 40 years have done nothing to turn the Second World War conscientious objectors and pacifists into militarists.

"Everything that's happened



Left: Conscientious objectors put to work cutting firewood at Balmoral State Forest. Right: This swing bridge across the Tongariro River was the route of Jack Rogers' secret night-time mail-run between Hautu Detention Camp and Rangipo Prison.

ganui and a member of the Labour Party's national executive which made the decision on conscription. When Jack Rogers was called up three months before anyone else, his father telephone Walter Nash, the Minister of Finance, who said it must be a political stunt to discredit the Labour Government.

At his appeal he was asked the standard question: "If the Japanese landed on the beach and came to rape your mother, what would you do?" He replied that he would "do his darndest" to prevent violence, but not with gun or bomb.

The rules were changed and he had to re-appeal. "I didn't accept their right to examine my conscience," he says. "I declined that and I declined the medical exam." He was sent to Wanganui Prison, where his father was the visiting magistrate. On release he was taken to Trentham and held in guardhouses until the detention camps were made ready.

Later, at Hautu, Jack Rogers was the runner for a clandestine courier service which the prisoners set up between Hautu and nearby Rangipo Prison.

since — the Korean War, Vietnam, the arms race — confirms me in my view of the whole situtation," says Bruce McAlpine. "Nothing comes out of a war except misery."

Generation missing

Jack Rogers notes that New Zealanders today are searching for the causes of the growing level of violence in the community. "They ignore the fact that during the Second World War we indulged in a huge exercise in uncontrolled violence, legally."

He and Connie Summers both say they wish they had done more to oppose the war. And Connie says it is a pity that so many of the people who went into the detention camps are not still active in the peace movement.

"I look around and see so few of our generation," she adds. "You're one of only three old people there."