

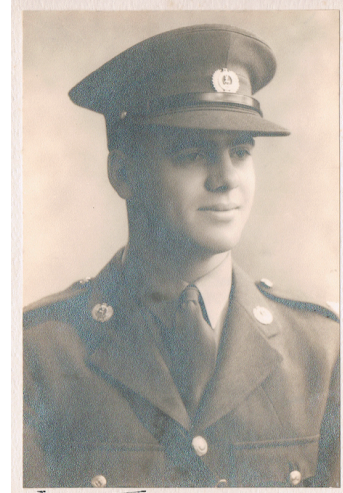
HOW I BECAME A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

Alistair Mackenzie

I know that many young boys think of their fathers as heroes. In my case the idea that my father was a hero was reinforced by messages from a lot of other people.

When I was born in 1947 my dad was still in the army, regularly getting dressed up in his uniform, to do exercises as an officer with the weekend Territorial soldiers. And among the row of medals that he wore on his chest was the Military Medal he won for bravery in battle under fire as Sergeant Bruce Mackenzie in northern Italy.

I knew the story well. Not because he talked about it, because he didn't. He didn't talk about the war, except in terms of friendships made. But other people talked about what he had done. And it was written up in the history of the 26th Battalion that I loved leafing through. And also talked about by my high school teacher and rugby coach, Gordon Slatter, who had been in my dad's army unit and written a couple of books about the war, including references to my dad's exploits.



Bruce Mackenzie

My mother was in the Women's Army Corps and also went to North Africa and Italy in her administrative role with the army. Mum and dad went overseas on the same troop ship, where they got engaged, but not married, for fear that at least one of them might not return.

From an early age I grew up assuming that sometimes ruthless dictators only respect equally determined and armed opposition. And when the Crown and your country are under threat you need to be prepared to fight for freedom, even at the risk of your own life.

The trouble was that when this occasion rose for me I came to completely different conclusions to my mum and dad.

You need to understand that I grew up loving war comics and Biggles stories and reading the biographies of war heroes, such as double-VC winner Charles Upham and Douglas Bader in Reach for the Sky and the Dam Busters.

As a kid I would love to dress up in my dad's huge greatcoat with its three pips on each shoulder and a row of heavy medals pinned on the front and his Captain's cloth hat with its badge in front and a rifle I had fashioned for myself by my side.

I played war games with my friends, imagining that this might be preparation for us to become heroes too.

Then when I got to high school we did the same thing, starting each year with a week of cadet training. A thousand boys all lined up in uniform and learning to march and turn and salute and pull old Lee Enfield rifles apart and clean them and put them back together again.

I even joined the Special Training Unit to become an NCO and spent holidays voluntarily negotiating confidence courses and shooting Bren guns and marching around the parade grounds at Burnham Military Camp. Only now, as I write this, does it hit me what a militaristic world it was. It was a world still shaped and shadowed by the experiences of WWII and also what was felt to be the growing threat of Communism during the Cold War. And this latter threat began to be felt most profoundly in New Zealand with the escalation of war in Vietnam. This is what started me thinking about becoming a conscientious objector.

By the end of my secondary school years New Zealand became caught up with America and Australia and a number of other countries in the war in Vietnam.

Personally I couldn't see anything particularly glorious, or even just, about that war. Of course, from the point of view of America and our government and my father too, it was an attempt to stop Communism moving from Russia and China down through Vietnam and South East Asia to Australia and New Zealand. For them ruthless and atheistic Communism was the greatest threat to Christianity and humankind and would take over the world, according to the Domino Theory which saw Communism knocking over one country at a time all the way down to us.

So it had to be stopped somewhere and Vietnam was the place.

But for all sorts of reasons, from my point of view, it was a crazy war that could never really be won by force of arms, especially American arms that wreaked such destruction on this land and its people. Their hearts and minds needed to be won through care and concern rather than being brutalised into submission.

Especially when it was such a proud people who knew far better than foreigners how to wage war in their own land. And anyway, it seemed to be more of a civil war created by foreign colonization that would never be solved by further foreign interference.

Two particular influences solidified my opposition to this war. The first was that I got involved in playing folk music and the 1960's folk music revival came with some strong political overtones attached, especially when it came to opposition to the Vietnam War. I got involved as part of the protest movement singing those early Bob Dylan songs like Blowin' in the Wind, The Times are A Changing and Masters of War, and Buffy Sainte Marie's Universal Soldier. In those days the Folk Music Club was the largest club at Canterbury University with over 400 members. We did concerts and South Island tours and sung at protest marches.

I helped to organise a week long Fast for Peace. We met and fasted and slept and protested for a week based at the Oxford Terrace Baptist Church in central Christchurch. This involvement and the relationships and debates and discussion that went with it definitely contributed to a real change of perspective for me.

The second thing that happened was I got called up to do Compulsory Military Training. New Zealand was still conscripting people into the army. But only some people. So they balloted birthdays and if your birthday came up in the ballot you were in the army.

And my birthday got balloted.

And the only legal way to resist this was to go through an interrogation process that could get you registered as a conscientious objector.

So that's what I did.

You had to appear before a tribunal to plead your case and make plain the grounds on which you were objecting to do military training and with witnesses to prove your sincerity.

This forced me to do some serious homework.

I had already read Archibald Baxter's autobiography *We Shall Not Cease*, and was also profoundly influenced by the examples of Martin Luther King and Gandhi and Jesus. I wasn't sure if I was ready to call myself a pacifist (more like an angry activist), but I was definitely committed to non-violent resistance in opposition to violent aggression.

I was an angry young man.

My dad and I had some fierce arguments over this issue.

He had such an intense sense of loyalty to Queen and country, while I felt our government had betrayed us.

I couldn't see how war and killing people was the way to promote peace. And especially if, as in this case, it meant foreigners pushing to get involved in someone else's civil war.

For me and my dad this was probably the most difficult period in our lives. It sometimes felt like the toughest war was being fought between us at home. I soon left home to avoid it.

But I must say this in tribute to my dad.

When it came to the crunch and I had to appear before the Tribunal, he came around to my flat and said: "Ali, you know I don't agree with the stand that you are taking, but I do believe in your sincerity and I want to come with you to testify to that".

This was a huge and humble and healing thing for my dad to do. It meant appearing before senior military personnel, some of whom had previously been his colleagues, with my dad as a witness for the opposition as it were.

I don't know how we would have retrieved our relationship apart from me experiencing his willingness to do that.

I still have a copy of my presentation to the military tribunal on that day. I was given the option of becoming a non-combatant in the army (as part of the medical corps), but I refused to do that, on the basis that I felt it was still supporting the war effort.

Fortunately my plea to become registered as a conscientious objector was accepted. As I look back on these events now, I see that being forced to take a firm ethical stand and to justify this publicly was a very formative experience for me. And, although this perspective may be very different from that of the family and context in which I was originally raised, I continue to hold very similar convictions today.

Lab.-M.T. 20

Registration No. 848856

Application No. C.O. 641

NOTICE OF DETERMINATION BY CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION COMMITTEE

IN THE MATTER of ALISTAIR JOHN MACKENZIE, a person who has applied for registration in the Register of Conscientious Objectors.

The determination of the Conscientious Objection Committee on the above-mentioned application is as follows:

Applicant to be unconditionally registered in the register of
Conscientious Objectors.

Dated at CHRISTCHURCH, this 29 day of October 19 70

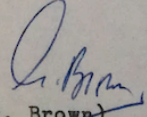
(H.L. Bockett) Chairman,

(G.R.H. Peterson) Member,
(E.W. File)

Conscientious Objection Committee,
P.O. Box 6310, Te Aro, Wellington.

Attention is particularly drawn to the endorsements printed on the back hereof. This notice should be retained by the applicant.

To Mr A.J. Mackenzie
113 Heaton Street,
CHRISTCHURCH 5


(G. Brown)
Secretary
2 November 1970

P.T.O.

Mackenzie's Conscientious Objector registration