

Standing up for peace

by David Grant

In 1941, Connie Jones (later Summers) mounted a soapbox in Wellington's Pigeon Park and spoke about 10 words before she was arrested. She was the only woman to be imprisoned in New Zealand for anti-war activity during World War II.

SHE still stood erect, her mock-fur coat pulled tight to keep out the bitter Wellington wind. 45 years on, Connie Summers had returned to the scene of her testimony.

This Queen's Birthday weekend, Summers was back in Wellington to celebrate the 50th birthday of the Christian Pacifist Society, New Zealand's longest-surviving pacifist group. On the Friday, along with 40 or so other celebrants, she strolled the short distance from Taranaki Street's Wesley Church to Pigeon Park to re-enact the scene. This time on the soapbox her speech of remembrance was dignified and brief and greeted with polite applause from her friends and a handful of onlookers. "The proudest moment for me came when I stood together with the three others on the box (fellow wartime street-speakers Jim Doherty, Jack Hamerton and David Silvester) to acknowledge not only what we stood up for during the war but also that we all felt exactly the same today," she says.

It was all very different in 1941. Connie Summers, then aged 22, was the only woman among a group of militant Christian pacifists who had decided on a deliberate policy of confrontation with the Fraser Government by speaking against the war in Pigeon Park every Friday. Worried and angry that there was visible opposition to this "popular war" and New Zealand's participation in it, the Government had cracked down hard on public dissent. By the end of 1940 anybody who dared to face a crowd and proselytise against the war suffered at the very least a mandatory three-month prison sentence for "obstructing a policeman in the execution of his duty" and probably a further 12-month jail sentence for holding, or attempting to hold, a prohibited meeting.

But Connie Summers had no choice. Her opposition to the war was absolute, the culmination of many years of pacifist activity. She was born in 1919, one of 10 children. Her father was an itinerant labourer based in the little hamlet of Oxford. "He had very strong political convictions and was my most powerful formative influence," Summers recalls.

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In Christchurch at the age of 13 she joined the Socialist Guild of Youth, an offshoot of the Socialist Party. Local Baptist minister and stalwart of the No More War Movement Charles Cole was a teacher at the guild. His influence on her was formidable. She became a committed Christian. Her pacifism sharpened and took a more fundamentalist direction. In 1937 she joined the newly-formed Christian Pacifist Society.

Methodist bible-class leader and Wellington accountant Archie Barrington had co-founded the society with the Rev Ormond Burton. In 1939 Summers moved to Wellington to work and boarded with the Barringtons in Rodrigo Road, Hataitai. As the society became more active so did she; she wrote for and distributed the society's newsletter, the *Bulletin*, she participated in propaganda poster parades through the streets of Wellington and she spoke at meetings.

When war came some Christian pacifists withdrew in the face of mounting state recrimination. She did not. "We had to keep on. I could do no other. What we wanted was a continuous protest against the war. I was happy with that because I knew it would be peaceful. The crowds were not antagonistic."

May 12, 1941, was her turn on the roster. The night was clear and still. As Connie Summers and one of her friends Nara Bohlsen dragged the butterbox through the crowd she felt exhilarated and determined to speak, not at all frightened. Knowledge that her predecessors on the stage were now in jail was not a problem.

The word had spread that the speaker was to be a woman. The mass — a group of upward of a thousand people — buckled and swayed across the lawn and spilled over Dixon and Manners Streets, holding up traffic. As Summers neared the fountain, a young constable pleaded with her not to speak. But the crowd was expectant and restless. One onlooker shouted, "Good on you lady"; another, "Give it to 'em"; a third "Go home!"

She mounted the soapbox. The crowd hushed. When she spoke she was calm and the voice carried far, too far for Chief Inspector C W Lopdell, head of Wellington Police, who was there in person to arrest her. She was on the box for less than a minute before Lopdell reached up, assisted her down, spoke the words of



Connie Summers in the garden of her Christchurch home: the sculpture is the work of her son Llewelyn Summers.

arrest and led her to a waiting black maria.

The following Monday Summers faced J J Stout SM in the Wellington Magistrates' Court. She was only in the dock for a couple of minutes. It was an open-and-shut case. Freedom of speech was not discussed. For Stout the issue was simple and clear-cut. The emergency regulations had been breached — and that was that. Three months' hard labour. She was spared the Supreme Court trial on the charge of attempting to hold a meeting — and the 12-month sentence that followed. When she later had a chance to ask Lopdell why the police had laid only one charge, he was patronising. "I was being kind," he replied.

Connie Summers did her time in the forbidding Point Halswell reformatory, then part of the Wellington women's borstal. "Inside conditions were very poor. We were allowed only one bath a week and to do that we had to carry the water up about 90 steps in buckets. We were shut in at 4.00pm each day until 6.00am the next morning without a pan so you had to train yourself not to go to the toilet. Also the lack of nutritious food caused me many times to wake up in the middle of the night very hungry."

On dry days she weeded the prison garden, very cold in a cotton frock during Wellington winter gales. When it was too

wet to go outside she had to split timber in an adjacent shed. It was very heavy work.

On release she returned to Christchurch, married and quickly became pregnant with the first of her seven children, and worked for the Fellowship of Conscientious Objectors, a support group for the 800 or so military defaulters confined in detention camps and prisons for the duration of the war. She remained politically active and in the late 1940s she helped to establish in Christchurch the Christian Social Justice League who pursued a variety of liberal and humanitarian causes. Much later, despite extensive family commitments and involvement in a bookshop that she and her husband John had established in 1958, she still found time to march in the Vietnam protests.

In 1968 Connie Summers marched against the Vietnam war and refused to allow her sons to participate in cadet training at school. These days her attention is turned more towards the evils of apartheid in South Africa. In 1981 she was arrested five times for blocking city streets in protest at the Springbok rugby tour. When I tentatively suggested to her the phrase "professional protester" she reacted in haste: "Oh, that is a cynical term. When you believe in a cause you must be uncompromising, otherwise there is no point."