

PRISONERS for PEACE

Account by Fred. J. MURFIN of his Experiences as a
CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR during
the 1914-18 war

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Not long after I returned from prison in 1919, I was talking to a friend I had known for a long time, and suggested that something should be started in the town for the young lads.

I suggested various young men about my own age who might be approached as leaders, in a Youth Movement that would have a broadly religious aspect, and be recreational as well as educational.

To every name I suggested, there was one answer:

“He was killed in the War”.

The question I asked then and still ask is: “How is it that men from Christian homes, and often working voluntarily for such ideals as above, are swept into war, the antithesis of all their beliefs and ideals?”

Not **all** were swept up. I know a number who were not, and some suffered far more than I did. But for my own satisfaction – and it may interest others, I am putting on paper the experience I had along with many others. I am now (in 1965), in my seventies, and so I look back nearly fifty years. Thinking about this, I realise how deep were the impressions made, and while names and dates are a bit vague at times, it all comes back distinctly.

PART ONE

When the Conscription Bill was before Parliament, there were already organisations in being – at least in towns and cities – where men got together to consider what course they should take. The main association of this kind that I knew was the “No Conscription Fellowship” – or the N.C.F. as it was affectionately called.

At that time, I was a printer in Louth, a small Lincolnshire town. We were printing a good deal of work for London firms, and very soon, transport difficulties caused lack of work. As I was the only unmarried machine-minder I had far more short time than the other men, so I got a job in Manchester.

At Manchester, I made my first contact with the Society of Friends, as I knew, through the Adult School in Louth, that the Society is, traditionally, opposed to all wars. Later, when I moved to London, I at once associated with Friends in Tottenham, though I did not seek to become a member, as there was some talk of Quakers (Members of the Society of Friends) being given exemption from military service. This suggestion was attributed to Lloyd George.

It is significant that Young Friends got together and decided that, if exemption was given, they would resign from membership of the Society of Friends.

In contrast to this, an amazing thing to me was the militarist attitude of many ministers of religion. Because of their “calling” they were exempt from military service, and because they gave support to the war, many young men joined up. I heard of ministers who boasted of the number of young men whom they had influenced – against their own judgement – to join up. I have known men who, attending their usual church services, heard sermons on the text:

“Greater love hath no man than this, that
a man lay down his life for his friends”

No mention was made of the fact that are called on not to lay down their lives, but to **kill and destroy** men just like themselves. The logical thing for ministers who thought that war was right, was to join up themselves. Some did, as Chaplains, and several of these became Pacifists because of what they saw of the actual war.

The No Conscription Fellowship

In London, as in the provinces, there were branches of the N.C.F. , and central meetings were held. War-minded periodicals incited mobs to attempt to break up the meetings, to throw bricks and so on through the windows and to rough-handle anybody they could lay their hands on. It was found best to organise “ticket-meetings” - admission only by ticket, to avoid intruders, and I remember one such meeting at which I was doorkeeper. A man came without a ticket saying he was one of the Speakers, but Speaker or not, I refused to let him in until someone we both knew vouched for his identity!

The meetings were packed and so much enthusiasm was shown that, later, when we were arrested, we felt we had behind us much moral support.

THE COMING OF CONSCRIPTION 1916

Posters were up all over the country – pictures of Kitchener pointing with his finger, and the caption:

“Kitchener needs you”.

Another:

“Will you march too, or wait until you have to – March 2 ?”

March 2nd was the day when conscription became the law of the land, and single men were deemed to have enlisted. The married men were told that conscription was for single men and “Married versus Single” was very much in evidence in some quarters. Later, of course, married men were also conscripted.

There were various exemptions i.e. for Work of National Importance, Export Work; Munitions; Police; Merchant seamen (I believe); Indispensable to Business.

There was conditional exemption, or postponement for a period; - and - what was usual for those considered to be genuine C.O.s – relegation to the Non-Combatant Corps. There was a clause in the Conscription Bill to the effect that anyone convincing a Tribunal that he was a genuine C.O. Could receive absolute exemption. Very few did this.

For C.O.s, the procedure was to write out one's statement, and in due course, one appeared before a Tribunal. This consisted on a Chairman, two others and a military representative –

the latter to oppose any exemption. There was some difference of opinion among C.O.s regarding these Tribunals. Some refused to register on the ground that no one person could judge another as to whether he had a genuine objection to war. Some men would be prepared to fight for a political belief but not for a national war.

Before the Tribunal

Tribunals were open to the public and sympathisers attended in numbers, often commenting loudly.

I received my first notice on March 8th, 1916, “the case to be heard on March 18th at 4:30 at the Tottenham Town Hall, North London”. When I arrived, a case was being heard *in camera*, and when it was over, they tried to keep the public out. There was an uproar and the tribunal was adjourned. My case was eventually heard on March 23rd. It was a terrible ordeal to anyone sensitive. I found it very trying. How does one feel when trying, in public, to convince people (who are out to trip you up and misconstrue what one says) that because of one's religious convictions – no matter what the consequences – no war service is possible.

Very few men got absolute exemption and where anyone did, I believe the Military representative appealed against it and sometimes succeeded.

I was asked by a member of the Tribunal what my job was and I replied that I was a printer. He further asked if I was printing for export (which would have meant exemption or postponement). I replied that I was objecting on religious grounds.

I was given a non-combatant certificate, but said that I would not take it and would appeal.

Next came the **Appeal Tribunal**, held at Guildhall, Westminster.

The Military representative asked if I would kill wild beasts. I replied “The Germans are not wild beasts, sir!” The Non-Combatant orders were confirmed, but I said I would not take it and would appeal. Anyone who refused to join up was termed a Deserter, and I awaited arrest.

Arrest

Sunday 21st May 1916 was a landmark in my life. After attending Tottenham Friends' Meeting, I went back to my lodging, and after dinner, my landlord asked me to go into the

garden with him for a talk.

“Oh!”, I said “has the policeman been?”

“Yes”

The officer had been told where I was, and, if he would say when he would call again, I would be in. He came again on Monday evening and after a chat, said “You know what I've come for ?” “Yes” “Will you meet me at the Police Station tomorrow or would you like a few days to arrange matters?” I said that if it was alright with him, I would like a few days and we agreed that I should report at Tottenham Police Station on Thursday morning, May 25th. I went to work as usual on Tuesday and Wednesday. I had to decide whether I should continue my work or go to Louth, Lincolnshire to say “Goodbye” to my parents. This experience seemed unreal to me, so I carried on as usual, which seemed the right thing to do at the time.

On the Sunday evening after the policeman had called, I went along as usual to the Friends' evening meeting and told my friends there, and said “Goodbye” to them. Some promised to be along at the police court and to write letters, which they did. I wrote to tell my parents what was happening, and on Thursday morning, May 25th, I reported to the Tottenham police. I was put in a cell but the door was not locked.

In the Cells

Soon after six on the same evening, more Conscientious Objectors were brought in from Edmonton. One I already knew - Stuart Beavis. Stuart and I, together with Alfred Taylor, were (except for a short time in a detention camp in France, referred to later) together throughout the three years of prison. While we were in the cells, a Belgian was brought in who was in trouble with the police; also a deserter - an indignant Irishman who had a lot to say for himself.

Particulars were taken at the Police Station and then we were taken to the Magistrates' Court. Several of my friends were there.

At this court

We were charged individually as Deserters from the Army. I declared my faith, was found guilty and fined 40/0d or 14 days. No one paid any fine, and the fourteen days meant nothing. We were then taken under escort to Mill Hill Recruiting Station.

The Guardroom at Mill Hill

Particulars were again taken - by a junior officer; we were then sent (or taken) for Medical Examination and told to strip. We were told that if we didn't, our clothes would be torn off. We found that we would be putting our own clothes on again, so we did strip. But I was as unhelpful as I knew how to be - kept my feet on the ground when weighed; told the Eye Doctor that I couldn't help him and the Heart Doctor the same thing; telling each that I was a Conscientious Objector and wouldn't be a soldier. We were sorry for one man who looked very ill. He failed the Medical Examination and was sent home, to Edmonton, I believe.

Soon after this we were taken to the Stores for uniform. Kit-bags were put around our necks. I refused to give the size of anything and the men had to guess. All the things were piled into the bag - such as one as I associated with sailors. As I wouldn't carry the thing, the bag was hung around my neck; then one man on either side and one behind, ran me to another department, pressing on the bag and nearly strangling me. Had I been less nervous I would have refused to use my legs. When I arrived, gasping for breath, the officer there was very concerned. "Poor fellow, sit down and rest". My throat (Adam's Apple) still hurts if I press it slightly, nearly forty five years after. Stuart Beavis was treated in the same way.

Next came the putting on of the uniform. The officer said: "Now, my lads, we want you to put khaki on". We all refused, I think, and we each had a soldier to undress and dress us. My attendant suggested that as my feet smelled so badly, I'd better see to my own socks! I did, and we both enjoyed the joke. He was a nice fellow - we found, as a rule, that if the officer was decent, the men were.

We were taken back to the Guardroom and saw one another in uniform for the first time. One man came in later very flustered. He had resisted having the uniform on and his words were: "They have got the uniform on, but they haven't got the man". We tried to help him to accept the situation and pointed out that we were still prisoners. For tea we had bread and butter and a bucket of tea which we drank out of a basin. (I tell my friends that it was like a Youth Hostel).

I remember that whilst we were at Mill Hill, one young man had a letter from his father,

who wrote that his mother - had become ill through thinking of her son as a coward because he wouldn't go to be soldier. I didn't know his name or what happened to him.

The next morning, we had breakfast; not more than an hour later, dinner was brought in and we were told to be quick as we were to march to the station.

We lined up and were put behind a lot of Non-Combatant men - we were under escort. Occasionally an officer would tell us to keep in step, but we took no notice - though curiously enough we soon seemed to be unconsciously in step. We kept, deliberately, getting out of it!

We reached Mill Hill Station long before the train was due. We were going to Seaford and had to change at Lewes. Whilst on the platform there, we saw, some distance away, Philip Snowden and his wife - he probably knew about us.

Our escorts asked if we would sign for our day's pay, then they could buy food for us. Unless we did sign, they said, neither we nor they could have food, but we wouldn't sign anything.

At Seaford Camp

We reached Seaford Camp late in the afternoon.

An officer chatted with us and said they had no trouble with Conscientious Objectors. The Non-Combatant men were very happy there, he said, and did odd jobs gardening and attending to paths. If we fell in with the rest, "all our crimes would be wiped out". We would start with a clean sheet.

We repeated:

“WE SHALL REFUSE TO OBEY ALL MILITARY ORDERS ON
CONSCIENTIOUS GROUNDS”.

We were taken off to the Guardroom and found it full of C.O.s. We were told that there were more C.O.s in another Guardroom. One of the non-combatant men told that he had meant to stand out but he was alone and gave in. He wished he could join us. But if he refused to obey orders, he would not have kept with us.

When we had settled in the guard-room, we talked among ourselves and felt that we had stood our ground; we discussed in this way whenever possible.

Next day brought the first batch of letters. They arrived in the middle of a lively discussion - which fell flat! Imagine the letter you would write, or, would like to receive, under such circumstances.

When we were at this camp we saw men having bayonet practice, and throwing mock bombs. I heard of one man who couldn't do this bayonet practice - he was vomiting so badly. They had to give him some other military duty. Everybody should see this disgusting practice.

COURT MARTIAL AND EMBARCATION FOR FRANCE

May 28th, 1916, when evidence was taken for the Court Martial, was a very hot day. We stood outdoors for hours awaiting our turn. The lieutenant who took my particulars had only one arm. He was very abusive and told me that he had lost his arm defending me. I replied: "You lost your arm whilst you were trying to destroy someone else". It made him mad. He kept calling me Private Murfin. I said I wasn't a Private. He said was. I said I wasn't. We repeated this a few times, then I said: "You may think I am but I am not a private. I'm a prisoner". The only particular I gave him was my name, "Fred J. Murfin". He filled the paper as best he could - it was not my concern.

On the Tuesday morning, May 29th, there was much excitement. An officer came to tell us that we were being sent to France. Would we go willingly? - if not we would be handcuffed and under escort. We said we would not go unless under escort.

This meant that although we had been committed for court martial, it was being washed out. We were lined up outside the guard-room. A kit-bag was fixed on each of us and things put in it, with comments: "A razor - they'll cut their throats before they're through", "A paybook - they'll want their pay alright" and so on. I used my paybook as a diary. Some filled them with texts and others threw them away when their hands were free. Any left were taken away from us.

Departure from Seaford

Our hands were handcuffed behind our backs and we were told: "You have an escort - you

are prisoners” “Yes, but we are not soldiers”.

An officer came up to me and, speaking friendly enough, said: “You know, lad, it's a Christian duty to fight for your country in war time” - quoting the Old Testament. I replied, quoting the New Testament, and he laughed, shook hands with me and wished me luck. We had been ordered to put on puttees and refused, so a soldier put them on, and we didn't resist.

Curiously enough, a number of Conscientious Objectors who had been in the guard-room fourteen days before we arrived, were still left there. It seemed as though we were chosen to go to France. Well, each of us had an escort and I said to mine: “Give me a push or I'll not walk”. “All right, mate” he answered and we set off. We were behind the Non-Combatant men, who seemed very down-hearted.

As we started, one of the escorts kept tripping one of the younger lads. “If you don't stop that”, I called out “we will refuse to walk”. He stopped.

We hadn't gone far when we stopped, for some unknown reason. I learned afterwards that Stuart Beavis had decided not to walk (why hadn't we all thought of that?). In the struggle, Stuart's glasses were broken and they had to get a conveyance and lift him into it.

Before we got out of the camp, a young lad shouted out “It's all right, boys. I've sent a telegram to N.C.F. Headquarters telling them you are being sent to France”. It was one of the C.O.s who had got out of the guard-room. We learned later that questions were being asked about us in the House of Commons before we reached France.

Seaford is a terminus and the train was in the station, so we got in with our escorts, who took our kit-bags off so that we could sit down. The officer in charge came to ask if we would have our handcuffs off. “No !” we said. Before the train started he came again - the same reply “No !” At the first stop he came and asked if we would have them off as a favour to him? I said “Yes, if they are put on again before we leave the train”. He said they would have to be. I suppose, he felt uncomfortable about us.

Southampton and Le Havre

We eventually arrived at Southampton Quay, the handcuffs were put on and we stood together on the platform, left till last. I suggested that we ask to see the officer in command before we went on board and make our protest. We all agreed.

So when an officer came for us, we asked to see the Commanding Officer. When he arrived we said;

“We are religious conscientious objectors to all warfare and we shall refuse to obey all military orders and shall only move under escort.

We are prisoners, not soldiers”.

We asked him to report our protest, and he said that he would do so. We thanked him and said that we would move, so long as we had an escort. As we went on board the St. Tudno, we were hooted and shouts of “put them among the Australians or Canadians” were heard. I believe the hooters were Non-Combatant men who had accepted that service, Well, we were put among these colonials and, having got all our kit off, had started to talk to them when we were doved down to the ship's hold. There we found sixteen C.O.s from Richmond, Yorkshire who had arrived before us. We talked until we fell asleep, in all sorts of positions - and awoke to find that we had arrived at Le Havre.

ARRIVAL IN FRANCE

Before leaving the ship at Le Havre, we got together in our separate groups to decide on our next move and I suggested that we refuse to leave the ship until we had, again, made our protest and demanded an escort. Both groups decided to do this.

We were, of course, always in uniform and puttees were considered essential - I deliberately left my puttees on the ship. One man told me later that, until he knew my name, he thought of me as “the man who had lost his puttees”. I hadn't lost them - I knew where they were left. In the meantime, the rest of the men had assembled on land and were waiting for us. We walked to a camp at Le Havre and stayed there till towards evening.

At this camp I saw a man who had been given absolute exemption at the first Tribunal (we were members of the same N.C.F. Branch). The military representative had appealed; the

second Tribunal had taken the exemption away and the man had accepted non-combatant service.

To Rouen and Bologne

Evening came and we walked to Le Havre Goods Station and entrained, travelling through the night to Rouen. There, we sat about the goods yard and then entrained again, travelling at night to Bologne. This train was a tremendous length and often we went for some distance at walking pace. Some of us got out and picked wild flowers then ran and caught the train up. We could see a nice house in the distance with roses blooming and I thought of my own roses at home. Some of the soldiers went into an orchard and pulled small uneatable apples - must have been uneatable, for it was May-June.

We travelled in what I know as a "box wagon", and we had the doors open. We sat on the floor (the only place) and on one occasion I helped a soldier, one of our escorts, to get into the wagon. He passed his gun up to me and without thinking (it all seemed so unreal) I took the gun and then helped him up. But I wiped my hands afterwards !

When we arrived at Bologne we were taken to a large hut. From time to time an officer would come up and ask names. "Ah, yes if you will sign here, all your crimes will be wiped out". It was quite a ritual, but we repeated that we would not sign anything.

Whilst we were in this camp our party of seven or eight were allowed out on parole - in the camp itself, though the other men from Richmond, Yorkshire were allowed out on parole in the town. Three of our party were walking about in the camp the day after we arrived when some soldiers asked who we were and where from. We said we were Conscientious Objectors and prisoners. They said a lot of C.O.s had been shot the week before at this camp. We knew there had been about sixteen C.O.s ahead of us and asked these men if they knew the names. "The names were posted there", they said, pointing to a hut. We went to see but found no names posted there, and we ran after the soldiers to tell them so. "Oh, well", they said, "the names must have been taken down - they were there earlier today". Some time afterwards we found that this was not true. None had been shot.

Why they lied to us in this way I have no idea; perhaps they had been told to do so. Anyhow it made no difference to our determination to refuse to obey military orders.

The need for foundations

We had little discussions among ourselves as to what we should do and did what we could to encourage any who seemed to be wavering or a bit frightened. One man, whom we knew as “Billy”, didn't take part in any discussions, and while we were talking, would dress himself up in coats turned inside out, or anything he could get hold of; a proper Bohemian.

When we had been at Bologne for a few days, we were told that in the morning (it was now Sunday, June 5th) we would be ordered out to go to work at the docks, unloading goods. There would be a bugle call; if we didn't go, we would be court-martialled and it would mean the death penalty, as we were in the war zone. (We could hear gun-fire occasionally).

In the morning the bugle call was sounded. We could hear someone moving and were concerned as to who and how many had gone out. It was Billy.

Later when we were in the guard-room and Billy brought our rations, he said:

“You men have your religions. I have nothing.”

Later that day, we were joined in the guardroom by the men we had met on the “St. Tudno” on the journey from Southampton to Le Havre.

When these men were ordered out to go and work in the docks and refused, soldiers started to throw the smallest men out. So they all decided to go down to the docks and refuse there. There was one man, John Routledge, who had trouble with his ears and was sent to the hospital. He caught up later, having stood firm alone. “Well done, Johnny”.

There were a number of incidents at Bologne and I will describe the guard-room. From the road (inside the camp, of course) you entered the reception part of it, and here the guards had their sleeping accommodation. From this, a door opened into the room where the prisoners slept - and stayed most of the time - and there was a yard with conveniences and wash basins. We were allowed during the daytime to go into the yard - fortunately, for it was early summer and we were overful.

Occasionally the guard would ask one of us to sweep the path outside, and we were pleased

to do this. But one day, while waiting for the toilet, I was asked to sweep up. Before the brush was at liberty, the toilet was, so in I went. When I came out, the guard stormed at me. "Didn't I tell you to sweep outside?" "Was it a command or a request?", I enquired - "If it was a command I wouldn't touch the brush!". He ordered me into the guard-room, where I sat on the floor and took no further notice of him. Stuart Beavis and John Brocklesby came in, stood by me and said: "If there is any of this, Fred, we won't touch the brush". The guard walked away.

From June 6th to 13th, there was no military move. The guard-room became more overcrowded and several of our number were moved to other barracks. We didn't see them again until the Court Martial was held. Prisoners were allowed two blankets but we had our greatcoats and kept our uniform on - we had no other clothing.

Several times, after we had lain down for the night and the light was put out, there would be a commotion in the outer room. The light would be put on and a drunken soldier pushed in, sometimes two. Usually when the door was shut the man would try to open it. One man was an acrobat, and though he was tipsy he did the splits for us and said he would show us a lot of tricks when he was sober. However, when he was sober he became very quiet and would do no acrobatic tricks.

"Simply Trusting"

We often sang together and one song especially that I recall was

"Simply trusting every day".

The words indeed fitted our experience and the tune went well as we sang it. The man just referred to, while he was drunk, asked us to sing it time and again. One man came in - a huge fellow - and wanted to know who we all were, for the room was packed. When he found out that we wouldn't take part in war he went up to John Brocklesby, the biggest man among us, and wanted to fight him. John just held his hand out to shake and smiled at him, and the chap collapsed and became friendly. So we sang "Simply trusting" to him and he liked it.

Another visitor was for John Brocklesby alone. His brother, who was an Army Officer, came to see John (sometimes called Bert), gave Bert some money which somehow was turned into sweets, the first for a long time, and the last we had for three years.

The attitude to C.O.s “back home”

In England, meanwhile, the rumour got about that we and the first sixteen C.O.s had been shot. While the general national feeling against Conscientious Objectors was bitter, there was some concern about people known to have been pacifists for a long time. The minister of the Chapel attended by my parents had “no patience” with Pacifism. He said that he was sorry for me. Some friends of my parents in Louth had heard the rumour that we had been shot, and seeing my mother coming up the road, crossed over because they couldn't bear to meet her. My mother hadn't heard the rumour and didn't know until later why they avoided her. We had had no correspondence, either way, for several weeks.

There was much concern among Friends (Quakers) of course. Many Members and Attenders were involved. The Non-Conformists who stood for liberty of conscience - though many supported the war - were also concerned. To satisfy these, permission was given for someone to go over to prove that the “shooting rumour” was unfounded. The Rev. F. B. Meyer - a prominent Non-conformist - went over to France with his secretary, Hubert Peet. Mr. Meyer spoke to us all together and afterwards to each individually; and we were told that Hubert Peet (who later became a C.O. prisoner himself and later still, Editor of *The Friend*) was allowed to speak to Cornelius Barritt. They were acquainted.

Another visitor was J. Rowntree Gillett, a Quaker. We were in “the yard”; looked up and saw him looking through the window and said: “Why, there's Rowntree Gillett!” and he said “Who is it knows me?” - I didn't know him well, but shortly before I was arrested he had spoken at the Tottenham Men's Adult School to which I belonged. We felt very encouraged by his visit and sang “Simply trusting”, to his delight. To our own delight, Rowntree Gillett, who had come as a chaplain, was wearing a parson's dog-collar! It was lovely. Three and a half years later, when we were free, we regarded him as “Our Chaplain” - some honour.

Over to the Guard-room again

One night, two Irish drunks came in very late. We had long been abed (otherwise; lying on the floor). We heard noisy goings on - boots thrown off, a bit dazed, and later the second. Very soon one of them was walking about the crowded room singing “Tipperary”. The second said “Phwat is it, Mike - Tipperary?” Then one picked up the latrine bucket and

walked round stumbling over legs and we would soon have been in a mess. So I got up and firmly took it from him.

When we had been in the guard-room for a few days, some of us became lousy. As early as possible in the morning we would go into the yard and start hunting - shirts off. Body lice are called "Chats" and we went Chatting. I was very fortunate and only caught three at the most at any one time, some caught many more. We asked to see the Officer-in-Command and told him of our condition, and from then on we not only had a bath but went out on exercise. The bath had its humorous side. We sat one in each end of a bath flavoured with strong disinfectant, while our clothes were fumigated. After the bath, a pretty picture we looked in dressing jackets and any old thing till our clothes were ready. But the bath was welcome, and a shower that we had once. The exercise, too, was very welcome. We were taken on to the hills and we could see the Cliffs of Dover. We ran and jumped, played Leap Frog; and - well, imagine a lot of healthy energetic men having been prisoners for some time. We made the best of it.

COURT MARTIAL and SENTENCE OF DEATH

In the meantime we were formally committed for Court Martial and we gave our reply that we would not obey orders on conscientious grounds. We were given pen and paper to write out our statement, and in due course we had our Field General Court Martial. We were told that it would mean the supreme penalty - the Death Penalty.

The day arrived; we were all put in an army hut, and waited for hours. The only exercise we could think of was Leap Frog (or what I know as "sugar"). Very soon we found the asbestos lining smashed up by our rough play, so we used the bits as marbles for a game. If this sounds silly or frivolous, think of a lot of healthy young men shut within four walls for a long time, waiting for we knew not what. Looking back it seems a natural reaction.

About the Field General Court Martial I remember one thing - something that was impressed on the minds of all of us. This was the evidence given by a sergeant as our reply to the charge, when he gave it to us in the charge-room. This was: He said "He couldn't take part in any military duties on conscientious grounds, or words to that effect." - The phrase "words to that effect" was on our lips on many occasions after this.

After our Court Martial, when the rest of the men were asleep, Stuart and I lay awake

discussing what we thought might happen to us. At the time, we thought that the first sixteen C.O.s had been shot; it seemed to us probable that one or two of us might be shot and the rest given another trial.

It was two or three days after this that we learned the truth behind the rumour that the first sixteen had been shot. The officer who told us said that the death sentence had been read out, and that the men turned white (they were white already). There was a pause, then the sentence was "Committed to ten years' penal servitude". I have mentioned before that we had been told they had been shot. This was the first true news we had heard, and it meant also that this was probably the sentence that we ourselves would receive.

The rumour concerning the shooting of the sixteen C.O.s was still abroad in England, and it was after this that F.B. Meyer and Rowntree Gillett went over to find out the truth.

Result of the Court Martial

In due course we were called out to receive our sentence. There was quite a parade of soldiers and the "high ups" were in state. The men who had been in another camp had joined us, and as we all knew by now of the sentence that the earlier men had received, we expected, and received, the same.

When the sentence was read out one man smiled (one of the youngest of us), and was reprimanded by the Big Noise. We never knew the latter's name. When we got back to the guard-room, the soldier prisoners, most of whom were already friendly with us, wanted to know the verdict. One man said he had been in prison and advised us to learn the Morse Code so that we could speak to one another if we were in adjoining cells. Two taps for a dot and one for a dash. He told us the Code; soon we knew it, and would practice speaking to one another in Morse Code. It was an interest and worth-while later on - besides it was fun.

Detention Barracks at Rouen

Several days after we were sentenced, we were moved to Detention Barracks.

I remember that one soldier stared at Stuart, who stared back, and as a result Stuart was taken away but we didn't know why. However, he soon came back and we all went off to Bologne Station, travelled in the night to Rouen and then to camp where we were put in cells. There were so many of us - four in some cells - so that when we lay down we were

touching each other. The cell floors were newly cemented and we had no board to lie on, just one great-coat and of course we were wearing uniform. When we got up in the morning the floor was wet.

We complained, after which boards were given us and one man was taken out. Now the conditions of these cells were bad. We were let out only once a day for a short while. There was no lavatory accommodation and a sort of wide bucket served the purpose. Our nerves were affected; one of us was costive and another loose - the loose friend would say: "Sorry chaps, I'll have to do it again".

The second day, when the cell was foul, we had a visit from a C. of E. chaplain and the cell smelt awful. The following dialogue is word for word -

Parson holding his nose:-

"What is your name?" "John Brocklesby"

"What is your religion?" "I'm a Methodist"

"Oh, I'm sorry I can't help you- I'm Church of England"

"What is your name?" "Norman Gaudie"

"What is your religion?" "I'm a Congregationalist"

"Oh, I'm sorry I can't help you - I'm Church of England"

"What is your name?" "Fred Murfin"

"What is your religion?" "I'm a Quaker"

"Oh, I'm sorry I can't help you - I'm Church of England"

Then

"What is your name?" "John Routledge"

"What is your religion?" "I'm Church of England"

"You're Church of England, are you Church of England. If you'll give me the name and address of your Vicar, I'll write and ask him to pray for you".

"I can pray for myself, thankyou", said Johnnie.

We also had a visit from a lay-reader, who chatted with us as a friend and never mentioned religion.

TO ENGLAND and WINCHESTER PRISON

We spent three days in the cells at Rouen, and on the fourth day were taken to the Quay, where soon a ship came alongside the "St. Tudno" - the ship we had sailed in from

Southampton to Le Havre. While we waited for the men to disembark, we were aware of a crowd of people on the quay, watching. There was some commotion which I noticed but did not understand until later - it was felt that this should be known, and a leaflet was issued by the Society of Friends telling the story.

A French officer called out to the crowd:

“These men are cowards. They won't fight for their King and Country. Push them in the river!”

He spoke in French and John Brocklesby and Stuart Beavis, knowing French, understood what he said. Speaking to a little boy in French, Bert said:-

“We are trying to follow the good Lord Jesus”.

This boy ran among the people repeating this and there was no more trouble.

When the ship was empty we were told to go on board and stay on deck, which pleased us. We sailed down the Seine and went below when it became dark, arriving at Southampton in the morning, July 6th. As we came off the ship and walked to the quay there was a crowd of people booing - they all seemed to be in uniform and must have been told who we were.

We were taken by train to Winchester and from train to prison - just over six weeks after our arrest. We were relieved to find that we were to be in a civil prison as this meant that we would be able to do some work. The first sixteen men were already there, and this was the first time we had seen them.

And so, on July 7th, 1916, we arrived at Winchester Prison to carry out our sentence - the Death Penalty, commuted to Ten Years Penal Servitude.

End of Part One of PRISONERS for PEACE

PRISONERS for PEACE

Account by Fred. J. MURFIN of his Experiences
as a CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR during the 1914-18 war

PART TWO

Not many who read this little account of experience as a Convict will have spent a period of time as a prisoner. I think therefore it will be wise to explain some of the prison routine so that the reader may imagine being "inside" for a while. It all seemed unreal at first, but one settled down and made the best of it.

There were tasks of some sort in all prisons. In Maidstone there were working parties, numbered more or less in this order: - Cookhouse; Laundry; Builders; Tinshop; Printers; Tailoring; Engineers; Gardeners; numbered 1 to 8.

When the Governor, Chief Warder, or Principal Warder came along, the Officer-in-charge would salute, and say:-

"No. 6 Party, 40 men. All correct, sir".

There was a story of one Officer reporting:-

"No. 6 Party, one men, one barrow. All correct, sir".

PRISON FOOD

With slight alteration, the food was the same every week.

All Breakfasts: - 1 pint unsweetened porridge;

8 ozs. brown bread;

3/4 oz. margarine.

(Have you ever tried to spread 1/4 oz. margarine on 8 ozs. bread?)

Suppers were always the same, and were served shortly after returning to the cells, after leaving the workshops about 4.30 p.m. -

1 pint Ship's Cocoa, slightly sweetened;

8 ozs. bread;

1/4 oz. margarine -

this would be about 5 p.m. and the door was not opened again until morning.

Dinners

Sunday: corned beef.

Monday: beans and fat bacon.

Tuesday: braised beef.

Wednesday: beef stew.

Thursday: braised mutton.

Friday: mutton stew.

Saturday: suet pudding (no sweetening).

Potatoes each meal, cooked in their jackets - usually dirty. Occasionally we had cabbage. One year - in the summer - there was a generous supply of caterpillars. Once or twice a year a coarse Cos lettuce, just as it was pulled up, and occasionally spring onions - also dirty - were thrown into the cell with soil on. When there was a bread shortage, we had very salt fish in brine for dinner, the result being so many prisoners were ill that that didn't last long - most men only ate one lot. I only ate a very little and the stuff was put out uneaten.

Several of us went on Vegetarian Diet. At first we had some rice pudding with some milk and a little sweetening, but very soon it was just boiled rice - no flavouring. Anyone thinking he had short weight of margarine could ask for it to be weighed. According to "Prison Rules", if this happened often without justification, the prisoner was liable to be punished.

Prisoners are weighed on arrival and a record is kept and we were weighed periodically. If there was a loss of weight, extra food was given. The greater number lost weight and he was given more food, he did not ask for. I always had sufficient, except when I was on punishment - mentioned later.

Winston Churchill was very popular in prison. When he was Home Secretary he ordered that prisoners should receive a portion of Christmas Pudding on Christmas Day. It was a larger mid-day meal that day, but we felt days before and after that we had a little less than usual, or was it our imagination? Anyway I heard it said several times.

The food tins were often dirty.

The Prison Chaplain etc.

A card hung on the wall informed the prisoners: - "The Chaplain is the prisoners' friend,

can be seen on application". The Governor could be seen on application. If one were unwell, he could see the doctor. Periodically there was a visiting Magistrate and one could see him on application.

Dossier

A Dossier was kept of each prisoner and followed him to his release. A lot of questions and answers recorded, among them "What is your normal occupation and what is your religion?"

Quaker "Chaplain" and Meetings

In those days there were very many Quakers in prison and usually a Quaker Visitor - courtesy title Quaker Chaplain. Soon after I arrived at Winchester I was called out to meet Joseph Gundry Alexander (This Friend had long been concerned about the abolition of the enforced Opium Trade with China). He thought it was his last visit as the Friend he had been visiting was being released. On one of his subsequent visits he brought me a lovely flower from his wife; of course I had to destroy it, but it was a lovely thought. Later he was rejoicing because the opium conflict was settled. He felt his life's work was over.

Later when we moved to Maidstone, we had a fortnightly Meeting for Worship as there were several Friends there by the time we had arrived. Occasionally one gave Ministry. At these Meetings a warder was present and, I believe, stood all the time. Other Quaker Chaplains were: Alfred Horsnall, Alfred Brown and Harold Morland. They all gave splendid service. The official prison chaplains were, of course, Church of England. The local Methodist minister conducted services for the Methodists, and one of the C.O.s played the organ. The Roman Catholics too had their own religious services.

The Quaker Meetings were held over on the local side in Maidstone and occasionally, we caught sight of the "tread-mill" - no longer in use. We also passed on some fine days an elderly man sitting on a chair on a lawn reputed to be a millionaire - probably a prison rumour. There were lots of rumours about and "news" would be greeted with "Is it true?" or "A prison rumour?"

This elderly man was, of course, a prisoner.

Prisons, Local or Convict

Winchester was a local prison. These local prisons were for sentences of less than three years. Prisoners with longer sentences served so long in a local prison (3 months, I think) and then moved on to a Convict Prison. These prisons were of two kinds. Star Convicts were those with a sentence of three years or more who had not been in prison before. The conditions were reputed to be less severe than for those who had been in prison before and were called Recidivists. Portland and Dartmoor were Recidivists - there may have been others.

One man arrived at Maidstone from Portland. It was discovered he had not been in prison before. I don't know if his normal occupation was cobbling, but he was soon given the cobbler's job at Maidstone. I have occasion to remember "George" for on his release he opened a cobbler's shop in the East End of London.

I went along on Saturdays to give him a hand. Soon after this he said he would give me a pair of shoes in payment. I said I didn't want payment but he insisted. It wasn't long before he said he was "short" and would I lend him £4. I did. Next time I went he had disappeared.

There is a prison, at Parkhurst, I.o.W., where ailing prisoners are sent. If a prisoner became handicapped or mentally disturbed he was sent to Parkhurst, One such case happened while we were at Maidstone - particulars appear later in the text.

The Marks System

Privileges were based on a Marks system, i.e. Letters, Visits of friends, Stages and Release etc. Diligent prisoners received 8 marks a day. Six marks constituted a day, so three days of 8 marks counted as four days. Three years equalled a four years' sentence, the one year after release being Ticket of Leave. All this depended on no loss of marks, some out-of-ordinary remission. There might of course be for breaking of rules, a prisoner might have so many days in a Punishment Cell, i.e. Solitary Confinement on bread and water (8 ozs. only a day) no mattress and a loss of 50 or more marks (larger loss of marks on subsequent transgressions). This was on the ruling of the Governor or his substitute.

It was an offence to speak to another prisoner and if he were reported, the offence was "for forcing conversation on another" or, not for speaking out of the window but for "shouting" etc. Sounds more criminal.

My own experience of punishments are referred to in the text. In the earlier stages of a sentence, more marks must be earned to enable a prisoner to write a letter and receive an answer and also to receive a visit. So a loss of marks delayed these privileges. (They will be saying at home: "Why don't we hear from him? Is he ill?" etc.) A second letter may be had in lieu of a visit.

A Visit

I had one visit. It was a tremendous strain on my parents and myself. I had no more visits. There was a wire partition in front of both parties and a space between where a Warder listened to all that was said.

When a prisoner had been 'inside' several years, he was able to write and receive a letter every fortnight if he had no visits. There was one elderly man in Maidstone who had been there a great number of years and had no contacts outside. He knew he might be released soon but wanted to stay in prison.

Prison Clothing

This belongs to the issuing prison, so in moving to another prison a complete change is made and the previous clothing is sent back. Local male prisoners wore long trousers. Convicts wore knee breeches and long stockings. For the first three years, a convict wore a khaki suit, then a blue suit for two years, then a grey suit for the remainder of the time - if his sentence was more than five years. There was only one pocket in the whole suit for his pocket handkerchief. The grey dress brought special privileges, a penny a day which could be spent at the end of the month on such as:- boiled sweets, jam, cloves, chillies, mustard etc., all strong tasting things. All prison food lacked taste.

After three years in prison, a much valued privilege was that of Talking Exercise on Sunday afternoons on the exercise grounds. Through my cell window I could watch the men talking, and, towards the end of the time, arranging who to talk to next week.

Some warders were really decent men and while they would call out "stop that talking", they seldom, if ever, reported men for trivial offences. Some others acted as if vindictive. There were several ex-service men, and one usually looked half asleep. The rules were

such that a warder could take it out of a man. Convicts had a shave weekly and a haircut fortnightly - both by clippers. (There were separate Clippers for those with Venereal Disease).

Orderlies

All able-bodied men took it in turns to be orderlies - to carry round food. I liked it very much, it gave me a chance to say "hallo" - to all who were receptive.

On Saturday evenings, a barrel organ played the old songs just the other side of the prison wall. There was no work on Saturday afternoons. It was a time when fresh under-clothing was distributed and dirty clothes put out. Frequently the clean (?) stockings were dirty. I found out all stockings were washed together and seldom rinsed. Several times after the extra exercise on Sunday my feet would be as black as the stockings. Old hands who got a new pair of stockings would wash them in their cell and send the others back. I never had enough soap to do that.

Saturday afternoon was Choir Practice time, and one of the things we all liked - we talked between the singing.

We got up later on Sunday mornings than on other days, Chapel twice a day and exercise twice, weather permitting, outside; but inside, if it rained, and there were fewer warders on duty than on weekdays.

There have been prison reformers, the earliest perhaps being Elizabeth Fry. To read her life and learn how she became involved in procuring better conditions for women prisoners is to wonder how such offenders could be treated with such lack of consideration. She worked wonders, not only in England, but farther afield. There are in existence, societies who aim at a more humane system than that in being now.

The Suffragettes, when they were sent to prison, were not intimidated by officials. The only ventilation in a cell was obtained through a grating in the bottom of the window. Dust and rain in the cavity accumulated and the air was musty when it came into the cell.

The Suffragettes smashed windows. They were told they musn't do that. They said they

would smash windows until sliding panes were put in to get the air fresh. This was done and we C.O.s benefitted by their determination.

Stephen Hobhouse and Fenner Brockway were both C.O. prisoners during the 1914-1918 War and sent round questionnaires to C.O.s. From these, together with their own experiences, they wrote a Standard Work on Prison Conditions.

We arrived at Winchester Prison on July 7th 1916. Up to this time we were in military uniform for six weeks we had worn nothing else and had only those clothes off twice - for a bath. Winchester was our first experience of a civilian prison. And we were in England. We were all put into a reception room, and after a bath, into prison clothes. There was the usual medical examination and particulars were taken.

Then away to a cell to become a number. I was C3/31, No. 31 on the third landing of C Hall. A disk was worn on the coat front with the cell number on. A change of cell meant a change of disc. This was our means of identity.

Up to the War, Chapel was held every day, but being war-time it was one of the economies to cut it to Saturday with a sort of hymn rehearsal for Sunday with a few collects and prayers. Church proper was on Sundays and there was a short mid-week service.

Prison Chaplains

There is a Church of England Chaplain at each prison. The Winchester Chaplain was a bully. I only remember him visiting me twice in my cell.

“You say you are a Quaker?” “Yes”

“Is your father a Quaker?” “No”

“Is your mother a Quaker?” “No”

“Then you are not one”.

Another visit was sheer bullying. I scarcely answered. Soon after this a friendly warder came in. I suppose I was looking depressed for he asked:

“What's the matter, Mr. Murfin?”

“The Chaplain has been in”.

“Oh, him. He ought to be inside”.

This chaplain couldn't preach. He once - in his sermon - told of a Conscientious Objector who was faced with several armed Germans at the front. This C.O. snatched a bayonet and killed every one. We all burst out laughing - which woke up the warders.

In Winchester, the warders sat perched up above on a pedestal chair and usually slept during the sermon. We enjoyed the hymn-singing, for it was a welcome change to be together and away from the cell.

We were pleased to have work to do and were given bags to make. When we asked what they were we were told they were war-time mail bags. After a few days one man got some material with 'For Naval Use' stamped on it. He stopped work and tapped in Morse Code to Bert Brocklesby and told him what he had found. Then he rang for the warder and said that he had stopped work and why. Bert Brocklesby went on exercise and told all he could and said "I've stopped work". I replied "So have I". Reported to the Governor, I said I wouldn't do military work and had been told that these bags were for naval use. He said that he didn't know it was military work and that I was not allowed to speak to other prisoners.

Solitary Confinement

I got two days' punishment - bread and water in a punishment cell - solitary confinement. These cells were on ground level, never cleaned out and smelt awful. There was a stool to sit on and one was allowed for toilet once a day. Each night, clothing was taken outside and there was just a bed-board to lie on - no mattress.

I was back in my cell after two days; it was the weekend. I heard some C.O.s talking out of the window; they were saying they hadn't seen Bert and Stuart and Fred. So I said through my window "I've been in Chokee (punishment) two days and I'll be in again tomorrow because I won't do military work".

In the morning I was reported again. I was first Charged with: "Shouting out of the window". I simply said "I've yet to learn it's wrong to speak". I was charged with refusal to work. I said again "I will not do military work", resulting this time in three days' solitary confinement on bread and water. I was put in a different cell this time and when the warder lifted the spy cap to see if I was all right I noticed the glass was missing, so I looked later and could see bales of canvas marked 'FOR NAVAL USE'.

I didn't eat anything those three days. When the warder came to let me out and saw the three loaves of bread he said, "Where did you get that bread?" I answered "You gave it to me, I shall eat nothing until I'm given different work". I was taken back to my cell - a different one - and later, an unfriendly warder, who looked as if he would like to harm me, took me into a cell where a non-C.O. was working. The warder told him to show me how to do some work and I asked the man if it was military work. He replied that it was for mail bags. "Are you sure?" "Yes" he replied. The warder all this time was trying to bully me. I took no notice of him. I found it much easier work and I had no more trouble in that direction.

We C.O.s had no opportunity to discuss things among ourselves.

The different cell was on the same landing in the centre at the prison. From the window I could see a stretch of the countryside. I would make me bed and then place the table near the window with my stool on top and sit looking till nearly dark. It was summertime. Each night I could hear someone at the opposite window but drew back as I didn't want to be caught talking again; but one night he got up so quietly that I didn't hear him. He said he had been trying to catch me several nights and we talked a long time. Someone shouted out: "Shut up and go to sleep!" We spoke more quietly. He said he had been thinking he had made a mess at his life and he had prayed to the Virgin Mary to help him make a fresh start, I'll never forget that. I couldn't see his face although he said he recognised me on the exercise ground. I never recognised him.

Humour in Prison

We had a bit at humour occasionally. The prison clothing wasn't smart and Bert Brocklesby, six feet tall, was fitted out with trousers a foot short. On exercise he was showing off so everyone noticed and enjoyed the sight. That was soon altered.

Soon after we reached Winchester we had our hair cut. One man had very long hair and we all had beards. Not all men can grow a good beard and we were a mixed lot in that respect. I think our hair was cut for our visit to Wormwood Scrubbs Prison one week-end. There we went before the Appeals Tribunal.

A Scheme had been devised to ease the prison situation. There were 80 C.O.s and a number of soldiers in the prisons.

Later, back at Winchester, we were given two questions to answer:

1. Would we work under Civil Authorities?
2. Would we work under the proposed Scheme?

Stuart Beavis, Alfred Taylor and myself said “No” to both questions.

The majority said “Yes” to No. 1 and “No” to No. 2. All these men were later sent out on this Scheme together with those who had said “Yes” to both questions, the Scheme was quarrying stone at Dyce in Scotland.

While we were at Winchester we were all collected and taken to have our finger prints and photos taken. We put on a jacket and high collar and tie. I think we all enjoyed this episode and how I would like a copy of all those photographed. I suppose a record is kept? It wasn't often we had a change like that.

Soon after this the majority of our group of C.O.s were sent to Dyce in Scotland, leaving only Stuart Beavis, Alfred Taylor and myself. We had all three been 'tried' at the same session at Tottenham Police Court. Several months later some of those who had been sent to Scotland felt they should go back to prison and - in pairs mostly – seven or eight arrived at Maidstone over some months. Stuart, Alfred and I were delighted to see them again.

We had heard there was a very good chaplain at Wormwood Scrubbs, but we were not allowed to go to Chapel and had extra exercise instead.

As soon as our cell doors were unlocked in the morning we all rushed out to the recess - until the warders interfered. The food was not as good at Wormwood Scrubbs as at Winchester. A friendly warder, when we got back, asked how we liked the Scrubbs and was quite pleased when we said we all preferred Winchester Prison.

Working in Association

After a period of working in isolation - with cell doors locked - one side of the hall had the cell doors open in the morning and the opposite side open in the afternoon. This was called working in Association. I looked out one day and, seeing no warder about, walked along the

landing with my shoes off to see Norman Gaudie. He was surprised and thought we would be caught. Soon we heard a warder coming and I got behind a door, the warder passed and I very soon got safely back to my cell. Another day, a friendly warder brought Stuart to my cell for a few minutes' chat - that was an event not to be forgotten.

On September 27th 1916 we were moved from Winchester Prison to Maidstone in stages. We stayed one night at Pentonville Prison - that's a wretched place. We were given oakum to pick. I picked a bit to see what it was like. We had no exercise and the food was poor. When we got to London we were put on a chain, handcuffed to it. I was close to a man reputed to have won the V.C. He thought it was scandalous that we should be treated like that. I said "I wish we could walk all over London like this so that folk could see how convicts are treated". Of course I didn't enjoy the experience. We were standing in full view of the public in the middle of London. I was as interested to see people walking about normally as they seemed to be to see us "terrible convicts".

On reaching Maidstone Prison we went through the usual routine and were fitted out with new suits. We now wore knee breeches and stockings. I became "Convict Q.259": "Q" represents the year 1916. There was one man at Maidstone "D" which meant he had been in prison thirteen years, and he looked it.

Maidstone - an old prison - was a Star Convict Prison for Men and a local prison for women. There were two Halls. "A" Hall was condemned long ago, I was told. The division between the cells was corrugated iron and the door had a space of about four inches at the bottom and occasionally a cat would visit us. He once jumped on my bed when I was asleep and I flung him off, not realising what it was - he never came back to me again. A hammock was fastened to either side and anyone turning over would shake his neighbour on either side. This Hall was very cold in winter. Slow combustion stoves were the only heat we had. I sat on the table with my feet on the stool out of reach of the draught and with the rug round me. I used to hold the rug first and put it on the concrete floor, take my shoes off and skip until I was aglow, then get fixed up on the table.

The Commanding Officer

The first time I appeared at the door of my cell, the man next door called out "How long have ye got, laddie?" I answered "Ten years". He then asked "What are ye in for?" I replied

“I'm a C.O.” He called out to another man “We've got a Commanding Officer here!” When I explained he seemed bewildered. We soon became friendly and, later on, on a Sunday evening I would sit near the partition and talk to him. We'd sing a hymn and read the Bible and he would ask “Are we going to have a service tonight?” He was a big raw boned Scottish Canadian and often on punishment. After a spell of punishment he would look starved. The cookhouse mess cells were opposite his and at one time they threw him their loaves at bread and he told me he had six loaves, 3 lbs. of bread, and he was going to have a good meal for once. Poor Jock. He once applied to the Governor and asked to be moved to work in the cookhouse.

Governor. - “Why? . . .” “So I could get more to eat, Sir”.

Soldiers- convicts - would often rag Jock and he would explode and get reported and punished.

I've described “A” Hall. “B” Hall was more modern and had a hot (warm) water pipe through one end. I moved to “B” Hall for about the last year I was there.

Library Books

We had a Bible and Prayer-book and Smiles' *Self Help*, till we changed the last-named for a novel or 'educational' book. We could see a catalogue on application and put numbers down - hopefully - on a slate, but more of this later.

Sympathisers sent in books and we could have books sent in. The rules said such books would, on the prisoner's discharge, become prison property but the sort of book the C.O.s would have sent in would be considered unfit for ordinary convicts.

Some unknown friend sent me the *Adult School Lesson Handbook* and at this time the “Daily Bible Readings” were printed at the end of the book. I mentioned this to several people and they were pleased to have these daily readings - I copied them out on lavatory paper - my only medium - and passed them round weekly. One man, (a doctor) said one day, “I'm very sorry dear boy, but I've lost the piece of paper, but it's alright, it's gone down the lav”. Well, it hadn't. I saw it on the ground when on exercise. I dropped my handkerchief on it and picked it up. No harm done, but supply stopped. A friend also sent me a book of *Daily Readings for the Year*.

A few months before we were released, a man fell in behind me on exercise and asked me to tell him why I was in prison. I told him as well as I could and had nearly finished when one of the warders walked beside me and said "It's all very interesting, I'll see you in the morning". But he didn't report me.

Occasionally a man would get a very poor library book. Alfred Evans had one at Winchester. Norman was next door and was persuaded to lend Alf one of his books. It was to be passed from one to the other through the cell window. Swinging the book tied by thread, it slipped out and fell to the ground. Years later Norman described the event better than any comedian could have done, Norman rang the bell and fortunately, a friendly warder was on duty. He fetched the book and gave Norman a good lecture.

One Sunday at Maidstone there was a merry event just above me. One man had tried to push a library book along the floor to the man next door and it had gone too far out. That would mean punishment for both, I expect.

Every week convicts were searched on the exercise ground and every fortnight in the cell. In the cell a prisoner could be stripped to his shirt. I was only once treated like this but I had on only shirt and stockings and I had a note in my stockings.

On one occasion Corney Barritt had an interesting letter from outside. He wrote details to pass round. It got as far as Bert Brocklesby. It was found on the outdoor search and he was reported. This was at Maidstone. He decided not to speak at his 'trial'. The routine was: two steps forward, left turn, give your name and number to the Governor:- No response , Order repeated - still no response.

Governor: "Turn his face to the wall".

He, Bert, was given the maximum punishment. A "greasy" warder took him to the punishment cell and Bert stood in front of the "spy hole", heard "Greasy" walk away, then creep back. All he could see was Bert's bald spot. As Corney had a notebook and pencil it was easy to trace the notebook to him. When he was charged, he replied: "I shall not say if I wrote the note or not". So he was sent out on three days' punishment. When he came out he was charged again. Corney said; "If I am punished again for something I do not admit doing, I will report to the Home Secretary". He was discharged.

It was thought by some that the prison Authorities thought C.O.s had the ear of influential people outside and in local prisons. The prisoners knew what was happening in other prisons better than the officials.

Punishment was often for very trivial reasons. Alfred Evans and Norman Gaudie could see one another from "A" to "B" Hall and one spelt out *Gray's Elegy* to the other in Morse Code. They were reported and punished for this. On one occasion Stuart Beavis had lent a man one of his library books and when the men were returning to their cells, this man put Stuart's book back on his table. A warder saw it and came running. Stuart heard him coming and put the book on the shelf and shut the door. The warder: "You have a book belonging to someone else, Beavis". Stuart: "Have I, I didn't know". The warder checked Stuart's books with his card and all was in order. Some warders who saw this happen would have taken no notice, while others would "report their mothers for slopping tea".

Exercise, daily in the yard, gave us an opportunity of seeing one another - about half an hour's walking in single file round the ground and turning inwards so that we passed facing. It was longer on Sundays and became tiring in hot weather. We walked round the hall in wet or in very foggy weather. In some prisons there are circular paths. There were three rings at Winchester, the alternate ring walking the opposite way. (Hence the saying prisoners are so used to going in Circles, they can't go straight when they come out).

Men in Chains

When we got to Maidstone we saw the horrible sight of two men wearing chains and parti-coloured dress. The chains hung from the waist to the ankle on either side and were welded to an iron ring at the waist and the ankles, clanging as the men walked; the dress is alternate khaki and black. This punishment was for striking an officer or escaping. The chain would be worn for a year or so, then taken off and the parti-coloured dress worn for so long, say, for twelve months. One of these was a coloured man and the other a giant of a man. The chains must have been horribly cold at night, especially in winter for the clothes were taken away at night as they were for ordinary punishment. When these men's chains were taken off they looked delighted and we all felt relieved. And later, back in normal dress, they beamed at us all on exercise. Some time after the Englishman "A" had got back to normal dress. He was in the same working party as I was - on assembling to go back for dinner, he

pushed past one man and the inhuman warder was on duty. "A" told another prisoner that if this warder reported him, he would 'smash him'. My cell was up above on the opposite side to "A's" and I had a full view of what happened. We could hear "A" smashing his stool; I was at my cell door waiting for the assembly after dinner. When a warder unlocked "A's" cell, "A" struck the warder. but it was the wrong warder. He was a new warder, a frail-looking man. At the 'trial', this warder said he had not been struck. He left soon after - I don't know why. Soon after this, "A" was sent to Parkhurst Prison.

In the Printer's Shop

My normal occupation was printing, and on reaching Maidstone I was put in the printer's shop. I was given work to do normally by a young girl in ordinary printing works.

It is ridiculous that a prisoner isn't told the prison routine. I wanted to cut my toenails, so took the scissors I was using, to the lavatory and forgot to bring them out. A few minutes later another prisoner came out of the same lavatory calling out "Sir, sir, I have found these". I went to the man in charge and claimed them. He said "Why didn't you ask in ward for scissors?" I said I didn't know I could. That ended it.

I was reported for passing messages from one Sein Feiner to another. While, on punishment, a Principal Warder came to see me and said "You're a fool, Murfin". I said "Yes". "Passing information for these people - they are in for the opposite crime to yours".

Removal to the Tailor's Shop

I said I didn't pass any information - why should I? "Didn't you - well it's too late now, but I can't let you go back to the printing party". I said I didn't want to go back. "Why?" "I want to learn something while I'm here. Can I go to the tailor's shop?" "Well, that can be arranged" and it was.

There were several Sein Feiners at Maidstone, including de Valera. Later they all refused to work and were soon after sent to Lewes Prison.

In the tailor's shop at first I only sewed up seams, but later the Works Officer gave me different work because he said I took an interest in my work. My first move was to fasten up the end of my stockings as they came off the machine and to iron them: this meant I

moved about a lot more.

I sat on a bench next to “Joe”

“Joe”: “What's your name?”

Fred: “Fred”.

“Joe” : “How long have you got?”

Fred: “Ten years: How long have you got?”

“Joe”: “Ten years”.

“Joe”: “What are you in for?”

Fred: “I'm a C.O.”

“Joe”: “What -----'s that?” Fred, having explained,

“Joe”: “I'd have ----- shot you”.

Fred: “What are you in for?”

“Joe”: “Murder”.

Fred: “That's funny”.

“Joe”: “What's funny”.

Fred: “You have ten years for killing someone, when you were drunk I suppose. I've ten years because I won't kill or help to kill”.

Three men sitting in front were listening to all this. One was a doctor in for illegal operation, one had altered a Will and a third man was in for murder. One turned round and said, “That's different”. I said “Of course it is!” and explained. This all took a long time to say because we were not supposed to talk. One of these men attended the same Chapel one of our group attended and they recognised one another. This man - “P” just referred to, told me later that when “Old Lags” knew C.O.s were coming to their prison, they decided to send them to Coventry.

We became friendly, and through him I was asked to go the “Choir”

Attractions? A tune book in my cell, out of the cell for choir practice on Saturday afternoons and anthems on special occasions. “P” had asked me if I could sing. I said “Oh, a bit of tenor”, he also. The Chaplain was duly asked for. Soon after I went in the choir, one of the bass singers said “Now we have a tenor in the choir, can we have anthem - 'I will arise and go to my Father and say unto Him, Father I have sinned ?'” We sang it at a service after a few practices.

The man who suggested this was in for murder but a nice enough fellow. He worked in the tailor's shop and one day gave me a couple of chillies - which I enjoyed.

One very old man once said: 'You're all fine lads and when I get my grey dress I'll give you something. He did – cloves.

Oats and Jam

A very small German Jew who was in the tailor's shop claimed to have belonged to nearly all denominations and said he would be trying Quakerism. One of his questions was "Do Quakers eat anything else besides oats?" He asked me if I liked jam. I said "Of course" and he replied "I'll give you some this weekend".

I've mentioned mustard as one of the luxuries men bought, and there was a time when the smallest size one could buy cost one penny. I duly got one of these tins full of jam. I was cautioned to be very careful and to let him have the tin back.

I had no idea where he got it from, for he was not a grey dress man.

There were several Germans, inside, one a gifted linguist. Also there was an Arab in our shop with only a word or two of English. He was allowed to send a petition to the Home Secretary "pertish" he called it. The German helped in this case. When the Arab was called out to receive the answer to this petition, he smartened himself up and was all smiles. As he passed he said "I go out tomorrow". When he came back he was very downcast and looked a hundred.

The German just mentioned went to see the Governor and said his dinner was not kept hot, he would not help in any further translations. Of course after that the dinners were kept hot.

There was a young Russian in the prison, so Stuart Beavis got a Russian grammar and learned a bit in order to speak with him from time to time as he passed on exercise. I believe both worked in the tinshop. Later it was discovered that the Russian was innocent and he was released. I never knew what he was "in" for.

In the Choir

To go back to the matter of sitting in the choir. We had a tune-book and, of course, a Bible

and we sat in front. The Governor attended sometimes and read the lesson. We “choir boys” had our Bibles open and once noticed that the Governor turned over two page's in error, but read straight on. The Chaplain looked down at us and smiled. This Chaplain couldn't preach but he played the organ nicely. He had a good voice and was genial. He visited me one Saturday about mid-day, a very hot day, and said “Well, Murfin , how are you?” To which I replied “Nicely, thank you, how are you?”. “Fine” he said, “It's a nice day - too hot to be indoors, just going to take my wife and child out. Good day”.

One prisoner always knew the news and when asked how he knew it all, said “Oh, the Chaplain, when he goes his rounds at mid-day, leaves the newspaper with me and collects it when he goes out”. About this time one convict was reading a newspaper when the Chaplain opened the door and saw the newspaper. He said “If I see you with this again I must report you”. I think he went about with felt or something similar on his footwear.

When there had been a bad reverse of Allied Forces there was an outcry for more men, and some were sent out from Maidstone Prison on the Chaplain's recommendation. “M” applied but was not recommended by the Chaplain. Later there was another crisis and “M” asked the Chaplain if it was any use him applying. “M” was a “D”. The Chaplain said “Yes, I'll do what I can”. Pat - red-collar man to the Librarian - saw and read the correspondence. The Chaplain had said of “M”: “A further term of imprisonment would be beneficial to this man”. It was always evident that the Chaplain was part of the prison staff.

After I had been on the punishment referred to earlier, I was out of the Choir. Some time afterwards, Pat urged me to try to get back in the Choir. The Chaplain wanted me back, but the Governor was against it, I was told. Not that I cared much. However, eventually I got back. Eight days after my release I was to have taken the tenor solo in the Easter anthem. I was asked if I'd go back to sing it and I said “Yes, if my fare were paid”- I was the leading tenor - the only one.

The Chaplain used to arrange concerts around about Christmas and people used to come in from outside. A young lady recited “Yawcob Straus” and so on. Once a lot of choir boys and older singers came in. Another time “our choir” had a go, and sang “Good King Wenceslas” etc., with one man singing the first four lines and another the second. One man went wrong, which was enjoyable.

At the Christmas Concert

At one of these concerts, Robert O. Mennel got up and proposed a vote of thanks to the Chaplain - Chaplain and warders calling out "Hush, hush". Robert O. Mennel was at this time serving a sentence (C.O.) on the local prison side. (Those who knew Robert would know that he would take little notice of "Hush, hush").

Pat, red-collar man to the Librarian, told me of new books that came in and I got preferential treatment. He invented a new kind of shirt while he was in prison and I was to have one made and presented as a token of our friendship after our release. Alas! there was a 'flu epidemic and Pat died in the hospital (prison). When I was released I wrote to his people and said that I would answer any questions about Pat, but I had no reply. I was never in Prison Hospital so had no experience of it.

I had lumbago once and went sick - that's the term. A relief warder was on duty. "What's the matter with you?" "I've got lumbago". "What's that? Never heard of it". "It's inflammation of the lumbar vein at the bottom at the back". Pills.

I had toothache and went to the doctor. There were two regular doctors, an old man and a younger one. This one was the younger and he said "There are two bad teeth". But only one was aching. He soon had it out and said "Sorry I've hurt you". Later tooth No 2 ached and he had more trouble with it (or rather I did) but there was no apology that time for hurting me.

I had occasional lumbago. There was turpentine in the tailors shop used for cleaning. I took a bit of bread and soaked it with turps and got ease that way.

Do you prefer an Onion?

One day, as we were going into the hall. a very bow-legged man said to me. "Fred, do you prefer an onion?" I said "Yes, rather". "Well, here you are then" and he put an onion in my hand. I had it for supper that evening and a warder came in to search and, at course, smelt my breath. He said to someone "Here's a Conscientious Objector who doesn't object to having a contraband onion". I wasn't reported.

This warder was often in charge of the tailor's party and would come and stand near me and misquote *Gray's Elegy* - and then walk away.

Neighbours in the Tailor's Shop

Occasionally a warder from the local side would be in the tailor's shop and if men got talking too much, he would call out: "Now, men, don't get too neighbourly". A coloured man came to work next to me and, this, too added variety. He was in for striking an officer but pleaded "Not Guilty" because no one had seen him do it. He had been brought up on 'Pilgrim's Progress' and identified Bert, Norman and myself each with a character from the book thus: Christian, Hopeful and Faithful. I taught him some Adult School hymns and got him yarning about his home in Barbadoes. In the winter he felt the cold and would take his shoes off and put his feet on the hot-water pipe.

Another man near me was a Spaniard, in for spying. As he knew no English, he was asking for it. When I was coming out he asked me to go and see Father (somebody) on his behalf at a monastery in London. Father (blank) said: "The man's a fool and lucky not to have been shot!" In the tailor's shop we had some tools; the scissors were collected every time we left for meals or at the end of the day. We had a cardboard box for other items. I'd put Adolph's box lid over his scissors and he would say: "You English are all pinch". He got very excited at times. Some time after my release, I received a note from Adolph (written very small on lavatory paper) concluding "be happy, dear Freddie, I wish you that".

An advantage of the tailor's shop was that the "old hands" would heat an iron and put it into a bucket at water, so that we had warm water, soap and towel. It helped to save the miserable little bit of soap we had doled out to us weekly. It was remarkable how often warders' trouser pockets had to be repaired, and how often fifteen grains of rice fell out in the process. I worked near a man who spent a lot of his time doing such repairs.

When a man is released, he is fitted out with a new suit, of very poor quality and ready-made, of course. Near the time of his release he would come along for a fittings; any necessary adjustment would be made. This suit would be pressed and made to look as good as possible by a competent prisoner. There were two prisoners whose normal occupation was tailoring. I became interested in tailoring and thought I might one day run a Club for

boys, get second-hand suits and get the boys altering these to fit themselves. I asked for a notebook and pencil in my cell so that I could jot down tailoring hints; but, because I didn't intend to become a tailor on release, this was refused. Anyway, no one could learn enough in the prison tailoring shop to become proficient enough to earn a living at it

The Red-Collar Man

A red-collar man was a prisoner who had earned special privileges.

For example, he could move about without asking a warder's permission. One of these was Pat, whom I have mentioned before. He was in the tailor's shop and I went in with him.

“I can't do that” I said, “I'm not a tailor”.

“Oh” he replied, “you can cut according to pattern”.

I found this more interesting and I had more liberty. I would get a list of things to cut and scheme to put a bit of shape in. In the meantime, Bert Brocklesby and Norman Gaudie had come to work in our shop, which gave an added interest.

It would be a mistake to think of all convicts as hardened criminals, i.e. hopelessly anti-social. There were three doctors 'in' for illegal operations; a postman who - didn't know what he was thinking of when he pinched postal orders - or when he was found out; a Bank manager who lost - or found - several thousand pounds and at first ran across the room when his name was called, till he found no one else ran. There were a lot of soldiers - and dirty criminals also. Some old and feeble men who just hobbled about on exercise in the centre of the yard, and a Swiss who had only recently started on his own account when the 1914 War broke out. He spoke German-English. Those who owed him money wouldn't pay; those he owed money to, demanded it. His wife, the doctor said, wouldn't live the year out and his little girl was starving. He drowned the child he worshipped and cried as he told me about it three years after. He was no criminal. Of course, he had done wrong.

One man said he was 'in' for attempting to murder Lloyd George. He said he hadn't but would have done it he could. But the man didn't look vicious.

Another man whose cell was near mine, looked like a farmer; he would often quote in a loud voice - at night -

“Stone walls do not a prison made
Nor iron bars a cage,

Minds innocent and quiet take

That for a hermitage”.

When the day warders had all gone, there was only the night watchman on duty, and there was talking going on. The night watchman went round the wards, lifted the spy hole and had a word for most of us and a goodnight. Once, when I had moved to another cell, he called out: “Oh, here you are, I thought you had gone out”. He had something to say to a lot of men and it was a treat to hear him. I never saw him, he was just a man on the other side of a locked door with a cheery voice. Often men would call out to one another and one night I heard one say “Well, what is nothing?” They didn't seem to make much of it so I called out “A footless stocking without a leg”. Several of them enjoyed this and such jokes, and one man I hadn't noticed before commented on my reply - not original.

Armistice Day, 1918

The day before Armistice Day, Nov. 11th 1918, a warder told me it was thought the Armistice would be signed, and if so, we would all be assembled on the exercise ground and the Governor would give us the news. This was the first time I had heard that such a thing might happen. We were duly assembled and the good news was heard. The Arab I mentioned earlier threw his cap in the air and said “We win, we win”.

While we were in Maidstone there were several noisy air-raids and as a safety precaution all upstairs prisoners were moved to ground level - making three in a cell.

Meditations on Crime

On one occasion, the other two got discussing various prisoners and their own crimes. (They knew I was a C.O.)

One said “Well, thank God my wife doesn't believe I was guilty of what I was convicted of” , and left it at that.

“What are you in for?”

“Oh, I'm in for a respectable crime: burglary”.

Several of us became friendly with one or other of the regulars. Corney Barritt was friendly with this ex-burglar, and on his release, Corney wrote round to those who could contribute to set him up with a street barrow. This man's normal occupation was brick laying. He made good and later was able to go back to his trade.

When men are released from prison they are handicapped by having no insurance stamps.

Imagine a man applying for a job:

Employer: "How long were you at your last job?"

Ex-convict: "Six years".

Employer: "What were you doing?"

Ex-convict: "Six years".

End of the War

The War ended in November 1918. We were released in April 1919 (except for one man who came later on and was released when he had served two years).

Release, April 1919

When some of our group had some inkling at the imminence of our release, they refused to have their hair cut, and their people had sent their clothes. We were all up together to see the doctor. I asked what it was all about and was told - we are going out. It was the first I had heard of the possibility. All but three had had clothes sent to the prison and went out. Three of us were sent back to our cells and not allowed on exercise. I had a humorous novel but, understandably, I couldn't read it. After a while, a warder opened the cell door very noisily and shouted at me - then whispered "There's a man on his way from London with suits for you three men - good luck, lad, and goodbye". Then he shouted at me again so that anyone outside could hear. After a while we were all moved to the gate and there were: Ted Bigland, who I knew, and Ted Mason - they had brought four suits to fit three men and what a job we had - then we were out.

"Three Cheers for the C.O.s"

The C.O. left behind, told us when he was released, that soon after we had left, the soldier convicts demanded to see the prison authorities and to be released. The officer said: "I know you think you should have been released before the C.O.s" and was going on, when the soldiers called out: "NO, we didn't. Three cheers for the C.O.s." and they gave three cheers. Well, we didn't hear the cheers but we all felt pleased that we had left a good impression on our late companions.

Yes, we were out, on a Saturday evening! On to Maidstone Station for the first railway ride

for nearly three years and with our rail fare paid home to where ever we wanted to go, and for all of us it was HOME.

When we reached London, two of us were unable to get a train to our destination till the Sunday morning. Ted Bigland took me to his home where he and his wife, Emily, gave me hospitality till next day - a service which they had given to other C.O.s and which was very much appreciated. Before we went to bed we were asked what we would like for breakfast:

PORRIDGE, PLEASE!

They laughed and said that all the other C.O.s and said the same.

To Louth and Home

On Sunday morning, a friend took me well on the way to King's Cross and I was on the last lap. The train seemed very slow - a familiar journey and great expectations at the end of it. I was bound for Louth, Lincs., where my parents lived. I was out of the train before it stopped, ran to give up my ticket and then ran most of the way home. I looked in at the front window and heard Mother say to Dad: "There's the train! He may be on it !"

A cherished memory - we had three years to talk about. I found there were many people in Louth who had been interested in my well-being. After tea, the next-door neighbours were going off to Chapel and Mother said: "There's Mr. and Mrs. Read - they'll be pleased you're home". So I hurried out and called to them. Mrs. Read rushed up to me and kissed me, and Mr. Read didn't seem to mind. I knew everybody at the chapel my parents attended for years. I had taught in the Sunday School, so I went the next Sunday. The mother of one of my playmates said she was pleased to see me home, but she wouldn't shake hands with me. The Minister called to welcome me home although I'd never met him before. I didn't meet with any cold shoulders, but plenty of friendship. I spent time in the garden where there were dozens of roses I had budded more than three years before.

After a fortnight's holiday, I wrote to the printing firm where I had been employed before I was a prisoner and had a reply from the manager who said there was no vacancy just then but that he had a friend in the trade whom he thought would be able to offer me a job. I went to London and started straight away, glad to be back to print. Friends, and friends, at Tottenham were, of course, delighted to have me back. Later where I was employed, the eldest son came back from the Army and it was not long before I was dismissed.

I was out of work for six weeks and it was the time of the slump. Then I obtained a job at a firm that printed a lot of literature in which I was interested. After two years I became overseer - I was already "Overseer" at Friends' Meeting.

During the Second World War, more consideration was given to Conscientious Objectors than during my experience. Also, of course, Prison Rules were less severe, but whether Prison Reform has gone forward on the right lines is another matter, and I have my doubts.

From time to time during the years there have been Reunions of the Conscientious Objectors who went to France. About ten of these are still alive. At the last Reunion - held in May 1965 - only four were able to attend: but we were glad to meet again, and to recall some of the memories of that unforgettable time.

<< THE END >>