

**The Army and I. An account of life in the Army as a non-combatant Christian during the Second World War**

**Robert B. Carter**

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There is an immense literature on the experience of those who saw active service in the British Armed Forces during World War II, and also about the Home Front, life for the civilian population. But there were many thousands, of whom a large proportion were Christians, who had an in-between status, neither combatant nor civilian, who found themselves drafted as noncombatant members of the British Army, serving in either the Pioneer Corps, or the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) or the Pay Corps. Their thinking and experience has had much less attention, which makes this account of six years' service in the Non-Combatant Corps (NCC) very welcome. And although it has been compiled some sixty years on, it is based on a notebook kept fully during these years, complemented by letters, photographs and documents such as his call-up papers, statement in support of his application in February 1940 to be registered as a conscientious objector (CO), and a discharge testimonial from his then commanding officer in May 1946. The account of his six years in the NCC is clearly written, and sheds light not just on Army life but also the activities of some Christian Brethren assemblies and servants during the war. Robert Carter was aged twenty when war broke out. He had been a Christian for some four years, and was a member of an Open meeting in Essex, South Park Chapel, with a steady job in insurance.

His decision to apply for registration as a CO was on religious grounds. As a Christian he found it impossible to 'join any force, the purpose of which was the destruction of human life' a position accepted with respect rather than ridicule when he appeared before a tribunal in June 1940. What is interesting is that this was by no means a view held in his home assembly or amongst his contemporaries; his father and uncle had both served in World War I, and according to

Carter, most of the older folk in South Park Chapel encouraged combatant military service in any form. Some of the younger men did serve in combatant roles: one Bible Class contemporary was killed with the Royal Marines in 1940. Others, like Robert Carter registered as COs, and a number saw front line service with the RAMC. To be in the RAMC was not a cushy number; one of Robert's friends won the MM in France during the invasion: another (a South Park Chapel lad) was killed in Holland in 1944.

Robert Carter's six years were spent in England in a variety of roles from cook to clerk. But his was far from an entirely rear echelon war, not just because the war came to Britain through bombing. In July 1942 an invitation was given for men in the NCC to transfer to Bomb Disposal unit which he took, learning the mysteries of timbering and steaming out TNT from the bomb fuses. By late 1943, the need for BD units in decline, he went to Evesham where his unit built some railway sidings. From this heavy manual work he was to get relief as a ration and then pay clerk. He was then temporarily transferred in December 1943 on to London into a branch of the Adjutant General's department to administer officers' records, and later on, planning for post war demobilisation. Being kept on there meant he could see more of his family, with occasional nights spent with them, and was able to resume attendance at his home fellowship. He began to think what he might do post-war and took the Civil Service entrance examination in November 1945 in which he was placed 347th out of 6000 candidates. As he did not receive an offer of a post until June 1946, he was assigned in the interim to a POW camp in South Devon where he became acquainted with some German prisoners with whom he had correspondence after they returned home, some to East Germany in the Soviet zone. Finally demobbed in June 1946, he journeyed home to begin a long and effective career in the home civil service.

Carter writes with a wry eye for the characters that he met, some of whom were either eccentrics or bullies or duds (of whom the British Army had more than its fair share). It is hard for us to understand quite how hard and real the culture shock must have been

for him, and others like him of life in the Army, and life as a CO in a NCC unit. But there was the strength and mutual support of other Christians in the NCC units, some from the Society of Friends, or the Baptists, Congregationalists and Methodists. The NCC units contained an extraordinary range of conviction and belief. There were communists and evangelicals, with Open and Exclusive Brethren a considerable part of the whole. Robert Carter took and gave fellowship where he could, in the unit, and at local churches and assemblies as he moved around. In one location they were allowed to hold an evangelistic meeting each week. Homes were open, and hospitality given freely which must have been welcome indeed for those who did not wish to spend time in the pub. There was much kindness which he fully recognises. Pre-war practices were shelved: the Glanton meeting at Evesham refused letters of introduction, saying that they were happy to receive fellow Christians. There is a nice account of a prayer meeting organized to find a brother's dentures lost on a beach (p.46). What was a further challenge was that although he was passed A1 at his medical, he was to be hospitalised at least twice, periods which he turned to advantage as a kind of enforced spiritual retreat.

What is clear from this fascinating account is that there was a spectrum within the Brethren with regard to what an individual would or would not do with respect to war service. A few were absolutists, such as Len Cook of the Brentwood Open assembly, others like Robert Carter went into either the NCC or the RAMC, and a third group served in the regulars. Harold St John, the noted preacher, had a son who was a captain in the Intelligence Corps. There were to be tensions post-war over what was the right thing to have done. But for those who did serve, the support of assemblies in welcome and hospitality was treasured. It would be good if Robert Carter were to follow up this fascinating account with how work and witness was rebuilt post-war.

Alastair J. Durie