

During the last few years, I have researched the lives of so many young men who were in the armed forces during the First World War. I can't begin to imagine the pain of a parent saying goodbye to their child never knowing if they would ever see them again. I am grateful that I have never had to face this challenge.

Now, I think of my own family history with a certain amount of pride and confusion.

I am the granddaughter of a convict

My late grandfather, Emmanuel Nunes Ribeiro, was arrested on 17th January 1917. He was taken to Salford Police Court and fined 4 shillings. He was then transferred to Bury Barracks where he went on hunger strike.

What was his crime?

My grandfather was a Conscientious Objector in the First World War.

He was an Absolutist, which means that he refused to co-operate with conscription or to do any war related work. He did not believe in the concept of war and young lives being lost. It may be because two of his four brothers, who emigrated to Australia and had joined the Australian Forces, were killed in the war, but I do not know if this was the main reason. I believe my grandfather was always a protester, a socialist and passionate about the rights of the common man.

On 24th January, he was force fed against his will. On 25th January he was transferred to the Lord Derby War Hospital, at Winwick near Warrington where the force feeding continued. He was force fed 155 times over a period of 17 months.

On 15th March he wrote a letter to my grandmother, Bella, describing in great detail the force feeding process, which I will not relate here as it is too graphic.

The way he was treated was the subject of controversy and his plight a cause of concern taken up by leading campaigners and MPs during the period of his incarceration. This is all recorded in Hansard (the daily report of what is said in Parliament) and together with my grandmother's letter, can be accessed through the internet.

In March 1918 he was court martialled, sentenced to two years hard labour and sent to Wormwood Scrubs Prison, in London.

A petition was drafted to Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, giving relevant details of my grandfather's situation.

The signatories to the petition included: George Lansbury, editor of the Daily Herald. Bertrand Russell, himself a conscientious objector and Catherine Marshall, a significant campaigner and Honourable Secretary for the No-Conscription Fellowship. The original petition is in the Catherine Marshall Archives in Carlisle.

I have often asked myself how my grandfather had the determination and moral strength to stand up for his beliefs, whatever the consequences. How did his conscience allow him to leave my grandmother and his six children in poverty and having to exist on charity. Records show that they were helped by the Primitive Methodists, who supported many conscientious objectors. The Daily Herald initiated a rehabilitation fund after he had been released, while he recovered his strength.

Society needs men like my grandfather, but in truth did he make a difference?

Have I inherited anything of my grandfather's character? I'll leave that for others to judge. I don't like the idea of war but how to deal with the Hitlers and Sadam Husseins of this world- that is the big question.

He was released from prison on health grounds on 8th June 1918, weighing only 7 stones, having survived his ordeal. My late mother was born on 12th March, 1919. She was child number 7 of his 8 children.

I never got to meet him, because he died one year before I was born.

Belinda Black, WWTT volunteer