



Mennonite men & recruitment

Courtland Avenue, Berlin/Kitchener

As a young Mennonite man during the war, Aaron Weber was wary of walking down Courtland Avenue in Berlin/Kitchener.

“One time,” his son Norm recalls, “he walked right close to the barracks, and the soldiers around there were watching him and he just hot-footed it . . . and got out of there in time because they used to grab them . . . and take them in there and make them sign up, force them to do it.”

Although the longstanding exception for peace church members remained in place, confusion among some officials over the legal status of conscientious objectors coupled with occasionally overzealous tactics to meet conscription targets caught some “peace church” men in the recruitment net.

Simeon and Carl Reesor in uniform at the Niagara-on-the-Lake military training camp, 1918.

Unlike most Mennonite men, the cousins were required to attend camp until their conscientious objector status was confirmed.



Mennonite Archives of Ontario

Joseph Smith, an Old Order Mennonite from Markham, was told to report to the Niagara-on-the-Lake military camp in June 1918, despite his exemption as a Mennonite.

He made the mistake of putting on a military uniform, since his ministers had cautioned him not to make trouble. He waited until bayonet practice to speak up. Consequently, Smith remained in various military camps until after the end of the war. The letter below is to his minister, Thomas Reesor.

Sunday August 11, 1918

Dear Friend: -

I thought I would write you a few lines this afternoon. I did hardly think I would be here this long when I come.

The Major called me in one day and asked me what they were doing with me. And he said he had not heard yet about my case but said he would call me in again as soon as he heard.

They have me training with the rest of the soldiers most of the time and I don't care much about the job. But they told me to do whatever they told me and it would be better for me, and I have done it yet so far. Do you think I will get off alright?

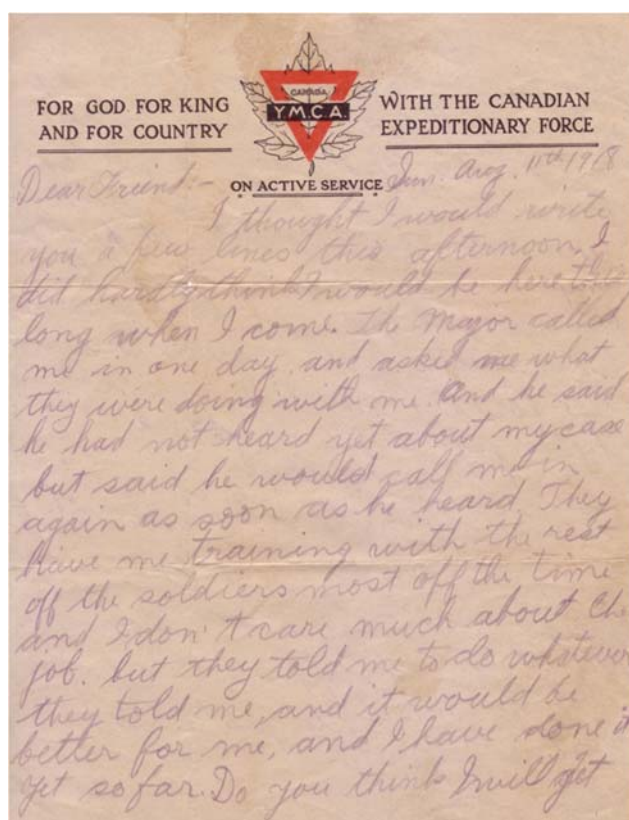
There were ten Court Martials yesterday and one this morning before church read out to us and they all got ten years in prison, most of them were men that would not put the uniform on. I was to church this forenoon, they only preached about ten minutes. Well I guess this is all for this time I am well hoping you are the same

Yours Truly

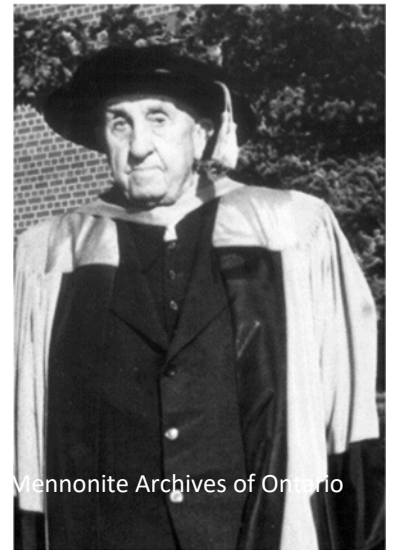
3235665 Pte. Joseph Smith

Niagara on the Lake

If it should happen that I don't get off what do you think I should do?



Brethren in Christ farm boy Ernie (E.J.) Swalm was imprisoned for his refusal to enlist. In 1938, he wrote an influential book about his experiences. He became chairman of the Conference of Historic Peace Churches during the Second World War.



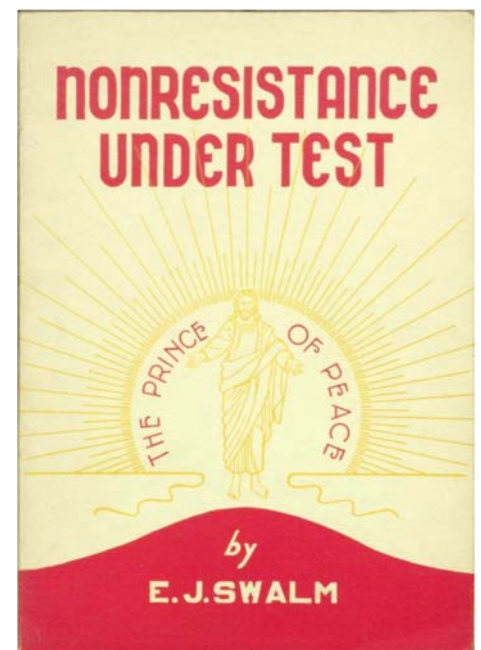
Swalm received a doctorate from the University of Waterloo in 1977.

Captain Marshall told me I had better take service or else I would be put in chains, taken overseas and placed in the front lines as a barricade and would be shot down first thing, with all the other cowards and despicable characters who would stop bullets to save better men who were coming up behind.

I replied, "Be that as it may. By the grace of God I am determined in my stand, and...I intend to be a conscientious objector." To this he replied, "We won't force you to put on the uniform, but we'll just make you so glad to do it that you'll put it on...."

One day when Sergeant Hartley was taking us up to headquarters to give a summary of evidence [before our court -martial], the boys were joking about shooting me, to which Sergeant Hartley replied, "this is nothing to joke about. I'll see that it is stopped," and we were never threatened again with anything like it.

We mention this merely to show that Sergeant Hartley, with some other officers of the army, were the finest gentlemen we have every met. Indeed, not all army men were corrupt. Some of the biggest and finest men we have ever met wore military uniform.



Certificates were issued by the churches and the government to prove exemption. Men of recruitment age like Jesse B. Martin carried his throughout the war.

27

MSA. 97

MILITARY SERVICE ACT, 1917
CERTIFICATE OF PROTECTION

This is to certify that on November 11th, 1918, the authorized holder of this certificate whose name, address and signature appear hereon, was in good standing under the Military Service Act, 1917, on the records of the undernoted Registrar. This certificate when properly completed will be accepted as evidence of good standing in lieu of all certificates of exemption previously issued to him. It may be revoked at any time by proper authority.

The authorized holder must sign here in ink and must carry this certificate at all times and produce it on request:
Sign here: *Jesse B. Martin*

Registrar M.S.A. *H. F. Burdett* at LONDON, ONT.

Authorized holder Mr. Jesse B. Martin, Serial Number 19A 75943
holder

Address R.R.#1,
Waterloo, Ont.

Certificate No. 256909

(Date) June 14th 1918

This is to Certify that Jesse B. Martin

is, and has been continuously since 1916 a member,
in good faith, of the Mennonite Church, in full fellowship, and is now a
member of the congregation worshipping at St. Jacobs Ont.

THE tenets and articles of faith of the Mennonite Church forbid
war or participation therein in any form, and such articles of faith were
in force on the 6th of July, 1917.

Jonas Snider Minister
Bishop

R.R. 1, Waterloo Ont Address