

## Deciding to Fight

**Bob Barnett**

I'm a strange animal to have around in a Quaker Meeting, somebody who was a soldier.

I would like to start by telling you about a German boy who was a friend of mine. His name was Fritz and was a friend of a friend. He was studying English and my friend was studying German; they used to do an exchange in the summer holidays for about three weeks. The three of us used to go out and have fun. We were about seventeen then, but there were one or two problems.

We would have liked to have taken Fritz to our school but we were afraid to do so because we were afraid he might be rude to our French teacher because he was a Jewish gentleman with the name of Mr. Lazarus, a very nice man and a good teacher. Back at home in Germany Fritz was a member of the Hitler Youth. He became a member unknown to his parents. His teacher encouraged him and he hid his uniform at school to start. His parents were quite upset about it and didn't like it. His older brother didn't like Hitler and the Nazis.

Hitler blamed the Jews who lived in Germany for all of Germany's troubles and they were treated horribly. Things were chalked outside their houses; they were sent to concentration camps and killed in gas chambers. Hitler used to talk about the "master race". He wanted to get rid of all the Jews.

At the same time he was building this very efficient army and navy and air force. He used to talk about "Lebensraum", living space. Germany needed more living space. First he started in the Rhineland and took it over. He did have some case for that, but then it was Czechoslovakia and then he took the whole of Czechoslovakia. Finally when they went into Poland the other governments said, "That's enough" and we had the second world war.

During this time I wanted to be a teacher. I knew this from quite a young age. I was doing my training. I started on the Monday in Birmingham and we all evacuated to Coalville in Leicestershire. War broke out on the Sunday morning. I was there for three weeks but we had left half the children back in Birmingham. I was sent back. With the schools closed it was dead boring for the children. There was just nothing to do.

Then they started having classes in peoples' front rooms. There would be a maximum of twelve children. The children who came had to be within two minutes of home to get back in case of an air raid. We took anyone from the age of five to the age of fourteen which was the leaving age, believe it or not, for most children in those days. I used to go to two houses in the morning and one in the afternoon with my case. Really it was a case of setting work and going through it. Really it was like a village school and we had quite a good atmosphere. We managed to have a Christmas party at one of these houses.

### Deciding Action

Then I received my call up papers to join the Royal Warwickshire Regiment which was the local infantry regiment. I didn't fancy it at all. I wasn't interested in the army. My mother was a pacifist. Nobody likes to be shot at and I didn't fancy shooting at someone else. At the same time I didn't want to see the things that were happening in Germany happen in our own country. I agreed that the powers that be were right to say "That's enough. We must stop it."

Since I believed those things it would have been very hard to say, "Well, I believe those things but I'd better leave it to someone else to do the nasty side of it." And so I settled down with the idea that I had got to be some sort of a soldier. I just hoped that it wouldn't be for too long. As it turned out it was nearly for six years.

### My Experiences in the Intelligence Unit of the Army

In an infantry battalion there are four rifle companies. Those are the soldiers you think of when you imagine "a soldier". Then there are support companies or groups. They might have antitank guns or be signalers. In my case I was in the Intelligence Section.

### "The enemy"

Sometimes I'm asked if we hated the enemy. There were some people who love to hate anybody, anybody who is different. You get an element of those people amongst soldiers. But most of us didn't think of it like that. They were the other side. You were in this situation and they were the other side. It was your job to oppose each other.

One of our duties was to sort prisoners out. There were only eight of us: an officer, myself (I was the sergeant), and six other blokes. Intelligence in the

army is nothing to do with being clever but is just the word used for information. Our job was with information, getting it from the German side. All we wanted to know was whom we were up against so when prisoners came in we wanted to know the name of the regiment or unit they belonged to. That was then put together.

These prisoners, they were just like us. They carried the same things. I used to feel sorry for them. The idea was that while they were still frightened, if somebody shouted at them they might give out information that they wouldn't later on. The man doing this was a German speaker, an Austrian Jew who went to England at the start of the war, but whose family was killed in concentration camps during the war. I had to keep my eye on this man who was meant to give prisoners the "tactical squeeze" because I was a great believer in the Geneva Convention which said how prisoners should be treated. He would go at it and overdo it a bit sometimes if you didn't watch him, but I could well understand why. His life had been completely wrecked.

In war people die. Who is responsible?

We used to watch observation posts. We didn't have to shoot because that would have shown where we were. We weren't much involved in shooting people. There was a lot to do with maps and that side of things I enjoyed. We used to take Dutch men out into no man's land in front of the troops and leave them there. They might come back in a week's time and tell us what they had seen.

I was never involved in actual fighting although I was near it and amongst it. The difficulty is you can't say you haven't had a hand in getting somebody killed. That's a difficulty not only for soldiers, but once you are in a war, for everybody. Somebody making shells in a factory is just as guilty as a soldier really. It's hard to cut yourself off from it once a war starts. Even if you eat a meal, some food would have to come from America. Food would have to come in ships. The German U-boats would be trying to sink the ships so the navy would have boats there trying to stop the U-boats. It's terribly, terribly difficult to get it quite straight.

When the war ended...

At the end of the war I spent a few months with a military government unit. It was to do with food. We had food experts. We employed a lot of German people. I started to learn German. The Colonel's secretary, a lovely German lady, used to give me a lesson once a week. She also taught me quite a lot about music. I used to go to a concert each week. Even in quite a small city they still had

kept their symphony orchestra going. She used to explain what was on the program to me.

I met a man there who had been in the same place as myself, but on the German side. We were sort of comrades—"Wasn't it rotten? Don't people realize how rotten it was?" That sort of talk. It wasn't hate. We weren't seething to get at each other. We didn't mostly hate each other at all.

In retrospect...Would I do the same again?

I've never consciously aimed at somebody, but you can't disentangle yourself. You're part of it. It's not fair to blame the lads with the guns because we are all part of it. This is the difficulty. I still think that pacifists are right. When push comes to shove, there is no doubt that we shouldn't fight. But even now I don't know what I would do if it happened again. I am 80 and I haven't been able to resolve this all my life.