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The Friends' Ambulance Unit in the First World War

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Abstract: The Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU) was created shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. It was an attempt to provide young Friends (Quakers) with the opportunity to serve their country without sacrificing their religious principles. However, it was considered by some members to be in direct opposition to the Society's fundamental religious tenets, and thus remained a cause of internal conflict throughout the war. Nevertheless, the civilian relief work that was carried out by the FAU early in the war, in the region of Flanders, aligned the unit's activities much more closely with the religious principles of the Society. The FAU assisted thousands of civilians trapped in the besieged and battered town of Ypres, working intensively in the containment and treatment of the typhoid epidemic that swept the region, locating sufferers, providing them with medical care, and inoculating people against the disease. It helped in the purification of the town's contaminated drinking water, and distributed milk for infants and food and clothing to the sick and needy. It helped found hospitals and orphanages, made provision for schooling, and organised gainful employment for refugees.

Keywords: Quaker; ambulance; pacifism; humanitarian aid; volunteers; First World War; Ypres

1. Introduction

This essay documents the response of a particular section of British society to the outbreak of what would later become universally known as the First World War. The collective in question, mostly young pacifists belonging to the Society of Friends (or Quakers), formed a voluntary ambulance unit to take out to the war zones of France and Belgium. Despite its considerable achievements, there is a general paucity of scholarly publication on the work of what became known as the Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU). (For exceptions, see Meyer 2015; Wynter 2016b. See also Palfreeman 2017).¹ Created at the beginning of August 1914, the unit was not a response to conscription. It was formed and began to operate long before military service became obligatory, with the intention of giving medical assistance to sick and wounded soldiers at the front—an objective that was seen by some to be in direct opposition to one of the Society's fundamental religious tenets, and one that would cause internal conflict among its members.

Since its origins in the English Civil War, in the seventeenth century, the Quaker faith has been defined by its commitment to peace. In a declaration to King Charles II of England in 1660, George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends, states,

All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and

¹ Particularly noteworthy, whilst not focusing entirely on the FAU, is the "Whitefeather Diaries" social media project that tells the stories of individuals who were opposed to the war—some of whom became members of the Unit: <http://www.whitefeatherdiaries.org.uk/> (Religious Society of Friends 2016).

this is our testimony to the whole world [. . .] the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.²

However, throughout its history, there has been an ongoing struggle within the Society of Friends regarding its response to warfare. The South African Boer War (1899–1902) saw the first serious violation of the Quaker peace testimony, when a number of prominent Friends supported the British Empire’s struggle against what they considered to be a cruel and inhumane people. Some of the younger, firmly committed Friends reacted with outrage, prompting what became known as the “Quaker Renaissance”, during which devotion to the peace testimony was reinforced as a central tenet of Quaker faith (Kennedy 1984). A document entitled “Our Testimony for Peace”, approved by London Yearly Meeting in 1912, underlined the rejection of war and violence as the fundamental principle on which the Society was built, and would become the foundation for twentieth-century Quaker resistance to war. Following the outbreak of war in Europe, in May 1915 the Yearly Meeting created the Friends’ Service Committee (FSC) “to strengthen the Peace testimony among Friends of military age” (Kennedy 2016). The committee made clear where the Friends’ loyalty lay:

Christ demands of us that we adhere, without swerving, to the methods of love, and therefore, if a seeming conflict should arise between the claims of His service and those of the State, it is to Christ that our supreme loyalty must be given, whatever the consequences. We should however remember that whatever is our highest loyalty to God and humanity is at the same time the highest loyalty that we can render to our nation.³

So, commitment to peace and love for fellow human beings were consolidated, once more, as central to the Christian beliefs of Quakers. But the advent of war in Europe would again provoke irreconcilable differences of opinion about what should be their response to war—differences that would lead to the Quakers becoming more sharply divided than ever. The Friends’ Ambulance Unit would be at the centre of this internal conflict.

Despite its name, denounced by some as misleading, the Friends’ Ambulance Unit was never actually an official organ of the Society of Friends and though it gained the sympathy and support of many of the Society’s members, its relationship with the latter remained somewhat ambiguous. Later in the war, after the introduction of conscription, this relationship would reach breaking point.⁴ Here, however, the focus is upon the civilian relief work that was carried out by the FAU early in the war, in the region of Flanders, and that, if only in the short term, aligned the unit’s activities much more closely with the religious principles of the Society.

The sudden advent of war triggered some uncertainty about what had previously seemed unshakeable religious beliefs. Here, we question how it was that young men with fundamentally pacifist beliefs were drawn, voluntarily, into the European war. What prompted these men to offer their services on active military fronts, in apparent contradiction of their religious principles? By examining the nature of the work carried out by these volunteers, and the values upon which such work was based, it is hoped that the apparent incongruity may be lessened, if not completely resolved. With this aim in mind, a brief descriptive account is given of the activities of the FAU in France and Belgium, with particular focus on the work carried out in the devastated town of Ypres.⁵

² Extract from a declaration to [Quaker Organisation 1661](http://quaker.org/legacy/minnfm/peace/A%20Declaration%20to%20Charles%20II%201660.htm). The full text of the original declaration is available at <http://quaker.org/legacy/minnfm/peace/A%20Declaration%20to%20Charles%20II%201660.htm>.

³ From a statement presented to London Yearly Meeting by a committee appointed by young men of enlistment age present at Yearly Meeting 1915. Available online at <http://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/23-89/>.

⁴ For further discussion, see [Wynter 2016a](#). Wynter focuses chiefly on the FAU Committee’s response to the threat and enactment of conscription and the effect this had upon the internal workings of the Unit and its personnel. Her work represents a vital contribution to an almost nonexistent academic historiography on the work of the FAU during World War I.

⁵ Flanders would become infamous as the field of the successive battles that took place in the Ypres Salient. The First Battle of Ypres took place from 19 October to 22 November 1914; the Second Battle of Ypres from 22 April to 25 May 1915; the Third

2. Methodology

Tatham and Miles's official history of the Friends' Ambulance Unit offers an extraordinarily comprehensive, if somewhat effusive, first-hand account of the daily activities of the unit's various sections in France and Belgium (Tatham and Miles 1920).⁶ Similar publications produced by members of the French Motor Convoys and the FAU Ambulance Trains (see, for example, Lidbetter and Monk-Jones 1919; Harrison and Young 1919) record the undertakings of these particular divisions, as do the accounts of some individual volunteers (see, for example: Catchpool 1940; Pearson and Pearson 2015; Pettifer 2014). In addition to these published sources—for the most part, sadly, out of print and difficult to obtain—many individual members of the FAU kept diaries and described the work being done in correspondence with their families and friends. It is these texts, not intended for publication, that offer the writers' spontaneous, heartfelt reactions to what was going on around them. Just like in the letters home of many thousands of soldiers and other first-hand witnesses of those tragic events, tales of heroics are told together with all their blips and blemishes, when chinks appearing in the outer-armour of supreme courage and boundless good humour reveal moments of anger and revulsion and utter despair at the horror of it all. They also reveal something of the moral and religious dilemma being faced by these particular volunteers. (See, for example, Catchpool 1940; Pearson and Pearson 2015; Pettifer 2014.)

Whilst of inestimable social and historical value, most of these documents remain hidden in the archives of libraries and universities and in private collections all over Britain and beyond. Though widely dispersed, and not on general view, most are, nevertheless, available to the interested reader. They offer detailed insight into the undertakings of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, as well as into the various motivating forces driving the individual members of this particular band of brothers.⁷

3. The Declaration of War: A Quaker Dilemma

The August Bank Holiday of 1914 was one of pleasant sunshine and British families—Quakers included—were making the most of the long weekend. While the advent of war had not been entirely unheralded, few could have possibly foreseen the disastrous events that were about to unfold and that would drag every major country in Europe into one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of humankind.

Existing alliances meant that countries were bound to support one another in the case of conflict. The Germans and Austro-Hungarians were confident that they would easily defeat Russian and French forces and they were sure that, as it was not in Britain's interests, the latter would not become involved in the conflict. They were wrong. Britain would be duty-bound to defend its weaker neighbours, and when German troops entered Belgium by force, the British had no alternative: Prime Minister Asquith and the Cabinet instructed King George V to declare war on the German Empire.⁸

In the great wave of patriotism and national solidarity, thousands of British men signed up for the fight—many spurred on by the then-popular but mistaken belief that it would all be over by Christmas. Far from being over by Christmas, however, the war would last until 11 November 1918, claiming

Battle of Ypres (the Battle of Passchendaele), 31 July to 10 November 1917; and the Fourth Battle of Ypres (known as the Battle of the Lys) over 9–18 April 1918.

⁶ Tatham and Miles were themselves both members of the unit, part of the group of enthusiastic young men bound for France in what they themselves describe as "knight errant fashion", bent on carrying out good and heroic deeds. Their account of events, whilst incredibly informative, cannot be described as either detached or objective.

⁷ See reference section for archival details.

⁸ Conscious of the fact that Belgium presented a prime strategic base of attack for any power wishing to invade Britain, in 1839 the British Government had negotiated the Treaty of London, guaranteeing Belgian neutrality. It was signed by all the major European powers. When, in their lust for war, the Germans renounced the Treaty of London in 1914, they thought the British would follow suit. But Belgium's ports were not far from the British coast and German control of Belgium might easily have become a serious threat to Britain. When, on 4 August 1914, German troops invaded Belgium, en route for France, and Britain declared war on Germany, the Kaiser remarked that Britain had foolishly committed herself to war for the sake of a "scrap of paper".

the lives of more than nine million soldiers, including more than 880,000 British, and some seven million civilians, while more than twenty million people were wounded. There was also material mass destruction on an unprecedented scale, with entire towns and cities razed to the ground, causing still further misery and untold suffering.

In Britain, young men were being bombarded by the plea that their country needed them, and they were responding *en masse*. Over a million men had enlisted by January 1915. This would have important repercussions for Quakers, explains Rubinstein (2015): “With virtually every newspaper and prominent publicist, almost all politicians and the vast majority of public opinion on the pro-war side, it was not easy for Friends, particularly young male ones, to stand aside” (Rubinstein 2015, p. 4). But while tens of thousands of Britons clamoured to enlist, others, for various reasons, felt that they could not. As pacifists, for ethical, moral, religious, or humanitarian reasons, they believed it to be wrong to kill fellow human beings. Within this section of society were Quakers, for whom the outbreak of war presented a serious and unpleasant personal dilemma. Many felt the urge to do their duty for their country but struggled to reconcile this with their duty to God, to promote peace and to oppose war, seeking other means to settle disputes. “We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world”, states the Quaker Peace Testimony (From a declaration to Quaker Organisation 1661).

When war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, however, Quakers had no clear guidance as to what their response should be. As surprising as it might seem, Friends were by no means unanimous in their attitudes to war and peace: while the majority opposed the war, there was a small but strident minority that showed fervent support. Some of the letters published in the Quaker journal *The Friend* clearly illustrate the internal conflict within the Society. It was clear that some individuals found it difficult to apply Quaker peace tenets at such a time. Where the politicians’ attempts at conciliation had failed, then they believed there was justification for answering the call to arms, in defence of vulnerable nations. A message “To men and women of goodwill in the British Empire”, issued by the Meeting for Sufferings,⁹ acknowledged that the British Government had “made most strenuous efforts to preserve peace” and had entered the war “under a grave sense of duty to a smaller State to which we had moral and treaty obligations”. (London Yearly Meeting 1914). In such circumstances, some Friends believed that the individual was at liberty to support the war effort with a clear conscience.

Although the Society of Friends opposed war, argued prominent member, Edward Grubb, “it seems that *this* war has been forced upon us by circumstances; and we do not see how our country’s share in it could have been avoided except by refusal to fulfil her obligations of honour, and to stand up against an unjust attack on a weaker nation” (Rubinstein 2015, p. 3). Others went further. Quaker Albert Wilson MD served in the French Medical Corps and he called for Quaker youth to unite to the cause. “It is a Christians’ war,” declared Wilson, “a war against rape, massacre, cruelty, hate, injustice and every vice we can mention”.¹⁰ Relatively few, however, took this stance. Most were of the opinion that any war was directly opposed to Quaker beliefs and to the “law of love”. It soon became overwhelmingly clear that the outbreak of war had left many Friends in a quandary and many would remain so as, throughout the conflict, the debate continued. Roughly a third of all Quaker men of military age—some 259 men—enlisted in the armed services. Of these, forty-three joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and thirty or so became members of home front militia. Perhaps most alarming for many members of the Society was that fifteen men were actively involved in army recruitment. This issue led to resignations from the Society.¹¹

The York Conference, “The Present Call to Arms and its effect on our Peace Principles” was very well attended. The decided opinion of the meeting was that no cause, however just, could obliterate

⁹ Meeting for Sufferings is an executive committee of Britain Yearly Meeting, the body that acts on behalf of members of the Religious Society of Friends.

¹⁰ Albert Wilson MD, *The Friend*, 5 February 1915, p. 109.

¹¹ York Preparative Meeting Minutes, 23 September 1914. Brotherton Library, Leeds University.

the inherent wrong in war. The present crisis, the meeting concluded, should encourage Friends to hold even more strongly to their peace principles. Friends should work for a lasting peace, attempt to limit arms competition, and help to heal devastated lands. Nevertheless, members were asked to respect the decisions of individuals with regard to the question. At Clifford Street Preparative Meeting, held at Bootham School in 1915, the minutes note,

Realising that the question of taking up arms is one that must be decided by each individual according to the dictates of his own conscience, our warm sympathy goes out to those who feel that their conscience will not allow them to respond to the call that is being made upon them and also to those who feel that their duty compels them to enlist (York Preparative Meeting Minutes, 24 October 1915).¹²

3.1. Civilian Relief Work—The Only Option?

Regardless of any differences among individuals within the Society, in attitudes towards taking up arms, Friends were compelled by conscience to help those affected by the war—whether by administering aid to refugees in France and Belgium or by offering shelter to those who had fled to Britain. The European war saw a revival of the Friends War Victims Relief Committee (FWVRC), originally set up in 1870 to help civilian victims of the Franco-Prussian War. Many Quakers now became members, working at home in Britain and abroad, in agricultural and building work, for example, as well as in medical care, or in education, offering much needed assistance to the war's civilian victims. Many of the younger men, however, were anxious to carry out more challenging work in the war zones. They wanted to share the dangers and the deprivations being suffered by their countrymen, who were risking their lives at the front. Like them, the young Friends wished to serve their country, but without renouncing their pacifist beliefs, and they believed that one way of being able to do this was by creating an ambulance unit for service on one of the war fronts.

Among the leading advocates of the proposed ambulance unit were Philip J. Baker; his brother, Allan R. Baker; Arnold S. Rowntree; and Sir George Newman.¹³ The idea was put to the Society of Friends at the Meeting for Sufferings in London on 7 August, soon after the outbreak of war, but it did not receive the support hoped for. Nevertheless, Philip Baker, former President of the Cambridge Union Society, put the idea into action. His appeal for volunteers to form an ambulance unit was published in *The Friend* on 21 August, and met with a tremendous response. Among the Friends who were keen to volunteer were young men like Alister Macdonald, son of the first Socialist Prime Minister of Britain, Ramsay MacDonald. He declared himself to be “100% behind” his father's anti-war stand. “It is perfectly clear in my mind that I would sooner be shot than shoot at somebody,” explained Macdonald, “and a lot of my friends felt the same way. We couldn't kill anything. We would sooner be killed than kill. Joining the FAU was a satisfactory compromise”.¹⁴ Many Quaker elders harboured strong reservations about the proposed ambulance unit, however, as indicated by several letters published in *The Friend*. One reader proclaims,

[T]o join such a corps is to forsake our testimony entirely. An ambulance corps at the rear, healing the fighters to fight again, is as much a part of the military equipment of to-day as the man with the bayonet doing his deadly work on the field of battle, and it will be deplorable

¹² Albert Wilson MD, *The Friend*, 5 February 1915, p. 109.

¹³ Philip John Baker was born in 1889 into a Quaker family. He was an accomplished scholar and an outstanding athlete, competing in the Olympic Games before and after the First World War. A staunch supporter of equal rights, he backed the Suffragette movement, campaigning for votes for women. Arnold S. Rowntree was director of the Cocoa Works at Rowntree & Co. In 1910 he also became an MP for York and worked indefatigably to get Parliament to recognise the rights of conscientious objectors during the First World War. Fellow Quaker, George Newman was, at the time, Chief Medical Officer to the Board of Education. After the war, in 1919, he would also be appointed Chief Medical Officer to the Ministry of Health. The annual reports he wrote for both these posts were enormously influential and widely acclaimed.

¹⁴ Peter Liddle interview with Alister Gladstone Macdonald. LIDDLE/WW1/CO/062, Macdonald, Alistair.

if any of our young Friends should so fall away from their peace principles as to take part in this work.¹⁵

Such letters, however, provoked equally passionate reply:

I cannot share the point of view of those who are horrified at helping people to get well, for fear that if they do get well, they will want to fight again. It seems to me a curious illustration of how blind adherence to tradition drives men into a position utterly inconsistent, not merely with Christianity, but with common humanity.¹⁶

Another reader asks, “Are we going to help and encourage those who would, regardless of personal risk, play the part of the Good Samaritan, or are we, like the Pharisee, going to pass by on the other side”?¹⁷ Several more put pen to paper to give public thanks to the organisers of the proposed ambulance unit for providing such an opportunity for service for the younger and eager-spirited Friends. Then, in September 1914, the Meeting for Sufferings issued a letter stating the official stance of the Society: “We see danger to principle in undertaking any service auxiliary to warfare which involves becoming part of the military machine.” Far from being the final pronouncement on the situation, however, the debate continued, with heated exchanges from both sides. At the Meeting for Sufferings on 6 November 1914, John Moreland proposed that the Meeting unitedly affirm that voluntary Red Cross duty was work in which Friends could freely engage, not being required to enlist in the Army (as opposed to Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) workers) or to carry weapons. While the Peace Committee declared that volunteer ambulance workers were deserving of sympathy, it was ruled that there was not sufficient unanimity in the Meeting to adopt Moreland’s proposal. Nevertheless, the position of the Meeting for Sufferings was never intended to be binding on the conscience of individuals—liberty of conscience being a fundamental Quaker tenet. In other words, it was down to the conscience of the individual with regard to his or her own course of action—a point underlined by W. S. Rowntree, a supporter of the proposed ambulance unit:

I fully recognize that these Friends, in their own words ‘see danger to principle in undertaking any service auxiliary to warfare which involves becoming part of the military machine’ . . . but the application of a principle must be a matter of individual conscience . . . And in any case, it seems clear that anyone who pays taxes is doing much more to keep the military machine going than a worker in an ambulance corps who succours the wounded on *both* sides. Let not either of these condemn the other, but let each be fully persuaded in his own mind.¹⁸

So, while there would never be complete agreement between Friends, it was also acknowledged that no individual should be condemned for their personal decision. J. Ormerod Greenwood later summarises the situation being faced by young Quakers at that moment in time:

Each young [male] Quaker had personal decisions to make; and from the first there was a whole spectrum of choice before him. He might volunteer as a soldier, or join the non-combatant service in the Forces, or work in ancillary bodies such as the Red Cross or the Y.M.C.A. [. . .] [H]e might volunteer for one of the non-Quaker relief bodies such as the Belgian or Serbian Relief Funds. He might apply to the Friends Ambulance Unit; or prepare, as conscription grew near, for alternative service on the land, in forestry or in a hospital. He might offer to go to France or Holland, or later, to Poland or Russia, for the Friends War Victims Relief Committee; or he might stay at home and work for the Emergency Committee set up for the relief of distressed enemy aliens in Britain. (Greenwood 1975, pp. 178–79)

¹⁵ Charles Edwards Gregory, letter to the editor, *The Friend*, 29 August 1914.

¹⁶ E. Richard Cross, letter to the editor, *The Friend*, 14 September 1914.

¹⁷ Alfred J. King, letter to the editor, *The Friend*, 5 September 1914.

¹⁸ Letter to *The Friend*, 2 October 1914.

For those able-bodied youths eager to share the vicissitudes of their fellow countrymen, but who were prevented by their conscience from enlisting in the armed forces, the Friends' Ambulance Unit seemed the perfect alternative. Young Quaker, Julian Pease Fox immediately offered his services as a driver. His argument was typical of his co-volunteers: "Everybody my age was making some kind of sacrifice and I didn't want to be left out of it. Mother was bitterly opposed to war, but grudgingly accepted that the FAU was a compromise solution".¹⁹

The idea of a volunteer ambulance unit also roused the interest of some who were not Quakers—young men like Olaf Stapledon. Stapledon admits to being 'thoroughly bewildered' as to what course of action he should take upon the outbreak of the conflict. He felt he could not enlist, but knew that he had to do something to help those affected by the war.

Like so many others I loathed the war and at the same time felt an increasingly urgent call to be doing something about it . . . I heard of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, an organisation of young Quakers who wished to carry on the great tradition of their faith by serving the wounded under fire while refusing to bear arms or submit to military discipline. That sounded like the real thing. (Stapledon 1935, p. 3)

Stapledon was aware that not all Friends were in favour of the Unit, but he did not concern himself with the argument. For him, it was the answer to his dilemma.

For my part I had not the heart to stand aside any longer . . . Somehow I *must* bear my share of the great common agony. To refuse it entirely, even though the war could bring no good to Europe, seemed at that time base. Yet by now it was becoming clear to me that I must not enlist . . . I had no belief that killing, simply as such, must in all circumstances be wrong. It was war, modern war that was wrong, and foolish, and likely to undermine civilisation. It was nationalism that was wrong; and militarism, and glib surrender of one's moral responsibility to an authority that was not really fit to bear it. (Stapledon 1935, p. 3)

As the ambulance unit's intention was to administer emergency medical aid to fallen troops, it was, from the outset, inevitably implicated in the military endeavours of Britain and her allies. Some Friends continued to argue that there was little or no difference between the Unit's work and that of the military medical service—an uncomfortable alliance that was later to become further consolidated with the introduction of conscription. Olaf Stapledon sums up the situation as he saw it:

To all arguments against the FAU I am inclined to say finally this. Yes, it was an attempt to have the cake and eat it, to go to war and be a pacifist. Its basis was perhaps illogical; but it was a sincere expression of two overmastering and wholesome impulses, the will to share in the common ordeal and the will to make some kind of protest against the common folly. (Stapledon 1935, p. 4)

Consequently, the FAU would never become an official body of the Society of Friends, nor would it ever be completely reconciled with the Quaker faith²⁰. Nevertheless, it raised money and support via the Society, publicising its "adventures" in the *Friend* and, later, adopted the title "Friends' Ambulance Unit", thus creating a close association with the society in the mind of the public. The enterprise began with a donation of £100. By the end of the war it had received voluntary subscriptions, mostly from members of the Society of Friends, amounting to £138,000.²¹

While the persistent argument as to the moral and religious acceptability of such a unit continued to play out in the public domain, private preparations were begun for its creation. A training camp

¹⁹ Julian Pease Fox, interview with Peter Liddle. Brotherton Library Special Collections, University of Leeds: LIDDLE/WW1/CO/036.

²⁰ The exact proportion of Friends holding this conviction is unclear.

²¹ Funding was raised, principally, among Friends both inside and outside of Britain. There were very few appeals made to the general British public.

was established at the Quaker centre, Jordans, in Buckinghamshire, where the young volunteers would receive instruction in first-aid, stretcher-drill, field cookery, and the basics of sanitation and hygiene, while frequent long-distance route marches through the countryside would help improve their stamina and general fitness. The ancient Mayflower barn was used for meals and recreation, while the men slept in tents in the orchard, or in the field used for drill and sports. The camp's leaders explain the general ethos of the camp:

The training was short and sharp. Men arrived from civilian life, in civilian attire, and with civilian habits, and in five weeks were turned out as efficient as it was possible to make them in so short a time [. . .] The main aim of camp life was not to turn out men qualified as only experience could teach them, but to turn them out fitted so far as possible to receive the benefits of experience. To this end they were accustomed to work together, to live together, to act with some measure of discipline and to face the disagreeable as part of their lot. (Tatham and Miles 1920, p. 243)

The enterprise began with a team of 43 volunteers, and by the end of the war there were 720 people working in England and 640 elsewhere in Europe. A further 420 had been involved at some stage during the war, making a total of over 1800 individuals who had worked for the organisation. Records show that some 102 women worked with the FAU, 48 staffing hospitals and other medical facilities at home, in England, and 54 serving abroad.²²

In addition to medical volunteers, there were engineers, mechanics, architects, accountants, and other skilled men involved in the various different branches of the ambulance unit's work. There were also very many unskilled labourers—young men who threw themselves selflessly and with seemingly limitless enthusiasm into a variety of tasks. These were often repetitive and mundane duties, away from the excitement of the front lines—missions that were, perhaps, without glory, but not without danger. Indeed, twenty of these young volunteers were to give their lives in the performance of their duties. Nine were killed by shell-fire or in bombing raids and the others died from illness contracted during service. Several more were wounded. On a more gratifying note, at least 93 FAU volunteers were decorated for their bravery. For the invaluable service it rendered during the war, the FAU would receive recognition from the civil and military authorities of Belgium, France, and Britain.

Negotiations for the initial deployment of the volunteers proved more complicated than had been anticipated. In mid-October, after six weeks, the Jordans camp was disbanded and the men were ordered to return to their homes to await further instructions. They did not have to wait long. Towards the end of the month, war correspondent Geoffrey Young returned from France, bringing news of the desperate predicament of the Belgian Army.²³ The Belgians and the French were incurring enormous losses and their medical resources were being strained to breaking point. Young was deeply moved by the sight of scores of men, despite their often-indescribable wounds, patiently awaiting their turn to receive medical assistance—assistance that was often painfully slow in coming.

The scenes he came upon in Calais, says Young, “came as an overwhelming, infinitely painful proof that here lay work close at hand” (Young 1915, p. 4). Medical provision was, at the beginning of the war, distressingly inadequate, with a woefully insufficient number of doctors available for military service and a lack of fully trained nurses, as the professionalisation of nursing in Belgium was still in its infancy and nursing care was still in the hands of religious orders. The scale and severity of the injuries being caused by the new weapons of mass destruction employed in the war took the Allied medical services by surprise, as did the extent of wound infection. Enormous open wounds were inevitably

²² See the [British Red Cross 2014](#) for a full list of the names of FAU volunteers. The personnel cards of FAU volunteers in the Library of the Religious Society of Friends can be consulted online at <http://fau.quaker.org.uk/>.

²³ Geoffrey Winthrop Young was a renowned climber and scholar. He studied Classical Languages at Cambridge where, as well as winning prizes for poetry, he wrote *The Young Roof Climbers Guide to Trinity*, a satirical parody of the early (and rather pompous) Alpine guide-books.

contaminated by bacteria from the richly-manured fields of Flanders, as soil or muddy fragments of clothing were often projected deep into wounds. This, together with delays in the recovery of wounded from the battlefield, and the often-insanitary conditions of their evacuation to the rear, led to tremendous loss of life.

3.2. The First Anglo-Belgian Ambulance Unit Sets Out for the Front

The eager young ambulance volunteers were rapidly assembled in London, issued with uniforms and otherwise readied, whilst all manner of other equipment and provisions was hurriedly purchased and prepared for shipping. They would be known as the First Anglo-Belgian Ambulance, and would leave for Dunkirk at 2 o'clock on Friday 28 October, from Charing Cross. The Unit would function under the auspices of the Joint War Committee formed by the Order of St John and the British Red Cross. As well as extensive material help, the British Red Cross Society (BRCS) offered the Unit advice and support in France and Belgium and, furthermore, this collaboration would afford the Unit some considerable credibility in the eyes of both military and civil authorities. In sum, the BRCS proffered assistance without which the Unit could not easily have accomplished much of the work that it eventually did. The unit's creators were eager to explain the motives behind the enterprise and to justify its purpose as in-keeping with the Quaker faith:

What are the purposes of the Unit? First, to provide an efficient and effective Ambulance Unit, a piece of sound workmanship, a good instrument skilfully used; secondly, to render the ministry of compassion to men, women and children of whatever nation, caught in the toils of misery, suffering and death on account of the war, the splendid errand of extending the frontiers of life; and thirdly, there is the practice of the Quaker ideal, the application to the form and service of the Unit of the living principles for which Quakerism stands in the world.²⁴

Throughout their training—and, indeed, throughout their service abroad—the religious beliefs of the young volunteers would remain central to their daily activity. They were allowed into France on the understanding that they would not preach, or otherwise attempt to convert others, but they would be at liberty to continue to practice their faith.

Their boat was only a few miles out from Dover when the men met their first sight of war and its dreadful consequences. The British cruiser HMS *Hermes* had been torpedoed by a German submarine. Some of the Unit's members immediately manned the lifeboats while others helped haul the half-drowned men onto the decks and unpacked its medical stores to be able to attend those in need. As the great HMS *Hermes* plunged silently and tragically from sight, the *Invicta* headed back to Dover with the survivors.²⁵ The Unit had experienced the tragedy of war even before reaching its destination.

That same afternoon, the Unit set out once more from Dover, reaching Dunkirk in the evening, without further incident. As it was too late to find lodgings, the men were given permission to stay on board the ship overnight. However, though exhausted after the day's events, none of them would sleep. There came an urgent call for their help with wounded soldiers lying in railway sheds not far from the quayside at Dunkirk. The enormous numbers of casualties that were being brought in from the Yser front had caused the system of evacuation to collapse under the deluge and now there were thousands of men, some very badly wounded, mounting up at the evacuation posts where, because of the lack of resources, they were receiving very little attention, either medical or otherwise. The weary but willing members of the Unit made their way in the darkness to the railway station, where there

²⁴ "3 Years Under the Red Cross, Fourth Report of the Friends' Ambulance Unit", in *The Friend*, 21 September 1917, p. 4.

²⁵ The first Royal Navy aircraft carrier, HMS *Hermes*, was sunk by a German U-boat on 31 October 1914, with the loss of 22 men.

was a dreadful spectacle awaiting them. The doors of the sheds were opened to reveal hundreds upon hundreds of wounded men lying on the dirty, straw-covered floor:

[T]he living, the dying, and the dead side by side, long rows of figures in every attitude of slow suffering or acute pain, of utter fatigue or dulled apathy, of appeal or despair. Out of the cool night air one passed through these high doors into an atmosphere that was insufferably revolting. It required a great effort of will to face the sight and stench of the countless gangrenous limbs that lay there helpless among the foul straw. This was a grim introduction to the Unit's work. None who were there can ever forget the horror and the hopelessness of that sight. (Tatham and Miles 1920, p. 7)

Faced with an almost impossible task, the volunteers set about doing what they could to ease the suffering, working day and night to give assistance to those in greatest need. Thankfully, British hospital ships the *Rewa* and the *Plassy* arrived in the following days, to begin evacuating the wounded troops. More volunteers sailed out from England to help with the work and over a period of three weeks they managed to complete the task. Once the work in the sheds was reduced to proportions with which the military medical service could cope by itself, the Unit withdrew, leaving the Army medical services in charge. This would be the Unit's *modus operandi* in all such future ventures, as Geoffrey Young explains:

The introduction to war-needs in the sheds showed us what should be the guiding principle of our work: to be at hand to step into the gaps as they opened, to be elastic, and be prepared to initiate and undertake any big task at any moment, and to be ready to surrender it again as the slower, more complete, official machinery moved up to replace us and relieve us. (Young 1915, p. 6)

On its fourth day in Dunkirk the FAU discovered the Hotel du Kursaal, a small wooden hotel at Malo-les-Bains. The hotel would serve as the FAU's headquarters until it was later transferred to the larger Hotel Pyl, on the same street. One of the advantages of having headquarters in Dunkirk was that it was also a base for the several Allied authorities with whom the Unit would have to work. The other was that it enabled fluid communication with England and facilitated the transport of goods and personnel between England and France.

Once the emergency of the evacuation sheds was under control, the Unit had to find further work. Passing through the small village of Woesten, to the north-west of Ypres, they discovered that the medical headquarters of a French Division was stationed there, and seized the opportunity to offer its assistance—an offer that was eagerly accepted. Laurence Cadbury:

It seems rather a queer thing for the French army to take on a totally unknown ambulance unit without references like that, but they did, and we were glad of the chance of course. They were short-handed and had only two doctors in the place so I suppose the chance of acquiring two doctors, two dressers and three Motor ambulances was too great temptation to resist so we settled in.²⁶

Thus, the Unit's ambulance work for the French began in earnest. This was just the sort of work that the men had hoped for—close to the front line aid posts, evacuating the wounded and often under shellfire. They quickly earned the respect of the French, as volunteer, Olaf Stapledon explains:

We became popular with the Division. Officers and men regarded us as amiable and efficient cranks. They were particularly amused because we wore shorts throughout the summer, and drank less than our ration of wine. Our pacifism was put down to some eccentricity

²⁶ Paul Cadbury, interview with Peter Liddle: LIDDLE/WW1/CO/016 Cadbury, Paul S. Brotherton Library Special Collections, University of Leeds.

of religion. We discussed it freely, and were treated with respect, sympathy and almost complete incomprehension. (Stapledon 1935, p. 359)

FAU volunteers would go on to establish and staff several military hospitals in France and Belgium, as well as running motorised medical convoys attached to the French Army, carrying over 260,000 patients.²⁷ It provided staff for two hospital ships, the *Western Australia* and the *Glenart Castle*, which transported over 33,000 sick and wounded men overseas; and four ambulance trains that transported over 520,000 cases. Later, FAU members also staffed recreation huts like the *Pig and Whistle* and the *Cat and Fiddle*, which did much to help boost the morale of servicemen.

All this represented a tremendous and sustained contribution to the military medical services of the allied nations throughout the war—a contribution that brought it into direct conflict with Quaker religious principles and would, eventually, lead to the threat of disownment by the Society of Friends. Meanwhile, however, there was one aspect of the work carried out by the ambulance volunteers that would, albeit temporarily, reduce the prevailing religious dissonance—a type of work neither envisaged nor planned for before they had set foot on foreign soil. It was rather stumbled upon incidentally, as we shall see, as the Friends traversed the fields of Flanders, determined to do good works and to bring succour to all those in need. Those in need, it had initially been assumed, would be sick and wounded soldiers. But in Flanders the Friends discovered an alarming reality that had hitherto been overlooked. There were civilians trapped in the war zone and existing in desperate circumstances. Nowhere was this more acute than in the besieged and battered town of Ypres where there were people sheltering in the cellars of their homes or in the dank and airless underground passageways and casements of the town's ancient fortifications.²⁸ Having discovered this dreadful state of affairs, the Friends, under the leadership of Geoffrey Winthrop Young, determined to provide for these wretched people as best they could.

3.3. Civilian Relief in Ypres

Ypres (or “Wipers”, as it would soon be nicknamed by British troops) was an important hub for the rail and road network in the area, and of vital strategic importance, as control of the town would be vital in blocking all access routes for the German Army through to the sea. As such, it formed an obvious German objective. Allied forces also recognised the value of Ypres, however, and resolved to defend it at all costs. With so much at stake, both sides committed great numbers of troops to the struggle for possession of the town. The tranquil market town of Ypres, once famous for its magnificent Cloth Hall and its cathedral, was about to become infamous throughout the world as a scene of not one but four of the heaviest and bloodiest battles of the war. The relentless bombing and shelling of the doomed town would claim the lives of many thousands of troops and civilians.

After the emergency work for the French, the Unit went to offer its medical services in Ypres. The men found the town apparently devoid of all inhabitants, but were informed by an RAMC worker that below the scenes of devastation and destruction, in the dank cellars and subterranean passageways forming the entrails of the ruined town, were the remainder of its inhabitants—the old and infirm, the homeless, the sick and the wounded who had nowhere left to turn. These people were existing in fear for their lives and in crowded, insanitary conditions. Both the French and the British armies had made some attempts to evacuate them, but with little success. Even if they had agreed to go, there was nowhere that could take them, as Geoffrey Young explains:

Their fate was sad; but it was illustrative of the conditions of that war, in which no provision whatever had ever been imagined for the civil population of the war zone—who ought, in every military preconception, simply not to be there. Poperinghe had no room for them,

²⁷ For further details, see “Quakers in the world”, available online at <http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/252>.

²⁸ The population of Ypres numbered about 18,000 in 1914. The influx of refugees took this figure to almost 20,000. Many continued to live in and around the town until early 1915.

the military trains could not accept them—overstrained already with troops at that stage of the fighting.

[. . .] So began our Ypres work, certainly the finest work in which I have been allowed by life to take a part. [. . .] It was a subterranean population, hopeless, often lightless, living on what they might and breeding disease, they were being killed and wounded by dozens whenever a direct hit smashed down above their cellar. (Young 1953, pp. 196–97)

This was the beginning of the civilian relief work of the Friends' Ambulance Unit—work that would continue until well after the conclusion of the war, and that would obtain the immediate approval among even the most ardent of dissenters at home. The unit was involved, primarily, in the containment and treatment of the typhoid epidemic that swept the region, locating sufferers and providing them with hospital and outpatient care, and inoculating some 27,000 people against the disease. It played a major part in the purification of drinking water after the destruction of the water supply, distributed milk for babies and infants, and dispensed food and clothing to the sick and needy. In collaboration with the parish priest of Ypres, Charles Delaere, and Soeur Marguerite of the Sisters of La Motte, the unit established and ran two large civilian hospitals: the Sacré Cœur Hospital in Ypres (1914–1915) and the Château Elizabeth Hospital in Poperinghe (1915–1916). Patients from the latter would eventually be moved to the Musée at Hazebrouck (1915–1917), the Barge Hospital at Watten (1915–1917), and the Ferme de Ryke ('the Farm') near Poperinghe. The FAU also helped to found and maintain orphanages at Wisques and Wizernes, near Saint-Omer; made provision for schooling; organised gainful employment for refugees; and, eventually, it became responsible for the final evacuations of the civilian population, during the Second Battle of Ypres.

In its rescue and relief work in Ypres, the FAU formed a special relationship with the local priest, Charles Delaere, and Soeur Marguerite of the Sisters of La Motte, the young nun who had become his loyal assistant. They were doing what they could to alleviate the desperate suffering of the remaining townsfolk. The convent St Marie became a medical out-station and the centre of FAU activity. The FAU's doctors also made home visits to patients unable to attend the clinic. Geoffrey Young sent moving reports back to the London office in an attempt to impress upon those in Britain the tremendous scale of the unanticipated problem with which the Unit was now dealing:

Here, daily almost, come our civilian wounded, women in large proportion, old men, and above all children [. . .] Wilhelminchen (7), our golden-haired pet, who calls herself 'dimples', and whose mother and grandmother were killed by the shell that wounded her. [. . .] Albert (16) who has lost a leg; Julia (2) with a head wound; Lucien (13) whose fingers were shot off; Bertha (3), who is all wounds; little Jules (4) who chuckles gaily over an amputated leg; babies of all ages [. . .] But the stories are too many and too sad to set down. There is, happily, little time in the rush of work for our boys to think of them. (Young 1915, p. 18)

Many Friends voiced their approval of this new branch of the FAU's work. Civilian aid was something wholeheartedly condoned, and donations increased in the light of this new commitment, from Friends and Red Cross branches throughout Britain.

The FAU joined forces with two Belgian countesses—Countess van den Steen de Jehay and Countess Louise d'Ursel—in an enterprise which would be known as the *Aide Civile Belge* (ACB), with the aim of maximizing the quality and the efficacy of civilian aid. The whole of uninvaded Belgium would subsequently be covered, together with a large section of the *Département du Nord* in France, into which large numbers of Belgian refugees had fled. The ACB set to work to save all that could be saved of the babies, the mothers, the old and infirm, and a great many others who needed help and comfort in the region of Flanders. The ACB implemented systematic aid measures to the sick and wounded; it distributed milk for babies, and food and clothing for refugees and others in need. Children were evacuated to safe colonies in France, orphanages were established, and for those children

remaining with their families, schools were opened, to meet the desperate needs in villages behind the lines. In collaboration with the British Army, the FAU undertook systematic measures to deal with the situation in and around Ypres. It was to identify and collect all civilian typhoid sufferers and transport them to hospitals, to purify the water supply, and to open inoculation centres. New volunteers from England joined the team, allowing the strategies to be implemented simultaneously.

3.4. *The Evacuation of Ypres*

On 8 May, the military authorities finally ordered the evacuation of Ypres—an estimated 5000 remaining civilians. Geoffrey Young and his men, with the help of the nuns, attempted to clear the remaining civilians out of their squalid cellars. Small children, babies, and old people were loaded into the ambulances and London buses that Young had managed to borrow from the British 2nd Army. Some 71,500 Allied soldiers were missing, wounded, or dead, for the sake of gaining three miles of territory, and there were 35,000 German casualties, before battle faded out on 24–25 May. The final exodus of civilians from Ypres marked the end of an era for the FAU in Flanders, and, potentially, an end to the tentative tolerance of the Society at home.

4. Conclusions

The undertaking of any service auxiliary to warfare was (and is) against Quaker religious principles. Thus, from the outset, the Friends' Ambulance Unit encountered opposition from within the Society of Friends. However, in its relief work among the civilians of Flanders, the FAU found renewed support from those at home. Far from aiding the machinery of war, the volunteers were practising the fundamental tenets of their Quaker religion—as well as preserving life in such extreme and unhappy circumstances, they were bringing the spirit of love to those in desperate need, caught up in the conflict through no fault of their own. The FAU brought not only momentary relief to these unfortunate people but also renewed hope—hope for a future less terrible than the living hell in which they had been entrapped. It would be difficult to find a finer example of devotion to the Quaker religion. The Unit's creator, Philip Baker, explains in typically unassuming terms the reasons for its practical success:

[A]ll this work was achieved . . . because of our strict adherence to the principle of doing what was needed, and what was not being done, whether or not we had expected to do it, whether or not it happened to suit our plans, and whether or not we wanted to undertake that work at that particular moment.²⁹

Young volunteer Charlie Dingle also spoke of the Unit's work in the region of Flanders, during those dark days of war. He expresses the religious value of its achievements—a sentiment echoed in the testimonies of many of those who played a part:

How thankful I felt that I had been enabled to become one of the Friends' Ambulance Unit; time has only increased that thankfulness, and after nearly two years of service I honestly feel that the existence of such a Unit has been, and is, of incalculable benefit to me and to the world at large. It seems a wonderful thing that a Unit, having as its ideals peace and brotherhood, should have been able to work for so long in the zone of war with its attendant denials of Christian principles³⁰.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

²⁹ Extract from a speech at Headquarters by Philip Baker, dated 2 May 1915. In documents of [Rowntree n.d.](#)

³⁰ Charlie Dingle, interview with Peter Liddle: LIDDLE/WW1/CO/024, Dingle, Charles Frederick. Brotherton Library Special Collections, University of Leeds.

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