

Stand against war

Peace Week revives memories for objector

Peace Week, which ended today, brought back some harrowing memories for Christchurch man Jack Rogers, who was one of about 800 men who refused to take up arms during World War 2. But on the plus side he met his wife-to-be while interned – who became a Marta Hari of sorts for the conscientious objectors detained. **Amanda Legge** reports.



JACK ROGERS stood before the court to defend his belief that it was wrong to go to war. The crown prosecutor looked him in the eye and said, "What would you do if the Japs landed at Castle Cliff and raped your mother?"

He replied: "Well, I don't really know, but I hope, I really hope I would do my utmost to interpose myself between my mother and the alleged rapist. And I wouldn't have a gun."

And that was it – 21-year-old Rogers had sealed his fate.

He was a military defaulter – one of the around 800 conscientious objectors to be locked up in New Zealand for the duration of World War 2, and sometimes even months after it had finished.

Wanganui-born Rogers, who has lived in Halswell with his wife Jean for 43 years, has been a lifetime campaigner for peace.

His story was featured in a documentary *Breath of Peace* that premiered on Sunday night in Christchurch as part of Peace Week celebrations. Rogers, now 86, and seven other Kiwi peace campaigners appear in the film.

He was one of the country's first conscientious objectors, motivated by his beliefs as a member of the Christian Pacifist Society. The son of then Wanganui mayor Bill Rogers, his decision not to go to war did not sit well with everyone in the town.

"I remember as a little boy listening to the minister at church and the readings, to love your enemies and turn the other cheek. And I used to think 'yes, that's good, but nobody was acknowledging that. Even in the church."

Rogers was sent to Wanganui

» Fact box

World War 2 saw an unprecedented expansion of government control over the lives of New Zealanders. The Labour government introduced military conscription.

More than 800 conscientious objectors were sent to detention camps. Leading pacifists were arrested and jailed for speaking out against the war.

Military defaulters were not allowed to vote in a general election until 1951.

Prison for a month after appearing for a second time before the courts. From there he was sent to the military barracks at Trentham, part of a group of conscientious objectors housed right next to young soldiers training to head overseas in the war.

But most of the time he was housed at Hautu Defaulters Detention Camp, set up by the government especially to house military defaulters on the volcanic plateau south of Lake Taupo. Hautu was nicknamed by many of the men housed there as New Zealand's own "Siberia" because it was so cold and isolated.

While there, Rogers became involved in "The Mail Run" – a secret link between Hautu and the nearby Rangipo Prison Camp. The two camps were about 8km apart, separated by rough pumice, manuka scrub country and the Tongariro River.

When the Christian Pacifists realised some of their friends had been sent to Rangipo Prison, at the time probably the smallest, most remote and



Conscientious objector Jack Rogers, 86, and his wife Jean, 79, met while he was at Hautu Defaulters' Detention Camp during World War 2. The camp is pictured above.

primitive prison in the country, they wanted to send messages of encouragement that weren't censored.

And so the Mail Run was born, started by one of Rogers' friends, Jack Hamerton. "Ham", as he was known, was the camp butcher, meaning he had to rise early but had several hours free in the afternoons.

One day he slipped out and reached a narrow swing bridge spanning the Tongariro River and came face to face with

a Rangipo prisoner who had an unsupervised job repairing boundary fences. An arrangement was made.

At the Hautu side of the swing bridge a large syrup tin was buried, where messages, newspaper cuttings and occasional treats like chocolate or prison tobacco were left for the Rangipo "postman".

He in turn would leave messages, articles for the underground magazine and letters to special friends and influential

contacts.

Hamerton managed the run for about a year, before deciding he was going to refuse to do prison labour because of his beliefs. This would mean he no longer had the freedom to be the postman and a new one would have to be found.

"That is how I came into the job," Rogers said.

All other letters going in and out of Hautu were censored.

That was until another means was discovered, which hap-

pened when Rogers met his wife-to-be Jean near the end of the war.

After the conscientious objectors had been detained for almost four years, the government decided they should receive dental treatment.

Rogers was booked in at the dental practice where Jean worked. The rest, as they say, is history.

Jean became crucial to the posting of uncensored letters.

To page A5

Halswell man's stand against war

From page A1

When other defaulters were sent in to have their teeth checked they would bring in letters for loved ones that Jean in turn would post.

Rogers was not released until the end of February, 1946 – six months after the war ended.

The reception from many in

Wanganui was frosty.

"Some shops wouldn't even serve him," Jean said.

Once let out, Rogers went straight to see his beloved Jean, whom he married on December 13, 1947. The couple moved to the South Island in 1948, buying a section in Halswell six years later where they built their own house and still live today.

They have four sons, the eldest of whom was caught up the Vietnam War ballot and a went to court as a conscientious objector.

Looking back, Rogers is a bit bitter about the time he spent Hautu or in prison for his beliefs. He sees himself simply as a man who stood up for what he believed in.