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Celebrations of war anger pacifist Connie

By Mike Crean

Fiftieth anniversary commemorations of World War 2 battles grate with Christchurch pacifist Connie Summers.

The only woman jailed in World War 2 for holding anti-war meetings said she was appalled at news pictures of old soldiers wearing their combat medals.

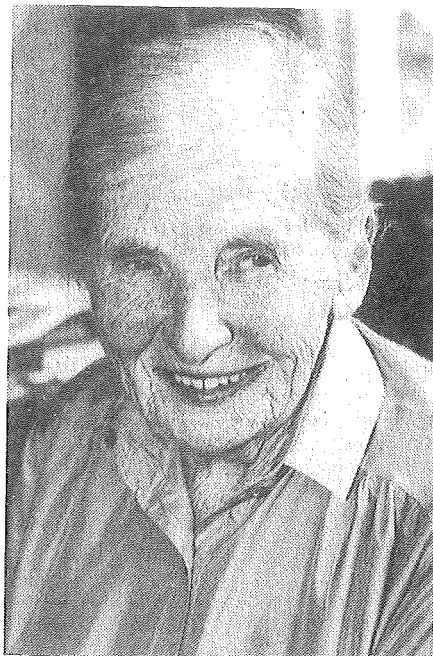
"You can be brave, great and noble without going to war," said Mrs Summers, who holds the courage of the fireman who protected a girl from possible burning under an upturned petrol tanker in higher regard than that of any war hero.

Bravery in war was often driven by circumstances and boosted by the peer group, she said. People went to war because they believed in it. Pacifists stayed behind because they believed against it and were often just as brave.

Being a life-time pacifist had been like pushing against the tide, the diminutive septuagenarian said. But she had never taken any notice of peer pressure. The cause had always seemed worth fighting for — "No, that's the wrong word: worth witnessing to," — and she had persevered even through a prison term and five other arrests.

Mrs Summers' husband and family of seven call her unbending and stubborn. It probably started when she was a child at Christchurch West school (now Hagley High) and was excused from daily prayers because of the insistence of her rationalist, agnostic father. This set her apart from the others at an early age.

After school she joined the Socialist Party, which was little more than a propaganda



Connie Summers

wing for the Labour Party. There she came under the influence of Christian pacifists and soon became a Christian. She has remained a Christian pacifist for nearly 60 years.

On a two-year stint in Wellington where she worked as a clerk Mrs Summers was arrested for denouncing the war from a street corner soapbox in 1940. She spent three months in a women's borstal and reforma-

tory. The matron referred to her as the institution's most dangerous prisoner because of her beliefs. But, said the matron, she would grow up and change her thinking.

"That matron would have been most disappointed to see me marching and arrested five times during the 1981 Springbok tour," Mrs Summers said.

Her whole family marched in those demonstrations, though Mrs Summers stayed true to her belief by eschewing violence and refusing to take part in breaking down fences.

She also marched against the Vietnam and Gulf wars.

During her imprisonment through a harsh Wellington winter Mrs Summers was locked outside the building each day to work in the garden and chop firewood. Inside the building the other inmates mended puttees for servicemen at the front — a job Mrs Summers objected to.

On her release she moved back to Christchurch and soon after married bookseller John Summers. He was a pacifist too, a Quaker who served overseas in World War 2 as a medical orderly.

Her Left-wing political background, strong family support and deep Christian belief had kept Mrs Summers going. The Christian ethic of peace provided a broader base to her pacifism which some anti-war people lacked. The support for war by some churches led her only to delve deeper into Christian teachings and conclude those churches were wrong.

The advance of pacifism was slow, Mrs Summers said. Another outbreak of war would draw masses of people to fight still. But she was sure more pacifists and other objectors would stand up next time than the last when she was nabbed from her soapbox.