

No Statues, But Courage Still

by Shelley Anderson

This August will mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. Statues will be unveiled, ceremonies and debates held, television series and books produced, all to commemorate a war that saw up to 37 million casualties.

Amid all these remembrances will be much rhetoric about the bravery of the dead and the sacrifices they made. It is important to reflect on history and to honor heroes. Both heroes and history teach us valuable lessons about how to model our lives. Yet there is one group of heroes and a hidden history regarding the First World War that is being neglected in this upcoming centenary.

What is lacking, amid the glorification of warriors and war, is a look at those who opposed the war and the movements they built. They, too, sacrificed much. They, too, have left a legacy. The valorization of these people, many of them women, is important. There are lessons in these stories for modern peacebuilders.

Hidden history of women's peace activism

It's unlikely there will be a memorial unveiled for the British anti-war activist Alice Wheeldon (1866-1919) and her daughters Hettie (1891-1920) and Winnie (1893-1953). But there should be. The Wheeldons were a working-class family, active in both the socialist and the women's suffrage movements. They were also pacifists. Like many other women, they had split with the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the UK's biggest suffrage organization, when WSPU leaders became pro-war.

When Alice's youngest son was refused conscientious-objector status, Alice, Hettie and Winnie organized the Derby branch of the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF). The NCF was a national organization that supported imprisoned conscientious objectors and their families. At one point during the war, the NCF's weekly newspaper had a circulation of 100,000—an astonishing accomplishment given that NCF offices were routinely raided by police and NCF activists were often imprisoned.

Alice was outspoken in her opposition to the war and provided shelter for men fleeing conscription. A government spy, posing as a conscientious objector, was given shelter by Alice. The *agent provocateur* then arranged for four vials of poison to be mailed to her. In January 1917, Alice, Hettie, Winnie and Winnie's husband were arrested for conspiracy to poison the prime minister and other government leaders.

It was a sensational case, deliberately “designed to intimidate anti-war forces.”* The trial was moved from Derby to London, where the family had less support. Even so, the courtroom was packed during the trial, which lasted less than a week. Government witnesses lied under oath about the manufactured conspiracy and the Wheeldon's involvement in it. Towards the end of the trial the charismatic suffrage leader, Emmeline Pankhurst, denounced the accused women in the name of the WSPU. This must have been a particularly bitter moment for Alice, Hettie and Winnie, given their feminist convictions. Alice was sentenced to ten years' hard labor, Winnie to five years in prison and her husband to seven years.

*Adam Hochschild (2011) *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, p. 258

This article is the fourth of the six articles to be published by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) during the six week *Gender & Militarism Campaign*. The Gender & Militarism Campaign advocates for awareness and action around the multi-layered connections between gender and militarism, and highlights gender-sensitive nonviolent action (people power) as a powerful alternative to address conflict.

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About Shelley Anderson

Shelley Anderson has worked in peace movements for over 30 years. She was one of the founders of the Women Peacemakers Program in 1997, which at the time was the Women, Peace & Security program of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR). She was the IFOR WPP Program Officer until 2007.





Alice went on several hunger strikes in prison. Her health permanently damaged, she was released after serving nine months and died a year later. Family and friends, afraid that her tombstone would be defaced, buried Alice Wheeldon in an unmarked grave.

Wheeldon's anti-militarist and feminist beliefs inspired many activists during her lifetime. Her determination and sacrifice continue to inspire.** She was, however, only one woman among many who realized that militarism and women's rights were incompatible. They supported and were in turn supported by men who had the courage to resist conscription.

These women built organizations to oppose the war, some of which still exist today. In Australia, two government referendums to expand conscription were defeated, in 1916 and again in 1917, thanks to organizing by anti-war forces, especially anti-militarist women. A Women's Peace Army was founded with the slogan "We war against war." In the UK, a proposal was made for a 1,000-strong Women's Peace Expeditionary Force to march between rival male armies. In the US, 1,500 women marched silently in New York City in the Women's Peace Parade, held only weeks after the war began. The Women's Peace Party was set up shortly afterwards.

The most remarkable accomplishment was the Women's Peace Congress held in The Hague in 1915, when 1,200 delegates from 12 countries came up with a proposal to end the war by negotiation. The warring governments were so threatened by this meeting of women that France, the UK and Germany forbade their nationals from attending. The UK went so far as to suspend commercial ferry traffic between England and the Netherlands. Some German women who participated in the Congress were jailed upon their return to Germany. The Congress led directly to the founding of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which continues its anti-militarism today.

Hidden history

This is a hidden history that needs to be made visible. All these women deserve to be valorized. Their sacrifices deserve commemoration. Analyses of their successes and failures need to be made, so peace-builders today can learn from them and avoid their mistakes. And there's yet another reason why their stories need to be better known.

I wish I had known about these women when I was beginning my own work as a peace activist. Their courage would have inspired me as I left the US military as a conscientious objector. I joined the military in order to get the GI Bill, a government subsidy for veterans who wanted to go to university.

I did get an education of another sort while I was on active duty. The first time I was issued a rifle I hesitated. My gut reaction: I don't want to hurt anyone—and this weapon could hurt someone very badly. But my feelings changed after only a few days. When it came time to return the rifle I didn't want to give it up. No one would attack me if I was carrying a rifle. Or so I thought. Weapons have a seductive power, giving an illusion of invulnerability, of control.

Fear of being attacked is very real for military women. A woman inside the military is twice as vulnerable to rape.*** It was ironic that I was more in danger of being attacked by my fellow soldiers than from any foreign enemy. The hostility towards a woman in uniform was palpable at times. It puzzled me, until I began to understand that being a soldier is an affirmation of masculinity. A woman soldier challenges the very identity a young man joins the military for.

A special kind of courage

Ultimately I left the military because of two women's stories. I went to a talk by several *hibakusha*—survivors of the US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An older Japanese woman explained how the children of *hibakusha* often find it hard to marry, as people are afraid of possible genetic defects. This woman's daughter had found a husband. After several miscarriages, the daughter was pregnant again. The family was living in fear—fear of another miscarriage and fear of a baby being born with birth defects.

**In 2012 two of Alice Wheeldon's great-granddaughters began a legal campaign to clear her name (see www.alicewheeldon.org for more information). There have also been a BBC television drama, songs and books about her life, the most notable being Pat Barker's second novel, *The Eye in the Door*, in Barker's award-winning First World War trilogy.

***Sadler, et al. (2003) "Factors Associated with Women's Risk of Rape in the Military Environment" in *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 43:262-273.





An older American woman then spoke. Her husband, now dead from leukemia, had been a soldier in Nagasaki with the US occupation force after the bombings. Her daughter, too, had had several miscarriages and was pregnant again. The family was living in fear of another miscarriage—or of a child born with birth defects.

I was stunned. So this is what war is really like: victims and victimizers, both living in fear, over three decades after the war had ended. If there was an enemy, it was war itself. I left the military shortly afterwards.

Reflecting on that experience, the words of peace researcher Cynthia Cockburn come to mind. “Women,” she wrote, “learn from women’s lives. Women’s lives are different from those of men. Women’s characteristic life experience gives them a potential for two things: a very special kind of intelligence, social intelligence; and a very special kind of courage, social courage.”

Everyone needs to learn this hidden history of women’s peace activism. It can inspire and incite. Amidst the upcoming ceremonies that praise militarism, remember the stories of women’s social courage and their determination to build a world without war.

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