

Ben Salmon and the Army of Peace

By **John Dear SJ**

Feb 23, 2010 Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<http://ncronline.org>)

One of the inspiring Christians of the last century was Ben Salmon, the American Catholic conscientious objector to World War I. Whenever my spirits sag over the apparently dim prospects for peace, I think of Ben, layman, husband, and father, peacemaker and resister. His was a lonely, steadfast stretch of discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus. I've thought often of Ben and taken his example to heart.

Imagine! Long before Mahatma Gandhi, Franz Jagerstatter, Dorothy Day, Dr. King or Thomas Merton -- before the Catholic Worker or Pax Christi or NCR, before Archbishop Romero, Vatican II or the Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Peace -- this lone man stood and said that because of Jesus, he would not be a soldier. Right here in the United States.

Ben came to my attention in 1990, during ceremonies for the Pax Christi Book Award, which I used to direct. Gordon Zahn had nominated a biography on Salmon, written by one of Zahn's graduate students, Torin Finney. It's titled *Unsung Hero of the Great War* (Paulist Press, 1989). Our committee awarded Torin the prize. Our thinking was that perhaps more people might come to know this singular man, Ben Salmon.

Just a few years ago, I was delighted to see Ben featured in *The Sign of Peace*, my favorite U.S. journal. I gleaned more on the man as I pored over the rare photos, as I took in the synopsis of his life, some of his writings and an interview with his daughter Elizabeth, today a Maryknoll sister in Nicaragua. (For the full issue, where I gleaned these details, and other information, see: www.catholicpeacefellowship.org [1].)

The story begins April 6, 1917. It was the day President Woodrow Wilson, the "peace president," declared war on Germany, and the next day, Congress ratified the decision, bringing the United States into World War I. Two weeks later, Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, the de facto head of the U.S. Catholic church, issued a letter, to this effect: all Catholics were to support the war.

[2](Icon by Fr. William Hart McNichols)



The letter was soon followed by the founding of the U.S. Bishops' "National Catholic War Council," which set out to mobilize Catholics for, what it called, "war work." Peacework? Peacemaking? That was never an option. (According to historians, this War Council eventually led to the creation of the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops.)

As the darkness descended, on June 5, 1917, 28 year-old-Ben Salmon took up his pen. He wrote the president, saying he would refuse to fight. "Regardless of nationality," he wrote,

all men are my brothers. God is "our father who art in heaven." The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is unconditional and inexorable. ... The lowly Nazarene taught us the doctrine of non-resistance, and so convinced was he of the soundness of that doctrine that he sealed his belief with death on the cross. When human law conflicts with Divine law, my duty is clear. Conscience, my infallible guide, impels me to tell you that prison, death, or both, are infinitely preferable to joining any branch of the Army.

A brave missive in those days. Congress, suddenly fervid for war, wasted little time getting a new law on the books. It outlawed activities "detrimental to the war effort" -- public anti-war statements, anti-war literature, utterances that might encourage draft resistance -- all these punishable by up to 20 years behind bars.

Under the law, the authorities arrested hundreds, harassed thousands. And when challenged, finally, the law was upheld by the Supreme Court. Necessary for "national security," they decreed.

Salmon had voted for Wilson. Like most, he had expected the president to lead the country to peace. And when the brilliant and upright candidate came to power and unleashed war, Salmon's disappointment burned deep. Wilson outdid even his hawkish predecessors in warmaking. (A pattern, need it be added, quite obvious today.)

Undeterred by the chill on the air, Ben rose to leadership in Denver's "People's Council for Democracy and Peace," a national anti-war organization. In defiance of the law, he wrote letters, gave speeches, and distributed pamphlets. Soon, he caught the attention of *The New York Times*, which hotly denounced him. He had become notorious.

Meantime, the gears of war turned feverishly, with a kind of census going full tilt to unearth prospective recruits. On Christmas day, Ben's Army registration questionnaire arrived. Ben returned it, unfilled-out, accompanied by a letter explaining why. "Let those that believe in wholesale violation of the commandment, 'Thou Shalt not Kill' make a profession of faith by joining the army of war. I am in the army of peace, and in this army, I intend to live and die."

Jan. 15, 1918, Denver policemen arrived at his door. The papers hurled slander his way, all sulfur and fire. The Knights of Columbus, the prominent Catholic lay association, in a fit of indignation revoked his membership. In March he was tried and convicted. And then the sentence came down -- nine months in the county jail.

Matters, already grim, spiraled downward quickly. While out on appeal, his draft notice arrived. Report for induction, it ordered, in three days. A second refusal, a second arrest. And this time he found himself in the clutches of the military authorities, who hustled him into solitary confinement at Fort Logan, Colo.

At Fort Logan he was ordered to work. Again he refused. What to do about this, a trouble-maker in their midst? Guards and other prisoners nearly lynched him that night. And so the authorities put him in chains and trundled him to Camp Funston in Kansas. There, they told him, he would face court martial for "desertion and propaganda." For desertion? "I've never actually been inducted," he said. No matter.

The preliminary hearing was held in Iowa, and an offer of leniency proffered, a kind of quid pro quo. Again, no. He would make no deals with the military. He would rather face court martial -- and defend himself. It was held on July 24, 1918, and in his own defense he argued three points. 1) He had been inducted illegally; 2) he was responsible for a dependent wife and mother; and 3) conscription violated the First and Fifth Amendments.

The court found him guilty; the verdict came down in minutes. The sentence...was death.

Second thoughts came to the court, and before long they commuted the sentence to 25 years in prison at hard labor. More second thoughts came and lures and enticements. Be a legal clerk in an army office, they offered, and no more troubles. All charges dropped. His wife, having just given birth, urged him to accept, but the recalcitrant Ben again said no. Even non-combatant service, he said, entails cooperating with an institution "antithetical to Christianity."

They hauled him under heavy guard to Leavenworth, Kan., He arrived Oct. 9, 1918, and a month later an armistice was declared. The war was over. But not for Ben; his imprisonment had just begun.

He was assigned to a unit comprised of hundreds of COs and there, with them, expected to work. He was quickly consigned to "The Hole" -- solitary confinement -- when he refused all orders. Five months he suffered in a dark, rat-infested cell. No toilet but a pail, bread and water his only food.

Matters grew worse yet when in June, 1919, the authorities transferred him to a military prison in Utah, where sadistic guards took a dim view of conscientious objectors. The guards inflicted beatings, withheld food, and kept prisoners underdressed against the cold.

Still, he refused to buckle, and instead pushed things to their logical conclusion. A hunger strike. He wrote to the Secretary of War: "Unless you [release me], you will cause my death from starvation, for I cannot honestly continue to support [the Greek war god] Mars as I have in the past. I now realize that even the tiny bit of assistance that I was rendering in the way of accepting your food was too much."

And he added: "Christ's doctrine to overcome evil with good" is the "most effective solution for individual and societal ills that has ever been formulated. It is a practical policy...My life, my family, everything is now in the hands of God. His will be done."

Two weeks later, death loomed, and he asked to see a priest. The priest arrived, but refused to offer him Communion, hear his confession or anoint him. Two other priests arrived some days later. And, after sizing things up, one of them agreed to the request for Communion. The sacrament was done. When word made its way back to the diocese, a fury descended. The priest was sent packing. Off to minor and punitive assignments in Oregon for pitying a traitor. Another instance of church colluding with warmongering state.

Force-feeding followed -- 135 days of it -- then a one-way ticket to Washington, D.C., to St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Insane.

While there he refused to languish; he kept busy -- thinking, praying and writing. From the ACLU archives we have the fruits of Ben's efforts, a 200-page, single-spaced essay on the fallacy of the just war. Much of it a refutation of the Catholic Encyclopedia's article on war by Father Macksey, a Jesuit from the Gregorian University in Rome. Point by point Ben refutes the lofty scholar.

"Either Christ is a liar or war is never necessary, and very properly assuming that Christ told the truth, it follows that the State is without [in the words of Father Macksey] 'judicial authority to determine when war is necessary,' because it is never necessary."

Much of Salmon's thinking depended on the Apostle Paul. "Overcome evil with good," admonished Paul. (Rom 12:21).

We do not attempt to overcome lying with lies; we overcome it with truth. We do not try to overcome curses with curses, but we overcome with silence or with words of friendship. Sickness is not overcome with sickness; it is overcome with health... Anger is overcome with meekness, pride by humility. And the successful way to overcome the evil of war is by the good of peace, a steadfast refuse to render evil for evil.

A sad matter when faithfulness, nonviolence, sanity, as it was in Jesus' own day, is regarded as -- insanity.

Eventually, in the cultural mind there passed an assuaging of adamant feelings. The newly formed ACLU had ignored his many pleas for help, but gradually they changed their tune. *The New York Times*, previously Ben's sharp detractor, wrote about his plight and hunger strike. The well-respected

Msgr. John Ryan of Catholic University got wind of the news and personally lobbied the Secretary of War.

The War Department, in a feeble way, finally relented -- they would release 33 conscientious objectors. Ben would be among them. Thanksgiving 1920, he was released and, from the army he never joined, dishonorably discharged. The news made front pages across the nation.

Persona non grata thereafter, he struggled to find good work. And when the Depression set in, he and his family landed in deep poverty. His health never recovered -- the forced feedings had taken their toll -- and in 1932 he caught pneumonia and died.

The astonishing life and times of Ben Salmon, all but unheard of in our day and age.

A few years ago, my friend Bruce MacIntosh of Taos, N.M., wrote an inspiring screenplay based on Ben's life. Bruce sent me a copy of Ben's original manuscript, which I treasure as a kind of long lost Dead Sea Scroll. [If anyone knows a Hollywood producer who might be interested in Bruce's screenplay, please contact me!]

Meanwhile, *The Sign of Peace* concludes that Ben Salmon isn't just a faithful Catholic, but a "confessor of the faith." I would go farther. I regard him as a saint for the ages. He took on the nation, he took on Christendom. He took them on in reverence toward the Christ of peace. He shows us what allegiance to the nonviolent Jesus looks like.

Since Ben's days, decades have been born, decades have died. And sad to say, little has changed.

A handful of great peacemakers have been given us: Franz Jagerstatter and Dorothy Day, Philip Berrigan and Howard Zinn. Yet most bishops and priests, and following their lead, most of the laity, still cheer on state-sanctioned mass murder, especially when committed in Jesus' name. They go along, they rock few boats.

More, among our military, a third are Catholic. Vastly more theologians than not, like Father Macksey, pursue justifications for war. I get the feeling that the bishops wish they could start a new "National Catholic War Council;" they certainly haven't formed a "Peace Council." And today, as in Ben's own day, an eloquent president, elected on promises of peace, has taken warmaking to new heights. The times, Ben's and ours, run parallel. And that being the case, one of the brightest beacons we have is Ben.

His example urges us to refuse to cooperate with the warmaking state. Is the stand costly, are the stakes high? No matter. "Peacemaking is hard, hard almost as war," to quote the poet. The vocation falls to us, Christians everywhere, to follow the nonviolent Jesus.

May we all be inspired to join Ben's Army of Peace. It is the witness most required by our times.

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