

March 1916

The Tribunals have begun hearing arguments from men who, having received their call up papers, are determined they should not go to war. Attached to the Tribunal is a military representative, in Brandon's case it is Earl Cadogan, who will do his best to ensure that every man does his duty and goes to war. Some believe the Tribunal has to satisfy a quota, after all this is all about getting men who have not volunteered into the army. To date about three-quarters of appeals have been refused and failure to obey the Tribunal's ruling could result in imprisonment with hard labour for up to six months. Even when someone gains exemption, it is merely for a few months, such as when Brandon's Tribunal gave three months exemption to a man, so he could drill corn in his elderly father's field. After that time he must report to the army. Another temporary exemption went to a 40-year-old man caring for his 73-year-old mother. He will remain exempt as long as she lives.

Right now, stood before the Tribunal, is a 25-year-old farm labourer from Brandon. He is desperate to remain working on the farm, rather than be sent to the trenches. His boss also wants him to stay because there simply is no one else in Brandon who possesses this man's skill. The odds are stacked against him, but he will endeavour anyway. The farmer steps forward to address the panel. The chairman is Arthur Rought-Rought, the fur factory owner, who wields ultimate responsibility for sending men off to war or allowing them to stay. The farmer tells him there is much work to be done on the farm, work he is unable to do himself due to a heart condition. Earl Cadogan barks back, "Have you been trying to replace the man?" And the farmer replies he has.

Cadogan will not accept this argument, "A lot of farmers come to Tribunals saying they had been advertising, but it is not enough to just say that. I had a letter from the Labour Bureau in Bury St Edmunds to the effect that there are a large number of men on their register. Although none are eligible for war service, for one reason or another, it does prove there is no shortage of labour, be it men or women! The letter states that no unmarried man is indispensable to their employer, no matter what industry they were involved in!"

Cadogan suggests the farmer has had plenty of time to find a replacement. If the farm suffers because the labourer is sent to war then it will not be the Tribunal's fault. The farmer should have dismissed the man long ago and employed a married man to replace him. Cadogan will accept no excuses! Rought-Rought informs the labourer his appeal is refused. So that is it. Nothing more can be said.

By the end of the week the labourer will be a private in the British Army, albeit training in a barracks somewhere. Has Rought-Rought sent this man to certain death? Or is the labourer destined to be a hero like Robert Docking? This month Docking was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for "gallantry in the field". Who can tell? What is clear is that while we are at war, these Tribunals are here to stay.