**BELFAST TELEGRAPH**

**DEBATENI**

**Jeff Dudgeon**

**5 November 2013**

**Poppy Day**

I have an uncle and a cousin buried in the same war cemetery in Libya near Benghazi. They were killed months apart although I don’t know if either was aware the other was nearby. Both were at my parents’ wedding in 1939 and were to be dead three years later.

My mother’s brother was in the Royal Engineers. He died aged twenty-nine. I am named for him. His widow only died in 2007. Their cousin Raymond Alderson also known as Nik wasn’t in the military. He was a conscientious objector and had joined a Friends Ambulance Unit attached to the Free French Army. I am thus in a fairly unique position of being entitled to wear a red and a white poppy on Remembrance Sunday.

Raymond worked first in Syria and then Egypt and finally in Libya. Just before he died he wrote “We have had some busy and exciting hours but no casualties. The main Unit (am now writing in the bottom of a slit trench - halt for dive bombing) has started on some of the hardest and most satisfying work we have done since the Unit came out - working in a filthy hospital among tired and understaffed personnel doing a really splendid job.” Three days later he was killed in the same slit trench aged twenty-three. Nik’s partner Sandy Parnis lived on until 1994.

His parents were luckily reconciled to his decision to be a CO before he left for the Quaker brigade. Otherwise their earlier estrangement, only to be followed by letters of condolence from various Cadbury and Rowntree comrades and from French Generals talking of his bravery would have been unbearable. Anita Leslie, daughter of Sir Shane from Co. Monaghan served in the same ambulance unit writing ‘*A Story Half Told: A Wartime Autobiography’* which is both a human and horrifying war memoir, well worth getting hold of.

I respect the sacrifice both made in their different, civilised ways. They didn’t start or prolong a war. Like the 1,000 people killed in the Belfast blitz in 1941, they are history. However each has a story which should be collected and told. Historical disputes about the reasons and justifications for this and every war will continue and are valuable, if only to learn how to prevent future conflicts. Some like the Second World War have a more comprehensible and ethical aspect than others but all have unexpected courses and unforeseen consequences. Unpicking and rewriting history is however not a worthy process and will lead only to demoralisation.