

For God, King and Country

A Radio Play

by

Jan Storey

Synopsis

It's 1917 and the conscription referendum debate has turned bitter and divisive. John Hunt is in favour of conscription but his wife, Alice, is fiercely opposed. Their eldest son, Fred, has been injured on the Western Front and Alice is determined to stop their youngest son, Harry, from being conscripted. Will Harry be forced to enlist and will Fred survive the war?

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR:	Either female or male
ALICE HUNT:	Woman about 45
JOHN HUNT:	Alice's husband, about 50
HARRY HUNT:	Alice's son, about 19
SERGEANT:	Male, about 50

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Bayside U3A Writers Group

SCENE ONE: INSIDE THE HUNT'S KITCHEN

AUDIO: WORLD WAR 1 MUSIC

NARRATOR 1917. Prime Minister Billy Hugh's second referendum to introduce conscription divided the country and tore communities and families apart. Propaganda for both sides was polarising, adding to the bitterness and violence of the debate.

HARRY Oh, damn. We're out of bread!

ALICE I tried to get some but there's none left anywhere. *(Pause)* Not that we can afford it.

HARRY *(Disdainfully)* Ha. And the Government wonders why there's been food riots! *(Pause)* I *hate* this war.

ALICE I know love. Tea?

HARRY Yes. Thanks, Mum.

AUDIO: Sound of tea being poured

HARRY I *don't* want to enlist just because Fred volunteered.

ALICE I'm proud of you Harry, standing up for your beliefs.

HARRY Those pro conscriptionists are mongrels. Did you hear they bashed Arthur?

ALICE Oh, no. Really?

HARRY Then they threw him in the Yarra. Lucky, the poor fella didn't drown.

ALICE That's terrible!

HARRY *(Pensive)* They've given me so many white feathers I could stuff a pillow.

ALICE *(Sighs)* Foolish people. *(Pause)* There's some porridge in the pot. Would you like some?

HARRY Only if there's enough left for Dad. He's already angry with me for not volunteering.

ALICE He's worried about our Freddie. That's all.

AUDIO: Door slamming and footsteps

JOHN *(CHEERILY)* Oh good, you're both here. Look what's just arrived.

ALICE It looks like ... is it a letter from Fred?

JOHN Indeed, it is.

ALICE Oh, John. What does he say.

JOHN Hang on. Let me open it and I'll read it to you.

AUDIO: **Sound of paper rustling**

JOHN *Dear Family*
Just a line to let you know I am alright and recovered from my leg injuries. By the time you get this I will have left London and be on my way back to the Front. Don't worry about me for I shall come home well. Your loving son and big brother, Fred.

HARRY They must have done a good job getting the shrapnel out of his legs.

ALICE (SOBS) Oh, my poor darling Freddie. Will I ever see him again?

JOHN If you support the troops by voting Yes for conscription, you will.

ALICE How can you say that John. I couldn't bear it if both my sons were ...
I'm voting No.

JOHN Surely, woman, you realise a No vote will play into the hands of the Kaiser – bloody Hun murdering innocent women and children.

ALICE But, a No vote will keep our Harry at home.

HARRY Don't worry, Mum. I'll go to prison first.

JOHN What silly talk, Harry. Think of your brother. You're being unpatriotic.

ALICE Well, I'm sorry John, but I will *not* vote Yes to send another mother's son to his death.

SCENE TWO: INSIDE THE HUNT'S LIVING ROOM

AUDIO: SOUND OF WAR MUSIC IN BACKGROUND

NARRATOR War-time censorship made it difficult for anti-conscriptionists to meet and express their views. They adopted the tactic of disrupting pro-conscription meetings in order to have their voices heard.

JOHN Well, you're off then, Alice?

ALICE In about 10 minutes.

JOHN Out with those women again, I suppose.

ALICE You suppose right.

JOHN Where's the meeting this time?

ALICE Hmm. The Fitzroy Town Hall.

JOHN Look love, I know you're worried about Fred but shouting anti-war slogans won't help him.

ALICE I won't vote Yes, John.

JOHN Instead of protesting why don't you make yourself useful by volunteering at the Red Cross.

ALICE (*Disdainfully*) What! By packing Christmas boxes full of cigarettes and chocolate. (*Pause*) Freddie doesn't even smoke.

JOHN It's wrong to let our troops down. That's why Harry should sign up.

ALICE And it's wrong to pressure him, John. Our youngest is a pacifist and has no intention of volunteering.

JOHN If the Yes vote wins he mightn't have a choice.

ALICE That's why I'm doing everything to make sure they lose.

JOHN (*Pleading*) Oh, Alice dear. I wish you'd stay home. You're risking trouble with the law if you go.

ALICE I'm going whatever you say. It's time for women to put down their knitting and say enough is enough.

JOHN (*Getting angry*) You're just parroting that darned fool of a woman, Adela Pankhurst.

ALICE So she's a fool for speaking out against our boys dying like flies. Is that what you think?

JOHN (*Sighs heavily*) Well, don't say I didn't warn you.

SCENE 3: INSIDE POLICE STATION

NARRATOR The police were used to suppress anti-conscriptionists. Hundreds were arrested and many jailed for breaching the tough censorship laws.

SERGEANT I'm Sergeant Brown. Sit down please, Mrs. Hunt.

ALICE (*Sings anti-war song loudly*) I didn't raise my son to be a soldier. I bought him up to be my pride and joy.

SERGEANT (*Angrily*) Be quiet and sit down.

ALICE (*Continues singing*) Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder, To kill some other mother's darling boy?

SERGEANT (*More angry*) Stop! Any more and you'll find yourself in the cells.

ALICE Why can't I sing?

SERGEANT You know perfectly well, that song is banned under the *War Precautions Act*.

ALICE (*Sighs deeply*) Alright.

SERGEANT I must inform you that anything you say or do may be used in evidence against you. Do you understand?

ALICE I'm not stupid, Sergeant.

SERGEANT I am charging you with disturbing a pro conscription gathering.

ALICE Now why would you do that, Sergeant?

SERGEANT I'll spell it out for you. On October 10, you attended a pro conscription public meeting with the sole purpose of disturbing the peace.

ALICE If you say so.

SERGEANT Witness statements claim you were interjecting and shouting anti-war slogans.

ALICE We live in a democracy, don't we?

SERGEANT Pro German are you, Mrs Hunt?

ALICE I was knocked down and forcibly ejected. What are you doing about that, Sergeant?

SERGEANT You are also charged with being in possession of a Red Flag which is banned under the *War Precautions Act*

ALICE I shall be pleading deliberately guilty to all charges.

SERGEANT What does your husband think of you belonging to the Women's Peace Army? Approve, does he?

ALICE It's nothing to do with you what he thinks or doesn't think.

SERGEANT It seems you want to end up in Pentridge like that Adela Pankhurst woman.

ALICE She'll be out soon. Thousands have signed the petition to have her released.

SERGEANT She got what she deserved – four months. No wonder the Prime Minister calls her a dammed nuisance.

ALICE She was just demonstrating against wartime food prices. Since when is that a crime.

SERGEANT If I had my way she'd be deported back to London where she belongs with her pesky suffragette mother.

ALICE Have you quite finished, Sergeant? I'd like to go home now.

SERGEANT For the moment, but I'll see you in court next week, Mrs Hunt.

ALICE I'll be at the Yarra Bank rally on Sunday, Sergeant. Just letting you know in case you want to arrest me again.

SERGEANT If you want to risk that, be it on your own head, Mrs Hunt.

SCENE 4: INSIDE THE HUNT'S LIVING ROOM

AUDIO: SOUND OF WAR MUSIC IN BACKGROUND AND RUSLING OF NEWSPAPER

NARRATOR Despite censorship laws obstructing the NO campaign, 53.8 percent voted against conscription.

JOHN Well, you must be pleased, Alice.

ALICE What do you mean, John?

HARRY Dad means the anti's won.

ALICE Of course, I'm pleased, especially for Harry. *(Pause)* And you should be too John.

JOHN Humph. The Prime Minister's right. It's a win for the selfish and the unworthy.

HARRY Selfish! How come I'm too young to vote but old enough to take a bullet. How was that fair, Dad?

JOHN *(Angrily)* Fairness! You talk about fairness when Fred is risking his life.

HARRY *(Scathingly)* I know my brother. He wouldn't want to be in a trench with another bloke who was forced to be there.

JOHN Well, you both better realise without extra troops the war will take longer to end.

ALICE We've done more than enough as it is. Good God! Twenty-two thousand of our men killed this year!

JOHN Thankfully Fred isn't one of them.

ALICE (*Bitterly*) And what would you say if he was? Another noble life lost for God, King and country?

HARRY Ease up. (*Pause*) There's someone walking up the front path.

AUDIO **Knocking at front door**

HARRY I'll get it.

AUDIO: **Door opening and closing**

HARRY (*Voice off mike*) Thanks.

ALICE Who was it?

HARRY The Telegram boy.

ALICE (*Crying*) Please, dear God, no. *No.*

JOHN Here, give it to me, son. (*Pause, John reads telegram*)

Regret to advise your son Private Frederick Hunt dangerously ill of wounds received in action. STOP. Will advise further when new reports received

ALICE Oh John. He's not dead, he's not dead!

JOHN He's a strong lad, our Freddie. He pulled through once before and he'll do it again. You mark my words.

NARRATOR In the eleven months between the second conscription referendum and peace being declared on 11th November, 1918, eight thousand more Australians died. And, despite the Armistice, the bitterness caused by the referendum continued to divide communities and families for many more years.

AUDIO **War music**

THE END