Shot at Dawn: Cowards, Traitors or Victims?

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

During World War One, the execution of troops for desertion was intended both as punishment and a deterrent to others. What was the reason for this form of military justice, and should these cases now be pardoned?

Expectations of war

World War One soldiers knew their king and country expected them to fight to the death. Such was the expectation of their military commanders, their political leaders and even their loved ones that there was no question that if mortal danger came, they should face it like men. It was the only way for good to triumph over evil.

But this conflict quickly became the most brutal war in history and not even the most seasoned serviceman was prepared for the scale of carnage that unfolded before him. For many the horror proved too much. Hundreds were unable to cope, many were driven insane and several simply ran away.

But the army could no more afford to carry cowards than it could traitors, and many of those who did flee faced instant retribution with a court martial and death by firing squad.

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British and Commonwealth military command executed 306 of its own men during the Great War. Those shot brought such shame on their country that nearly a century on, their names still do not appear on official war memorials.

Relatives and supporters of the executed men are fighting to win them a posthumous pardon. Their Shot at Dawn campaign claims the soldiers were blameless because it was severe psychological trauma, not cowardice, that rendered them physically unable to cope with the shocking scenes they had witnessed.

But others believe it is impossible to condemn the events of a century ago from a modern-day perspective. Whatever the rights and wrongs, they say, a pardon is inappropriate and impossible.

Military justice

Most of the three million British troops soon knew they faced almost certain death on the battlefield. Day after day they would witness the annihilation of their friends, never knowing if or when they would be next. On some occasions whole battalions were wiped out, leaving just a handful of confused, terrified men. But those who shirked their responsibility soon learned there was no way out of the horror - if they ran from German guns, they would be shot by British ones.

Private Thomas Highgate was the first to suffer such military justice. Unable to bear the carnage of 7,800 British troops at the Battle of Mons, he had fled and hidden in a barn. He was undefended at his trial because all his comrades from the Royal West Kents had been killed, injured or captured. Just 35 days into the war, Private Highgate was executed at the age of 17.

Many similar stories followed, among them that of 16-year-old Herbert Burden, who had lied that he was two years older, so he could join the Northumberland Fusiliers. Ten months later, he was court-martialled for fleeing after seeing his friends massacred at the battlefield of Bellwarde Ridge. He faced the firing squad still officially too young to be in his regiment.

To their far-off generals, the soldiers' executions served a dual purpose - to punish the deserters and to dispel similar ideas in their comrades. Courts martial were anxious to make an example and those on trial could expect little support from medical officers. One such doctor later recalled, 'I went to the trial determined to give him no help, for I detest his type - I really hoped he would be shot.'

Those condemned to death usually had their sentences confirmed by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig on the evening following their court-martial. A chaplain was dispatched to spend the night in the cell with the condemned man and execution took place the following dawn, with some men facing their last moments drugged with morphine or alcohol.

When the time came, the offender was tied to a stake, a medical officer placed a piece of white cloth over the man's heart and a priest prayed for him. Then the firing line - usually made up of six soldiers - was given orders to shoot. One round was routinely blank, and no soldier could be sure he had fired a fatal shot.

Immediately after the shooting, the medical officer would examine the man. If he was still alive, the officer in charge would finish him off with a revolver.

'So many of those who were executed were just boys,' argues Shot at Dawn campaign leader John Hipkin. 'They made no allowance for that. They and their families were let down. The whole issue was, and still is, a disgrace.'

Shell shock

Not one of the executed soldiers would be shot today - the military death penalty was outlawed in 1930. But psychologist Dr Petra Boynton believes that, even 90 years ago, there was no excuse for killing soldiers who were so obviously under the most extreme stress.

'Letters home from the front-line show soldiers in stages of mental collapse,' she says. 'Men were obviously breaking down as they wrote about the horrors they'd seen. Those who did survive were changed forever.'

Shell shock - now called post-traumatic stress disorder - was first recognised in print by Dr Charles Myers of the British Psychological Society in 1915. By the end of the war the army had dealt with more than 80,000 cases.

'Even the ancient Greeks knew about what they called 'war exhaustion', whether it was physical or mental,' says Dr Boynton from the Royal Free and University Medical School.

'This condition would make soldiers behave erratically or hysterically or go to the other extreme and become catatonic. Some who had run away claimed they could no longer stand the noise, and we know that if the eardrums take a constant pounding, the discomfort is too painful to bear. I'm sure thousands of men were terrified, but this is different. This is about inability to cope.

'Many of these men later proved they were brave by refusing to be blindfolded for their executions. They stared down the barrels of the guns which would kill them. That's not cowardice. That's courage.'

Dr Boynton believes those in the firing line would also have suffered. 'It was an extremely powerful form of bullying, having to kill your own friends,' she says. 'It sent out the message that you could be next.'

The case against a pardon

Britain was not alone in executing its own soldiers. The French are thought to have killed about 600. The Germans, whose troops outnumbered the British by two to one, shot 48 of their own men, and the Belgians 13. In 2001, 23 executed Canadians were posthumously honoured by their government, and five troops killed by New Zealand's military command also recently won a pardon. Not one American or Australian soldier was executed.

Five successive British governments have rejected appeals to pardon the soldiers and the Ministry of Defence refuses to re-open the court martial files, even on the youngest troops.

'There are lots of problems with second-guessing the reasoning behind these actions from today's standpoint,' says an MoD spokesman. 'Anyone over the age of 14 was deemed legally responsible for his actions and army regulations provided no immunity from military law for an underage soldier.

'A blanket pardon is impossible because all the cases were different. It would be very difficult to review each case separately because in 80 years a lot of the papers have disappeared.'

Offences other than desertion carried the death penalty and Cathryn Corns, co-author of Blindfold and Alone, which examines all 306 courts martial, agrees pardons would be entirely inappropriate.

'The number of rogues outnumbered those with mitigating circumstances by about six to one,' she said. 'Many were repeat deserters who showed no sign of shell shock. An individual re-assessment of these cases would undoubtedly reconvict the majority, which would be a terrible thing for families to bear - even worse, probably, than clinging to the hope of a pardon for the ancestors they believe to be innocent.

'Sometimes there were no witnesses at the original trials. If evidence wasn't available then to say exactly what happened, we certainly won't find it now.

'Military justice was harsh, but life was much harsher then. Capital punishment was still used in Britain. And while the military law used was written for previous campaigns in Africa, and perhaps was not appropriate, every one of the soldiers signed up to those regulations.'

Changing times

Opinion continues to be divided. The Royal British Legion supports calls for a pardon and, for the past two years, has invited the Shot at Dawn campaigners to take part in the march past the Cenotaph in London on Remembrance Sunday. Last year a memorial to the executed soldiers was erected at the National Memorial Arboretum in Lichfield, Staffs.

'We don't want pardons for villains. We want justice for people who were shot for insubordination because they refused to put on a hat, or who fell asleep at their post, or were just so terrified they simply could not cope.'

But Cathryn Corn's co-author, former Intelligence Corps officer Colonel John Hughes-Wilson, is adamant history should not be rewritten. 'The real issue is not about the convictions but about the severity of the sentences,' he says.

'Some men, and there are tragic cases, were undoubtedly suffering from what we would now recognise as combat stress. But our great-grandfathers didn't understand that any more than they knew about blood transfusions or penicillin.

'If these men were alive today, we would not kill them. But we must be very wary about applying our modern sentiments and values to the 1914-18 war. We cannot re-invent the past to suit ourselves today. And even now we expect our servicemen, and women, to do what they presumably signed up to do - risk their lives and fight.'

A soldier's story

Veteran Albert 'Smiler' Marshall recalls only too well the terror of battle. The former Essex Yeomanry soldier, who was 105 in 2002, remembers one incident in 1917 as being even more horrifying than the Somme.

'One afternoon at about 4pm we learned that soldiers from the Oxford and Bucks regiment were to go over the top at 6pm. By nine o'clock every single one of them was dead.

'We went out with the Royal Army Medical Corps to bury them all. An officer held up a white stick as we went into No Man's Land. It was a sign to ask the enemy to stop firing, and they did. We could only dig down a few feet and cover them with a bit of soil, burying them where they lay. It was horrible.'

But having lived through the terror, Smiler, now of Ashtead, Surrey, believes it would be wrong to pardon those who were shot at dawn. 'I didn't know anyone who was executed or who had anything to do with a firing squad, but we all knew about the penalty. But it didn't occur to you not to fight. You didn't think about it, you just did it. And you just took what came your way.'

And Smiler saw only too well what came the way of many of his comrades. 'You lived in these trenches for days and days with nothing happening but bombardments, but you regularly lost a friend, or someone near you. The thought never left you that you could be next.'

But Smiler, believed to be the last surviving World War One veteran to have fought on horseback, did have some sympathy with at least one man who was punished. 'One day I was ordered to stand guard over a chap who had been tied to a wheel, without food or water, as a punishment for something. I can't remember what he'd done. But I felt sorry for him, so I put my fag up to his lips, so he could have a smoke. It was a very risky thing to do because if anyone had seen me, they'd have tied me to the wheel as well!

'Years later I was walking down Oxford Street in London and I saw him. He recognised me immediately and thanked me. He said he'd never forgotten that fag.'