

British soldiers executed in First World War denied official pardon

Harvey Thompson
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On Sunday, November 14, the last "Remembrance Day" services of the century were held across Europe to remember the dead of two World Wars. On the day before the official commemoration in London, the capital hosted a much smaller unofficial ceremony to honour those shot for "cowardice" and "desertion". The crowds at the Cenotaph (a recreation in stone of a structure erected for the first Armistice Day parade in 1919) were largely made up of relatives and friends of the executed men. Some of the people gathered have been campaigning for decades to clear the names of their fathers and grandfathers.

During the First World War, France and Germany also shot men on charges of cowardice or desertion. But whereas Germany executed only 25 of its own soldiers, in Britain the figure was 306, some as young as 14 years old. Both France and Germany posthumously pardoned the men, recognising the extraordinary conditions they fought under, and built official memorials to these soldiers after the war. In Britain, successive governments refused to reconsider the original verdicts or grant an official pardon.

Saturday's ceremony was only the second year that campaigners for the executed have been officially allowed to commemorate their dead. The public address system was turned off, however. Campaigner John Hipkin, 73, said that the Home Office had informed them it would turn off all microphones and loud speakers at the Cenotaph because "they did not know what we were going to say in advance".

The military hierarchy and Ministry of Defence bureaucracy always claimed that the executed men had received a fair trial, but recently released documents prove that this was not the case. In many instances, the accused was not properly represented and evidence presented against them was either contradictory or

irrelevant to the charges.

It is widely believed that the majority of those executed were suffering from a form of what is now known as "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder". At the time of the First World War, this condition, which the military authorities refused to recognise, was known as "shell shock".

A typical case is that of Harry Farr, who joined the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 and fought in the trenches. His position was repeatedly shelled, and in May 1915 he collapsed with strong convulsions. In hospital, his wife Gertrude—who was denied a widow's pension after the war—recalled, "he shook all the time. He couldn't stand the noise of the guns. We got a letter from him, but it was in a stranger's handwriting. He could write perfectly well, but couldn't hold the pen because his hand was shaking."

It is now thought that Farr was possibly suffering from hypacusis, which occurs when the eardrums are so damaged that the auditory nerve becomes exposed, making loud noises physically unbearable. Despite this, Farr was sent back to the front and fought at the Somme. After several months of fighting, he requested to see a medical orderly but was refused. In Farr's Court Martial papers, the Sergeant Major is quoted as saying "If you don't go up to the f*****g front, I'm going to f*****g blow your brains out" to which Farr simply replied "I just can't go on."

The Court Martial was over in 20 minutes. Harry Farr had to defend himself. General Haig signed his death warrant and he was shot at dawn on October 16, 1916.

Those soldiers in the firing squad ordered to carry out the execution were often tormented by the experience for the rest of their lives. John Laister, who died two months ago at the age of 101, recalled how he and a number of others were marched into the woods and told

they were to be part of a firing squad. Speaking on the BBC television's programme *Everyman* (screened last Sunday evening), Laister said he was still haunted by the moment that he looked in the direction the rifles were pointed and saw a mere boy stood with his back to a tree. "There were tears in his eyes and tears in mine."

The Blair government is resisting appeals for a "Millennium Pardon" for the 306 men. The army also seems unlikely to change its position. Earlier this year the Ministry of Defence sent a reply to "Shot At Dawn" campaigner John Hipkin on the question of the under-age soldiers that had been executed. The letter read, "You also state that a number of soldiers who were under-age were illegally tried and executed. This is not the case. Anyone over the age of 14 was deemed legally responsible for his actions and Army regulations provided no immunity from Military Law for an under-age soldier."

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