A secret execution – Pvte. Harold Pringle

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If word leaked out, it could cause real trouble. The war was over, after all, and no other Canadian soldier convicted of murder had been executed. Worse, this young private was professing innocence.

Fifteen days later, on a brilliant sun-baked July morning in 1945, not far from the Italian village of Avellino, Pte. Harold Joseph Pringle was roused from a makeshift cell in a war-ravaged castle, taken to a deserted firing range once used by the Mussolini youth wing for target practice, bound to a wooden post, and shot.

For deserting the military and for having been found guilty of murdering a fellow soldier, 23-year-old Harold Pringle paid with his life — a penalty exacted on no other Canadian soldier during the war. Indeed, the military has long insisted that there were no executions carried out at all during the war.

But a new book by journalist Andrew Clark reveals the secret execution of Harold Pringle and casts doubt on the murder conviction.

After interviewing hundreds of veterans and reviewing thousands of pages of military documents, he concludes that the soldier Pte. Pringle was accused of killing, was already dead.

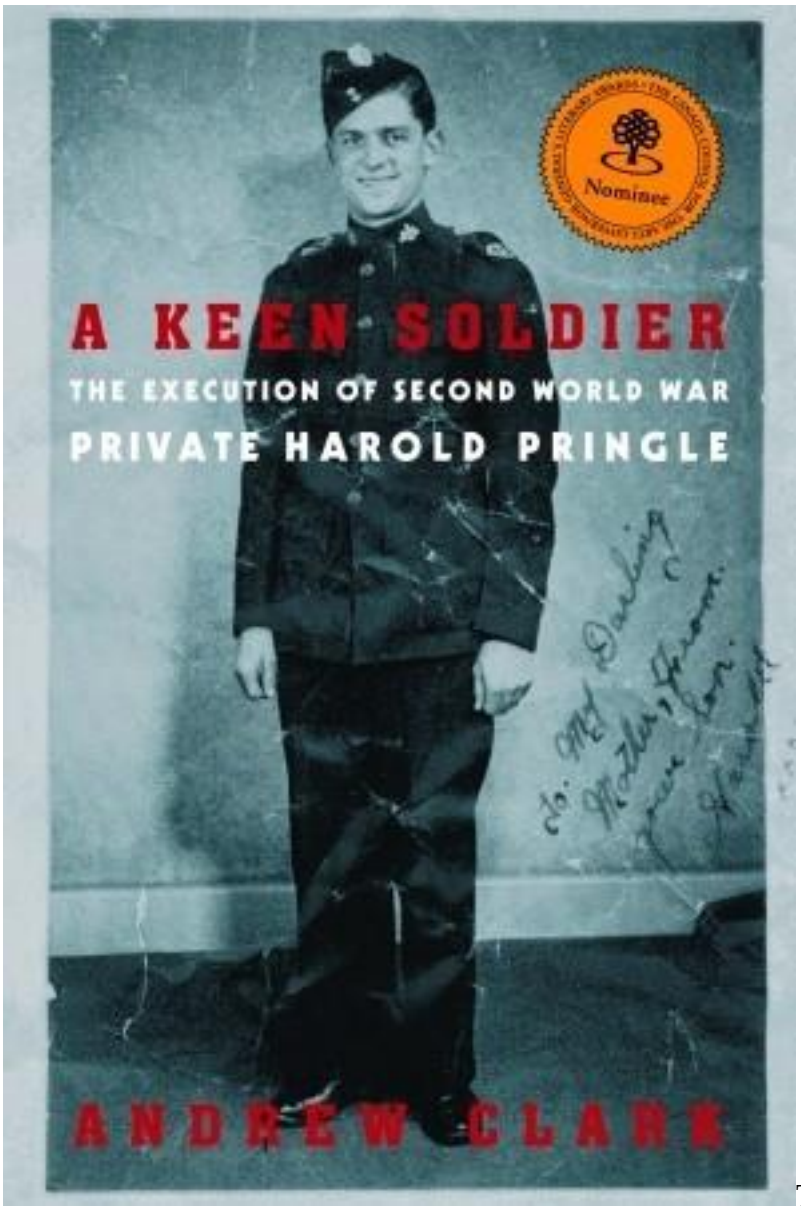
“Harold Pringle deserves some vindication,” Mr. Clark writes in A Keen Soldier. “An official recognition that he was not a cold-blooded killer, but rather a young, rebellious, shell-shocked rifleman, would help heal his family.”

The young man from Flinton, Ont., a tiny rural community north of Napanee, lied about his age at the beginning of the war so he could enlist with his father — a marksman proud of his service in the First World War.

But 16-year-old Harold grew into a thorn in the side of the military. Although he demonstrated fierce courage in battle, he had both a temper and a frequent propensity to go on leave and not return.

He was a deserter who got caught, again and again. Neither fines nor military prison time deterred him, particularly when it came to visits with girlfriends.

His penchant for taking off would not help him when he found himself charged with the murder of a fellow Canadian soldier and friend named John (Lucky) McGillivary, found shot to death outside Rome in late 1944.



The two had been part of a small group of deserters called the Sailor Gang, who fled the battle for Rome and ran a healthy racket in black-market goods. Pte. Pringle and two British gang members who were also charged argued their companion's death was an accident — that he was mistakenly shot in the liver

during a drunken tussle with one of them, then died on the way to the hospital. Pte. Pringle admitted to shooting his friend in the chest, but only after he was dead — and only as part of a plan to make it look like the soldier was killed by the Mafia.

But the military refused to believe it. Pte. Pringle and the Britons were each court-martialed and sentenced to death. After his investigation, Mr. Clark believes the Canadian government had written off their young soldier as a troublesome deserter and that Pte. Pringle was doomed from the moment he was charged.

The book raises doubts about the case, including how:

– Authorities yanked an experienced lawyer with an impressive record of acquittals first assigned to Pte. Pringle's defence, replacing him with a lawyer who had never tried a case before and had just seven days to prepare a defence.

– Michael Cloney, the original lawyer and now a retired Ontario judge, firmly believes the soldier should have been acquitted — saying in the book, "I can't believe they found him guilty. There was reasonable doubt a mile

wide."

– The chief witness against Pte. Pringle, a former associate, was given immunity from prosecution in the killing in return for his testimony. He gave four separate and inconsistent statements about what happened that night.

– A Canadian colonel who reviewed Pte. Pringle's petition of appeal shared with his colleagues his belief that Lucky McGillivary was already dead before he was shot in the head and chest.

– A highly respected British pathologist who put forward his opinion that McGillivary was killed by the shot to the head turned out to be "mentally spent" at the time and later committed suicide.

Mr. Clark would like to see Pte. Pringle's record expunged — more for the man's family than anything else. There are some in the soldier's family who never even knew he existed, so deep the shame of what happened and so well preserved the secret of his execution by Canadian soldiers in 1945.

The book reveals that the Canadian government seemed intent to see the execution through — though it was delayed for months until Prime Minister King was re-elected. No one, it seems, thought it a wise idea to execute a Canadian soldier after the war and while an election campaign was underway.

But soon after the 1945 election was over, the prime minister met with one of his advisers and discussed the case. According to the book, Mr. King was told that eight other soldiers had also been convicted of murder during the war but had death sentences commuted. There was a wrinkle in this case, though: Two British soldiers had already been put to death after being convicted in the same murder, and it might anger the British government if the Canadian were to be spared.

However, if the Canadian public found out about the execution, there would be trouble at home. So the book says King agreed to a plan that would see the death sentence carried out in a remote area of Italy in absolute secrecy. All involved would be prohibited from talking about it, and all records about it would be sealed.

And it remained a secret until a few years ago when Mr. Clark requested the Pringle documents from the National Archives and got back a file seven inches thick. He had first heard of the case from his grandfather, a veteran from the war who had almost been picked for the firing squad.

The casual mention of the case one Christmas Eve eventually grew into something of an obsession for the writer. He secured a book deal and then quit his job at Maclean's magazine to pursue the story. At first, the military was insistent that what he was after just was not true.

"The reaction from the military was quite simple — no Canadian soldier was executed during the Second World War. That was the first thing I would be told," Mr. Clark says in an interview. "They would say to me emphatically 'You are incorrect — no Canadian soldier was executed during the Second World War.' "

But when he told military officials what files to pull, they were astonished.

And the more Mr. Clark learned, the more fascinated he became.

"I didn't think it happened the way my grandfather described — that they actually kept a few soldiers in Italy after the war just to shoot him? I thought, surely it is not true. But when I found the list, it was right there — 31 guys left in Avellino when there used to be tens of thousands of troops," he says.

“They shoot him, then they just bury him and forget about it. It is interesting that the guys who shot him, none of them talked about it,” Mr. Clark says. “I think because the government wanted them to, but also it is an extremely painful thing to remember.”

One of the men who remembers is Tony Basciano, who was Pte. Pringle’s sergeant in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment.

“Harold was a brave bugger, you know,” he told Mr. Clark. “He was to be shot sitting in a chair and he had the choice of sitting facing away from the firing squad. But he chose to sit facing them and with no blindfold. He walked in and almost took over, you know. He told the squad, ‘Come on, do what you’ve got to do. Let’s get it over with.’ ”

Reference: http://www.canadaka.net/article/143-the-secret-execution-of-private-pringle

Reading: Andrew Cark, A Keen Soldier: The Execution of Second World War Private Harold Pringle, 2004