

SHOT AT DAWN.

This was a sentence passed mainly during the First World War, 1914/1918, on soldiers who were accused of breaches of discipline at the front. Offences that merited this sentence were many and varied; treason, desertion, disobeying an order, spying, collaboration with the enemy, cowardice, sleeping on duty, striking a senior officer, mutiny, theft and being absent without leave. The alleged offender was tried by court martial; this consisted of a minimum of three officers, one acting as president (who, in theory, could not be below the rank of captain). A sentence of death could not be passed without the unanimous agreement of all those on the panel. A prisoner was entitled to a 'prisoner friend', normally an officer who would represent the accused. Many of the accused did not for various reasons avail of this form of defense.

During my time growing up in the 1930's and 1940's the 1914/18 war was referred to locally as the '**Last War**'. There were several ex-soldiers natives of the area still living around Belleek, they had survived that terrible conflict but they still carried the effects of it. Most of them were small in stature, as hardy as 'nails' and generally reluctant to talk about their experiences. They lived on a small army pension and whatever work they could find; some were employed as postmen or on the county council as road workers. They reared good families on a meager income. One of them that I remember always maintained that he would never live to see all his money spent, when he did die, he had just sixpence in his purse. Another when questioned about what he did during the war would say with conviction, "Dam it, I was standing behind the lines shooting them that were running away". We young lads thought this was very funny, it did not conform to the lofty ideals we had about the glamour of hard fought battles and great victories.

It was only when researching for this story that it was brought home to me how the story told by Wee Paddy was true, it went some way to explaining his reluctance to talk about his experiences. In the book "They Shall Not Grow Old", Irish Soldiers and the Great War by Myles Dungan is the story of a Colonel Percy Crozier, who in April 1918, ordered that machine-guns be turned on retreating allied Portuguese soldiers. He did this he said, 'In order to stem the tide. Had a complaint been lodged against me and had I been tried for murder, would Sir Douglas Haig have ordered my execution?' On the same morning Crozier had personally shot dead a young subaltern who was running from a German officer. There will be more latter; about this Colonel.

During the Great War and in its aftermath, Allied officers executed 306 men for alleged desertion and cowardice. Many of them suffered from shell shock and gassing by the enemy, they had served for lengthy and un-natural periods in the trenches. A number of them were in their teens or early twenties, some had given false ages when joining up and were well below the legal age of eighteen years. Twenty-one of them were serving with Irish regiments at the time of their execution. Other executed Irishmen were serving members of other regiments.

In most of the cases the suggestion that they were guilty and deserving of their punishment could not be further from the truth. Many of them had distinguished service records and had not been defended during their court-martial. One young Canadian who was shot at dawn had been awarded the Military Medal for bravery. They were the victims of a military establishment; which believed that their executions would be a lesson to others. Far from being cowards, many of them had survived horrific battles before reaching breaking point. Their comrades were often made to watch the executions, or parade past the body. Defending officers, when availed of, were often incompetent advocates and did not have crucial information that might well have cleared the accused. The number quoted does not include men who were sentenced for crimes such as murder or other offences that in civil life would have merited a court trial.

For some years recently, a campaign has been organized on a worldwide basis by John Hipkin of Newcastle-upon-Tyne to clear the names of those innocent men and he is seeking a full pardon for them. John who was born in 1927 was at the age of 14 Britain's youngest prisoner of war in the Second World War. He was serving as a cabin boy on a merchant navy ship; '**The Lustos**', which was sunk by the German battleship 'Scharnhorst' in February 1941, he was captured and put into a prisoner of war camp in Germany. After a few months in the camp, he witnessed a German soldier shoot dead a teenage prisoner over a bowl of soup. In October of 2,000 John Hipkin as the guest of the Mid-Ulster branch of the Friends of the Somme gave a lecture in the Royal Hotel, Cookstown, on the subject of his work in seeking a pardon for the men Shot at Dawn. I had the honour of attending his lecture.

The campaign led by John Hipkin, a retired teacher, still attracts attention in the media. His group has sought the help of the Irish Government to have pardoned the 26 Irishmen who were court-martialed and executed by the British army during the First World War. The Republic's Foreign Affairs Minister is backing this long running campaign. The organization; which is dedicated to getting posthumous pardons for veterans, has said that the Irish should follow the example of New Zealand who pardoned the five of its own soldiers who were executed for 'desertion' or 'disobedience'. John states that there was a disproportionate amount of Irish soldiers executed by the British army, all the Irish were young volunteers and should not have been executed. The Australians refused to execute any of their own volunteers for breaches of discipline. Australia said any man who volunteered for hell couldn't be faulted, or shot, because he'd had enough. Australians resisted all attempts by the British to impose their harsh discipline. In 1929, the practice; of shooting worn-out men was outlawed by the British Parliament. The soldiers executed in most cases were suffering from the effects of gassing or from shell shock. The present campaign was launched when the British Public Records Office released the court-martial documents in 1990. The campaigners describe the executions of the men who were shot "as judicial murders, they were brutally gunned down, not in the name of justice but as a stupid, spiteful and shameful example to others".

One Irishman to be executed was **Patrick Joseph Downey** from Limerick. He was shot at dawn on Monday 27th December 1915. The charge was insubordination and refusing to put on his cap. The cap was soaking wet and covered in muck. His age was officially given as 19 years; he was possibly much younger. The charge read, "The accused disobeyed a lawful command in such a manner as to show willful disobedience of authority given personally by his superior officer in the execution of his office". Downey was not defended at his trial. An officer told how on hearing that he had been sentenced to death, Downey laughed and said, "That is a good joke, you enlist me to shot the enemy, and then you shoot me". Other Irishmen Shot at Dawn were, **Stephan Byrne**, Dublin. Sunday 28th October; 1917. **Thomas Murphy/Hogan**, Kerry, Monday 14th May, 1917. **Joseph Carey**, Dublin, Friday 15th September 1916. **Thomas Cummings**, Belfast, Thursday 28th January, 1915. **Albert Smythe**, Ireland, Thursday 28th January 1915. **Thomas Hope**, Westmeath, Tuesday 2nd March 1915. **Thomas Davis**, Clare, Friday 2nd July 1915. **Peter Sands**, Belfast, Wednesday 15th September 1915. **James Graham**, Cork, Tuesday 21st December 1915. **James Crozier**, Belfast, Sunday 27th February, 1916. **James Templeton**, Belfast. Sunday March 19th 1916. **J.F. McCracken**, Belfast, Sunday March 19th 1916. **James H. Wilson**, Limerick, Sunday 9th July 1916. **James Cassidy**, Ireland, Sunday 23rd July 1916. **Albert Rickman**, Naas, Friday 15th September 1916. **James Mullany**, Ireland, Tuesday 3rd October 1916. **Bernard McGeehan**, Derry, Thursday 2nd November 1916. **Samual McBride**, Ireland, Thursday 7th December 1916. **Arthur Hamilton**, Belfast, Tuesday 27th March 1917. **J. Wishart**, Omagh, Tuesday 5th June 1917. **Robert Hepple(Hope)**, Ireland, Thursday 5th July 1917. **George Hanna**, Belfast, Tuesday, 6th November 1917. **John Seymour**, Ireland. Thursday 24th January 1918. **Benjamin O'Connell**, Wexford, Thursday 8th August 1918. **Patrick Murphy**, Dublin, Thursday 12th September 1918.

Irish, Scottish & North of England soldiers made up 50% of soldiers shot at dawn; their fate was kept secret for 75 years. Perhaps the Irish & Scottish Parliaments along with the Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies could unilaterally pardon their own nations. (John Hipkin)

Patrick Downey, who was executed on 27th January 1915, was one of those who had been sentenced to what was known as 'field punishment number one' for a series of minor misdemeanors. This involved being tied by the wrists and ankles – crucifixion style – to wagon wheels for periods of two hours daily as well as performing heavy duties on starvation rations. It was during this period of punishment that Downey refused to put on his wet cap. One soldier who survived the crucifixion treatment told how he was strained so tightly that he was unable to move a fraction of an inch, and the pain grew steadily until by the end of half an hour it seemed absolutely unendurable. John Hipkin told of how an Australian patrol was passing by the scene of a crucifixion, the officer in charge took his knife and freed the prisoner. A British officer told the Australian in no uncertain terms that he had carried out an

unlawful act. The Australian replied, "I shall be returning this way quite soon and if this prisoner is not alive and well I will personally blow your head off". At the trial of Bernard McGeehan who was accused of desertion, he was deeply traumatized, he said, "Ever since I joined up, all the men have made fun of me and I did not know what I was doing when I went away. Every time I go into the trenches, they throw stones at me and pretend it is shrapnel and they call me all sorts of names. I have been out here 18 months and have had no leave". But, passing the death sentence on the hapless prisoner, his senior officers curtly noted that, 'He seems of weak character and is worthless as a soldier'. A noted historian said that the attitude of some British officers towards Irish volunteers was that they were, 'A warrior tribe that needed a firm hand to prevent ill-discipline'.

One soldier related how he was detailed to form part of a firing squad at the execution of a deserter. The prisoner was tied to a post against a wall in his civilian clothes, and we were told to fire at a piece of white cloth pinned over his heart. We did not know what the rifles were loaded with, some were loaded with ball; others were blank. Then we got the signal to fire and pulled the trigger, we knew by the recoil if it was loaded with ball or not. The signal to fire was given in the form of a raised sword, cloth or stick being dropped, rather than a vocal order. This was supposed to be less stressful for the victim, naturally none of them could comment on this method. Then the deserter's name was read out at three successive parades as a warning. Another soldier told how while he was in the trenches he was told that six men had to go on a firing party to shoot four men of another battalion who had been accused of deserting. I was very worried about it because I did not think it right, in the first place, that English men should be shooting other English men. I thought we were in France to fight the Germans. Another reason was because I thought I knew why these men had deserted, if they had in fact deserted. It was just that they had probably been in the trenches for two or three months without a break, which could absolutely destroy your nerve, so I really did not feel like shooting them.

Anyhow later in the evening an old soldier in another battery told me that it was one thing in the army that you could refuse to do. So straightaway I went back to the sergeant and said, "I'm sorry, I'm not doing this", and I heard no more about it. I think the reason why I felt so strongly about it was the fact that the week before a boy in our own battalion had been shot for desertion. I knew that boy, and I knew that he absolutely lost his nerve; he could not have gone back into the line. Anyhow he was shot, and the tragedy of it was that a few weeks later, in our local paper I saw that his father had joined up to avenge his son's death on the Germans.

In another account, 'We were getting new recruits from London, and one day we had these two youngsters, between sixteen and seventeen years of age, they had only been with us for two weeks, when all of a sudden we had to go on attack. These two youngsters, when they knew they were going to be doing this attack, were literally crying their eyes out; it was such a shock for them to

go on an attack so soon. When we moved up to the attack we lost sight of them, but they had actually cleared off and had been caught by the Red Caps about three or four miles from where the action was taking place. They were brought back and charged. On the Sunday the whole battalion was paraded, the young men were brought in and stood at the end near the officer. Their caps were taken off; every insignia of their regiment was torn off, to disgrace them as much as they could. Then the verdict of the council was read out, which described how the two young men had deserted and, by their desertion and for letting their mates down they were going to be shot the next day at dawn.

As the two young men had been in my platoon it was decided that we should draw lots. Those that were drawn out – four of them – knew what they had to do at 8 o'clock the next morning. They felt as I would have done; terrified, almost sick with the whole thought of it. They were going to go and shoot their own mates. But there you are, we had to have discipline. So next morning the two young men were brought out to a yard and blindfolded. The four men from my battalion who were going to shoot them, each had been given their bullets and each pair were told to shoot one of the boys, one was to fire at the heart the other at the head. So that they would be killed instantly, as of course they were. The terrible thing was, the parents were never told; they were simply sent telegrams to say that their sons had been killed in active service. The four men who had to shoot them were sick with it all. There was sympathy in the platoon for the boys, but more sympathy really for the parents. We lived with it all for days and for weeks, I can still see it all now. But the point was this; every soldier directly he arrived in France, was read out the war facts. Every man had come out to fight. For the mere disobedience to an officer you could be shot. So we knew that. And so we took punishment as a fact of life.

One of the most poignant and, best documented judicial slayings of being **'Shot at Dawn'** was that of 18 year old James Crozier from Belfast. In 1916 his commanding officer was a namesake, Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Crozier. James was a 16 years old apprentice in Belfast shipyard when he enlisted in September 1914. He was under age and his mother came as far as the recruiting officer to persuade him not to join up. She threatened her son that she would tell the recruiting officer his real age. James said, 'You cannot do that, mother, if you do you will be a coward and none of your family were ever cowards'. At this point the then Major Crozier said to the mother, 'Do not worry, I will look after him and see that no harm comes to him'. Events would show that the officer was not as good as his word.

Rifleman James Crozier spent the dreadful winter of 1915/16 in the trenches of the Somme. In February of that miserable cold, dreary wet winter James Crozier went missing from his sentry post. He had walked a considerable distance when he was admitted to an Army Medical Post. At his court martial he said that he had not known what he was doing when he made off, being in a daze and suffering from pains throughout his body. However the

doctor who examined him pronounced him fit for active service and he was returned to his unit to face the consequences of his desertion. Lt. Col. Percy Crozier in evidence stated that this was not a case of a confused and disorientated young man who left his post to check into a field hospital. Rather he was a cunning deserter. He also said that James Crozier, fed-up, cold, wet to the skin and despondent, had sneaked off from the line under cover of darkness, throwing away his rifle, ammunition and equipment. (A legal ground for a second charge also punishable by death)

Percy Crozier's distortion of the facts makes it easier for him to explain away his subsequent actions. The young rifleman was court-martialed and found guilty of desertion. Despite his promise to the boy's mother the officer had no hesitation in recommending to higher authority that the sentence be carried out. The carrying out of the sentence itself often verged on black farce. According to Lt. Col. Crozier, he plied his young namesake with drink in order 'to ease his living misery' before his execution. He may also have had a desire to ensure that the young man went to his death in a state of sufficient oblivion to avoid any embarrassing scenes. The officer was conscious that feelings against the execution were running high in the battalion. The military police and the assistant provost marshal were convinced that the firing party would deliberately miss. They even feared a mutiny by the troops.

Just before dawn on the morning of 27th February 1916 the battalion was paraded, the execution was to take place in a walled garden so Crozier's comrades could hear, but would not see, what happened. Not unexpectedly, the firing squad failed to find their target, and the officer in charge was obliged to step forward and put a bullet through young Crozier's head. Because of his promise to the young boy's mother; Percy Crozier attempted to have his name added to a list of field casualties. He failed in this and Mrs. Crozier was duly notified that her only son had been shot for desertion, and she was denied the normal allowances payable on the death of next-of-kin. Percy Crozier commanding officer of the 9th Royal Irish Rifles, despite his promise to the boy's mother had no hesitation in recommending to higher authority that the death sentence be carried out. He tried to justify his stand by saying that, 'When it fell my lot to recommend the carrying out or remitting of the death sentence, I invariably recommended the carrying out of the extreme penalty – because I expected to be shot myself if I ran away', Crozier was conscious that feelings against the execution were running high in the battalion.

Will justice ever be done in the case of those executed soldiers clearly damaged by post traumatic stress disorder before committing the 'crimes' for which they died. The feeling is that the Government, rather than issue a blank pardon, each case will be examined separately and an individual judgment made on its merits. If that happens, hundreds of families will have the reputation of their loved ones restored, and government policy will finally catch up with public understanding, which has already pardoned most of the unfortunates who were 'shot at dawn'.

Some poor mother in God's own land,
Back where the almond and wattle bloom,
Wakes in the night in the darkened room;
Whispers a prayer to the unseen Hand,
Whispers a prayer for her boyish son
Over there where the angry night
Hugs the secret she'll know too soon.

At around the same time as the Crozier case, an officer was court-martialed for desertion. However, more fortunate than Rifleman Crozier, although convicted, he managed to get off when 'influential friends' queried the legality of his conviction. Another account. 'When we were at rest behind the lines during the battle of the Somme, I was told one morning that a private in my company, who had been out since the beginning of the war was unfit to go on parade. But the doctor passed him as fit and said he should go on parade. When I went to see him I came to the conclusion that he was in a very serious mental condition. I told him he was not to go on parade and I reported the matter to the commanding officer. He told me that it was not for me to decide; only the medical officer could do that and that the man should get up, and go on parade. Later in the morning this chap shot himself. This incident shook me very much; here was a case where undoubtedly the battle had been too much for this man. This illustrates the incompetence of some doctors and many officers'.

'When we were having our fortnight's rest out of the line, which was a habit, when one was occupying the trenches you had a fortnight in and a fortnight out in a village a few miles behind the lines. It was during one of these periods that the Colonel sent for me and said, 'I have a very unpleasant duty for you to perform which I don't like any more than you do'. He told me what it was about, apparently one of our men had absented himself from the front line on two occasions when a battle had started, and after the battle was over he came back and made some excuse that he had lost his way. Well, of course, I realized that this was a very serious offence and the first time I sentenced him to some severe punishment myself. But then when it happened again I realized he must be sent up to army headquarters for a court-martial. They court-martialed him and sentenced him to death by firing squad, and the unpleasant task the Colonel had set me was to attend the shooting and to pin on his heart a piece of coloured flannel so that they would have something to fire at. The following morning he was to be shot at dawn and I lay awake all night thinking about it and I thought, 'Well I will try to help this fellow a bit'. So I took down a cupful of brandy and presented it to him and said, 'Drink this and you won't know very much about it'. He said, 'What is it?' I said, 'It is brandy'. He said, 'Well I have never drunk spirits in my life, there is no point in my starting now'.

That to me was a sort of spurious sort of courage in a way. Two men came and led him out of the hut where he had been guarded all night, as he left the hut his legs gave way, then one could see the fear entering his heart. Rather than be marched to the firing spot he had to be dragged along. When he

got there he had his hands tied behind his back, he was put up against the wall, his eyes were bandaged and the firing squad were given the signal to fire. The firing squad consisted of eight men; only two of them had their rifles loaded, the other six carried blank ammunition – that was so that they wouldn't actually know who had fired the fatal shots. I wondered at the time; 'What on earth will happen if they miss him and do not kill him completely?' I was very anxious about that, but when they fired he fell to the ground writhing as all people do – even if they have been killed they have this reflex action of writhing about which goes on for some minutes. I did not know whether he was dead or not but at that moment the sergeant in charge stepped forward, put a revolver to his head and blew his brains out. That was the coup de grace, which I understood afterwards – I learned afterwards was always carried out in these cases of shooting.

Notes from the work of John Hipkin.

2,938 privates were sentenced to death.	316 were executed.
134 N.C.O.s	24
3 – 2 nd & Sub. Lieutenant	3
2 – Lieutenant.	0

It is not a case of whether Britain should pardon those poor shell-shocked soldiers who were inhumanely executed during World War 1 but of whether their families will pardon Britain. In the battlefield courts, only the man's last act was considered. His bravery before he broke did not count. John says the youngest in his files was a West Indian boy who found his way to Europe to join the great adventure. He joined up at 16, and was executed at 17. He was 17 years old Herbert Morris who was shot at dawn on 20th September 1917. The first, and only underage black boy soldier to be unjustly executed by a British firing squad. Enlisted illegally at 16 in Jamaica. Posted to Ypres Salient, shell fire was too much for the lad who was an under aged boy soldier, according to King's regulations, should have been sent home, not shot. His next of kin were William & Ophalia Morris, Jamaica. The youngest boy soldier in the British army to be killed in action in World War 1 was Private J. Condon, from **Waterford** a member of the Royal Irish Regiment. He was only 14 years old when shot at Flanders on 24th March 1915.

In September of the year 2,000 the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark pardoned the five New Zealand soldiers who had been executed in World War 1. They were; **Private Jack Braithwaite**, (29-10-1916) **Private Frank Hughes**, (25-8-1916) **Private John King**, (19-08-1917) **Private Victor M. Spencer** (24-02-1918) and **Private John J. Sweeney. (02-10-1916).**

An interesting story was reported in the Mail newspaper on June 23rd 1897 concerning the young Queen Victoria and the Iron Duke of Wellington. The Duke, as Minister in Attendance, produced some sentences, passed by a court martial, for her signature. One was a death warrant for desertion. The

Queen read the document carefully, and, looking the Duke straight in the eyes, said: 'Has your Grace nothing to urge in this man's favour?' 'Nothing, your Majesty; he has deserted three times'. 'Think again your Grace'. 'I have thought, your Majesty; he was a bad soldier'.

'Yes, but he may be a good man', persisted the Queen. Discipline must be maintained'. Murmured the martinet, (a strict disciplinarian) beginning to feel uncomfortable. 'Yes, but not if it demands the sacrifice of a man whose life may be as good as your own. Shall I?' went on the young Queen, persuasively, dipping her pen in the ink and looking at the duke with a pleasing expression. 'If it pleases your Majesty', stammered the hero of Waterloo, the lines of his stern face relaxing. 'Oh! Thank you, a thousand times', writing 'Pardoned' in large letters on the fatal page. The Queen pushed the parchment across the table to a dumbfounded Minister.

John Hipkin has extended his campaign to Canada in an effort to have 25 young Canadians who were shot at dawn pardoned. It was the duty of British Army Officers to repatriate underage soldiers, not to send them into action. The Canadian expeditionary force sent more than 1,000 underage soldiers back to the U.K. from France. They were housed in Kinmel Park Camp, Wales until arrangements were made to ship them home.

"LAST LETTER HOME"

by

Private Albert Troughton.

21st April 1915.

This short piece of First World War writing, smuggled from the Ypres Front by army jailors to the family of Albert Troughton is a valid and poignant piece of World War One writing in its own right. He wrote it from a heart full of 'shell-shocked' experience. The next morning, as his letter warns, he was shot by firing squad.

Lieutenant-General – later Field-Marshal Douglas Haig had conformed the death sentence "as a deterrent to others". This was in spite of Albert having followed his own Commanding Officer's last order of "everyman for himself" as nearly 300 comrades of the 1st Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers were being slaughtered all around him. Albert fought his way clear of the Germans. He was then told by an officer that one of his three fighting brothers had been killed on the line. Albert wandered off in shock. Later arrested, he was returned to his unit where all who could have vouched for him were dead, or alive in the "hands" of the Germans. Lower ranks in those days were not allowed representation at court-martial. Albert's fine record allowed him neither exemption from this "King's Regulation" nor mention of his contribution to the war effort

save for his momentary lapse. These Regulations were revised after the 1914-18 Great "War to End All Wars".

Thus, the night of 21st April 1915 saw Private Albert Troughton penning his "LAST LETTER HOME". It says much of him that his army jailors risked charges by smuggling the letter to his family in Coventry after his execution. His last message was, 'I am dying tomorrow, please clear my name'. The theory that one man could be selected to be shot at dawn as an example to others would seem to be unsustainable when, on 22nd April 1915, the fifth double execution of the war took place. The condemned men, both privates from the Royal Welsh Fusiliers- Private A. Troughton aged 22 and Private M. Penn aged 21 will be remembered along with the other 304 executed soldiers by the planting of 306 posts around a statue of a blindfolded "Shot at Dawn" boy soldier in the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas, near Lichfield. Both privates are buried together in Estaires Communal Cemetery, Belgium.

"LAST LETTER HOME".

Dear Mother, and Father, Sisters and Brothers,

Just a few lines to let your know I am in the best of health and hope you are mother. I am sorry to have to tell you that I am to be shot tomorrow at 7 o'clock in the morning the 22nd April. I hope you will take it in good part and not upset yourself. I shall die like a soldier, so goodbye mother, father, sisters and brothers, if any left. Remember me to Mr. Kendell and them who knew me. Mother I am very sorry nothing happened to me at Ypres, I should not have went away and then I might have stood a good chance of being still alive, but I think that they are paying the debt at the full rate. I thought the most they would give me would be about ten years. It is worse than waiting to be hung.

I hope you got my letters; which I sent you while waiting for my court martial. It seems that something told me I would be shot, so I think the time has come for me to die... I am only a common soldier and all civilians should know that I have fought for my country in hail, sleet and snow. To the trenches we have to go. All my comrades have been slaughtered which I think everyone

should know. When our regiment was captured, the Colonel loudly strained "Everyone for himself", but on and on I fought and got clear of the German trenches. This is the punishment I get for getting clear of the Germans.... I have wrote my last letter to you all at home, so mother don't be angry with me because I have gone to rest, and pray for me, and I will pray for you. Remember me to Mr. Newbold and tell him about it... I have been silly to go away but if you knew how worried I was, and almost off my head. Think how we had been slaughtered at the beginning of the war... You think they would have a bit of pity for those who are living for their country. Goodbye to all at home. Goodbye, Goodbye.

From your Son, Albert.

Many of those executed were young working class soldiers. They were tried, not by their peers, but by men of a different social class imbued with the prejudices of the military sub-culture of which they are now a part. There was an incident where soldiers were executed for killing a superior officer, probably as a result of severe provocation. They had said that they were sorry but they had just shot the Sergeant-major. The adjutant said: 'God Heavens, how did that happen?' 'It was an accident, sir.' 'What do you mean? You damn fools. Did you mistake him for a spy?' 'No, sir, we mistook him for our platoon sergeant'.

A certain form of moral blackmail used take place during the war, common in England it also spread to Dublin. Those were the days when young women were capable of presenting a white feather to even a strange young civilian when they met him on the street, as a token of his cowardice. It was an ingenious form of moral blackmail, which must have given its original inventor a considerable degree of patriotic and at the same time malicious pleasure. Recruitment officers would visit towns on the fair day to encourage young men to accept the Kings shilling. A Leitrim M.P. told a meeting held in May 1915 that Manorhamilton; a town with a population of only 1,000 inhabitants had sent 117 recruits to the army to do their part. The courage of many Irish chaplains saw some of them decorated for bravery. Fr. Maurice O'Connell received a D.S.O., Fr. Willie Doyle S.J. and Fr. Rafter S.J. got the Military Cross, The Revd. J. Jackson Wright, a Presbyterian minister from Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal and the Revd. Joseph Henry McKew, a Church of Ireland, clergyman from Clones in Co. Monaghan, were both awarded the Military Cross for bravery.

Many rank and file soldiers were not found wanting in courage as the story of one named Gilhooley illustrates. He was big, broad shouldered, ungainly, square jawed, potent and aggressive. Gilhooley was a dangerous man to cross, the story tells of his unthinkable physical courage and his healthy contempt for English officers. Once, when

a German sniper potting at our trenches in Vermelles picked off a few of our men, an exasperated English subaltern gripped a Webley revolver and clambered over the parapet. 'I'm going to stop that damned sniper,' said the young officer. 'I'm going to earn the V.C. Who's coming along with me?'

'I'm with you,' said Gilhooley, scrambling lazily out into the open with a couple of pet bombs in his hand. 'By Jasus! We'll get him out of it!' The two men went forward for about twenty yards, when the officer fell with a bullet through his head. Gilhooley turned round and called back. 'Any other officer wantin' to earn the V.C.?' There was no reply: Gilhooley sauntered back, waited in the trench till dusk, when he went across to the snipers' abode with a bomb and 'got him out of it'. One Irish soldier was asked what had struck him most about the war. 'What struck me most?' he replied. 'Sure, it was the crowd of bullets flying about that didn't hit me! A series of pass words were issued to soldiers at one stage in the trenches, words like rabbit and apple were used, and not unreasonably, some men found it difficult to remember from day to day what the password was.

On one dark night an officer seeing a man approaching, called out 'Halt, who goes there?' only to get the following unusual reply, 'Begorrah, I was a rabbit last night, a spud the night before, and I am damned if I know what I'm meant to be tonight'. Many of the Irish Great War veterans who have spoken of their experiences reveal a grudging admiration for the German soldier. One Irishman said that it was starvation that beat the Germans in the end. The lack of stamina, from completely bad food. They had bread that we found that was completely black and as hard as iron. You'd need a sledgehammer to break it. They'd give you anything for a bit of chocolate. Bully beef they'd go mad for. The British soldier bore no animosity to the German. When we got up amongst the Germans in the occupied territory in Cologne for instance you'd see the British Tommy go up and say 'Hello Bochy, come and have a drink.'

A Soldier's Grave.

Then in the lull of midnight, gentle arms, lifted him slowly down the slopes of death, lest he should hear again the mad alarms of battle, dying moans, and painful breath. And where the earth was soft for flowers, we made a grave for him that he might better rest. So, spring shall come and leave it sweet arrayed and there the lark shall turn her dewy nest.

Field punishment was of two types, No.1, a soldier was kept busy with continual labouring duties and might be restrained in fetters or handcuffs. He was also liable to be attached to a fixed object- as an additional humiliation. The fixing to a post, or sometimes a wheel, became known as crucifixion and might continue for a total of 21 days, during which the daily maximum period for such treatment was two hours. Additionally the attachment could not be carried out for more than three in any four consecutive days. In the case of field punishment No. 2, the prisoner was not subjected to being tied to a fixed object, but underwent the other restrictions. Assuming that death sentences were imposed by officers overwhelmingly drawn from the upper classes, on soldiers who were predominantly of working class origin, the taint of class justice, which

accompanied the Edwardian civil magistracy cannot have been absent from court martial.

The Australian Government refused to inflict the extreme penalty upon their soldiers, Suggestions have been made that this was because two Australian officers had been executed in the Boar War under dubious circumstances and without reference to the men's homeland, One of the few regiments not to have men executed was the Royal Irish Regiment. A Private George Ward aged 20 years who was executed on 26th September 1914, his was the second execution of the war. What is astonishing about the case of Private Ward is that his offence occurred on the 14th September his third day of active service. He had landed in France on 12th September and the brief duration of his service, before committing the crime of 'cowardice' that cost him his life, was the shortest of the war.

A soldier who was a member of a firing squad described what happened.

'I think it was hard lines that I should have had to make one of the firing party, as he was a chum of mine. . . We were told that the only humane thing that we could do was to shoot straight. The two men were led out blindfolded, tied to posts driven into the ground, and then we received our orders by sign from our officer, so that the condemned men should not hear us getting ready. Our officer felt it very much, as he, like me, knew one of the fellow's years before. The other I never knew, but his case was every bit as sad, he was only a boy'.

A sample letter sent to the parents of a young soldier executed by firing squad reads as follows;

Sir, I am directed to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office to the effect that your son was sentenced after trial by Court Martial to suffer death by being shot for desertion, and the sentence was duly executed on 20th Match 1916.

I am Sir, your obedient servant. Lt.Col. P.G. Hendley.

The young 19 years old Jewish soldier had been severely wounded in action some time before his alleged offence. In a letter to his mother he wrote.

Dear Mother,

We were in the trenches, and I was ill, so I went out and they took me to prison, and I am in a bit of trouble now and won't get any money for a long time. I will have to go in front of a court. I will try my best to get out of it, so don't worry. But, dear Mother, try to send me some money, not very much, but try your best. I will let you know in my next letter how I got on. Give my best love to Mother, Father, and Kate.

From your loving son, Aby.

The lot of a Chaplain was an extremely difficult one, the Rev. Captain Guy Rogers wrote of his most harrowing ordeal in attending to a condemned soldier.

'31st May 1916. Shall I tell you of the terrible experience I have just gone through (if so it must not go beyond the family circle of yourself). It has just fallen my lot to prepare a deserter for his death, that means breaking the news to him, helping him with his last letters, passing he night with him on the straw in his cell, and trying to prepare his soul for meeting God: the execution and burying him immediately. The shadow was just hanging over me when I wrote the last letter but I tried to keep it out. Monday night I was with him, Tuesday morning at 3.30 he was shot. He lay beside me for hours with his hand in mine. Poor fellow, it was a bad case, but he met his end bravely, and drank in all I could teach him about God, his father, Jesus his saviour, and the reality of the forgiveness of sins. I feel a bit shaken by it all, but my nerves, thank God, have not troubled me. Everyone has been so kind who knew of the ordeal. I will tell you more some other time. I want to get off it and away from the thought of it as much as I can.

The army authorities made attempts to cover up the true facts of one young soldier executed. When his father learned the truth he choose an unusual inscription for his sons headstone. 'Shot at Dawn one of the first to enlist, a worthy son of his father'.

Another inscription chosen by puzzled relations of an executed soldier read, *'Thy purpose Lord we cannot see but all is well that's done by thee'*.

One officer, who was sentenced to be shot at dawn, seemed to have an excellent case for reprieve. He was Lieutenant Eric Poole, injured by a German shell he was examined by a doctor who recommended that he be evacuated to a base hospital. In spite of hospitalisation and convalescence that lasted for a month, a consultant doctor decided that Poole's continuing symptoms rendered the officer unfit for active service at the front. This recommendation was over ruled and Poole was returned to the front. Poole left his post in the trenches to see a doctor, he was absent for two days and this was considered to be the most fatal ingredient of the offence for which he was court martialled. His brigade commander sent a communication to head quarters expressing the opinion that Poole be sent back home rather than be court martialled, and it outlined the officers previous shell shocked condition. The medical evidence was ignored and 31 years old Lieutenant Eric Poole was executed for desertion on 5th December 1916. One army historian said, "It is, I believe, a fact that even the bravest man cannot endure to be under fire for more than a certain number of consecutive days, even if the fire is not to heavy".

A private, suffering from severe shell shock, was examined by a doctor, who recommended that he return to his line. It would be an understatement to say that the medic failed in his duty. Rifleman Fred Barratt said at his trial for desertion that on one occasion he had been wounded and left unattended for five days. His constitution never recovered, and he became terrified when under fire. Never the less he was executed on 10th July 1917. There was one Australian executed by firing squad, he was Private John

King who had served with a New Zealand Regiment. Another sad case is that of a young 21 years old soldier who was executed on 29th August 1917. He was wounded early in the war, when on 10th November 1914 he received what, was known by the men as a 'Blighty' wound. This was a serious enough wound to have the man returned home to England. While under arrest for desertion in 1917 he escaped when a German shell exploded near his place of detention. At his trial the soldier told how he feared enemy gunfire, and his statement that for four years he had been resident in a lunatic asylum did nothing to enhance the reputation of special Reservists.

An eyewitness to an execution gives this graphic description of the event.

'What a setup? The Provost Marshall beneath contempt. The sergeant-major a cowardly vindictive rat and the senior sergeant a loud mouthed shyster, and for the men themselves with the exception of about seven they were a proper shower. . . Soon after I joined the unit we had to turn out one night and fall in outside the hut, and I wondered what it was for. Then along came two of the police with a prisoner and they stood backs to the hut and we faced them; next came a file of men with an officer and they stood at ease in front of us. We had an old soldier who looked after things at night-time and he came along with a lighted lantern. Then the Provost Marshall walked up with a paper in his hand and stood facing the prisoner. The old boy stood at the back of him holding up the lantern to shine over the Marshall's shoulder. We were called to attention and the APM began to read. Private 'so and so', you have been charged and found guilty of cowardice and desertion in the face of the enemy. The verdict of the Court Martial is that you are to be shot at dawn, signed Sir Douglas Haig. Next morning the sun was shining and a touch of frost was in the air. I was sent up the road to stop any traffic and high up I had a bird's eye view. I saw the man brought out to the post, the firing squad march into positions turn right and take up stand. I heard the report as they fired and saw the smoke from their rifles. They then turned and marched off. The officer with revolver in hand inspected the body then turned away. The dead man was then taken away on a blanket and buried in the small cemetery in the next field, it was over, I came down but it did not seem real'.

In 1915 a question was asked in the House of Commons whether it might not be a kindness to relatives at home not to promulgate details of men executed to soldiers serving abroad. The ritual of reading out details to men on parade, of the offence, sentence and shooting being an established practice. It had been decided that, in future, relatives of soldiers executed for military crimes would receive a pension in the same manner as soldiers dying honourably. It was also decided to alter the formal notification sent to next-of-kin after an execution. He modified form conveyed very deep regret, but went on to stipulate the offence and date of execution. It is noted however that the message of sympathy from the King and Queen was always omitted.

Another volunteer shot might have had other medical problems beside shell shock; he had also been wounded by a shell. He told the court how he had been invalided home with heart failure and shattered nerves. He was returned to France and

was no longer able to stand the strain and went absent. His court martial proved to be an absolute farce. Undefended, the soldier detailed his nervous condition and his inability to control himself when in the trenches. The court martial panel was clearly indifferent, as they did not even take the trouble to order a medical examination, merely sentencing the private to death. A private -Hubert Clarke, a West Indian Negro was executed near the Suez canal. A witness gave an account of the execution. 'It was just before dawn, the prisoner was standing close to the wall, a magnificent bronze Hercules, clad in a pair of khaki shorts only, his hands fastened behind his back. The firing party stood huddled nearby, their faces looked white and drawn in the gathering light. We were all in a state of extreme tension, then I looked at the prisoner, the light was coming up from the East. It glistened on his bronze skin and the white of his eyes. I was startled to see there was a smile of beatitude on his face, his white teeth sparkled, he was completely at ease. The Baptist chaplain was with him, the man's eyes seemed to glow with an inner joy. A few seconds later the command was given; then came the volley; and then the great, beautiful body crumpled and suddenly fell. Later I spoke to the Padre and commented on the courage of the man. The Padre said that he had been with the man almost hourly during the week; he had repented for his sins, and believed that he was forgiven; he was ready therefore to face his God.

Another witness to an execution told of the terrible scene, made worse because he knew the lad whose last words were, 'What will my mother say'. On 23rd August 1918 the oldest soldier to be executed was an American who served in an Irish regiment. Private Henry Hendricks was 46 years old and the third American to be executed under the British Army Act.

A doctor who served with the RAMC gave an account of an executed soldier. *'I shall call him Jim, he had been out three years, he had been wounded at a time when the wounded were cared for in France and usually were sent back to the line in six weeks. There was nothing about Jim that attracted special attention, he was the average happy-go-lucky sort of lad who did the days work in the normal way. War had become normal to him, and he had settled down to that fatalism which characterized so many of our men when they said, 'If it's to be it will, and if it ain't it won't'. On the front one night some thing suddenly snapped, he refused to go over the top with a raiding party. By the time he stood before the court the seriousness of the situation had washed away the colour from his face, and there was a dull leaden look in his blue eyes. He was sentenced to be shot at dawn. From the death sentry Jim learned the names of the officer and men who were to send him West in he morning. They were all his friends; two or three officers who had known him for years went into the death hut and said Good Bye. Somehow none of them could quite catalogue Jim as a coward. The sentry saw some men hovering around, and gauging the situation by intuition, turned his back, while through the open window old pals whispered, 'Au revoir, Jim'. . . From what the CO and Jim's pals told me I am fully persuaded that Jim died as a martyr to discipline...Jim was blindfolded, his hands were bound together behind him, as he stood there, calm and steady as a rock, the orders were given. "Goodbye Sir, Good bye*

Boys! , he said, just as if he were off on 10 days furlough. There was no reply. The subaltern was choked with emotion and the firing squad, as heart rent as he, dared not reply. The sharp crack of a volley, smothered sighs of relief from the squad, and all was over. All save laying him beneath the soil of France. And there, where Jim lies, there shall remain forever a little bit of England’.

Father Benedict Williamson, a Catholic Padre attended to a Private Patrick Murphy before his execution on 12th September 1918. The Padre said that there is an immense difference between seeing a number of men slain in battle and seeing one shot with all the cold deliberation that follows in such a case as this. The shelter was closed with a door of open ironwork. We talked for some time, and as I was going away Murphy said to me, ‘Father I am glad that I am a Catholic, and I am not afraid to die’. The boy was so wonderfully calm and resigned. The officer in charge of the firing party said that the condemned boy was a nice friendly sort of chap; he smiled on the firing party and assured them that he bore them no ill will and realized that they had to obey orders. Father Benedict also bore witness to the condemned boy’s spirit saying, ‘The boy’s death and his fine courage made a great impression on all who assisted at that sorrowful scene...’ The last two soldiers to be executed in 1920 were Irish, one of them was Private James Joseph Daly, aged 20 years. He was shot for his part in the much chronicled mutiny by 1 Connaught Rangers. Fourteen of those who took part in the mutiny were sentenced to death, the other 13 were reprieved and only Daly was executed.

Most of those executed were volunteers; a number of them had been initially rejected on medical grounds but then conscripted at a later date. Medical history was ignored and overlooked. Often unhelpful remarks by from senior officers condemned the men and sealed their fate. Because of their background they were poorly educated and so ill equipped to defend themselves. They had no concept of what they had to face on the front. Conditions could be cold, hot, muddy and often boring. They were terrifying for poorly trained and in experienced soldiers when confronted with the noise and ferocity of constant shell-fire, machine gunning, sniping, gas attacks coupled with the constant threat of death. Fatigue was brought on by long marches, poor food, extensive service without any leave and worries about their families. So many of them were under age, just boys, Much has been heard of people calling out to punish the guilty.... Few are concerned to clear the innocent.

A quote by a Commanding officer about a condemned man, “The particulars of the offence, as given on the charge sheet, were not completely proved before the court, but I do not think any injustice has been done. I recommend that the extreme penalty be carried out. One victim pleaded at his trial, ‘ I have had a very bad time since I have been out here and having no father I have had to worry about my mother, as I have not been home in almost three years’.

The Deserter.

“I’m sorry I had done it, Major”

We bandaged the livid face
And led him out, ere the wan sun rose
To die his death of disgrace
The bolt-heads locked on the bullet
The rifles steadied to the rest
As cold stock nestled on colder cheek
And fore sight lined on the breast
“Fire” called the Sergeant-Major
The muzzle flamed as he spoke
And the shameless soul
Of a nameless man
Went up in the cordite smoke.

He died a hero, I say that every man who died in that Great War was a hero, no matter how he died.

If soldiers accused of cowardice or of desertion in the face of the enemy had looked to the medical officers for assistance or compassion then they were likely to have looked in vain. The army doctors as a whole seem to have set themselves up as an extra branch of the provost corps, intent on securing the extreme penalty for such offences whenever possible. Medical examinations carried out after trials were of dubious value in any regard and did nothing to suggest that any alteration to the sentence was required. One simple soldier boy, who grinned at life in empty joy, slept soundly through the lonesome dark. And whistled early with the lark, in western trenches cowed and glum, with cramps and lice and lack of rum. He put a bullet through his brain – no one spoke of him again.

For some of our soldiers and their families, however, there was neither glory nor remembrances. Just over 300 of them died, not at the hands of the enemy, but of firing squads from their own side. They were shot at dawn, stigmatized and condemned, a few as cowards, most as deserters. The nature of those deaths, and the circumstances surrounding them, have long been a matter of contention.

During his campaign, John Hipkin got the following reply to a question he asked from the M.O.D. “You also state that a number of soldiers who were underage were illegally tried and executed. This is not the case, anyone over the age of fourteen was deemed legally responsible for his actions and army regulations provided no immunity from military law for an underage soldier”.

Cowardice is defined as the inability to master fear. Many of the firing squad members were driven mad over the shame and guilt of their actions and were hospitalized for psychiatric care. They suffered guilt that would haunt them for the rest of their lives. Many accused had no friends in court since they did not like an officer, mix socially with their masters. With officers the old boys network came into play and urgent, discreet private meetings ensured that they received favourable treatment. It is incredible to think that soldiers who had shown great courage in many fierce battles,

suffered injuries and had even been decorated for bravery could then be accused of the lack of moral fibre and branded as cowards. The terrible conditions in the trenches had brought many men to breaking point and so members of an entirely volunteer force were stigmatized for the rest of their lives. They suffered from stress created by overwhelming paralyzing soul destroying fear. The most courageous of all men were those who fought constantly against their own dreadful fear and yet somehow contrived to fight on.

In the year 2003 the Church of Ireland standing committee at a meeting in Dublin has given its unanimous support to the shot at dawn campaign. In November 2003 the Irish Government pledged support for the campaign. In 1998 a bill sponsored by John Hume, Rev. Ian Paisley and Sir David Steele to allow for pardons was defeated in the House of Commons. There is no doubt about the bravery of the unfortunate young men who were Shot at Dawn, their courage was only matched by the Chaplains who supported them to the end.

While the official records show 26 Irishmen executed at dawn, there were another 24 Irishmen who were resident in England, Scotland, Canada and New Zealand and joined regiments there who were also executed making a total of 52 men. **Private Joseph Brennan** – 16th July 1916. **Private Joseph Carey**, Royal Irish Fusiliers – 15th September 1916. **Private John Docherty**, 15th February 1916. **Rifleman Thomas Donovan**, 31st October 1917. **Private Richard Flynn**, Dublin Fusiliers, 6th November 1920. **Private Hugh Flynn**, 15th November 1916. **Lance – Corporal Joseph Fox**, age 20. 20th April 1915. **Private J. Fox**, 12th May 1916. **Private J. M. Higgins**, 7th December 1916. **Private Frank Hughes**, Irish/ New Zealand. 28th August 1916. **Private Henry Hendrick**, age 46, from the U.S.A. but in an Irish Regiment. 23rd August 1918. **Private Francis Murray**, 1st October 1916. **Driver Robert Murray**, 3rd March 1917. **Rifleman William Murphey**, 7th July 1917. **Private Allen Murphy**, 17th August 1916. **Private Charles Milligan**, 3rd March 1917. **Private John McQuade**, 6th November 1916. **Private A. O'Neill**. 30th April 1916. **Private Frank O'Neill**, 16th May 1918. **Private John Rogers**, 9th March 1917. **Trooper John Sweeney**, in a New Zealand regiment. Irish/Australian. 2nd October 1916. **Private George Ward**, age 20. 26th October 1914. **Private Thomas Ward**, age 23. 16th October 1914. **Private James Joseph Daly**, Connaught Ranger. Age 20. 2nd November 1920.

Royal Irish Rifles – 5 executed. **Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers** – 5 executed. **Irish Guards** – 3 Executed. **Royal Dublin Fusiliers**. – 3 executed. **2 Leinster Regiment**. – 3 executed. **Royal Irish Fusiliers**. – 2 executed. **Munster** – 2 executed. **Connaught Rangers** – 1 Executed.
(22 Irishmen were executed in 1916)

In the midst of the First World War Canada experienced a war disaster in its own territory. On December 6th 1917, two ships collided in Halifax harbour. One was munitions ship, the resulting explosion shook Halifax and Dartmouth with the largest man made explosion before the atomic bomb. Almost 2,000 people were killed and

thousands more injures. The blast destroyed many homes and caused \$35 million in property damage.