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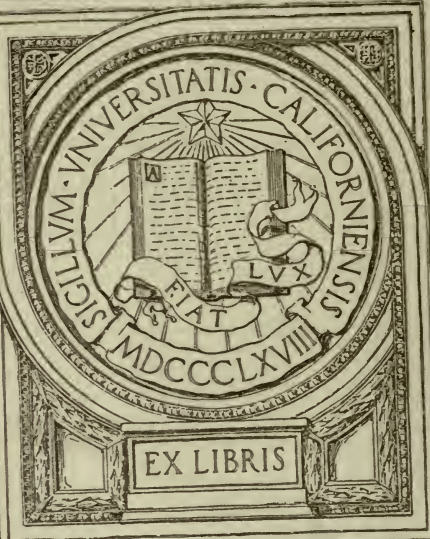
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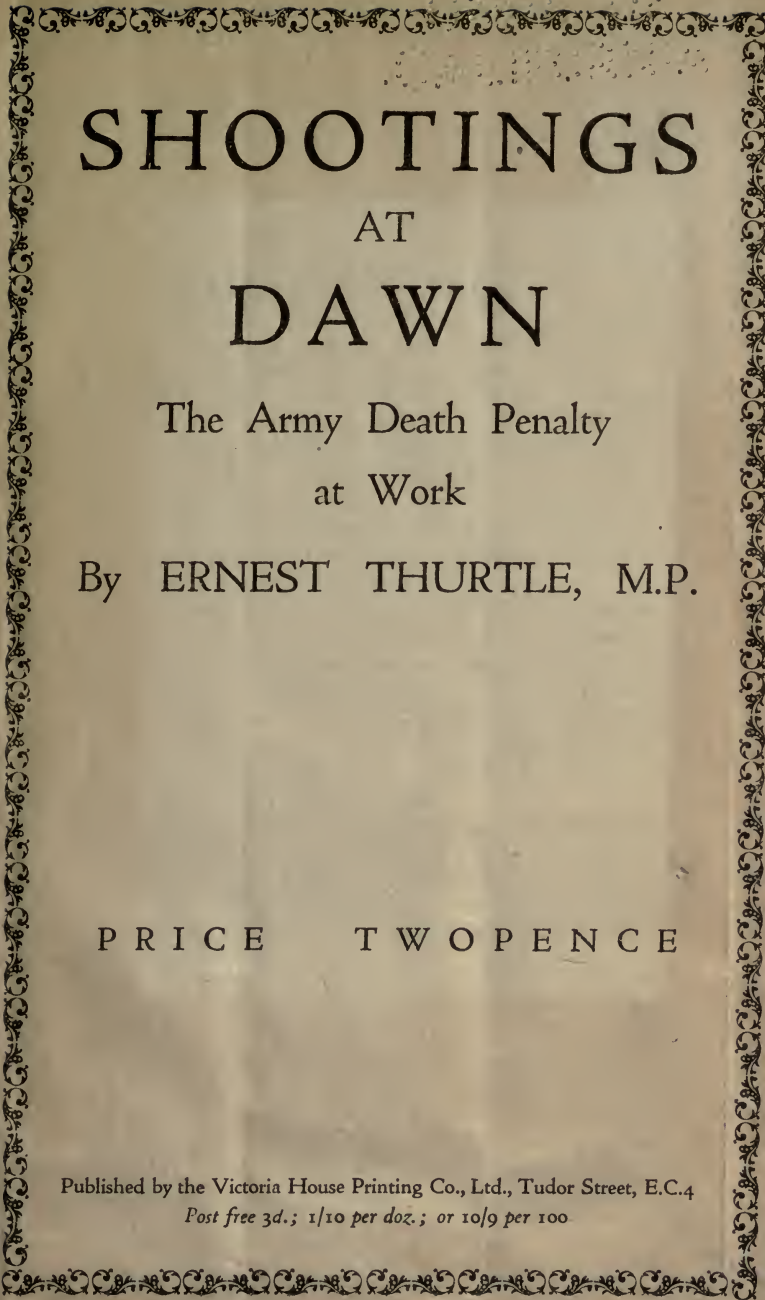
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SHOOTINGS
AT
DAWN

The Army Death Penalty
at Work

By ERNEST THURTLÉ, M.P.

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Daily Herald



Truth for your penny

SHOOTINGS AT DAWN

THE movement for the abolition of the Death Penalty for military offences is growing rapidly, as the recent debate and division in the House of Commons demonstrated. There is no doubt that these shootings in cold blood of men for desertion and cowardice (so-called) are repugnant to the great majority of the people of the country. Offences of this kind are almost entirely manifestations of nerve failure in one form or another, and, to the average man and woman, it is an outrage of justice that for such failure men should be shot by their own comrades, in accordance with the provisions of existing Military Law.

Defenders of the Military Death Penalty challenge the contention that these executions—there were 264 of them in the last war—are miscarriages of justice, and ask for facts to prove this contention. It is not easy to furnish these facts. Records of all the cases, as viewed by the military authorities, are in the possession of the War Office, and access to these records is not permitted. The necessary evidence, therefore, can be obtained only from the comrades of the victims, and in view of the time which has elapsed since the end of the War, and the absolute necessity for accuracy as to details in each particular case, it will easily be understood that nothing like a complete picture of the operation of the Death Penalty in war time can be constructed.

I have, however, succeeded in obtaining the facts in regards to a number of executions, and I think these will be sufficient to convince the public of the barbarity and gross injustice of this particular part of Military Law. All the cases quoted are supported by complete details, which are in my possession, as to names, units concerned, dates, places and offences. My informants, who certainly have no motive for departing from the truth in regard to these cases, are prepared to maintain the accuracy of their statements before any competent tribunal.

The names of the unfortunate victims have been deliberately suppressed, in order to avoid the possibility of giving unnecessary pain to relatives or friends, though letters I have received from some relatives indicate that they, having suffered cruel bereavement from the operation of this harsh law, are prepared for any kind of publicity which will help to get the law abolished.

Published as they were received, the letters which follow are plain, unvarnished tales, more eloquent in their recital of bald facts than any fine writing could be. They will, I feel confident, make all decent men and women who read them resolve to make an end of the Military Death Penalty. Recently, in the House of Commons, when I was giving some details of one of these miscarriages of justice, one member (I know not what manner of War Profiteer or callous Brass Hat he was) called out: "More sob stuff." I am well content that the men (particularly ex-Service men) and women of this country should decide whether these stories of military executions are "sob stuff," or damning evidence against an injustice which cries aloud for remedy.

LETTER NO. 1

"The following are the true facts relating to the execution of No., Pte. 'A,' B Company, 1st Berkshire Regt.:—

"We were in reserve trenches at Metz Farm on or about September 22, 1914, each man in his own dug-out, when an enemy shell dropped in the trench, killing two men. I was standing in the road at the time. When the shell burst, Pte. 'A' jumped out of his dug-out and I promptly jumped in. This occurred about 3.30 p.m. At 5.30 p.m. the Company fell in on the road, when Pte. 'A' reported himself to Sergeant-Major S——, who asked him why he ran from the trenches. 'A' stated that he was slightly wounded, whereas he was not.

"For this crime he was court-martialled on September 29, and executed on September 30, 1914. Only his Coy. Sergt.-Major was called to give evidence. I was the only man that saw what happened, and yet I was never called.

"Now for his death. To get the firing party, as we were going into the line that night, they called for twelve men to carry tools. Now the men who carried tools at that time had the first chance of using them, so you see there were plenty of volunteers, but once on parade they quickly realised that their job was to shoot poor 'A.' On his being brought out he broke away from the sergeant of the guard, and the firing party fired at him on the run, wounding him in the shoulder. They brought him back on a stretcher, and the sergeant of the guard was ordered by the Provost-Marshal to finish him off as he lay wounded.

"These are the true facts, and you are at liberty to use my name and number and letter any time you think fit."

LETTER NO. 2

"This is the case of Pte. 'B,' of my late platoon, No. 5, B Company, 11th Middlesex Regt., 36th Brigade, 12th Div. He was a boy of 18½, and he was shot at dawn at Sailly La Bourse on April 26, 1916. He was known to the whole Company as a bundle of nerves. He ran away from the trench known as Vigo Street, at Vermelles, after it had been bombarded for six days and nights, and we had suffered heavy casualties. This lad joined the army in August, 1914, at the age of 17."

Note.—Here is little more than a bald statement of facts, but these facts are eloquent. Enlistment at 17, nerve failure after prolonged bombardment, then execution at 18½.

LETTER NO. 3

"I was a Transport Driver of the 10th Durham Light Infantry, 43rd Brigade, 14th Division. In the early part of 1916 we were on the Arras front. While the battalion was in the line the Brigade transport camp was at a village called Warlus. On the evening of May 20, 1916, we were informed that *réveillé* would be at 2 a.m. next morning, and we were to parade in full equipment, with ammunition. At three o'clock next morn-

ing we were marched to the outskirts of the village, where we found the rest of the Brigade transports. At 3.30 a.m. we were called to attention, and to our surprise a prisoner with escort was marched down in front of us. Then came the A.P.M. with some papers in his hand.

"Then the prisoner's cap was taken off, and he was told to take one pace forward, which he did. Then the A.P.M. commenced to read the papers, which were to the effect that Private 'Y,' of the 7th K.R.R., 41st Brigade, 14th Division, was found missing from his battalion the night they went into the line. He was arrested and charged with desertion. The man pleaded that he was drunk that night and missed his way. He was tried by court martial, found guilty and sentenced to death, the death sentence being confirmed by Sir Douglas Haig.

"The man was then told to take a pace back again, which he did without a quiver—a braver man at that moment wasn't to be found in France. He was then marched away to the place where he was to be shot. We were then ordered to about turn, and the Brigade Transport Officer threatened us that any man who turned round would be put on a crime. So we stood in silence for what seemed hours, although only minutes. Then the shots rang out and one of the Yorkshires fainted, the strain was that great. Still we stood in silence until we heard another shot, which I afterwards ascertained was the doctor's shot to make sure he was dead.

"This is the whole thing as it happened. Hoping this will help the cause. I am ready to substantiate all I have written here."

LETTER NO. 4

This deals with two separate executions:—

"On February 9, 1916, when I was a sergeant in the 1st Battn. West York Regt., 18th Brigade, 6th Division, I was ordered to take over the guard of Lance-Corporal 'X,' of the same regiment, who was to be shot for desertion, having been absent for twenty-three days, until apprehended by the police. He was not shot until two days after this. On the evening of the 10th I handed him over to the new guard and proceeded with my platoon to the trenches. Next day I was ordered to pick the two worst characters in my platoon to form part of the execution party. 'X' was a clean, smart, brave soldier, respected by all his comrades.

"The two men I selected for the firing party went with the adjutant. When they came back, tough characters though they were supposed to be, they were sick, they screamed in their sleep, they vomited immediately after eating. All they could say was: 'The sight was horrible, made more so by the fact that we had shot one of our own men.'

"Lance-Corporal 'X' had been very lucky in gambling with his comrades and had won a fair amount of money while the battalion was back at rest. This had been his downfall, as he had gone on a drinking bout only a few hundred yards away from his battalion.

"This execution took place at the Asylum, Armentières."

"I add another experience, which followed a week later. A private in my regiment, 'W,' was charged with desertion. He had been absent

about 18 days. He was tried and convicted at Houplines, near Armentières.

"On or about February 16, 1915, I was Sergeant in Charge of the Regimental Guard. I had thirty-two prisoners, mostly twenty-eight-day men. Amongst these men were all those who had formed the firing party for Lance-Corporal 'X.' At 8 p.m. I received an envelope marked:—'Open this when you are alone.' The instructions contained in this were: you must warn a party of twelve men from the prisoners you have (those who shot Lance-Corporal 'X' must not be included). At 4 a.m. next morning I entered the prisoners' room with an escort. I gave strict orders that no man must move until his name was called out, and he must then get up and go outside. Of course they knew poor Pte. 'W' was to be shot that morning, and the idea went straight to them—I was warning the execution party for Pte. 'W.'

"It was then I witnessed a scene I shall never forget. Men I had known for years as clean, decent, self-respecting soldiers, whose only offence was an occasional military 'drunk,' screamed out, begging not to be made into murderers. They offered me all they had if I would not take them for the job, and finally, when twelve of them found themselves outside, selected for the dreaded firing party, they called me all the names they could lay their tongues to. I remained with the guard for three days, and I leave you to guess what I had to put up with. I am poor, with eight children, I would not go through three more such nights for £1,000.

"This execution also took place at the Asylum, Armentières."

LETTER NO. 5

"I quite agree with you that the Death Penalty should be abolished. It cost me one of my best pals during the War. His name was Private 'W,' B Coy., 2nd Battalion S.W.B., 87th Brigade, 29th Division. He deserted twice or three times, but he was not a coward, as a braver man never went on Active Service. He told me that the reason of his conduct in that way was that he was the sole support of a widowed mother, and that the Government only paid her an allowance of 5s. 6d. a week. He said he would never soldier until they gave her more, which was not done, according to his own words to me. The last time he deserted was at the beginning of July, 1918. He was arrested at St. Omer early in August, 1918, was court-martialled and sentenced to death, the sentence being confirmed by Sir Douglas Haig. The execution was carried out at dawn on August 10, 1918, between the town of Hazebrouck and the village of Bore, by men from his own Company, and he was buried in Bore Cemetery."

The following is an extract from an article which has already been published. The writer of it, an ex-soldier, describes an execution he witnessed:—

"'Come out, you,' ordered the corporal of the guard to me. I crawled forth. It was snowing heavily. 'Stand there!' he said, pushing me between two sentries. 'Quick march!' and away we went, not as I dreaded,

to my first taste of 'pack drill,' but out and up the long street to an R.E. dump. There the police corporal handed in a 'chit,' whereupon three posts, three ropes and a spade were given me to carry back. Our return journey took us past the guard room, up a short hill until we reached a secluded spot surrounded by trees. . . . Certain measurements were made in the snow, after which I was ordered to dig three holes at stipulated distances apart. I began to wonder. . . . Could it be . . . ? No, perhaps spies . . . perhaps oh, perhaps only my fancy. . . . The next scene a piercingly cold dawn; a crowd of brass hats, the medical officer, and three firing parties. Three stakes a few yards apart and a ring of sentries around the woodland to keep the curious away. A motor ambulance arrives conveying the doomed men. Manacled and blindfolded they are helped out and tied up to the stakes. Over each man's heart is placed an envelope. At the sign of command the firing parties, twelve to each, align their rifles on the envelopes. The officer in charge holds his stick aloft and as it falls thirty-six bullets usher the souls of three Kitchener's men to the great unknown. As a military prisoner I helped clear the traces of that triple murder. I took the posts down . . . I helped carry those bodies towards their last resting place; I collected all the blood-soaked straw and burnt it. Acting upon police instructions I took all their belongings from the dead men's tunics (discarded before being shot). A few letters, a pipe, some fags, a photo. I could tell you of the silence of the military police after reading one letter from a little girl to 'Dear Daddy,' of the blood-stained snow that horrified the French peasants; of the chaplain's confession that braver men he had never met than those three men he prayed with just before the fatal dawn . . . I could take you to the graves of the murdered."

The victims of the above execution were a sergeant and two corporals of the Durham Light Infantry. Their Company had made an attack on King's Crater, near Arras, and captured it. The enemy counter-attacked and recaptured the Crater. The captain in charge was killed, and as he was dying he told his men to get back to their own trenches. The next morning they were all put under arrest, and the three N.C.O.'s were court-martialled, sentenced to death and shot at Roellecourt, near St. Pol. I have complete details of this case in my possession.

Extract from a letter from an ex-private of the 1st Battn. East Kent Regt., who gives full details:—

" . . . I think it was hard lines that I should have had to make one of his 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 the fellow 'E' years before. 'G' I never knew, but his case was every bit as sad, as he was only a boy."

Extract from a letter of an ex-sergeant of the 13th Middlesex Regt., who was in charge of the firing party in this case, and who gives full details:—

“ . . . It was a terrible scene, being that I knew him made it worse me. The ten men were selected from a few details left out of the line. They were nervous wrecks themselves, and two of them had not the nerve to fire. Of course, they were tried, but they were found to be medically unfit—their nerves had gone. . . . I have always had it on my mind. I think these terrible things should be abolished, and so would everybody else who had witnessed a ‘ Shooting at Dawn ’ affair. . . . Excuse my writing. It is difficult for me to write, but I felt it my duty to help to have these executions abolished. . . . P.S.—The last words the lad said were ‘ What will my mother say? ’ ”

I do not think it is necessary for any word of comment to be added to the foregoing revelations. They speak for themselves.

Perhaps I ought to add that in the last resort the War Office mandarins defend the retention of the Death Penalty on the ground of military necessity. If this argument means anything, it means that the military authorities are unable to keep men on the battlefield without the threat of having them shot in cold blood by their fellow countrymen. This may not be true—though the fact that the Death Penalty was not applied to the Australian troops during the War throws doubt on it. In any case the short answer to this argument is that in these days no man has the right to shoot any man in cold blood, volunteer or conscript, because he is unable to withstand the horrors of modern war. If war cannot be waged without the Death Penalty, and we take that Penalty away, it is much the worse for the people who make wars but take good care not to fight in them.

Will all those who wish to see the Army Death Penalty abolished endeavour to get definite pledges of support for this project from the members of Parliament and candidates for Parliament? Will they also endeavour to get organisations with which they may be connected to pass resolutions, at branch meetings and at conferences, demanding a change in Military Law?

ERNEST THURTLAND

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