



# When the penalty for fear was death

*Britain shot 306 of its own men during the First World War. This article is the oldest in my portfolio, published in The Independent in 2002, but its powerful imagery still resonates today.*

Sixteen-year-old Herbert Burden was so desperate to serve king and country that he lied about his age. When the First World War broke out he told the recruitment officer he was 18 and was accepted into the Northumberland Fusiliers.

Ten months later he was dead, shot by his own comrades, on the orders of British officers. After witnessing the massacre of his friends on the battlefield of Bellwarde Ridge, he had turned and fled the unimaginable horror. A court martial followed and in July 1915 the willing recruit, still officially too young to be in his regiment, was executed by firing squad as a coward.

Eighty-seven years later, Private Burden is still accorded no official military honour. No-one will officially record his bravery in signing up when there was no obligation to do so, nor will his name appear on war memorials. History will refuse to take into account the terror of a

17-year-old thrust into a war whose scale of carnage was so far removed from previous conflicts that even the most experienced veterans were abjectly unprepared for its horrors.



"He remains, officially, a coward, but this is more than just being frightened," says psychologist Petra Boynton, an Open University researcher and social sciences tutor. "I'm sure there wasn't one soldier on either side who wasn't terrified, and there are thousands of individual stories of enormous bravery. But Pte Burden's story is not one of cowardice – it's one of complete, physical inability to cope."

British and Commonwealth military command executed 306 of its own men during the First World War – many of them soldiers whose extreme mental stress was so obvious even at the time that the killings were reprehensible, argues Dr Boynton. "Even the ancient Greeks knew about what they called 'war exhaustion', whether it was physical or mental," she says. "Throughout history there have always been men who couldn't fight. There was much evidence at the start of the First World War, and even more by the end, that these men were suffering extreme trauma."

Now Dr Boynton is calling on the British Psychological Society to honour the executed soldiers and its own pioneers who first recognised the condition "war neurosis" in 1915, by supporting Shot At Dawn, a national campaign to secure pardons for those who were executed.

"Psychologists were distressed they were unable to save these soldiers," she said in a letter to the BPS journal *The Psychologist*. "Communities rejected family members of those executed. Many widows were denied war pensions, placing them and their children in poverty."

"Finally, it led to a 'stiff-upper-lip' version of masculinity that haunted many survivors of the war, along with negative views of mental illness that still exist."

"So many of those executed were just boys. They made absolutely no allowance for that," says Mr Hipkin, whose ship was captured within weeks of the outbreak of the Second World War, giving him the unenviable distinction of being one of Britain's youngest ever prisoners of war.

"The treatment of those boys and their families was and is a disgrace, a shameful secret that was kept for 75 years," he says. "Some of these people will have been villains and I don't want pardons for murderers or rapists. I – and the families of these men – want pardons 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."

Many of those executed were repeat deserters who had escaped the death sentence at a previous court martial only to be catapulted straight back to the front line. Others didn't get a second chance. Pte Thomas Highgate, who had joined the Royal West Kents at 17, was shot by his own side just 35 days into the war, after fleeing the carnage of 7,800 British troops at the Battle of Mons and hiding in a barn. He was undefended at his trial, his comrades all dead, injured or captured. Pte George Ward had been on active service for only three days with the Royal Berkshire Regiment when he was intercepted moving to the rear during a bombardment, falsely claiming to be injured. He was executed the next day, aged 20.

"Shell shock – or as it is recognised today, post-traumatic stress disorder – would make soldiers behave erratically, hysterically, or go to the other extreme and become catatonic," says Dr Boynton, who has recently moved from the OU and now works for the Royal Free and University Medical School.

"Some of those 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 becomes physically too painful to bear."

But those on trial for their lives received little or no support from medical officers. One such doctor, described by Wendy Holden in her 1998 book *Shell Shock: The Psychological Impact Of War*, said: "I went to the trial determined to give him no help of any sort, for I detest his type ... I really hoped he would be shot."

There is a case for suggesting those executed were horrifically unlucky. More than 16,000 Britons faced tribunals as conscientious objectors during the First World War and of those eventually dragged on to the front line, 34 were sentenced to death. However, every one was granted a stay of execution, meaning a soldier was more likely to be spared if he showed his reluctance to fight from the outset, than if he made it to the field of battle before losing his nerve.

They were unlucky, too, perhaps, to be British. Not one American or Australian soldier was executed. Even the Germans, whose troops outnumbered the British by two to one, shot only 25 of their own men. And the 306 were unlucky, also, to be serving in the first war in



which machine weaponry played such a major part that generals could direct operations from afar without having any idea of the trauma suffered by the men on the front line.

But most of all, claims Dr Boynton, they were unlucky, by virtue of their youth, race or social standing, to be deemed worthless enough to be assassinated simply as an example to other men who might show similar symptoms of fear. Nineteen-year-old Pte Charles Nicholson, who told the court: "When the bombs dropped I got nervous – I can't say anything else," was sentenced to death after a trial lasting 10 minutes.

Defenders of those shot at dawn say many were executed after taking what could be interpreted as reasonable strategic action or following orders to retreat. And while it is claimed large numbers of those who absconded were officers, they accounted for only three of those executed.

The Ministry of Defence continues to refuse to pardon the men, although the military death penalty was abolished in 1930. A letter to Shot At Dawn campaign leader Mr Hipkin from the MoD stated: "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."



Three years ago the then armed forces minister John Reid ruled out exoneration for those executed because, he said, it was impossible to determine which of the men had suffered genuine psychological trauma. Others have more strident views. Arthur Silver of Suffolk wrote, at the age of 103, to the *Daily Mail* to complain about moves to honour those who had been shot. He had been in the firing line and said he had "no regrets about executing ... cowards who let the side down".

Gradually, however, the tide is beginning to turn. The Royal British Legion supports a pardon, and for the past two Remembrance Sundays has invited the Shot At Dawn campaigners to take part in the march past the Cenotaph in London. Earlier this year a memorial to the executed soldiers, including a statue of Herbert Burden, was erected at the National Memorial Arboretum in Lichfield, Staffs.

There is still resistance, but Dr Boynton remains convinced of her own views. "These people were not cowards but suffering extreme mental stress. Many of them went to their deaths refusing to be blindfolded, but staring down the barrels of the guns which would kill them. That's not cowardice. That's courage."

*\*Since this article's publication, all 306 British soldiers shot at dawn during World War 1 have received a posthumous pardon. From 2006 their descendants have been permitted to march past the Cenotaph in London as part of the UK's national Remembrance Day memorial events.*