

People's Histreh

Nottingham & Notts Radical History Group



103 FORESTERS

MUTINIES AND DEATH SENTENCES
IN THE LOCAL REGIMENT – 1914-18

ISSUE 3:

Wipers, Helles and beyond

Three Foresters' death sentences, July 1915



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This is the third issue in a series of pamphlets, planned to be published over the next few years. Given that this is a work in progress, you will find that we will be revisiting earlier issues as the project develops, adding to or changing sections of previous publications. For some more information on People's Histreh, please see the links below and have a look at the last page of this document.

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Please keep an eye on our (highly irregularly updated) blog to find future issues in this series, and information on events, past projects by People's Histreh, etc.:

<http://peopleshistreh.wordpress.com>

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Erratum

We reviewed Issues 1 and 2, but made only cosmetic corrections and alterations. The one exception is a reference to the 2nd Battalion Sherwood Foresters in Issue 2 (chapter II.; p8) where the date of a particularly costly battle involving this unit had been stated incorrectly (see also chapter I. in this pamphlet).

Glossary & abbreviations

We have been trying to avoid too many army-isms and strange abbreviations, but the following might nevertheless be useful.

AWOL	ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE: a common military 'crime'; not a capital offence; desertion was defined as an aggravated form of going AWOL
BATTALION	a formation of soldiers, at full strength comprising around 1,000 persons; although further subdivided (into companies, platoons etc.), a battalion was the smallest building block of larger troop formations; it was also the smallest unit in the British Army to produce its own admin, for instance the so-called battalion <i>War Diaries</i>
BEF	BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE: the official designation of the British forces sent to the Western Front
BRIGADE	a formation of soldiers usually made up of four, at later stages of the war three BATTALIONS
DIVISION	a formation of soldiers made up of three or four BRIGADES, along with artillery, engineer and medical units
FGCM	FIELD GENERAL COURT(S) MARTIAL: the most common type of courts martial held abroad; it had full powers of sentencing, i.e. it could sentence a soldier to death, but was a lot easier to convene than a full General Court Martial, as a FGCM required only three commissioned officers and a limited amount of paperwork
FP1 & FP2	FIELD PUNISHMENT NUMBER 1 & 2: a form of corporal punishment introduced to replace flogging; frequently given out summarily by commissioned officers and as (part of) persons' sentences following courts martial procedures; people sentenced to a FP would stay with their unit, 'subjected to the like labour, employment, and restraint [...] as if [they] were under a sentence of imprisonment with hard labour' (see TWO2; pp721-2); those sentenced to FP1 could also be attached to a wheel or a wooden post, often in a pose which resulted in the punishment becoming known as 'crucifixion'; the severity of FPs depended on the person's commanding officers/NCOs
NCO	NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER: low ranking officer holding ranks such as corporal, sergeant, etc.; other than commissioned officers NCOs usually came from the same social and economic backgrounds as privates (the lowest and thus most common military rank)

Introduction

Welcome back and thank you very much for opening the new issue in this series of pamphlets. We would also like to thank everybody who read the previous publications and express our gratitude for all the positive feedback from fellow researchers and interested readers alike.¹

To anyone who skipped Issues 1 & 2, we are very glad you found your way onto our website, but advise you to go back and read the earlier publications, especially Issue 1, outlining the project and introducing our take on a number of key terms and concepts regarding military discipline and its enforcement during World War One (hereafter WWI) in general and death sentences and mutiny prosecutions in particular.

In Issue 2 we examined the case of W Harvey, convicted in February 1915 following his alleged desertion. In this pamphlet we are looking into three more cases of soldiers in the local regiment (commonly known as the Sherwood Foresters), who were sentenced to death by British Army courts martial. Like Harvey, John Coleman, George Ball and Reginald Burton ended up having their sentences commuted and continued to serve in the trenches. By September 1916, Ball and Burton had been killed. A year later Coleman was discharged from the army, no longer 'physically fit for war service' after having been severely wounded.

Coleman had been sentenced after allegedly deserting whilst his unit was deployed to the Western Front. Many aspects of his case mirror the one of W Harvey. Both soldiers had been pre-war Regulars, i.e. they signed up for military service before the war. Both had been lucky enough to miss the initial battles of the British Expeditionary Forces (hereafter BEF), before sharing the misfortune of experiencing the early months of trench warfare during the winter of 1914-15. Given that in both cases very little solid evidence appears to have survived, many aspects of their alleged desertions remain vague, although we were able to debate a number of direct and indirect clues and circumstantial evidence, allowing us to look into both cases in some detail. We began by depicting the story of Coleman's unit, the 2nd Battalion Sherwood Foresters (hereafter 2nd Foresters), tracking its movements, engagements, casualties, etc. (chapter I.), thereby providing the context for our deliberations regarding Coleman's case (chapter II.).

The cases of Ball and Burton were rather different, not only in regards to the charges brought against them, 'sleeping on post' rather than desertion, but also given the context of the events and the available source materials. One thing we learned working on their cases is the unnerving fact that it is a lot easier to research soldiers who did not survive the war, given that their deaths left a more extensive paper trail in the military records, often providing enough details to connect the military sources with civilian ones. Furthermore Ball and Burton were not pre-war Regulars, but volunteered for army service after the British Empire entered WWI. Thus we examined a group of these early volunteers who served with Ball and Burton in the 9th Battalion Sherwood Foresters (hereafter 9th Foresters), looking into their pre-war lives, occupations, family backgrounds, etc., whilst also discussing working class peoples' motivations to join the army (chapter III.). We subsequently outline the personal stories of Ball and Burton (chapter IV.), before investigating their cases (chapter V.).

In Issue 2 we decided not to provide any personal details about W Harvey which had not been previously published. This was due to the fact that we were unable to identify the – rather elusive – Harvey beyond reasonable doubt in the military records. As this was not an issue in the cases of Coleman, Ball and Burton and as none of our findings called for a more cautious approach, we decided this time to publish all the results of our research.²

¹ Many thanks go for instance to MICHAEL NOBLE from the [CENTRE FOR HIDDEN HISTORIES](#) for publishing a very motivating [review of the project](#). Also, some fellow researchers provided us with invaluable advice and evidence, signposting us in the right direction. Thank you ever so much!

² In presenting our findings we have once again indulged in our passion for footnotes. We think however that there are good reasons for this. Firstly, many of the references are quite extensive, making it impractical to squeeze them into the text and we deem the use of endnotes to be a rather irritating alternative. Secondly, many of the longer footnotes offer readers a glimpse into the ongoing research process, making it easier to retrace our steps and criticise us (please do!). Thirdly, extensive footnotes enable us to develop parallel narratives, allowing us to provide additional information for people who might be particularly interested in certain points. Fourthly, footnotes are awesome.

I. From Southampton to Ypres – the 2nd Battalion Sherwood Foresters' first year at war

On 4th August 1914, when the British and German Empires formally entered a state of war, the 2nd Foresters received their mobilisation orders in the late afternoon.³ Based in Sheffield at the time, the battalion was made-up of Regular troops and supplemented with reservists. Not a part of the initial contingent of the BEF, the Foresters eventually boarded trains to Southampton on the 7th September. By the next afternoon, 30 officers and 933 'other ranks'⁴ had embarked on their, rather uncomfortable,⁵ journey to France.

Their arrival at St Nazaire exemplifies how the scale of this industrial mass war put a significant strain on the often limited infrastructure.⁶ The harbour facilities struggled to cope with the influx of troops and equipment, leading to long delays and forcing the Foresters to abandon part of their stores when they had to board a troop train in the early hours of the 12th September.

By that time, the German advance through France and Belgium had been stopped.⁷ After a week of marching towards the – still shifting – front lines, the Foresters crossed the river Aisne on the 19th September and got involved in intense fighting from the next day. Their first WWI combat experiences were as brutal as they were costly⁸ and within a few days the Foresters lost one in five of their original strength, suffering just under 200 casualties, with over fifty killed.⁹

In the following weeks the unit took part in what has since become known as the Race to the Sea,¹⁰ and received a number of drafts and further equipment.¹¹ The Foresters were eventually deployed to the area

³ Unless stated otherwise, the information in this chapter has been retrieved from the 2nd Foresters' *War Diary*, BWD2ND; entries dated 4th August 1914-25th July 1915, as well as our analysis of casualties suffered by the 2nd Foresters (hereafter referenced as DATA CAS2ND), based on data excerpted from BWD2ND (entries dated 4th August 1914-18th July 1915), and the [casualty database of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#) (CWGC). Comparing the *War Diaries* of the 1st and 2nd Foresters demonstrates how varied these records are. The 2nd Foresters' diary initially appears to be, though not less detailed, less structured than the one of the 1st Foresters. This can partly be explained by the fact that the 2nd Foresters were initially on the move whereas the 1st Foresters were only thrown into the fight after the battle lines had come to a standstill, i.e. the 1st Foresters' diarist was immediately confronted with the repetitive routines of trench warfare. The 2nd Foresters' diary contains highly useful data not featured in the 1st Foresters' diary, e.g. records of Foresters sent behind the lines after suffering from various 'sicknesses', though these figures were not systematically recorded until the end of 1914.

⁴ For details see BWD2ND; entries dated 07-22/08/1914. According to WYL; pp91-2/95 the unit's strength upon disembarkation was: '6 warrant officers, 46 sergeants, 48 corporals, 16 drummers and 814 privates – a total of 930.'

⁵ See also *ibid.*; pp93-4: He describes the ship as 'no better than a cattle boat [...]; many of the Foresters had never before been to sea, and the English Channel was not in its most attractive mood; [...] all were rejoiced when St Nazaire was reached [where the] cheery adventurers disembarked, though few can have then realised that very many would never return home to England, or that four long and bloody years must go by before the World War would at long last come to an end.'

⁶ See *ibid.*; p93: St Nazaire had only recently become one of the main ports used by the BEF, after the 'rapid advance of the Germans [had made] Boulogne and Havre unsafe [...] and [...] all further movement of men or stores to [these ports] was stopped [and] St. Nazaire on the Loire selected as the new base.'

⁷ See e.g. *ibid.*; p95.

⁸ See also *ibid.*; pp96-9 for details on the fighting on these days, also featuring nicely labelled maps with neat arrows, that are however unable to dispel the impression that these engagements were chaotic affairs.

⁹ The *War Diary* is slightly inconsistent with regards to the exact number of casualties suffered between the 20th and 22nd September. Following a roll call on the 23rd, casualties were stated to include five officers killed and another eight wounded, whilst 44 other ranks had died and 165 been wounded. According to the [CWGC](#) database six officers and 46 other ranks were killed.

¹⁰ See EDM; pp68-9; WYL; p100: The redeployment of the BEF was supposed to support French troops trying to outflank German troops who were e.g. trying to seize a number of ports, whilst also shortening British supply lines.

¹¹ See BWD2ND; entry dated 4th October: The 'two wagons with blankets for the men' illustrate to what extent the Foresters were lacking basic equipment. Between the 27th September and 9th October the Foresters were reinforced by a total of 290 troops, including nine officers. Although these numbers exceed casualties suffered from combat and accidents (such as a sentry fatally shooting a comrade), it seems unlikely that the battalion was restored to full strength, given that a significant number of Foresters had probably fallen sick for one reason or another.

around Neuve Chapelle and Armentières, just south of the French-Belgian border. By now troops on either side:

[...] set to work to dig themselves in, to put up trip wires from the barbed wire found lying about, and to place the buildings in the vicinity in a state of defence.¹²

On the 19th October, the Foresters took up position near the village of Ennetières-en-Weppes. The following day, a 'heavy' bombardment was followed by a series of 'vigorous' attacks throughout the day. 'Vastly outnumbered', the Foresters were overrun and by 7pm the 'remnants of the [unit] fell back' towards a nearby village.¹³

The 726 casualties suffered by the battalion on that day¹⁴ illustrate the virtual annihilation of the original BEF during the first few months of the war.¹⁵ Despite their losses, within three days the remaining Foresters were put to work digging trenches, posted on guard duty and repeatedly stood to arms, although they were lucky enough not to be drawn into further engagements in the immediate aftermath of the disaster at Ennetières. Suffering no further casualties before late November¹⁶ and repeatedly reinforced, the Foresters were apparently back to combat strength by the end of that month, although it can be assumed that the unit remained a mere shadow of the force that set off from Southampton two months earlier.¹⁷

As temperatures dropped and heavy frost set in, the remainder of 1914 was dominated by hard, monotonous work in a continuous struggle to keep the defences more or less intact and, whenever possible, improve them. This was challenging not only due to the appalling weather,¹⁸ but also the activities of the German artillery and especially the 'everlasting snipers'.

Any time spent away from the immediate front lines was by no means an opportunity to rest. For instance, as the Foresters came out of the trenches on the 8th December, they were 'employed cleaning themselves

¹² WYL; p101.

¹³ The file containing the *War Diary* also holds three reports by officers describing the catastrophic engagement on the 20th October (dated 21st October and 7th November 1914 and 27th July 1921). The officers largely agree that the Foresters, exhausted after having been unable to rest for over 48 hours and left in a vulnerable position without reserves, were outflanked and overrun. One officer stated that he had repeatedly warned about a build-up of German forces in front and on both sides of the British lines, leaving the Foresters exposed to fire 'from the North, East & South, so practically every trench was under enfilade fire'. See also WYL; pp101-6.

¹⁴ The *War Diary* recorded most casualties as 'missing' and only a very few as 'wounded', indicating that the hasty retreat left few chances to assist and evacuate wounded comrades, let alone count the dead. According to the [CWGC](#) database, 76 officers and other ranks were killed that day, implying that the overwhelming majority of the remaining casualties were taken prisoner. See also PAN; pp101-2/123-6/128: From the early stages of WWI, both sides used POWs as a labour force, with those sent to the respective mother countries usually being more humanely treated than the ones who remained near to or in the conflict zone. Although all POWs faced severe physical and psychological hardships ('barbed wire disease'), PANAYI refers to a number of studies indicating that on average these tended to be less extreme than those suffered by troops fighting in the front lines. Hence, the Foresters taken prisoner at Ennetières faced years of privations but appear to have had better chances of coming out of the war alive and with less extreme physical and psychological damage than many of their comrades who escaped at Ennetières.

¹⁵ See e.g. BAB; pp9-10; COR; p61: These works estimate the strength of the original BEF at 100,000 troops. By the end of 1914 they had suffered c.96,000 casualties.

¹⁶ According to the [CWGC](#) seven Foresters died between the 22th October and 22nd November. Given that the *War Diary* does not refer to any casualties in that period, it can be assumed that these soldiers died of wounds away from their battalion, although it is unclear on which side of no-man's land.

¹⁷ See e.g. HAM; chapter XI: 'A perishing formation loses moral force in more rapid progression than the mere loss of members would seem to warrant. When a battalion which entered upon a campaign a thousand strong, – all keen and hopeful, – gets down to five hundred, comrades begin to look round at one another and wonder if any will be left. When it falls to three hundred, or less, the unit [...], is better drawn out of the line. The bravest men lose heart when [...] they see [...] that their Company [...] has become a platoon, [and the] battalion a Company. A mould for shaping young enthusiasms into heroisms has been scrapped and it takes a desperately long time to recreate it.'

¹⁸ See also WYL; p106: He summed up events during winter 1914-15 as a 'monotonous time of holding trenches and "resting" in reserve billets. The weather conditions were appalling [...] frost followed by a thaw during which the banked-up earth of the trench parapets simply crumbled away; there were no materials for revetting, and the liquid mud as it accumulated at the bottom of the trenches was merely shovelled out again over the top [...].'

after the filthy trenches' before being set to work again, 'making facines.' On other days spent in billets they dug communication trenches or engaged in other maintenance tasks, such as 'overhaul[ing] all transport'.

Spending Christmas behind the lines, the battalion then took over a section of trenches at Houplines, east of Armentières, which they were to guard for several months, holding positions in the direct vicinity of the German trenches, with no-man's-land in places a mere fifteen yards wide.¹⁹

During this period, casualties from enemy action occurred on most days when the unit was in the line and on some when they were in billets.²⁰ With the beginning of 1915 the unit's war diarist also started to regularly record how many Foresters had to leave the unit to be treated for 'sicknesses'. Most of these can be assumed to have been the consequence of the soldiers' constant exposure to the terrible conditions,²¹ the unit's diarist expressing his surprise 'that the whole battalion has not got pneumonia.' Indeed, for months to come, sickness absentees outnumbered any casualties caused by German attacks.²²

Low intensity, but constant fighting was however part of the Foresters' everyday experiences. As the stalemate on the Western Front became less of a novelty, tactics and weaponry evolved to achieve ever more efficient ways of killing and maiming, though this also meant reverting to rather ancient forms of murdering people. As many Foresters had a background in mining some were assigned to a new unit, 'driving mines' under the German lines. What had once been a common form of siege warfare quickly became re-established as a particularly horrible way to fight and die in France and Flanders.²³ The trenches also gave new importance to another age-old method of mutilation, the throwing of 'bombs', i.e. hand grenades.²⁴

Modern technology was also much experimented with. Planes had become a common sight in the skies, by now not only used for reconnaissance and to guide artillery fire, but also to directly attack each other as well as the troops below. This made the areas away from the immediate front lines ever more dangerous places and four Foresters were wounded 'by an aeroplane bomb' whilst billeted in Armentières in April.²⁵ One of the most terrifying innovations of WWI was however the use of poison gas.²⁶

¹⁹ The Foresters' first stretch in the lines at Houplines was unusually long, a total of nineteen days from relieving the unit that had previously held the line to themselves being relieved on the 13th January. During the following months the unit established a highly repetitive pattern of rotations, taking over the front lines on the first day, spending three days in the line, being relieved on the fifth day and having three days in billets before repeating this rotation. Up to the 28th April this routine was altered only once.

²⁰ Over a total of 13 rotations in and out the lines at Houplines, on average 1.3 Foresters were killed and 2.3 wounded in any eight-day cycle, not counting one period of unusually high casualties at the end of March 1915. Neither side seriously attempted to break the stalemate in this section of the front, but whenever a period of relative calm was ended by some shots across no-man's-land, e.g. at a work party, the side other retaliated. See e.g. the entry dated 12th February: 'Enemy were observed to have been digging a new small trench [...]. After dark it was evident they were again working at it so the Co[mpan]y fired [which] evidently stirred the Germans up as they sniped heavily for a time. However they went to bed soon after 11pm.'

²¹ See e.g. BWD2ND; entries dated 31st December 1914, 8th January & 15th February 1915: 'Co[mpanies] very busy draining Trenches & raising Trench bottoms with foot boards, fascines, etc. to get out of the water.' 'Trenches in a shocking state, 2 feet of water in most of them.' 'Another vile day.' See also WYL; p108: 'In those early days of the trench-war such luxuries as [gumboots] were quite unknown [...]. The cold and wet sent men fast to hospital [...].'

²² During the Foresters' at Houplines, between the last days of 1914 and late April 1915, a daily average of 3.7 (or a total of 351) Foresters were recorded sick, whilst the daily average of casualties was around 0.6.

²³ See also DIX; p13-7: 'The idea behind tunnelling was simple. All that was needed was a tunnel under the enemy's lines with a suitable charge of explosives which, when detonated, would take the line away and defenders with it.'

²⁴ See also WYL; p106: 'The German hand – and rifle – grenade was replied to by the British jampot variety'. Bomb training became a common part of the Foresters' activities when they were in billets and was rather dangerous. See e.g. BWD2ND; entry dated 26th March when at least three Foresters were wounded during bomb training.

²⁵ There were also more experimental weapons like a 'naval armoured motor car with a 3 pounder quick firer on board', which 'ran up the road just in the rear of [our] trenches and fired about 30 shots'.

²⁶ See DIX; p8: According to DIXON, poison gas was seen by German commanders a 'way-of making their resources more effective and of gaining ground cheaply and quickly by clearing it of the enemy.' See also HEL; chapter 1: The first use of chemical agents during WWI was by French troops who used rather inefficient tear gas shells in 1914. The first large scale use of gas was by German forces on the Eastern Front in January 1915, firing 18,000 tear gas shells. In the attacks on Ypres in April and May 1915 German troops used cylinders dispersing lethal chlorine gas.

Much of this arsenal was also used against the Foresters, for instance on the 13th May when German troops began a number of attacks 'with shell, rifle fire and bombs on our left trenches and ½ hour later exploded a mine halfway between their own trenches and [ours]'. Over the following days further attacks with 'trench-mortars, rifle [and] hand grenades' were made, also leading to some hand-to-hand fighting. By the 16th things quietened down again, but late in the day came a gas attack, killing three and 'affecting' nine others who were admitted to hospital. During this stretch in the front lines the Foresters had suffered the heaviest casualties since the battalion's near wipe out in October, with fifty-one wounded and eight killed over the course of just four days.

At the end of the May 1915 the Foresters were sent into the, already infamous, "Bloody Salient" around the town of Ypres, known to most British troops as Wipers, where they were to stay for over a year.²⁷

The war diarist described his first impressions of Ypres as 'noisy', with 'guns etc. continually going off'. Spending the first few days of June digging trenches behind the lines, the Foresters then took over a section of the front line trenches. Their first stretch in the lines at Ypres was very long compared to the length of rotations they had experienced at Houplines, as the battalion was only relieved on the thirteenth day.

Once again life in the front lines was dominated by bad weather and constant work on the defences,²⁸ though this time some of the Foresters, that is to assume some of the officers, enjoyed a little bit of added comfort after some soldiers established: 'a dairy farm [...] with 4 cows found between our 1st & 2nd line trenches'.

Although suffering a number of casualties, apparently mostly caused by shell fire,²⁹ the Foresters were lucky enough to merely witness other allied units' attacks on German positions, without having to take part in them. A week in billets was followed by another stretch in the lines where they were again pounded by German artillery, for example on the 30th June, when there was a 'good deal of shelling again, about 100 shells falling in and round our trenches.'

The following days saw more bombardments. On the 9th July 158 incoming shells were counted, an average of one every ten minutes. By then this was simply described as 'more than usual'. During this second tour of the front lines at Ypres, the Foresters lost another fifty wounded and two killed.³⁰

Finally marching into billets after they had been relieved on the seventeenth day, i.e. after two and a half weeks in the lines, the Foresters would be sent back into the trenches only three days later.

²⁷ See e.g. DIX; pp2/7-8/287-9/293-6; TAY; p12: The medieval town of Ypres had already seen fierce fighting, for instance in October and November 1914 during the so-called First Battle of Ypres, where, according to TAYLOR, the original BEF had 'fought the Germans to a standstill, and itself out of existence.' Allied forces had been forced 'into defending a curved, almost semi-circular, line that enclosed what was to become known as the Ypres salient.' In April and May 1915, the area became the scene of one of only four German offensives on the Western Front during WWI (the others being the initial invasion of France and Belgium in 1914, the attack on Verdun in 1916 and the Spring Offensive of 1918). By late May the Germans 'had expended much effort but had failed to capture Ypres. The British and their Allies, on the other hand, had made great sacrifice to hold on to the shrinking ground that was almost all that remained of "gallant little Belgium".' Casualties probably exceeded 100,000, about two thirds on the allied side, which DIXON partly attributed to British commanders' habit of ordering repeated counterattacks on positions gained by the Germans: 'Over and over again men were sent into attack with little imagination in the planning, with little support or reserve and often very little artillery cover.' See also CLA; pp75-7/86/94: CLARKE is particularly critical of these British counter attacks, ordering the troops time and again 'to attempt the impossible'.

²⁸ See BWD2ND; entry dated 7th June: 'Every one hard at work improving trenches and digging communication trenches. This Brigade seems to be the only one that [has] taken the trouble to dig communication trenches. Whenever we move to a new piece of line we have to start digging them.' See also WYL; p110: 'Curiously enough, a careful study of the war diaries of different battalions [...] reveals [that] every unit writes [...], more in sorrow than in anger, of the indifferent spade work put in by its predecessors in the line, none of which seem to have known even the rudiments of the art of the military navy.'

²⁹ From the 5th to the 17th June the *War Diary* recorded six Foresters killed and twenty-one wounded.

³⁰ See also WYL; p110: 'On almost every day during July the diary announces that matters are generally quiet, but none the less there was a certain amount of shelling, and occasionally the shells sent over were of the gas variety, but the casualties, happily, were light.' Although the *War Diary* describes a number of days in June as 'quiet', we do not agree with WYLLY'S description, especially due to the relative increase in casualties (see chapter II.).

By Sunday 18th July 1915, as they were digging defences on the Yser Canal Bank, the Foresters had been in France for 310 days. Following the near-destruction of the unit in late October, they had experienced 271 days of trench warfare, of which they had spent 176, almost two thirds, partially or fully in the front lines. Since they left Southampton, the battalion's total casualties had been 1,293 killed, wounded and missing, not counting the 589 (recorded) Foresters sent behind the lines suffering from various illnesses.³¹

There was no end in sight.

³¹ These casualties amount to a staggering 134 percent of the 2nd Foresters' original strength. The *War Diary* recorded a total of 1,566 persons (re-)joining the battalion since they had left Southampton, just under fifty percent of whom joined the battalion in the aftermath of the disastrous battle in October 1914 (in three drafts of 164, 40 and 556 soldiers on the 30th October and the 14th and 21st November). Although we calculated the varying strength of the battalion (see Table/Chart No 1), these figures are of limited reliability for a number of reasons, primarily as we cannot be confident that we have all the relevant data available, e.g. with respect to transfers and redeployments of individual soldiers. Another unknown factor, although not necessarily relevant when working out the strength of the battalion at any given day, is that in recording the drafts joining the battalion, the diarists did not systematically distinguish between soldiers re-joining the unit, e.g. after having been treated behind the lines, and those soldiers who had not been part of the battalion before. All in all, soldiers (re-) joined the battalion on 39 occasions between the 27th September and the 18th July. Nine times the diarists noted that some of these soldiers were 'sick and wounded men returning'. These nine drafts entailed a total of 170 Foresters, 90 of whom were specified to be returning. This does however leave an awful lot of the 589 sick Foresters unaccounted for, indicating that amongst the other drafts were also significant numbers of returnees. In any cases these figures demonstrate that by July 1915, not many of the Foresters remained who had originally arrived at St Nazaire on the 11th September 1914.

II. John Coleman's case

We faced similar challenges in researching the alleged desertions of John Coleman and W Harvey (see Issue 2), in particular as it was not possible to identify documents that could provide any details about the events other than the *Registers of Field General Courts Martial*.³²

Furthermore, we have only limited information about these two Foresters, as the few surviving military documents did not provide us with enough evidence to identify them beyond reasonable doubt in civilian records.³³ Therefore Issue 2 presented and discussed the results of an examination into the backgrounds of the people in Harvey's unit, the 1st Foresters, all so-called Regulars, i.e. soldiers who had all volunteered to join the army at some point prior to WWI. This culminated in outlining a – grossly simplified – profile of the 'typical' pre-war Regular private in the Foresters: a single man in his early twenties, who grew up in Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire in quite a large household, on average consisting of eight persons, having a background in the poorer, though not destitute, sections of the working classes.³⁴

Given that Coleman's battalion, the 2nd Foresters, was another unit consisting of Regulars, it can be assumed that the backgrounds of these soldiers would have largely mirrored those of the 1st Foresters. It therefore appears likely that Coleman came from the Midlands and had a working class background, but this is mere conjecture.

Looking into our first case it even proved difficult to identify the prosecuted soldier beyond reasonable doubt in the army records, given that there were two persons named W Harvey serving with the 1st Foresters at the time. This was luckily not an issue with regards to John Coleman, who could quickly be identified in a handful of army records.³⁵

It was therefore possible to establish that Coleman joined the army on the 11th July 1912. At the time he would have been 25 years old, placing him towards the upper end of the average age range for pre-war Regulars serving with the Sherwood Foresters. Assigned the soldier number 3550, he would remain a private throughout his career.

Coleman did not embark from Southampton with the 2nd Foresters in September, but joined the unit in November, thus not taking part in the battalion's early engagements, including the disaster at Ennetières. According to his *Medal Records* he 'entered the theatre of war' on the 11th November, making it likely that he joined the 2nd Foresters as part of one of two drafts in mid to late November, arriving either on the 14th or the 21st.³⁶

There is no mention of Coleman in any of the examined records before his trial in July 1915. This only makes it possible to outline and debate some of the conceivable scenarios regarding the events ending with him facing a court martial.

Regarding Coleman's alleged offence, the so-called 'crime' of desertion, please see the previous issue in this series. Other than in the cases of Ball and Burton (see below), the fact that this specific charge was

³² Regarding courts martial in general and FGCM in particular see also Issue 1; chapter I. For Harvey's case see WO213/3; p98; for Coleman's see WO213/4; p122; ORA2; p26. See also WO213/4; p119: Coleman was not the only soldier in the 2nd Foresters who faced a FGCM at Ypres that day. G Fearnley, charged with a Section 40 offence (see below), was sentenced to 90 days Field Punishment No. 1 (see below).

³³ We were able to find Coleman's *Medal Roll Index Card*, the award rolls for his *Victory/British Medal* and *1914 Star Record* and the record for his entitlement to a (*Silver*) *War Badge*, hereafter referenced as RECJCOL.

³⁴ See Issue 2; chapter I.

³⁵ See e.g. [ACMR](#): A number of other candidates could quickly be ruled out for one reason or another, such as John Coleman with the soldier number 16156, a nineteen year old from Derby, who had been discharged from the army in November 1914 after being described as 'not likely of becoming an efficient soldier'.

³⁶ See RECJCOL; [LLTRES](#): It is at present unknown why Coleman joined the 2nd Foresters only in November 1914. It is unlikely that he was an army reservist, given that he only enlisted in mid-1912 and thus would not have completed his regular army service. It is possible that Coleman had not been assigned to the 2nd Foresters before being sent as a draft in November 1914, opening up various possibilities what he did before, e.g. working at the depot in Derby. Other possibilities may include him e.g. being hospitalised at the time of mobilisation and therefore not able to disembark with the 2nd Foresters in September 1914.

brought against Coleman sheds very little light on the actual events. Desertion was essentially defined as an aggravated form of going absent without leave, aggravated by the fact that the alleged circumstances convinced the officers sitting in court that the defendant had no intention of returning to his unit. In the trials that intention was 'proved' by referring to a wide range of factors, for instance words allegedly stated by the defendant, whether or not he was said to have been apprehended whilst wearing civilian clothing, etc. In practice the difference between going AWOL and deserting was rather vague and the distinction between the two offences was very much dependent on the officers dealing with the 'offender'.³⁷

The courts martial *Registers* specify the venue of Coleman's court martial as 'Ypres', making it likely that it was held in close proximity to his battalion, and it is quite possible that he was tried by officers of his own unit. It seems however to have been standard practice to return an alleged deserter to his unit before a trial.³⁸ Therefore we cannot conclude that the alleged 'offence' occurred whilst Coleman was with his unit. It is entirely possible that he may have been separated from his battalion on a single or even on a number of occasions after he came to France, for instance after being wounded or falling sick.³⁹

It is thus conceivable that Coleman's alleged desertion attempt occurred behind the lines whilst he was away from his battalion. One possibility is that he decided after a brief spell in hospital that he had had enough of the war and tried to find a way back home or to hide somewhere in France, only to be discovered or grassed on, getting arrested by French or British authorities, ending up in the hands of British military police and being escorted back to his unit to be tried.⁴⁰

The trial was held on the 2nd July 1915, halfway through the Foresters' second stretch in the lines at Ypres.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the dates of the alleged offence and when Coleman was apprehended remain unknown.⁴²

If Coleman was with his battalion when he allegedly tried to desert, it appears likely that his absence would have been rather short-lived, maybe as little as a few days or even hours. All deserters faced considerable difficulties to remain at liberty for any length of time, probably even more so in the Ypres Salient. Furthermore he was never recorded as missing in the *War Diary*.⁴³

³⁷ See Issue 2; chapter III.

³⁸ See e.g. COR; pp22/233-6; MOR; pp171-2; PTS; pp14/249-50: In another case involving one of the 103 Foresters, Arthur Briggs was taken back to France after having been arrested in Edinburgh. Returning an 'offender' to his unit had also practical reasons, such as to obtain witness statements by the defendant's immediate superiors regarding his 'character', etc. In a number of other cases it proved to be difficult to find witnesses who were still alive.

³⁹ See DATA CAS2ND: In the period between Coleman joining the battalion and the day before his trial, a total of 219 'other ranks' were wounded due to enemy action, and 581 Foresters recorded 'sick'. It is also possible that Coleman might have been able to take leave at some point, an aspect of soldiers' experiences we need to examine more closely. See BWD2ND: In the period examined for this pamphlet, the *War Diary* does refer on only one occasion to leave taken by rank and file troops, in a brief entry on the 18th June 1915 regarding three officers, two NCOs and two privates going 'off on 5 days leave'.

⁴⁰ See e.g. BOY; p63; CHA; pp19-24: Finding out more about this (arguably the worst) kind of copper is also high on our research agenda. It appears that the history of the Corps of Military Mounted/Foot Police and the Military Provost Staff Corps (the military manifestation of screws) are relatively under-researched subjects.

⁴¹ See BWD2ND: The 2nd July 1915 was the eight day after the Foresters took over their section of the trenches, and the thirty-second day after they entered the salient.

⁴² See ORA2; pp21-5; PTS; pp25-47/292: In attempt to get at least some comparative data we examined the cases of the 37 British soldiers executed before July 1915, described by ORAM, as well as PUTKOWSKI and SYKES. The latter provide information on the dates of the arrests (etc.) of eleven alleged deserters, disregarding two cases where the 'offenders' were able to delay their trials by temporarily escaping. This sparse evidence shows that the period between the arrest, detention or discovery of an alleged deserter and their trial could be very short, with proceedings sometimes going ahead on the very same day, or as long as thirty-eight days. Although the average is just under fifteen days, all this small sample shows is that there does not seem to have been much of a discernible pattern, but rather that the intervals between arrest and trial in the individual cases varied.

⁴³ See Issue 1; chapter II.; DATA CAS2ND: After the battalion's near wipe out in October 1914, no Foresters were listed as missing. It needs to be stated that this argument only holds up if Coleman was with his unit when he went unaccounted for. If he went missing away from the unit, the *War Diary* would have not recorded this, just as the diarists did not record e.g. soldiers who died of wounds after being transported to a medical facility behind the lines.

Therefore it can be speculated that if the events leading to Coleman's trial occurred whilst he was with the other Foresters, he would have been apprehended rather quickly after his alleged desertion attempt. In this case it also appears likely that the trial would have taken place shortly afterwards, given that it seems to have been army policy to get these things out of the way as fast as possible.⁴⁴

Thus it is conceivable that Coleman's alleged desertion took place after the battalion entered the Ypres Salient. One opportunity might have been between the 18th and 24th June, a period spent in billets between the Foresters' first and second time in the front lines.

Whether or not this was the case, a number of aspects about the 2nd Foresters' experiences in France and Belgium may have been influential in the events leading up to Coleman's trial:

Table/Chart No 1: Estimated strength of the 2nd Foresters (September 1914-July 1915)*



* See DATA CAS9TH. The Foresters' war diarist only started to systematically record sickness absentees in the final days of 1914. The lack of this data in the first few months possibly accounts for the brief periods when the unit's strength appears to have been higher than when they arrived in France.

Examining the strength of the battalion over time, incorporating the recorded data on casualties, sickness absentees as well as reinforcements, the most outstanding features are the sudden drops marking the two occasions when the Foresters took part in pitched battles. It is however also apparent that following the build-up of the unit after the disaster on October 20th, the unit's effective strength began to be whittled down slowly but surely. This was the result of so-called 'trench wastage'⁴⁵ rather than actual battles, exemplifying the physical and psychological toll of continued trench warfare. By the time the Foresters were deployed to Ypres, the strength of the battalion had fallen well below 800 and the speed of the 'wastage' increased thereafter,⁴⁶ reducing the Foresters to around 600 soldiers by mid-July.

Whereas Coleman had been lucky enough to miss the Foresters' early battles, following his arrival with the battalion in mid to late November he would have witnessed the slow but sure erosion of the unit and experienced its causes at first hand, the low intensity but constant fighting as well the harsh conditions the soldiers were continually exposed to.

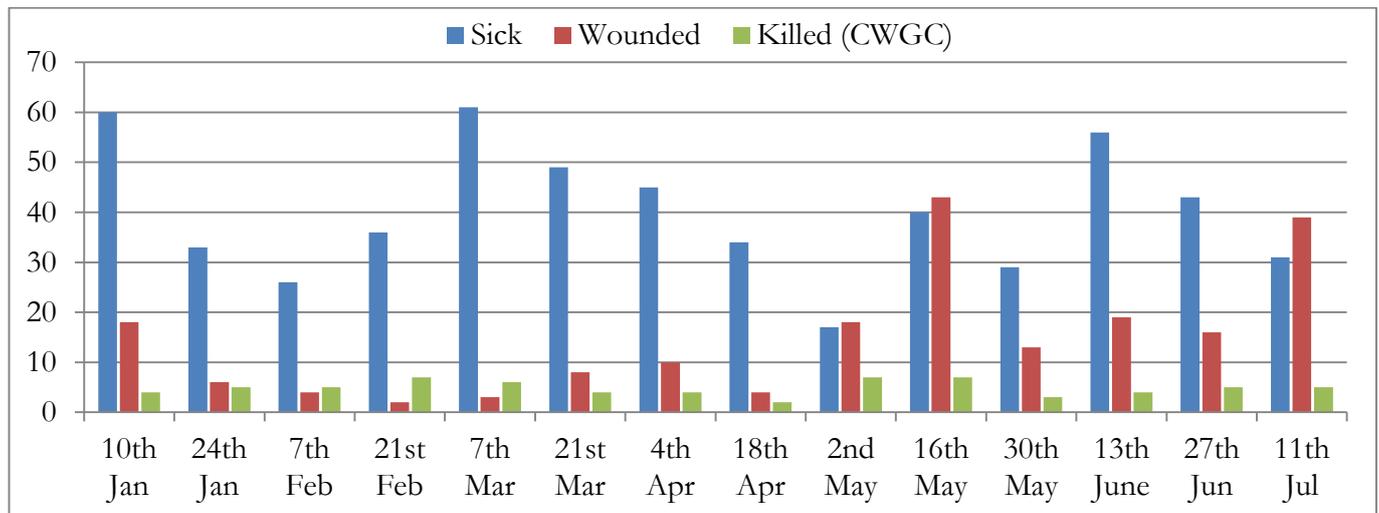
⁴⁴ See WO81/145; e.g. pp295-6: Letters regarding trials held in the UK show that the army tried to hold courts martial as soon as possible, but also document that officers repeatedly failed to do so.

⁴⁵ See MOR; p48: MORSE simply defines trench wastage as a 'not very pleasant army term for casualties', or to be more specific, casualties suffered outside of formal battles.

⁴⁶ See DATA CAS2ND: In the period 21st November 1914 to 31st May 1915, the unit's strength fell on average by one person a day. After entering Ypres, i.e. between the 1st June and the day before Coleman's trial on the 2nd July, this ratio increased to just over 3.4 persons a day. These figures do not take into account the 59 Foresters who were reassigned to a mining platoon.

Following the extreme losses in October 1914, the casualties inflicted on the Foresters by the Germans were constantly outweighed by the numbers of Foresters needing to leave the unit in order to be treated for 'sickness'.

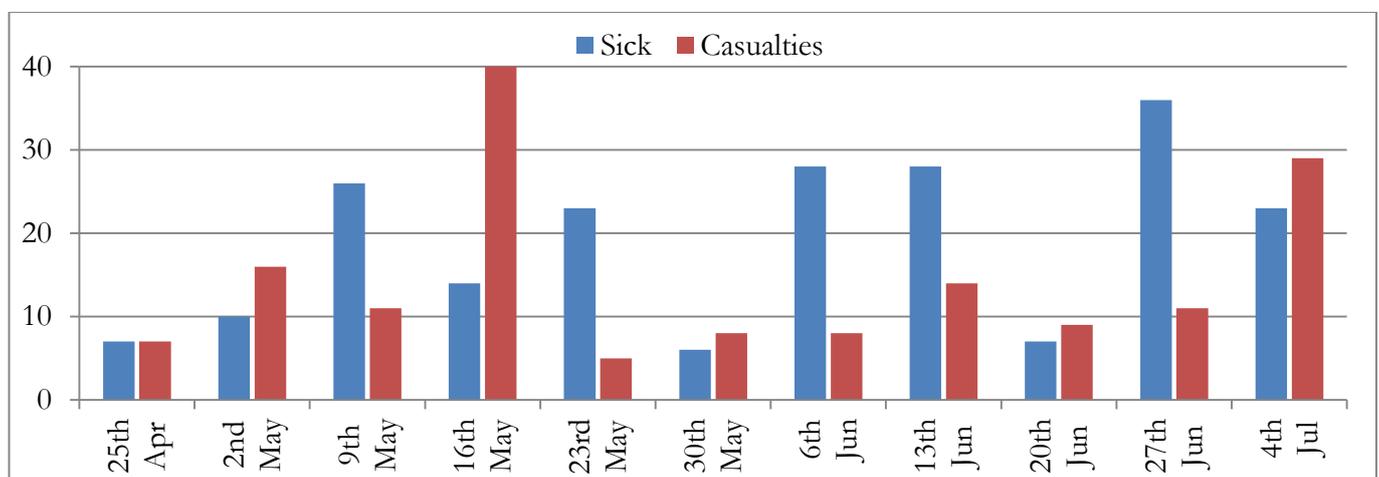
Table/Chart No 2: 2nd Foresters recorded sick, wounded or killed (January-July 1915)*



* See DATA CAS9TH. These figures of Foresters killed were excerpted from the CWGC database.

In the ten weeks before the trial, this trend was reversed on four occasions, including the week ending 4th July, which had seen Coleman's trial on Friday 2nd. This also occurred in the week ending May 16th, not long before the unit was redeployed to Ypres, when they were hit by German artillery barrages and mine explosions, followed by an infantry assault and a gas attack. Casualty figures also exceeded recorded sickness absence in the weeks ending 2nd and 30th May as well as 20th June, although this appears to have been due more to an unusually low number of sick Foresters, rather than exceptionally high casualty rates.⁴⁷

Table/Chart No 3: 2nd Foresters recorded sick or as casualties (weeks ending 25th April-4th July 1915)*



* See DATA CAS9TH.

There is however no doubt that average casualty figure rose sharply after the 2nd Foresters entered the Ypres Salient. By the day of Coleman's trial, the Foresters had spent 21 out of their 32 days in the salient in front line trenches. In those 32 days they had suffered 67 casualties, more than two a day, whereas in the 223

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*: The average number of recorded sickness absentees was 20 per week, slightly increasing to 21.5 after the unit entered Ypres. According to the *War Diary*, average casualties during the Foresters' time on the Western Front were just under 29 a week. Focussing on the period after the defeat at Ennetières, this figure drops to just over seven casualties a week, rising to a weekly average of twelve after the Foresters' deployment to Ypres. In the week which saw Coleman's trial on Friday 2nd July, twenty-nine casualties were recorded, all of them wounded. The CWGC database does however list three fatalities from the ranks of the 2nd Foresters in the same week, indicating that some of these soldiers died from their wounds in/on route to medical facilities behind the lines.

days between the disaster at Ennetières and the unit being sent to Ypres, 134 of which (partially) spent in the line, they had suffered a total of 196 casualties, less than one a day.

Although the ratio of days spent in the front lines to days in billets remained by and large the same, after the Foresters entered the Ypres Salient, the length of the individual stretches in the trenches markedly increased. Whereas they used to be relieved on the fifth day during their time in the trenches at Houplines, the Foresters' first tour of the front lines at Ypres was thirteen days, by far the longest since late December/early January 1914-15.

The Foresters, used to the mind-numbing trench routine of relentless work in vile conditions, interspersed with snipers' bullets and occasional bursts of shell fire, found themselves in a situation where these cornerstones of trench life were suddenly amplified. Their tours of the front lines lasted much longer and as the defensive works were perceived to be much lacking, the *War Diary* repeatedly comments on the soldiers' endless hours of toil, whilst German snipers and artillery were far more active than previously experienced.

This apparently did not come as surprise. WYLLY describes how Ypres had been known for its 'evil reputation [...] for gas attacks' and as they marched into the salient they were issued with primitive respirators. During the months spent at Houplines, the Foresters' war diarists had also recorded a number of references to severe fighting at Ypres, implying that the Foresters knew what they were in for.⁴⁸

It does however remain unknown whether any of these factors had an impact on Coleman's actions. It is also unknown whether he did experience any of the events in the run-up to or during the Foresters' time in the salient, as he might have been away from the battalion at the time, for instance at medical facility out of the combat zone or possibly already on the run.

What is known is that Coleman managed to avoid execution. His death sentence was not confirmed by John French, the commander-in-chief of the BEF, who took the final (and irreversible) decision whether a condemned soldier would be shot. Given that these decisions appear to have often been based not so much on the circumstances of the individual case but on wider concerns about actual or perceived levels of (in-)discipline, it is worth exploring some of the available evidence regarding this subject.⁴⁹

Of the 37 British soldiers executed before July 1915, four had served in units allocated to the 2nd Foresters' 6th Division, all sentenced for alleged desertions.⁵⁰ Although not all the relevant details of these four cases are available to us at present, making an example in an effort to improve overall discipline was at the very least behind one of these executions.⁵¹ However, no death sentence against a soldier in this division had been confirmed since April.

Examining the 2nd Foresters' recorded disciplinary issues, it is notable that there were a number of courts martial held during the dreary winter months 1914-15. We are still building up a comprehensive picture of all Foresters who found themselves before courts martial during WWI,⁵² but by the end of June 1915, at least seventy-five Foresters had faced a Field General Court Martial (hereafter FGCM), the most common type of court martial held abroad.⁵³ The vast majority of fifty-two of these soldiers served with the 2nd Battalion.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ See e.g. BWD2ND; entry dated 9th April 1915. See also WYL; pp109-10.

⁴⁹ See Issue 2; chapter II, e.g. for details on the procedure of how death sentences were (not) confirmed.

⁵⁰ See DATA DS/EXE; LLTOB6D: 342 British troops had been sentenced to death by the end of June 1915. Forty of these soldiers were executed, but in some cases the executions took place after the end of June.

⁵¹ See LLTRCOR; PTS; p35. See also CLA; p88: The recommendation to murder this soldier originated with a general who is e.g. noteworthy as he is one of the few British commanders praised by ALAN CLARK, who described Horrace Smith-Dorrien as 'a clever, sensitive and rational man.'

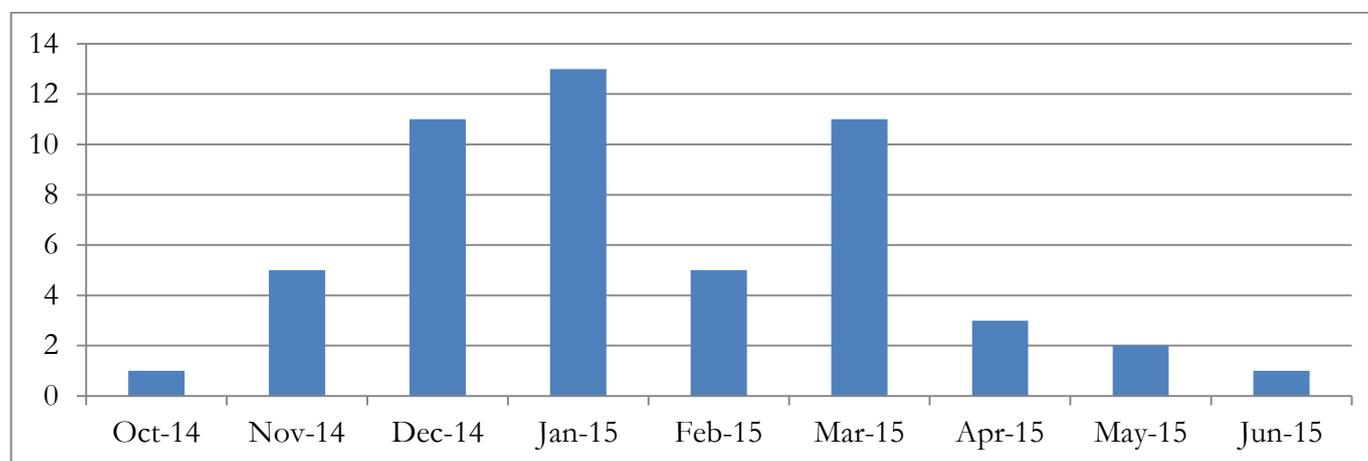
⁵² We have slowly been working through the *Registers* held at the National Archives, and more or less completed the volumes containing information on FGCM for the years 1914-15 (WO213/1-WO213/7), but have only just started on the *Registers* for the District Court Martials for the same period (WO86/62 etc.), which primarily contain records of courts martial held in Britain.

⁵³ DATA FGCM. See also Issue 1; chapter I.; DATA TWO2: 95 percent of the 125,955 courts martial held abroad between the 1st October 1914 and 30th September 1918 were FGCM against rank and file troops.

⁵⁴ See DATA FGCM: Seventeen prosecuted soldiers served with the 1st Foresters. Of the six remaining persons, one served with the 1/5th, one with the 3rd and another one with the 12th Foresters and two with the 8th Battalion, whilst one soldier's unit was not specified.

All the trials involving 2nd Foresters occurred after the defeat at Ennetières in October 1914, three quarters held between December 1914 and March 1915. Over 80 percent of the charges against these Foresters were based on just three of the offences defined in the *Manual of Military Law/ Army Act*: going absent without leave (25 percent), drunkenness (40 percent), and so-called section 40 charges (16 percent).⁵⁵ Following the trials held in March 1915, there were only a handful of cases before Coleman's FGCM in early July, although it is noteworthy that in June the war diarist referred to two soldiers with 'self-inflicted wounds'.⁵⁶

Table/Chart No 4: FGCM proceedings against 2nd Foresters (October 1914-June 1915)*



* See DATA FGCM.

Courts martial proceedings were therefore not an everyday occurrence, but, at least during the winter months 1914-15, a very regular part of the war experiences of the 2nd Foresters. These trials can also be assumed to have only been the tip of an iceberg of unrecorded disciplinary issues that would have been dealt with summarily by officers, who had far reaching powers to punish soldiers without resorting to courts martial procedures. The repeated enforcement of military law does however not necessarily reflect high levels of actual indiscipline in any unit. Instead, this may have rather been due to some overly keen officers trying to mark themselves as strict disciplinarians.⁵⁷

Although disadvantaged by his battalion's record, during the review process of Coleman's death sentence he would have benefited by the fact that the number of trials against soldiers in the 2nd Foresters had fallen sharply by the summer of 1915. Furthermore the whole brigade had been 'congratulated' by John French during an inspection immediately before they were dispatched to the Ypres Salient.⁵⁸

It remains however unclear whether Coleman's death sentence was not confirmed as it was not deemed necessary to make an example of him in order to intimidate his comrades, possibly due to reduced levels of perceived or actual indiscipline, or whether the specific circumstances of his case were so much in his favour that they became the main reason why he managed to avoid execution. In all likelihood it would have been a mix of these variables that saved his life, with the death sentence, probably passed with a recommendation for mercy, being commuted to ten years penal servitude. This commuted sentence was soon suspended.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See TWO2; pp23/412/673-4: Section 40 was designed to punish 'any act, conduct, disorder, or neglect to the prejudice of good order and military discipline'. It appears that this charge could be used to clamp down on any unwanted behaviour that did not constitute an offence in its own right, examples given in the *Manual of Military Law* being as varied as offering detained soldiers a smoke, using language that did not quite amount to insubordination but was still deemed offensive, suffering from a severe hangover, etc. See also DATA FGCM: Foresters were prosecuted for a number of other alleged offences, including a couple of charges for cowardice, one for violence against a commanding officer and a couple of each for insubordination and disobedience.

⁵⁶ See BWD2ND; entries dated 11th & 29th June 1915. See also DATA FGCM: These cases of alleged self-inflicted wounds are not directly referred to in the FGCM *Registers*. The *Registers* list the case of another soldier in the 2nd Foresters, tried on the 9th November 1914 for 'maiming himself', but found not to be guilty. It is possible that the soldiers referred to in the *War Diary* were charged with another offence, such as Section 40.

⁵⁷ See Issue 1; chapter I.

⁵⁸ See BWD2ND; entry dated 29th May 1915.

⁵⁹ WO213/4; p122.

A closer look at the available data regarding the 2nd Foresters' FGCM cases demonstrates that this was part of a wider trend. Apparently officers were trying to balance the upholding of discipline through the enforcement of military law with the pressing concern not to further deplete the army's dwindling human resources.

Examining the final sentences recorded in the FGCM *Registers*, just over ten percent of trials against soldiers in the 2nd Foresters ended with a verdict of not guilty or were subsequently quashed, keeping in line with trends we have presented elsewhere.⁶⁰ About a fifth of defendants were NCOs who incurred a loss of seniority, another fifteen percent were financially penalised, for instance being fined between 10s and £1. The vast majority of defendants (around 45 percent) would face Field Punishments, almost exclusively the infamous FP1.⁶¹

Looking at the remaining sixteen cases in which sentences of imprisonment or penal servitude were dealt out, it is not only notable that one was directly commuted to a Field Punishment, but that in all but six of these cases significant chunks of the sentences were remitted, two apparently to such an extent that the defendants did not have to do any time at all, and it can be assumed that even more of these Foresters would have avoided imprisonment.⁶²

What seems to be apparent is a policy of enforcing military law whenever deemed necessary, but to settle for a final sentence which would not result in taking a potentially useful soldier out of the field. This policy was codified by an Act of Parliament in mid-March 1915, when an addition to the *Army Act* was passed to 'authorise the suspension of sentences of penal servitude and imprisonment passed on soldiers engaged in active service beyond the seas during the present war.'⁶³

Reflecting concerns about dwindling manpower and the fear that soldiers might prefer imprisonment to service in the trenches, this act not only enshrined into law that the 'confirming authority may [...] direct that the soldier be not committed to prison', but also that soldiers already serving a sentence might be released to continue their active service.⁶⁴

Although Coleman not only avoided the firing squad, but also penal servitude, this meant that his war was far from over. He continued to serve in the Foresters, being transferred to at least one more battalion, the 16th. He was eventually discharged on the 28th September 1917, following him being severely wounded, apparently resulting in some form of permanent disability, leaving him of no further use to the army.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ See Issue 1; chapter I.

⁶¹ See DATA FGCM; Issue 1; chapter 1; TWO2; pp721-2: FP1 had been introduced to replace flogging. Whilst staying with their units, offenders were 'subjected to the like labour, employment, and restraint, [...] as if [...] under a sentence of imprisonment with hard labour'. Soldiers could also be attached to a wheel or a wooden post, often in a pose which resulted in the punishment becoming known as 'crucifixion'. FP2 did not allow for offenders to be tied up in that manner. In theory soldiers could only be crucified on any 'three out of four consecutive days', and no longer 'than twenty-one days in all'. Following 172 FGCM proceedings against Foresters between October 1914 and February 1916, 71 soldiers were sentenced to FPs, at least 64 to FP1. The average duration was just over 52 days, i.e. seven and a half weeks. Although courts martial could hand out FPs of up to three months (which happened in at least ten of these cases), it is unknown how the restrictions on the crucifixions were handled in practice. See also WO81/145; p38: The Army Council was well aware of the controversial nature of FP1 and advised officers not to use the punishment in the UK.

⁶² See also Issue 2; chapter III.

⁶³ SOSA.

⁶⁴ See Issue 2; chapter III; SOSA: The act threatened soldiers that they may 'at any time [...] be committed to prison, and thereupon the sentence shall cease to be suspended.' It also offered the incentive that their sentences were to be remitted if their conduct had 'been such as to justify' this. See also BOY; p62: 'This meant that a man [...] continued at the front, but with a knowledge that another blot on his copybook would put him away [...].' Boyes also quotes the Director of Detention Barracks: '[After] some months I found we had many thousands of soldiers in detention barracks with sentences of 18 months and 2 years. I pointed out [...] that these men ought to be in France.' See also BWD2ND; entry dated 6th July 1915: The *War Diary* recorded how on the 6th July 1915 '3 men joined from prison under the Suspension Act', although there is at present no way of knowing whether these included any of the Foresters who had previously been sentenced to prison sentences or penal servitude.

⁶⁵ RECJCOL.

Despite all these deliberations, at present we simply do not know enough about his case. In fact, it remains unknown whether Coleman did try to desert in the first place. He could have got into trouble for a multitude of reasons, possibly as mundane as being discharged from hospital behind the lines, taking the opportunity to get drunk before having to re-join his battalion, losing his paperwork, falling foul of a military copper and suddenly finding himself on his way back to his battalion facing a charge of desertion.

We will be revisiting his case in the future if we manage to unearth new information, for instance some scattered pieces of evidence that could allow us to exclude a few of the possible scenarios. There is some reason to be hopeful, given that in the later stages of our research process we did come across a few tantalising clues, but at the present date they are no more than that.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ There are a number of loose ends regarding this case, for instance a possibility that Coleman's service with the Foresters might have actually been the second time he joined the army, possibly having already completed seven years' service with a different regiment. In this case he would have been seventeen or younger when he initially signed up, but we have already found fifteen year old privates in other sources (see Issue 2; chapter I).

We have also come across some information that Coleman might have served not only with the 2nd and 16th Foresters, as indicated by RECJCOL, but also with the 3rd Battalion. The 3rd Foresters were a reserve unit, based in Sunderland from May 1915, training new recruits before sending them to other battalions on the Western Front and other theatres of war (see e.g. [FWR3SF](#)). Having yet been unable to examine the source in question ourselves, we can only state that it apparently also states that Coleman deserted on the 20th February 1916 and re-joined from desertion on the 5th May 1916. If it should turn out to be true that he deserted again, this would be quite remarkable. As we work our way through courts martial trials for the respective period, we will be extra vigilant in case we come across any information that he may have faced another trial around this time. It may be assumed that deserting whilst serving with a reserve unit in Britain might not have been seen as quite as severe a 'crime' as deserting whilst being assigned to a front line battalion. It would however be astonishing if in this case Coleman had not ended up in prison and be it only as the suspension of his previous sentence would probably have been invalid under the terms of the *Suspension of Sentences Act* (see above). The fact that he did go on to serve with the 16th Foresters, and was wounded and subsequently discharged in September 1917, does however strongly indicate that he did not serve any time between March 1916 and his discharge from the army.

It is possible that the dates in said source were stated incorrectly and actually refer to events in 1915. This would indeed be quite a find, making Coleman a rather successful deserter who nevertheless managed to avoid execution. This would have meant that he allegedly deserted during the period when the 2nd Foresters went in and out the trenches near Houplines, i.e. during some of the dreariest, muddiest weeks yet experienced by the Foresters. Given that Coleman was never recorded as 'missing', this would also imply that he went absent whilst he was away from his battalion.

This might also be supported by another scrap of evidence, found in an issue of *The Walsall Observer and South Staffordshire Chronicle*, published on the 15th May 1915. Here a reference is made to a John Coleman, serving with an unspecified battalion in the Foresters who had been 'Missing four months'. The period of 'four months' is however significantly longer than the period 20th February to 5th May. Extensive searches did not unearth any more information in this or other local papers, but, along with some digging in Ancestry databases ([ACCC](#) & [ACMR](#)), fuelled doubts whether the John Coleman referred to in this newspaper was the John Coleman discussed in this pamphlet. It is possible that the person referred to in the article was another John Coleman, serving with the 7th South Staffordshire regiment, and the editors had simply made a mistake.

Our investigations continue!

III. The 1914 volunteers

At the beginning of WWI, the British Army was a comparatively small organisation, designed to fight in colonial wars and to act as an instrument of repression in the UK and its colonies.⁶⁷ When Britain entered the war, even before the bloody battles of August and September decimated the ranks of the Regulars, some government officials and army commanders, notably Horatio Herbert Kitchener, acknowledged that the army would need to recruit large numbers of additional troops in order to '[see] this thing through'.⁶⁸

Within days, prominent notices appeared in the papers calling for '100,000 men [who] are immediately necessary in the present grave National Emergency'. Within a matter of weeks these volunteers were referred to as 'Kitchener's Army'.⁶⁹

The long queues of volunteers before the recruitment offices, which have become an integral part of the iconography of WWI, were in many places all too real, however depressing that may be. By the end of the year, one million had volunteered and numbers were to rise to two and a half million by the end of 1915.⁷⁰

Based on our examination of the backgrounds of the Regulars serving in the 1st Foresters, it appeared necessary to undertake a similar investigation regarding the early Kitchener Foresters, looking into the similarities and differences between the two groups. We therefore compiled information regarding soldiers serving in the 9th Foresters, the unit of the next two Foresters who would be sentenced to death, George Ball and Reginald Burton (see chapters IV. and V.).⁷¹

Looking at the age of the Kitchener Foresters, the picture largely mirrors the Regulars. The average age in both groups was just over 24. Two thirds of the Kitchener Volunteers in our sample were in their twenties, the vast majority (48%) under 25, whilst a handful each were in their late teens or thirties. It is noteworthy that none of the Kitchener Foresters were older than 37 or under 18 years of age, whereas the sample of

⁶⁷ See Issue 2; chapter II.

⁶⁸ See e.g. LEE; p22; *Nottingham Evening Post*; 6th & 15th August 1914: Kitchener, the newly appointed Secretary for War, argued from the start that this new war would be one of attrition. The *Post* quoted a *Times* correspondent who had been discussing Kitchener's plans, stating that 'the war may be long, very long. Behind the German lines are immense reserves. We shall need our reserves, too, for this war must be fought to a finish, and it may be that the new army of 100,000 men will not be the only one we may have to raise [...]'

⁶⁹ See e.g. *Derby Daily Telegraph*; 7th & 20th August 1914; *Nottingham Evening Post*; 7th, 8th, 10th & 21st August 1914. See also MOR; p11: Kitchener's Army was also known as the New Army/Armies.

⁷⁰ SIL; pp1/22-6/38-9. See also *Nottingham Evening Post*; 21st August 1914: At the end of the third week of August, the *Post* referred to the figure of 70,000 volunteers, actually underestimating the extent of the 'rush to the colours' as the real figure appears to have been 93,000 by the 22nd August. Recruitment numbers went even higher, with almost 300,000 volunteers coming forward in the first two weeks of September, following the publication of a notorious *Times* article on the 30th August regarding the retreat of the BEF, calling for 'men, men and yet more men'. See also SIL; pp22-37: According to SILBEY voluntary enlistment did slow-down over the course of 1915, but he makes the case that the government's drive towards conscription was primarily an attempt to manage who was being recruited. There were widely held concerns in various government bodies about skilled workers joining up and lowering production outputs (this also offered a convenient explanation for problems such as the 'Shell Crisis' of 1915), as well as widespread ideas about a huge pool of 'shirkers'. The latter assumptions were fuelled by a mix of middle and upper class insolence and rather dodgy calculations based the *National Registration Act*. The proponents of conscription believed that the 'wrong men were entering, while the right men were not.'

⁷¹ Unless stated otherwise, the following deliberations are based on our analysis of data referenced as DATA SAM9TH. Our investigation of these Kitchener Foresters was based on slightly different source materials than the examination of the 1st Foresters. This allowed us to look into certain aspects of the Kitchener Foresters' we could not explore in the case of the Regulars, for instance regarding the circumstances of how their army experiences came to an end. We were fortunate as we could build on MORSE'S meticulous work, who painstakingly compiled a (de facto) comprehensive list of the soldiers who served with the 9th Foresters, providing us with names, ranks, and soldier numbers. Ball's and Burton's soldier numbers (12686 and 12704) did imply that they signed up around the same time. We drew up a list of 212 soldiers with similar numbers (starting at 12441, going up to 12905), before using (once again) an amateurish but well documented random(ish) method to reduce the sample to a more manageable size, ending up with a group of 104 persons. In four cases our research efforts yielded no useable results, leaving us with 100 Foresters. This much simplified the calculation of percentages. See also Issue 2; chapter I.

Regulars included privates as young as 15 and as old as 55. This nevertheless exemplifies how the rules regarding the age range for Kitchener Volunteers, officially supposed to be between 18 and 30, were handled in a rather flexible way, by the volunteers themselves as well as the recruitment officers. There are for instance numerous accounts of enlistees lying about their age and recruitment officers actively encouraging this: 'the Sergeant said "have another think, lad". So, in ten minutes I became nineteen.'⁷²

Whereas two thirds of the Regulars came from the Midlands, a few had been born all over the Empire. In contrast all of the examined Kitchener Foresters came from the British mainland. Indeed, only two had not been born in England, one in Wales, another in Lanarkshire. Almost four out of five were from Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, with just under half having been born in the latter county. Looking at their last recorded places of residence, this trend is unbroken, though the data on many of the individuals illustrates that it was by no means unusual for working class families to move around towns, villages and counties, often in the pursuit of work.⁷³

In order to look into the civilian backgrounds of the Kitchener Foresters-to-be, we examined census records, mostly from 1911 and 1901, where possible expanding and updating this data with information from army pension records. Similar to the Regulars, the Kitchener Foresters grew up in quite large families, with an average of seven persons in the respective households. Although most children survived infancy, in over two thirds of these households parents lost at least one of their children.

On census night in 1911, the majority of the Kitchener Foresters-to-be still lived with their parents or guardians in their homes. Therefore their relationship to the respective 'head of household' was almost exclusively one of direct relation, usually being 'sons', with the occasional 'grandson' or 'nephew' appearing in the records. A few of worked as servants and were counted as part of other persons' households.

Given the relative youth of many of the Kitchener Foresters it can be assumed that the majority of these 'sons', 'nephews' and 'servants' would still not live in their own household by the time they decided to join the army three and a half years later.

A notable difference between the two groups is the number of married Kitchener Foresters. Whereas over 99 percent of the Regular privates had been single, at the very least one out of ten Kitchener Foresters were married. Some of these couples had children, though given the patchy nature of the available evidence it is not entirely clear how many.⁷⁴

Almost everyone in both groups came from solid working class backgrounds and like the Regulars, many of the Kitchener Foresters had been working in the mining industry, doing a wide range of jobs above and below ground. Some worked as hewers on the coal face, others, especially those still in their mid-teens, as pit pony drivers, whilst a few were in supporting trades, such as one 'colliery blacksmith'. Other Kitchener Volunteers-to-be toiled as agricultural labourers or metal workers, the latter involving both skilled and unskilled labourers. A few worked in the textile industries, building trades or as vendors, including one person who sold books on train stations along the Pennine routes. The only ones who do not quite fit this picture

⁷² See *Nottingham Evening Post*; 10th August 1914; SIL; p46. SILBEY refers to estimates that around 300,000 of the volunteers who came forward in 1914-15 were underage. The age range calculated in DATA SAM9TH is referring to the approximate ages of these Kitchener Foresters (plus/minus one year) in 1915. See also Issue 2; chapter I. This does illustrate that the data needs to be treated with caution.

⁷³ See also SIL; p69: 'Though many workers moved frequently in search of jobs, they usually ended up in a replica of the place that they had left; industrial slums like the Merseyside in Liverpool and the East End in London strongly resembled each other.'

⁷⁴ The actual number of married Kitchener Foresters and how many of these couples had children remains unclear. If for instance a person in our sample got married after census night in 1911, but their pension or service records did not survive, we could only be sure about their marital status if that person was killed and their next of kin was revealed to be their wife in the *Registers of Soldiers' Effects*. If that person survived the war, then none of the used sources would list any information on their marital status, throwing us back to the 1911 census data, listing the person as 'single'. We know for sure that ten out of the hundred investigated persons were married, but can assume the actual number to have been significantly higher. Even ten percent would however be a marked difference to the examined group of Regulars, as only one percent of the Regular privates had been married. See also Issue 2; chapter I.

are two men working in what we would now understand as white collar professions, one selling insurances, the other being an 'Insurance Assistant', possibly an office clerk.⁷⁵

Looking at the professions of the heads of the households, miners yet again dominate the picture, others working in agriculture and the transport industries. One father of a Forester-to-be is a soldier himself, whilst there are two widowed mothers whose unpaid labour is referred to as being a 'Homemaker' and being at 'At Home', whilst two other widows brought up their children whilst also working as a 'Laundress' and an 'Office Cleaner'.

Overall, the occupations of the Kitchener Volunteers and their families is very similar to the group of Regular soldiers and their peers. Many were so-called unskilled workers, toiling in often dangerous jobs and the heavy industries, especially mining and manufacture are more prominently represented than agriculture or the textile industries.

It is notable that amongst the Kitchener Volunteers and their families there are a handful of skilled workers as well as a very few other people who can be assumed to have been comparatively well off. Amongst the heads of the households there were for instance a few engineers, a railway foreman and a green grocer, as well as a farm bailiff and an estate gamekeeper. The vast majority of the Regulars as well as the Kitchener Foresters came however from the poorer, though not destitute, sections of the working classes.⁷⁶

This raises the question why these Kitchener Volunteers did sign up. Given that we do not have personal testimonies from anyone in the examined group, it is necessary to take a step back from our sample and discuss another researcher's work on this issue:

'Why were working-class men so willing to fight? The pre-war era had seemingly provided them with little incentive. They had a deep and abiding suspicion of the government, a suspicion returned by the ruling classes. There was little sense of cooperation between the two groups. The working class had experienced stagnant wages and rising unemployment. They had gone on strike for better working conditions with only limited success. They looked forward to a general strike in November 1914, aimed at shutting down Britain's economy. Worse, they had seen the army used against strikers and been warned by the Prime Minister, Henry Asquith, that he would use "all the force of the Crown" against them in future strikes.'⁷⁷

DAVID SILBEY has investigated the complex mix of Kitchener Volunteers' motivations in his outstanding book *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War...*, allowing some insights into the apparent paradox that this industrial mass war could only be waged by the government and military with the – explicit or implicit – consent of a large majority of people, many of the whom actively despised the British regime and its army.⁷⁸

Criticising military and social historians for treating the volunteers as a 'lemming like [...] herd', driven to enlist by their 'instinct', SILBEY identified a 'gaping hole' in the historiography of WWI and contributed his

⁷⁵ See SIL; pp38-45: Our data therefore reflects some of the wider enlistment trends in the UK. According to SILBEY, by August 1915 just under seventy percent of enlistees had working class backgrounds, including about one in every five industrial workers, though enlistment rates among rural workers were considerably lower. It is necessary to differentiate between enlistment and recruitment, the latter figure being lower given that large numbers of enlistees were turned away, usually for medical reasons. Rejection rates were much higher for enlistees from the working classes, estimates varying between 30 and 50 percent, whilst middle and upper class enlistees had much lower rates of rejection. See e.g. *Nottingham Evening Post*; 10th August 1914: 'The ground for rejection of [enlistees] is nearly always the same – bad teeth.' See also SIL; p47: 'Nonetheless, working-class men constituted both the largest pool of military manpower and the largest section of Britain's fighting forces. Within that group, urban workers were more likely to enlist than rural ones. No particular segment of the working class dominated the enlistment sheets, but some industries sent greater percentages of their men to the front than average. Some regional differences were significant, but none are so remarkable as to suggest a fundamental disparity between the countries of Great Britain, with the singular exception of Ireland.'

⁷⁶ See e.g. SIL; pp4-5: SILBEY outlines some of the conceptual challenges regarding the complex category 'class', e.g. in relation to unpaid labour, i.e. primarily the reproductive work done by women, or the grey area between the better off sections of the working classes and the lower middle classes.

⁷⁷ Ibid.; pp1-2.

⁷⁸ Ibid.; pp1-2/14/16-7. See also Issue 2; chapter I.

analysis of the testimonies of working class volunteers, drawing on over 1,400 diaries, memoirs, oral history sources, etc.⁷⁹

SILBEY describes working class volunteers as part of a 'reading public', consuming newspapers and books, actively participating in societal discourse, becoming 'acquainted with' descriptions of 'an imperial and European' world as well as various concepts regarding British working peoples' position within that system, reaching an 'understanding of the world not from a blanket acceptance of the newspaper stories, but through a negotiation between their own learning and the viewpoint presented to them.'⁸⁰

The embryonic stages of a welfare system, established in the early 1910s, provided much of the physical infrastructure that made the mass enlistment of working class people possible, for instance as offices which had been established in the hearts of working class communities to handle pension claims provided authorities with further information about working class men of fighting age and were used as recruitment offices. These institutions also played a part in creating the notion that working class people had a stake in British society. This was reinforced through the propaganda of publications, educational institutions and organisations like the Boy Scouts as well as their cheaper – often church-run – equivalents, all described by SILBEY as 'links' giving working class people 'an investment in [...] the "invented traditions" defining British symbolic life.'⁸¹

Going beyond the usual, often rather lazily used, label of 'patriotism', SILBEY identifies rather more complex notions of 'allegiances', which could include ideas about allegiance to a national collective, but also wider concepts about 'defend[ing] what was most important to [the volunteers], whether family, friends, their neighbourhood, [or] their class [...].'⁸²

The question however remains:

'How could what seems to have been a class-based consciousness turn so easily from resistance to cooperation? How could [working class people] join a campaign by and for their oppressors? This is perhaps the central question behind British enlistment in the First World War. Any attempt to prosecute the war would have been useless without sustained popular support. Any popular support meant working-class support. Did the "hurly-burly" of enlistment truly drown out the "rationalists"? Were the volunteers simply "cannon fodder", "infected" with the "virus of right-wing patriotism" to be used by an uncaring government? The simple answer is that the paradox is an illusion, fostered by a misunderstanding of the fundamental attitudes of the working classes. The endorsement did not, in fact, contradict the earlier industrial militancy. Too much literacy and knowledge did not make the workers rebellious, as the elites had feared in the nineteenth century. Instead, their knowledge made the working classes believe that, for good or for ill, they had an investment in Britain. Their wider worldview led them to fight for better working and living conditions in peace-time; in wartime, it made them willing to consider defending the larger nation. [...] Historians may or may not agree with [working class peoples']

⁷⁹ SIL; pp2-3/5-10/118. See *ibid.*; p3: 'Understanding their motivations is important for both military and social history. Military history can never come to grips with the rise and evolution of total war in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unless it understands popular support for warring states. The soldiers and factory workers are as important to understanding modern war as are the strategy, tactics, technology, and leadership. Social history cannot claim to understand the working class until it understands the enlistment, one of the greatest mass movements of modern British history, as large as the General Strike of 1926.' We recommend SILBEY'S book, especially as we are only able to briefly sketch out some of the core arguments, whilst e.g. totally omitting his careful and enlightening methodological deliberations. See also *Nottingham Evening Post*; 10th August 1914, describing the actions of the Kitchener Volunteers as 'Recruiting Fever'. For some deliberations on the portrayal of crowds, see also YAR; 'To the Castle'; chapter 4.1.

⁸⁰ SIL; pp49-62; see also *ibid.*; p49: 'The workers conceived of themselves as occupying a significant place in the British hierarchy just as Britain held a particular position within Europe and empire. They consciously located themselves within that national, continental, and imperial hierarchy. They believed themselves part of the "concrete community" of nation. They conceived of themselves as part of a larger whole, not separate from it, and their actions were based on that belief.'

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; pp74-9.

⁸² *Ibid.*; pp13/104-24.

actions, but robbing them of responsibility for their actions is both inaccurate and demeaning. Workers realized that they had [a] choice before them, and made their decision. It was for war.⁸³

SILBEY also investigates other motivations influencing the Kitchener Volunteers' decision making processes. The workers' testimonies apparently contain plenty of evidence that escapism was a strong pull factor. Many, especially younger, working class enlistees desired to break out of the monotony of their working as well as domestic lives, aiming to catch a glimpse at the wider world they only knew from papers and books.⁸⁴

'Most believed the war would end by Christmas, or spring of 1915; by enlisting, they thought they had agreed to six months of travelling. Few gave much thought to the danger of wounding or death. The idea of adventure focussed not so much on killing Germans or invading Germany as on a simple escape from England, from the warrens of the inner cities, from the dully repetitive factory work.'⁸⁵

Hugely influential were complex economic considerations. Although a soldier's wages were often actually lower than those of many better off workers:⁸⁶

'A man could join, earn money, take the burden of housing and feeding himself away from the family budget, and deed a weekly allowance to his parents, wife, or children. In an uncertain economic environment, marked by stagnant wages and unemployment and under-employment, this seems a reasonable bargain for many men.'⁸⁷

An article in the *Nottingham Evening Post* illustrates the growing economic pressures on workers in the early stages of WWI, describing how the local textile industry had been hit hard, given that 'most of them rely principally on [trade with] the Continent, and this trade is, of course, dead.' This resulted in 'practically the whole of the lace trade [only] working intermittently [...].'⁸⁸

'The men who volunteered were thus continuing the economic calculation that they had been forced to make all their lives. How could they arrange the situation such that they and their family would get the most benefit? Joining up promised them a regular wage, a potential allowance for their families, and one less mouth to feed.'⁸⁹

Economic pressure took other forms, such as straightforward bribery and coercion. Some employers paid some of their employees to enlist, or sacked workers so they would 'be compelled to do their duty'. Other forms of social pressures also played significant roles, as 'elements within society put intense pressure upon eligible men', be it through straightforward propaganda, or the direct and indirect shaming of not (yet) enlisted men, often manifesting in everyday social interactions.⁹⁰

SILBEY however summarised that:

'[...] more important than specific external pressures was the climate they created, one in which enlisting was an acceptable and lauded choice. But it seems unlikely that external pressures created a desire to enlist, or were the sole factor in causing a man to volunteer. The working class had demonstrated strong scepticism about government propaganda before the war. That

⁸³ Ibid.; pp65/68.

⁸⁴ Ibid.; pp69-73/79-81.

⁸⁵ Ibid.; p70; see also ibid.; p77: 'They compared their daily lives with what they conceived of as soldiering and found their daily lives sorely lacking.'

⁸⁶ Ibid.; pp82-103: A private's wages started as low as 8s 9d a week, considerably lower than the wages of many miners or workers in certain building trades. Army wages could however improve through additional allowances, for instance for married men, whilst even the lower end of army wages were rather attractive to many younger recruits.

⁸⁷ Ibid.; p82.

⁸⁸ *Nottingham Evening Post*; 10th August 1914.

⁸⁹ SIL; p87.

⁹⁰ Ibid.; pp116-20/124: There were however also a number of other employers, insisting vehemently that their workers should stay in their jobs. The iconic 'white feathers' apparently played less of a role than the prevalent legends about WWI would imply, being mentioned only in a handful of the testimonies examined by SILBEY. See also *Derby Daily Telegraph*; Thursday 20 August 1914: This article illustrates the role of the churches in getting people to enlist.

scepticism endured into the war. The factor that changed between the two was not the government's actions, but the workers'; not the external pressures, but the internal decisions.⁹¹

One aspect in the Kitchener Volunteers' complex mix of motivations is that:

'No one, at that point, knew what faced the soldiers. The long casualty lists of later years were yet to come. But if they did not yet understand the full price of their choice, they discerned a fundamental distinction that perhaps the elites did not. They separated the state from the nation. While criticizing the British state for its missteps before and during the war, they felt, in 1914 and 1915, a duty to defend the British nation, in whatever form they conceived it. The education of slaughter would come later.'⁹²

SILBEY'S work throws up complex questions, though a more detailed discussion of his arguments would require theoretical and empirical deliberations that would divert too far from our immediate subject matter. His book is however outstanding in taking the words of working class volunteers seriously and treating them as subjects making history rather than objects drifting along and occasionally coagulating into mobs throwing themselves into activities beyond their own comprehension, in this case flocking into recruitment offices.

With regards to the examined group of Kitchener Foresters, we cannot make any specific claims regarding their individual reasons to join the army. We can however assume with ample certainty that all of them enlisted during a very brief period in the earliest stages of the war, between the 15th and 19th August. They signed up in towns and cities, the records referring to recruitment offices in Chesterfield, Derby, Mansfield, Newark, Nottingham, Welbeck and Worksop, some travelling considerable distances.

Many of the Kitchener Foresters who survived the units' initial engagements (see chapter IV.) went on to serve in a number of different battalions in the Sherwood Foresters,⁹³ and their respective experiences would have been as diverse and individual as the persons themselves. What is however very striking are the circumstances in which these Kitchener Volunteers ended their army careers.

Amongst many historians it has become rather fashionable to attack common 'myths' about WWI, replacing them with their own tales, usually under the mantle of pseudo-objectivity. One example is Dan Snow, best known as a particularly infuriating television historian, who argued – factually correct – that the total ratio of British Forces killed was around 11.5 percent,⁹⁴ inferring that this discredits the prevalent idea of a 'lost generation'.⁹⁵

One of the problems with such crude generalisations about millions of people, mobilised and serving in very varied circumstances, is that it does not allow for an approach that takes into account their diverse and

⁹¹ SIL; p120.

⁹² Ibid.; pp130-1. See e.g. BLO; pp3-11; LEE; p22: There were of course a number of persons who did anticipate that this war would be different than previous conflicts, not least Kitchener himself. DE BLOCH was one author who predicted some of the impact of modern weaponry. See e.g. BLO; p11: 'In [...] the future war every body of men appointed for defence, and even for attack [...] must immediately entrench itself. [...] Sheltered behind such works, and in a position to devote all their energy to fire against the enemy, the defenders will sustain losses comparatively slight, [...] while the attacking bodies will be exposed to the uninterrupted fire of the defenders, and deprived almost of all possibility of replying to their fire.' We do however go along with SILBEY'S argument that the vast majority of Kitchener Volunteers did only anticipate a short and decisive campaign.

⁹³ Of the examined Kitchener Foresters, 64 served only with the 9th Foresters, though 26 of these soldiers were killed within days or weeks after the unit was sent into combat. Nineteen Kitchener Foresters served in two different battalions of the Sherwood Foresters, another sixteen in three or more different units. Only one ended up serving with a different regiment.

⁹⁴ SNO; see also WIN; p451: WINTER provides an overview of overall casualties, which also shows that SNOW failed to mention that his numbers were based on figures for the entire British Forces over the whole course of the war, crucially including combat as well as non-combat units.

⁹⁵ See *ibid.*; pp449-50/465-6: The idea of a 'lost generation', still commonly referred to (see e.g. TIM), needs to be scrutinised, though not for the reason implied by SNOW. Originally the term was primarily used, especially in post war literature, to refer to the losses amongst the middle- and upper classes, whose ranks had been severely depleted. WINTER asserts that this was not 'a myth. But in the inter-war years it became a legend which, though it had a basis in fact, took on a life of its own. Remembering the slaughter of elites seemed to take precedence over recognizing that such casualties were but a small fraction of total British war losses.'

sometimes contradictory range of experiences and how these influenced the individuals as well as their peers. Looking for example at the examined group of Kitchener Foresters, a group of men who joined up in the earliest days of the war and went on to serve in combat units, the war took a terrible toll.

Out of the 100 persons in our group, fifty-three died before the armistice of November 1918. Twenty-six perished within their first few months of active service, many of them within days of taking part in the landings on Sulva Bay on the Gallipoli Peninsula (see chapters IV. and V.). The others died on the Western Front, or in medical facilities in France or Belgium. Two died in the UK, one from wounds, another under unknown circumstances, possibly as the cause of an accident.

Of the 47 survivors, only 15 were discharged to the army reserve following the end of hostilities on the Western Front. 16 Kitchener Foresters would be discharged due to wounds suffered, another four owing to 'sickness', although the latter category also included persons who had been wounded.⁹⁶ One person was specifically described as suffering from 'neurasthenia sickness', i.e. shell shock.

Without further research into these cases, we cannot make any statements how the deaths and the survivors' physical and psychological wounds affected the remaining Kitchener Foresters, their families and friends. We did however work with one particularly depressing source, the *Registers of Soldiers' Effects*, listing payments to the next of kin of soldiers killed in the Boer War and WWI.⁹⁷

Sometimes providing vital information about the soldiers' families, the *Soldiers' Effects* list the so-called War Gratuity payments as well as any wages owed to the soldiers at the time of their death. The latter were usually paid to the families within a few months of the Foresters' deaths, often after the army deducted some 'charges'.

Average total payments in our group amounted to £13/18/2. The average War Gratuity payment awarded to the families of these killed Kitchener Foresters was £7/13/3, usually paid out in late 1919. This would have been equivalent to just over two weeks of a male miner's average wages in 1919,⁹⁸ or slightly less than the price of three of the most commonly used British artillery shells.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ For example Thomas Watterson, a plumber from Chesterfield, who was discharged in October 1917 due to his 'sickness', specified as 'Disability G[un] S[hot] W[ound] Abdomen'. In eleven cases it remains unclear how the respective Foresters' army service came to an end.

⁹⁷ See [NAM](#) for some more details on this collection.

⁹⁸ See e.g. *Derby Daily Telegraph*; 10th March, 16th July & 18th December 1919; *Nottingham Evening Post*; 21st January & 21st October 1919: This figure is based on a newspaper report from 1919 regarding a report by the Coal Commission, stating that the average annual wages of a male miner were £169. Other newspaper reports indicate that many workers' incomes had increased during the war, but also that the cost of living had been up from pre-war levels by 120-125 percent. We will return to these issues in more detail in a future pamphlet in this series.

⁹⁹ The total War Gratuity payments awarded to the next of kin of the 41 Kitchener Foresters amounted to £127/10/7. It has proved fairly complicated to find solid references for the prices of everyday stocks of weapons and munitions. See e.g. [TWO3](#); p480: This War Office publication lists the approximate costs of the preliminary bombardments leading up to a number of major battles. The earliest is regarding the bombardment preceding the attack on Arras in 1917. The most common rounds were fired by 18-Pounder guns, 1,558,525 times in a fortnight. The price for these projectiles is given as £4,441,796 and 5 shillings (the total recorded cost for rounds fired by a range of weapons in this bombardment is £13,162,689 13s 8d). Although calculating old money is always a bit of a pain, that breaks down to a price of £2/17 per 18-Pounder round. We will have to re-check these figures as the price for such a shell given in a – for once well referenced – [Wikipedia article](#) is considerably lower. If we were to apply the figures provided in the latter source, the average War Gratuity payment would be equivalent to the price of just over twelve 18-Pounder shells.

IV. George Ball & Reginald Burton

Among the Kitchener Volunteers who found themselves serving with the 9th Foresters were George Ball and Reginald Burton. Following their death sentences in July 1915 (see chapter V.), both managed to avoid the firing squad, but neither lived to see the end of the war. Due to the unnerving fact that researchers have a much easier time identifying records containing information on those soldiers who were killed, Ball and Burton are the first of the 103 Foresters whose personal stories can be outlined in some detail, drawing on military records as well as census information and newspaper articles.¹⁰⁰

In 1893 or 1884, Reginald Burton was born in Chesterfield, the second child of Emma and George, who had married in 1881. In 1901 they lived, along with Reginald's five siblings, on Durrant Road. Reginald, then a child of seven years, and his nine year old sister Annie were too young at the time to contribute to the family income through formal employment. It can be assumed that these years must have been rather hard, given that Emma and George had to care for their growing family, apparently whilst only being able to draw on George's income as a leather currier. He processed tanned leather in order to strengthen, waterproof and colour it, before other tradespersons would make it into finished products such as gloves or boots.¹⁰¹ Emma appears not to have been in paid employment, having to work long hours looking after a family of eight, with the younger children being five, three and two years, and the infant Thomas just four months old.

Emma and George came from the nearby village of Dronfield. Reginald and the three youngest children had been born in Chesterfield, but the oldest as well as the third child in Bristol and Sheffield respectively, indicating that the family moved a number of times, probably in pursuit of employment. The Burtons did however appear to have strong family connections in Chesterfield, for instance through Reginald's grandad who had been the landlord of the Horns Hotel, a pub about half a mile from the family's home.¹⁰²

In 1911 the family still lived on Durrant Road, although apparently in a different, four room house.¹⁰³ Another child, Florence, had been born in 1908, but Thomas had died.¹⁰⁴

By now the four oldest children were in employment. Annie and Evelyne, nineteen and fifteen years of age, worked both as 'Kitchen Maid[s]' in a restaurant, whilst the fourth child Gwendoline, fourteen, was a factory worker, producing boxes. Seventeen year old Reginald was a miner at Holmewood Colliery, working as a pony driver. In August 1914 he was employed as a trammer, hauling coal and rubble towards the mineshafts.¹⁰⁵

His future fellow Kitchener Forester George Ball was born in 1891 or 1892 in Clowne, a Derbyshire village a few miles east of Chesterfield. Little is known about his childhood besides him having at least one sister,¹⁰⁶ before he appears in the 1911 census records. By then in his late teens, George was living with his grandmother, the 72 year old widowed head of the household, as well as his aunt, also a widow, and her eleven year old daughter in a four room dwelling on Boughton Lane.

George appears to have been the only one in his granny's household who was in paid employment, working as a miner at Barlborough Colliery. The mining industry was well established in the area, employing

¹⁰⁰ Unless otherwise referenced, this chapter is based on a number of civilian and military documents recording information on George Ball (RECGBAL) and Reginald Burton (RECRBUR). These include e.g. their sets of *Medal Records*, data from the 1901 and 1911 censuses, information from the *Soldiers died in the Great War* and *CWGC* databases, newspaper reports published after the deaths of the two men, etc. For details see the bibliography.

¹⁰¹ See [WOO](#).

¹⁰² See [LPP](#): 'Previously known as the Horns Inn and The Old Horns. Demolished [in 1971] as part of A61 improvements.'

¹⁰³ The census form instructs surveyors to 'Count the kitchen as a room but do not count scullery, landing, lobby, closet, bathroom, nor warehouse, office, shop.'

¹⁰⁴ Reginald's father George is not listed on the household's 1911 census form. It appears likely that he was simply not home on census night, given that Emma is not listed as the 'head' of the household and that the *Registers of Soldiers' Effects* list George as Reginald's next of kin in 1919.

¹⁰⁵ See [HIOM](#).

¹⁰⁶ A visit to the archive holding the Clowne parish records should provide information on George's early years and how he ended up living with his granny. One persistent challenge in this project is to balance our urge to find out as much as possible about the 103 Foresters with the fact that at this point there are another 99 stories to investigate.

many of the locals in Barlborough and nearby villages like Clowne.¹⁰⁷ In 1911 George worked below ground as a 'filler', taking the coal won by the hewers, and shovelling or moving it by hand into waggons or other containers which would then be hauled away towards the surface.¹⁰⁸ Given the careers of some of the other miners in the examined group of Kitchener Foresters,¹⁰⁹ it appears likely that George had been employed in the mining industry for a number of years, possibly also starting out as a pit pony driver.

Both Reginald and George would have been well acquainted with the dangers of mining. Between 1911 and 1914 Reginald had directly or indirectly witnessed at least six fatal mining accidents and numerous non-fatal injuries at Holmewood Colliery.¹¹⁰ Both are likely to have personally known other miners who became victims of industrial accidents, such as Ball's fellow Clowne resident and Barlborough Colliery worker George Scarborough, who was severely injured when he was buried for twenty minutes in November 1911.¹¹¹

Another part of miners' experiences were frequent conflicts about pay and conditions. It is for instance possible that George attended the 'crowded meeting of Southgate and Barlborough miners in the Clowne Co-operative Hall' in 1911, where a speaker 'condemned [how] miners had been robbed of their wages'. This report did however hint at frictions amongst the workers, also exemplified in the following year when miners voted whether to continue a strike, with the results from Barlborough Colliery possibly indicating that many of these miners were at the time not among the more militant workers.¹¹²

Both men were footballers, Reginald playing 'on several occasions' for the Chesterfield Unitarians. George was also reported to have been a 'fine footballer', playing with his colliery team, apparently enjoying some success and drawing 'large crowds' during the season of 1913-14.¹¹³ He had also been involved with the Clowne division of the Boy Scouts, an experience that might have contributed to his decision to sign up for the army.¹¹⁴

Whilst the slightly younger Reginald remained single, at some point before August 1914 George married Annie Beatrice, with whom he had two children.

¹⁰⁷ See [DODR](#).

¹⁰⁸ See [HEW](#).

¹⁰⁹ See [DATA SAM9TH](#).

¹¹⁰ See e.g. [BRA](#); *The Derbyshire Courier*, 28th February 1911 & 25th June 1912: The two articles report accidents of miners who had been 'crushed' and 'severely crushed' at Holmewood Colliery. See also *idem.*; 14th June 1913: Following the partial collapse of one of the shafts at Holmewood Colliery in 1913, the general manager complained that a number of workers showed little inclination to return to the colliery. The manager and 'another authority' blamed the 'fine' weather and the benefits the workers supposedly drew from 'their union and sick clubs [...] having an extended holiday at "somebody's expense"'. A union official explained that these workers were 'non-union men' who 'went from place to place' and had simply been able to get 'better jobs' whilst part of Holmewood had been shut. See also *idem.*; 20th December 1913: An article under the headline 'Staveley Stinks', provides another snapshot of the miners' working conditions as well as the nearby residents' living conditions. In the short report, a 'Medical Officer' voices his disdain for 'the conditions arising from the Holmewood Colliery, from which black smoke poured out night and day.'

¹¹¹ See e.g. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 3rd & 23rd November 1911: Less than three weeks later, three other miners from Clowne were killed and four injured at the nearby Southgate Colliery, when their pit-cage crashed. One of the injured men, James, shared his surname with George Ball. As they were both from the same village, it is entirely possible that they were related, but we are at present unable to verify this.

¹¹² *The Derbyshire Courier*, 7th November 1911; *The Derby Daily Telegraph*, 2nd April 1912. We do not have other information about the circumstances of that particular ballot. It is therefore questionable whether it can be used as an argument to claim that relations between workers and management at Barlborough Colliery, where workers voted almost two to one to end the strike, may have been comparatively amicable. In this ballot even Welsh miners had backed the resumption of labour with a strong majority. There were however collieries near Barlborough that voted with large majorities against a return to work. Other regions, including Yorkshire, Lancashire and Durham also voted with strong majorities against an end of the strike. See also *The Derbyshire Courier*, 25th September 1915: That George Ball was described in his obituary as 'well respected by the management', may be an accurate description, but given that the paper was very keen to propagate a narrative of national unity it might as well have been utter nonsense.

¹¹³ See e.g. *idem.*; 11th October 1913.

¹¹⁴ See [SIL](#); p75.

Their motives for joining the army remain unknown, but, judging by their soldier numbers, it appears that Reginald and George both enlisted in the third week of August, along with the other Kitchener Foresters (see above). Both signed up in Chesterfield, possibly in the Drill Hall on Ashgate Road, becoming Privates Ball, number 12704, and Burton, 12686. They were assigned to the 9th Foresters, a battalion that had just been formed as part of 'K1', Kitchener's first 100,000 volunteers.¹¹⁵

Whatever their expectations of army life, it would have quickly become clear that these two workers had 'merely substituted one set of hardships for another.'¹¹⁶ The 'enlistment machinery broke under the strain' of the huge influx of new recruits, leaving the army unable to house, clothe, or feed, let alone equip many of the enlistees, stranding them in squalid conditions, whilst others were sent home again and called upon later.¹¹⁷

The 9th Foresters were 'luckier than some' as they found some basic infrastructure in their training camp in Lincolnshire, i.e. some tents, and luckier than most as these were replaced by wooden huts at the end of autumn. Although lacking in uniforms and other equipment, these Kitchener Foresters were soon immersed in a daily routine of drill, bayonet practice, marching around and shining up their belt buckles. Many of their NCOs were promoted from the ranks of the new volunteers, supplemented by a small number of old Regulars, often older soldiers who had reenlisted at the outbreak of the war. Experienced officers were 'also in short supply [...]. In effect they were as green as the troops they led.'¹¹⁸

After parading through Nottingham on the 3rd April 1915 they went on to Frensham Camp, Surrey, supposedly being brought up to speed with the new realities of trench warfare, receiving training in the use of hand grenades, barbed wire, etc. Deemed ready to join the slaughter ten months after the unit had been raised, the 9th Foresters' embarkation orders came on the 29th June. Despite expectations of being sent into France, the issue of 'Foreign Service helmets' was the first indication for the rank and file troops that they were instead heading for a theatre of war on the very edge of the European continent.¹¹⁹

As we will return to the subject of the Gallipoli campaign in some detail in the next issue of this series, a very brief summary must suffice at this point.¹²⁰ Twenty months into this research project, the Gallipoli campaign stands out as a particularly poorly planned and executed operation in a war which is not lacking examples of extraordinary screw-ups. Reading up on the campaign we encountered some of the hitherto most harrowing and depressing accounts of people on both sides being made to kill and maim their opponents under the most adverse conditions.

The idea behind the campaign was as grandiose and half-baked as ever. Partly conceived to support the Russian Empire's war efforts, the plans were developed and promoted by a number of people in the allied civilian and military elites, notably Winston Churchill, then in charge of the navy as First Lord of the

¹¹⁵ See MOR; pp10-2.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in ORA 1; p60. See also Issue 1; chapter III. We previously touched upon ideas of understanding many aspects of soldiering as a continuation of industrial proletarians' work experiences. We will further explore this approach in the issue that will investigate the first case of a mutiny prosecution.

¹¹⁷ SIL; pp22-6.

¹¹⁸ MOR; pp12-4.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.; pp14-7. Apart from the few outfits that are genuinely terrifying, virtually all military uniforms look rather ridiculous, but the so-called pith helmets can almost rival the ludicrousness of the German Pickelhaube.

¹²⁰ This summary is based on a number of publications, notably HAR; HAM; LEEJ; OGL1; WWICG. For details on the movements of the 9th Foresters see e.g. OGL2, for an overview of the terrain and the maze of trenches and outposts see e.g. OGL3. Much of the historiography has been concerned with the question if the operation had been 'foredoomed' from its very conception or whether any 'fleeting chances of victory' had been 'thrown away' by Hamilton and the other commanders of the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and its allies (see e.g. LEEJ; ppXXIII). In HART'S view Gallipoli was 'the most doomed, the most pointless' of all the British 'military adventures' of 1915, made worse as 'mistakes were made at every level of command [...]: operational planning was woeful and any localised tactical opportunities were routinely missed.' (see HAR; e.g. ppVII-IX/454; authors' emphasis removed). There is extensive evidence to back up HART'S position, though his critique aims not at the war itself, but merely how plans were made and implemented at the various levels of military command and civilian administration. This appears to be a widespread phenomenon amongst military historians. Despite this inherent problem, HART'S work can be recommend, not only as it provides a thorough and readable account of the campaign, but because it does so by extensively quoting personal testimonies, crucially not only recounting British and other Commonwealth voices, but also French and Ottoman accounts.

Admiralty. Unable to break the deadlock on the Western Front, the plan was to take control over the Dardanelles, a narrow strait of sea connecting the Mediterranean and the Sea of Marmara. The key to the Dardanelles was the Gallipoli Peninsula, a narrow stretch of land dominated by cliffs, steep hills and a maze of gullies and ravines. Aiming to threaten Istanbul, then the capital of the Ottoman Empire, the attack on Gallipoli was thought to be only the precursor to knock the major ally of the German and Austrian Empires out of the war.

These plans were at all stages based on brazenly overconfident estimates of the capabilities of allied forces and a blatantly racist underestimation of the Ottoman troops. Many of the allied commanders never really wavered in these convictions, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Two failed naval attacks gave Ottoman military planners, supported by a number of German officers, ample time to prepare against a large scale invasion. It finally came in late April 1915, a joint army and navy operation of as yet unprecedented scale, involving French and British troops, many of them from the colonies of the respective empires.

Due to persistent failures in the allied preparations, such as a lack of crucial equipment, the extremely averse terrain and not least the fierce defence by Ottoman forces, the attacks ground to a halt almost immediately. The allied troops were able to establish a number of bridgeheads on the peninsula and the Asiatic shores of the Dardanelles, but were unable to push much further inland. Gallipoli became a hot, dry and rocky mirror image of the Western Front, one of the notable differences being the lack of any safe(ish) hinterland for the allies, where troops could find some shelter from artillery fire.

On top of quickly mounting losses due to constant trench warfare and raging epidemics, especially dysentery, both sides wasted tens of thousands of lives in battle after battle, with the allies being unable to make any relevant gains, whilst the Ottoman troops were unable to force the attackers back into the sea. The allies finally evacuated their positions in December 1915, the retreat being the only part of the operation that went to plan.

In June 1915, George and Reginald were both headed to Gallipoli with the 9th Foresters. Shortly before they embarked on their journey, it appears that George was able to visit Clowne one last time.¹²¹

Following a brief spell in the trenches at Gallipoli, leading to their court martial (see chapter V.), Reginald and George took part in the landings at Sulva Bay in early August 1915, the allies' final attempt to break the deadlock on the peninsula. Having been fairly lucky during the landings, and initially only taking a defensive role, the 9th Foresters suffered heavy casualties in an attack on the 9th August.¹²²

On the 21st and 22nd August, the Foresters were assigned as the reserve force for yet another attack on Ottoman positions, whose strength had again been grossly underestimated. Their advance was supported only by a 'slight' preliminary bombardment, which 'failed to touch' the opposing forward trenches. The Foresters went over the top, but in the chaos of battle appear to have lost direction and had to retire to their rear trenches after taking heavy casualties from artillery fire and during a failed attempt to storm an Ottoman trench.¹²³

It is most likely that it was during these events that George Ball was shot through the spine and 'paralysed from the waist downwards'. He was evacuated to a hospital in Malta, where he died on the 10th September 1915.

¹²¹ It is uncertain whether Annie and the children were in Clowne at the time. In his will, George provides an address in Blakenall, a village near Walsall in Staffordshire. It appears that Annie stayed at this address with friends or relatives, though it is also possible that the family moved there after George joined the army.

¹²² OGL2; pp223-93.

¹²³ See DATA CAS9TH; HAR; pp369-84; MOR; pp27-9; OGL2; pp340-8: By this point, any illusions of routing the Ottoman troops appear to have been melting away. The objective of the attack was simply to 'reduce the length of the British front by several thousand yards', increasing the defensibility of the line. Although the available artillery support for this attack was described as 'stronger than on any previous date since the beginning of the August battles', it was 'all too weak for the heavy task assigned to it. The stock of ammunition was sinking very low, and there was little more in sight'. Apparently the orders for the attack arrived so late that only the officers knew anything about the upcoming battle, and 'when heavy casualties occurred amongst the [officers,] great confusion was unavoidable'. The Foresters lost eighteen dead and an unknown number wounded on the 21st and 22nd August.

His death was announced in the *Derbyshire Courier* two weeks later, one of two soldiers from Clowne reported to have died that week. Another article on the same page, headlined 'Two Killed: Six Serving – A Clowne Family's Patriotism' refers to another death in his extended family, describing this as 'a record the family may well feel proud of'.¹²⁴

Annie received a letter from a hospital chaplain, which was partially quoted in the *Derbyshire Courier*:

'I saw him before he died, and he was quite conscious, but at times wandered a bit. [...] He was liked by us all, and was cheerful amongst the wounded. His vitality was marvellous, and the doctors and nurses were astonished at the length of time he lived. [...] You have the sincerest sympathy in your great loss, but your husband's death was the noblest a man can die, for he gave his life for his King and country.'¹²⁵

George Ball was buried at Malta's Pieta Military Cemetery, his being one of 1,303 WWI graves.¹²⁶

At the time of his death, George Ball had two shilling of unpaid wages to his name, which were however not paid to Annie after the army charged his account with two shilling. Four years after his death, in September 1919, Annie received a War Gratuity payment of £4.¹²⁷

Reginald Burton was also evacuated out of Gallipoli to a hospital, suffering from severe dysentery as so many of his comrades on either side of no-man's-land.

The 9th Foresters, their ranks by now severely depleted,¹²⁸ were pulled out of Gallipoli as part of the general retreat, the last Forester leaving the peninsula on the 20th December. The battalion was sent to Egypt, where a recovered Reginald Burton re-joined it at some point in early 1916.

MORSE quotes an officer's summary of the Foresters' stay as a period of 'rest' and 'training', trying to rebuilt the depleted and exhausted remnants of the unit. Technically part of the Suez Canal defences and taking part in patrols along the East Bank of the canal, the Foresters apparently made no contact with any Ottoman forces during that time. By the end of February 1916 they were, at least nominally, restored to battle strength.¹²⁹

With the start of the infamous Battle of the Somme, the Foresters finally left Egypt and arrived in Marseilles, taking over a section of the lines near Arras from late July. Following two months of trench warfare on the Western front, the 9th Foresters took part in the later stages of the Battle of the Somme, notably the Battle of Thiepval from the 26th to the 28th September, in which the battalion was again to suffer heavy casualties, with nearly 100 killed and 200 wounded.¹³⁰

Reginald died in all likelihood a week or two before the battle in a trench, killed by artillery fire whilst being 'knee deep in mud'.¹³¹ He was one of 21 Foresters who died between the 13th and the 23rd September,

¹²⁴ That week, the paper reported the death of nine men from Derbyshire, whilst two more had gone missing, fifteen been wounded (including one more from Clowne) and one each reported to suffer from dysentery and 'Enteric'.

¹²⁵ The sickening finish of the clergyman's letter was topped in another article on the same page, reporting on a boy whose legs had been 'badly shattered' by shrapnel. It was stated that he had set a 'noble example of patriotism by enlisting at the early age of 15. He celebrated his birthday just prior to leaving England.'

¹²⁶ See [CWGCPC](#). George shares a gravestone with two other soldiers, W Stewart, Royal Medical Corps, died on the 11th September 1915 and G S Marlow, an ANZAC trooper from New Zealand who died the following day. Many thanks to a fellow researcher for sharing photographs of George's gravesite.

¹²⁷ George's entry in the *Soldiers' Effects* indicate that Annie might have been entitled to another payment of £2/18/10, but there is no record of this sum being paid out to her or anybody else. For all we know the army administration kept the money.

¹²⁸ See DATA CAS9TH; MOR; pp34-5. MORSE refers to a figure of 221 Foresters who died or were fatally wounded at Gallipoli. The [CWGC](#) database lists 213 soldiers killed by the end of 1915. The most likely cause for the discrepancy is that several wounded Foresters survived into 1916. MORSE estimates that around 400 Foresters were wounded during the campaign, reducing the strength of the unit by almost two thirds.

¹²⁹ MOR; pp34-5/48-51.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*; pp52-3/61-3. It remains unknown whether Burton had a chance to take any leave and visit his friends and family in Chesterfield.

¹³¹ See BWD9TH; entry dated 18th September 1916.

though there is some uncertainty as to the exact date of his death due to inconsistencies in the sources.¹³² It is therefore unclear whether the following did specifically refer to Reginald's death, but it stands representative of repeated entries in the 9th Foresters' *War Diary* in the run up to the Battle of Thiepval:

'[T]rench heavily shelled by enemy with whiz-bangs and + H[igh] E[xplosive shells]. Casualties 2 Killed]. 4 W[ounded]. Still raining.'¹³³

Reginald Burton lies buried at Ferme-Olivier Cemetery, alongside 407 Commonwealth and three German victims of WWI.¹³⁴

The army owed Reginald £7/19/1 outstanding pay. They posthumously charged him £1/7/5, leaving £6/11/8, paid out to his father in March 1917. In September 1919 George Burton received £9 as a War Gratuity.



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¹³² See also BWD9TH; DATA CAS9TH; MOR; p61. All but one of the available records state that Reginald was killed on the 17th September (and the one inconsistent date looks very much like a clerical error). The *War Diary* does however not refer to any casualties on the 17th or the 18th, when the unit took over a section of the front lines after having been in reserve trenches for several days. Over the following days the *War Diary* repeatedly refers to heavy casualties from intense artillery fire. The letter to Reginald's mother is rather precise regarding the circumstances of his death, making it likely that he did not die from wounds behind the lines, though it is of course possible that the author of that letter might have thought an 'instantaneous' death to be less agonising for Reginald's relatives than a possibly slow demise behind the lines. In any case, these and other examples of inconsistencies regarding the death dates of soldiers illustrate the chaos of battle and the necessity to treat any evidence with the utmost caution.

¹³³ BWD9TH; entry dated 19th September 1916. See also BWD9TH; entries dated 20th & 21st September 1916, when another nine Foresters became victims of artillery fire and thirty were wounded.

¹³⁴ See [CWGCFO](#). Yet again our thanks go to the researcher who shared photographs of Reginald's gravesite.

¹³⁵ George's picture was printed in *The Derbyshire Courier*, issues dated 25th & 28th September 1915, Reginald's in the same paper on the 30th September 1916.

V. Ball's & Burton's cases

These two cases have not only steered this research project onto new ground due to the defendants being Kitchener Volunteers, tried far from the Western Front, but also as their alleged 'crime' was not desertion, but 'sleeping on post'.

After desertion, falling asleep whilst being posted as a sentry was the second most common charge that led to capital convictions, although these sentences, usually following FGCM trials, were rarely confirmed. During WWI 449 British troops were sentenced to death on these charges, but only two were executed, the lowest quota of executions to death sentences. In comparison almost fourteen percent of alleged deserters' capital sentences were confirmed by the respective commanders-in-chief.¹³⁶

Whereas the offence of desertion is more ambiguous, the *Army Act's* definition of sleeping on post is very straightforward:

[Section] 6. (1.) Every person subject to military law who [...] (k.) [is] a soldier acting as sentinel, [and] sleeps or is drunk on his post [...] shall, on conviction by court-martial, if he commits any such offence on active service, be liable to suffer death, or such less punishment as is in this Act mentioned; and if he commits any such offence not on active service, be liable [...] to suffer imprisonment, or such less punishment as in this Act mentioned.¹³⁷

Therefore, what happened to Ball and Burton appears to be fairly clear:

The Foresters had embarked from Liverpool on the 1st July 1915, travelling on the 'Empress of Britain'.¹³⁸ They arrived at Malta on the 8th July, from where they continued to Alexandria the following day. They stayed three days, the rank and file going on 'route marches around' the city, before the 'Empress of Britain' set a course for Lemnos on the 16th. This was their last stop before disembarking at Gallipoli, where they arrived in the evening of the 20th July. The Foresters eventually went ashore at Cape Helles, the southern tip of the peninsula, in the early hours of the following day, being welcomed by an artillery barrage. They moved into reserve trenches in the afternoon of the 21st and into the firing line on the 23rd July where they 'would now learn quickly the basics of trench life'. Just over a week later, having lost three Foresters killed and an unknown number wounded, they were relieved in the early hours of the 1st August by French troops. The Foresters were to return to Imbros for a few days, before taking part in the landings at Sulva Bay.¹³⁹

The FGCM trials of three soldiers, Ball, Burton and Lance Corporal Shinton, serving with the 7th South Staffords, took place on the 31st July. All of them were charged with sleeping on post, found guilty, and sentenced to death, in all likelihood with a recommendation to mercy.¹⁴⁰

Given the circumstances it is most likely that Ball and Burton, posted on guard duty during the Foresters' stretch in the lines between the last week of July, nodded off, were found by an NCO or an officer and thereafter charged, tried and sentenced. Given that a third soldier, serving with a different battalion (though in the same brigade),¹⁴¹ was tried with Ball and Burton on the same day, it appears likely that these had been three separate 'crimes', tried together for practical reasons.

¹³⁶ DATA DS/EXE.

¹³⁷ TWO2; pp381-2. The commentaries on the legal clauses in Section 6 (see *ibid.*; pp383-4) are also comparably brief, and primarily revolve around issues such as the question whether a 'sentry found drunk a short distance from his post' should be charged with leaving his post or being drunk whilst posted as a sentry (the former).

¹³⁸ See [ASC](#): Starting her service as a civilian ocean liner, the 'Empress of Britain' became a navy owned 'armed merchantman' at the beginning of WWI, being returned to civilian status in May 1915 and used as a troop transporter. See [MOR](#); p19: At least the officers appear to have had a good time, MORSE quotes one of them describing an enjoyable trip 'although the men were quite overcrowded and, the greatest fealty of all, the supply of liquid refreshment ran out.'

¹³⁹ DATA CAS9TH; [MOR](#); pp19-21.

¹⁴⁰ WO213/5; p70. See also DATA DS/EXE. When transcribing the information from the FGCM *Registers*, ORAM made an error in giving the location of the trials as 'Egypt', causing a great deal of confusion. This does not detract from our immense gratitude to and admiration for ORAM, given that without his endless hours of work with these huge leather bound ledgers this project would have never come off the ground.

¹⁴¹ See [LLTOB11D](#).

It is not known how long it took Ian Hamilton, then commander-in-chief of the British troops in the area, to make his decision whether to confirm the sentences. In the end, all three death sentences were commuted to two years imprisonment with hard labour and then suspended. Given the small quota of soldiers sentenced for sleeping upon post who were actually executed, this is not particularly surprising, just as the fact that their commuted sentences were suspended fits with the arguments made in this and previous issues of this pamphlet series.

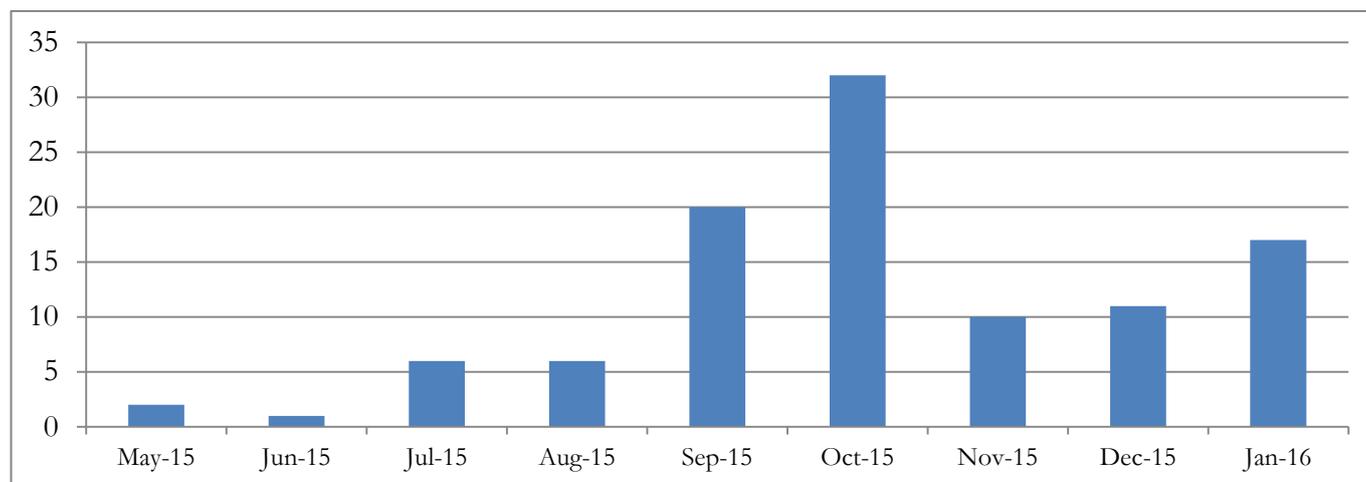
Indeed, it seems more surprising that the trials were held in the first place, rather than the person who found the sleeping soldiers giving them an unceremonious kick up the arse, followed by their commanding officer summarily ordering some days of FP1.

One possible explanation is that the officers on the ground were well aware of the fact that they were dealing with a totally inexperienced formation of the untested New Armies, recruited from one of the most land-locked regions of Britain, just days away from attempting an amphibious landing in 'enemy' territory, having received very little or no specialist training, and unable to rely on any support other than what they could carry in their kits.¹⁴²

In these circumstances, the death sentences appear to have been used to hammer home the message that strict discipline was expected from all troops, however impossible their task.

Examining the 105 death sentences handed out at Gallipoli, it is indeed apparent that the death penalty was used more and more in an attempt to uphold discipline as the pointlessness of the campaign became ever more apparent. It is however also notable that Hamilton, by no means timid to send thousands to their deaths, seems to have been reluctant to put his signature under the order to execute a soldier, given that only three of the condemned British soldiers ended up before firing squads, a much lower ratio than the overall eleven percent.¹⁴³

Table/Chart No 5: Number of death sentences at Gallipoli*



* See DATA DS/EXE. Given that the retreat was completed in late December 1915, it can be assumed that the trials in January 1916 were held elsewhere but referred to events at Gallipoli.

The other notable anomaly regarding the death sentences at Gallipoli is that charges of desertions were comparatively rare. They accounted for only eighteen percent of prosecutions, with 'sleeping on post' featuring in over sixty percent, thereby effectively reversing overall trends:¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² See e.g. HAR; p283; MOR; p19; OGL2; pp225/229: Given the ineffectiveness of naval bombardments, one principal problem was the lack of any artillery support during these landings; 'Instead of the guns opening a way for the infantry, the infantry had to push forward to seize a position to cover the landing of the guns.'

¹⁴³ See DATA DS/EXE: The first to be murdered was Thomas Davies. Accused of having 'quit' his post, he was killed on the 2nd July. Harry Salter had been charged with desertion and escaping confinement and was shot by his comrades on the 11th December. John Robins was executed on January 2nd, two weeks after the evacuation, allegedly for having been disobedient.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. See also Issue 1; chapter II. At Gallipoli there was also a significantly higher ratio of death sentences following cowardice charges.

Table/Chart No 6: Death sentences at Gallipoli by alleged offence

alleged offence	death sentences (Gallipoli sample)	% Gallipoli sample (105)	death sentences (all cases)**	% all death sentences (3,362)**
disobedience	5	4.8	120	3.6
desertion	7	6.7	2,005	59.6
quitting	9	8.6	82	2.4
cowardice	15	14.3	213	6.3
sleeping on post	65	61.9	449	13.4
other	4	3.8	493	14.7

* See DATA DS/EXE.

** These figures refer not only to British and Commonwealth/Colonial troops, but to all persons sentenced to death following proceedings before British Army courts martial.

This demonstrates a particularly terrifying aspect of the 9th Foresters' war experiences at Gallipoli. Whereas on the Western Front there were very few chances to escape the routine of boredom, toil and occasional carnage by fleeing the combat zones, at Gallipoli the only way out was on board one of the allied ships, unless deserters were willing to take the enormous risk of crossing no-man's-land in order to surrender to Ottoman troops, at best giving up their liberty for the foreseeable future.¹⁴⁵

With allied commanders spending months in stubbornly persistent and futile attempts to rout the Ottoman armies, a soldier's only escape from Gallipoli, other than death or highly risky surrender, was evacuation due to sickness or wounds.

¹⁴⁵ It can be speculated that such cases, along with desertion attempts whilst units were e.g. temporarily based as a reserve force on the island of Lemnos, account for the handful of cases when soldiers were sentenced for their alleged desertions.

Some conclusions

Given that this remains a work in progress, it is hard to draw any conclusions at this time as we might well come across new information along the way.

It is however already clear that the story of John Coleman's alleged desertion, debated in the context of the 2nd Foresters' experiences during their first year of WWI, is part of the wider story of the obliteration of the original BEF and the pre-war Regular Army. They were fighting a war they were neither trained nor equipped for, murdering and being murdered by people with whom they had so much more in common than with those who had sent them into the frozen mud in the first place. By mid-1915, there were few left who had seen the beginning of this tragedy and before it would end, many more would end up dead or physically and psychologically mutilated.

It remains unknown whether Coleman and Harvey really did go absent without the intention to return. If they did, they took their slim chances in a courageous effort to permanently escape the combat zone, an option that was simply unavailable to Ball and Burton during their time at Gallipoli.

The cases of Ball and Burton also illustrate where the true fault lines lay, as these two Kitchener Foresters ended up in a situation where they had been failed at every level by the civilian and military authorities but were still expected to achieve the impossible. When they slipped up in performing their 'duties', military law was employed to underline the fact that despite all their 'superiors' conceptual and practical screw-ups they were expected to obey and do their 'duty', in the cases of these two men literally to the death.

Despite many officers' utter incompetence in implementing laws and procedures many of them obviously did not bother to read,¹⁴⁶ we do not dispute that Harvey, Coleman, Ball and Burton were legally found to be guilty following lawful procedures. Although happy to point them out, proving legal mistakes or 'injustices' has never been our point, given that 'justice' has never been the point of military law. Each one of these Foresters became a victim of laws which had been designed to uphold military discipline, and thus supported the social and economic system that suppressed these three people as well as their peers.

Our deliberations regarding the Kitchener Foresters did however illustrate that they were not merely passive victims. They made a decision to support the war, not only passively by not resisting it, but actively by joining the army. Many may not have done so enthusiastically, but they did it nevertheless.

On an individual level that can be understandable, given the immense social and economic pressures facing young men of fighting age. The problem is that the Kitchener Foresters were not alone in doing so, but were joined by millions on both sides of the conflict, ready to take the places of those who had already been annihilated, marking a tragic failure of working class solidarity.

¹⁴⁶ See WO81/145; e.g. pp1/8/51/59/79-80/137/303/349/358/676: The correspondence of the Judge Advocate General's office regarding courts martial proceedings in the UK exemplify the extreme incompetence of many officers sitting on courts martial. Given how many problems these people, based far away from the combat zones, had in phrasing charges, understanding their powers of sentencing, remembering to sign sentences etc., it might be assumed that the standards in trials held near the lines were considerably lower.

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- DATA DS/EXE Our analysis of data regarding death sentences and executions in the British Army, based on the data referenced as DATA TWO3 as well as data excerpted from ORA2; pp14-6/21-67.
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About the People's Histreh group:

People's Histreh

Nottingham & Notts Radical History Group



Who we are...

We are a group of people with different political backgrounds, interested in what has been called 'history from below', 'grassroots history' or 'social history'. As Nottingham and Nottinghamshire have such a long and turbulent history of socioeconomic transformation, disturbance and conflict, there is a lot to be unearthed. In fact, the most amazing, inspiring, shocking and outrageous stories leap out wherever the surface is scratched.

...and what we do...



We have been working on a number of different projects since we first got together in late 2009. Among many other subjects, such as Chartism or the local history of slavery, we have e.g. been remembering the successful fight against the Poll Tax (for instance by celebrating the 20th anniversary of the custard-pieing of local councillors).

Probably our main project so far has been working on the history of riotous Nottingham during the Industrial Revolution. There is for instance our popular guided walk *To the Castle!*, retracing the 1831 Reform Riots. The publication of the same title, along with our pamphlet *Damn his charity...* (on the remarkable events known as Nottingham's 'Great Cheese Riot'), has just been reprinted in our new paperback book *Nottingham Rising...*

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