



# 103 Foresters

## Mutinies and death sentences in the local regiment – 1914-18

Since the start of 2014, we have been working on a research project regarding those soldiers who served in the local regiment (then known as the Sherwood Foresters) and were either sentenced to death or sentenced on mutiny charges by courts martial during World War One.

We have identified 103 Foresters, two thirds convicted for their alleged involvement in mutinies, the others sentenced to death for various offences. Eight soldiers were executed by firing squad.

Over the course of the last century some of the stories of these people have been looked into, with researchers' attentions focussing on those eight who were shot at dawn by their fellow soldiers. As the respective publications are usually looking into all executions of British troops, there are significant opportunities to further investigate the lives and deaths of these eight Foresters. With regards to the thirty condemned soldiers whose sentences were later commuted, very little information has been published so far.

Research concerning those convicted for mutiny had to literally start from scratch. This is even more surprising given that one of the events in question appears to be by far the largest (recorded) mutiny in the British Army during the first three years of the war, only being surpassed in spring 1918. It appears however that only one of the numerous publications regarding the subject even mentions these events (occurring in Egypt in June 1917).

As it is safe to assume that the stories of most of these 103 Foresters will play no role in the official commemorations due to be held over the next four years, it is up to us to research, contextualise and tell their stories.

We have already published three issues in a new series of pamphlets, the first introducing and contextualising the project, the second and third looking into the first four cases of soldiers sentenced to death between February and July 1915.



Shot at Dawn memorial,  
Staffordshire

# Trying to avoid the usual clichés

Over the last year, all forms of media have been filled with tales of brave heroines and heroes, doing their bit during the ‘Great War’, pulling together in the face of despair and adversity. We have no interest in repeating these myths of a nation and an Empire coming together in a great though terrible struggle. However, we also want to make sure not to tell equally glorified tales of brave revolutionaries ending the war, yet falling ever so slightly short of actually achieving revolution.

Instead it appears striking and disturbing that, despite WWI’s unprecedented horrors, the war machines of the respective great powers just kept on going. The collapse of the Russian Empire or the mass mutinies in the French Army of 1917 mark notable (and events in Germany in winter 1918-19 very much debatable) exceptions. It seems however that the British Army was particularly successful in avoiding any serious breakdown of discipline (however many blunders lead to one bloodbath after another), at least before hostilities ended in most theatres of war in November 1918 (and even then unrest arguably proved to be quite manageable).

It is thoroughly depressing but maybe unavoidable to face up to the tragedy that this was due to the vast majority of troops giving their consent to the war, although it is crucial to state that consent and enthusiasm are very different things. As illustrated by the widespread system of live-and-let-live, many soldiers in the trenches were not quite as keen on murdering their respective ‘enemies’ as grainy images of trainloads filled with excited volunteers may suggest.<sup>1</sup> But whilst it is also apparent that consent to the war was given increasingly grudgingly, it was given nevertheless.

Therefore the cases of the 103 Foresters are rare examples of active disobedience, not at all unique, but rare. However, that makes telling their stories not less crucial, but even more so. Taking the example of the alleged mutineers sentenced at Kantara base in Egypt,<sup>2</sup> their stories are incredibly relevant. Consciously or not, these soldiers’ acts of disobedience did undermine the war effort. As such they were a rare glimpse of sanity in a world that was expressing the in-built insanity of its social and economic system in the most murderous ways yet conceived.

We will furthermore try to avoid a persistent misconception that has shaped many debates regarding military law and its enforcement in general and the executions of alleged deserters and ‘cowardly’ soldiers in particular, namely attacking the army’s actions as ‘unjust’.

Military law and its enforcement had nothing to do with ‘justice’. Instead, the ‘... object of military law is to maintain discipline among the troops ...’<sup>3</sup>, i.e. to uphold the troops’ obedience to their officers.

Therefore we decided not to follow the line taken in a number of works, notably the prominent book *Shot at Dawn*<sup>4</sup>, approaching the actions of the army as injustices that must be unveiled and corrected. This appears to be missing the point that the actions of the army during WWI were motivated by a perverted but coherent logic aiming to keep the war machine going, whatever the cost.<sup>5</sup>

Although our analytical and methodological framework for studying the cases of the 103 Foresters is still very much work in progress, a number of assumptions and ideas are already shaping our work:

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<sup>1</sup> Live-and-let-live means exactly that, a practice of, often surprisingly long-lived, unofficial truces between opposing forces. This will be discussed in detail in a future issue of our pamphlet series, given that it was also part of many Foresters’ war experience.

<sup>2</sup> Given the information available at present, the following statement is not applicable with regards to at least one of the soldiers sentenced to death, as his (commuted) death sentence was the result of a court martial apparently held following an act of (possibly sexual) violence against a French civilian.

<sup>3</sup> THE WAR OFFICE (1907): *Manual of Military Law*; London; p6.

<sup>4</sup> PUTKOWSKI, JULIAN; SYKES, JULIAN (1992): *Shot at Dawn – Executions in World War One under the Authority of the British Army Act*; Pen and Sword; Barnsley.

<sup>5</sup> Choosing such an approach will hopefully allow us to hold up two fingers to the army and the social system in which it operated on a broader basis than mere moral outrage.

## Regarding military law and its enforcement

Maintaining mass consent to four years of organised mass murder was not merely based on repression. Enforcing military law was however one important tool in a complex mix of measures utilised in order to maintain military discipline.

The ways in which discipline was enforced were shaped by Edwardian class-relations and constituted acts of top-down class struggle.

Although perceived to be a serious danger to military discipline, individual as well as collective acts of disobedience, however inspiring and courageous many may turn out to have been, were at no point a real threat to the British war machine. The chances to end the slaughter that may have occasionally existed (the Christmas/New Year truces of 1914-15, or the French Army mutinies of 1917 might arguably be described thus), were not acted upon.

## Regarding WWI in general

Although we do not agree with their conclusions, many conservative historians, politicians etc. do have a point regarding the German Empire being a particularly nasty regime, even given the standards of the time. It was a society striving to enlarge its global power and dominate Europe. Germans had systematically perpetrated the first genocide of the century against the Herero and Namaqua people, while the Kaiser's infamous 'Hun speech' (followed by brutal atrocities in China), or the long list of war crimes committed by German troops during their advance in Belgium and France (let alone on the Eastern Front) were all too real, foreshadowing some of the horrors to be committed by Germans in the following decades. Although the German soldiers of 1914 were not yet the race warriors of 1939, the foundations of German fascism had already been laid.

WWI can be seen as a total failure for (almost<sup>6</sup>) everyone involved. The ruling classes of the Allied nations failed to construct a stable post-war settlement, which in turn contributed to the near-destruction of bourgeois liberalism during the fascist onslaught of the 1930s and 1940s. The British ruling classes in particular failed in their attempt to safeguard their Empire. The working classes and the labour movement not only failed in averting the war, without their active support it would never have been possible to drag it out for more than four years. Much blame must be put to the various Social Democratic parties and unions, which, although long having abandoned any revolutionary intent, openly showed their true colours in 1914 (and in Germany collaborated with proto-fascist paramilitaries in order to smash the revolution of 1918-19). But regardless how much blame the SPD and their international counterparts deserve, WWI marked a collective failure of the working classes who readily took up arms to slaughter each other.

The words of George Bernard Shaw, commenting on the British Army in the early stages of the war, sum up the tragedy of WWI like nothing else we have yet encountered:

'No doubt the heroic remedy for this tragic misunderstanding is that both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather in their harvests in the villages and make a revolution in the towns; and though this is not at present a practicable solution, it must be frankly mentioned, because it ... is always a possibility ... when [an army's] eyes are opening to the fact that in murdering its neighbours it is biting off its nose to vex its face .... But there is no chance ... of our soldiers yielding to such an ecstasy of common sense. They have enlisted voluntarily; they are not defeated nor likely to be; their communications are intact and their meals reasonably punctual; they are as pugnacious as their officers; and in fighting Prussia they are fighting a more ... tyrannical, personally insolent, and dangerous Militarism than their own.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There were of course a number of individuals and companies who did very well out of e.g. weapons production.

<sup>7</sup> SHAW, GEORGE BERNARD: 'Common Sense about the War'; in: The New York Times (1915): *Current History - A monthly magazine - The European War - From the Beginning to March, 1915*; Volume 1.

# Tackling this project

The main focus of our research is on telling and contextualising the stories of 103 persons, putting these individuals and an account of their experiences at the centre of a gradually built up narrative.

Although this will not be possible in every case, we will always strive to establish the following information about each of the soldiers:

- full name, date and place of birth, regimental/soldier number, unit(s), etc.;
- their profession, and the names and professions of their parents (and possibly siblings);
- date when they signed up/were drafted;
- finding out whether other close family members became soldiers/casualties;
- outlining their army experiences (e.g. drawing on the history of their respective units);
- the circumstances of their respective cases and their aftermath.

Given the scale of the project, we approached this from the outset as a long term project. We plan to publish more or less extensive pamphlets on the individual cases, using the centenaries of the respective trials as deadlines by which we would like to be able to put out some information. Given that this will remain a work in progress, we will keep going back to earlier issues, changing and adding to passages, for instance as we come across new sources allowing us more insight into earlier cases.

Date	Cases*
Feb-15	1 death sentence (commuted): see Issue 2
Jul-15	3 death sentences (commuted): see Issue 3
Oct-15	1 death sentence (commuted)
Nov-15	1 death sentence (commuted)
Dec-15	1 tried and convicted for mutiny
Feb-16	2 death sentences (commuted)
Jul-16	4 death sentences (two executions)
Aug-16	2 death sentences (one execution)
Nov-16	3 death sentences (one execution)
Dec-16	2 death sentences (commuted)
Feb-17	1 death sentence (commuted)
Mar-17	1 death sentence (one execution)

Date	Cases*
Apr-17	1 death sentence (commuted)
Jun-17	64 tried and convicted for mutiny; two death sentences (unrelated cases/commuted)
Jul-17	3 death sentences (commuted)
Oct-17	3 death sentences (one execution)
Nov-17	1 death sentence (commuted)
Dec-17	1 death sentence (commuted)
Jan-18	1 death sentence (commuted)
Apr-18	1 death sentence (one execution)
May-18	2 death sentences (commuted)
Jun-18	1 death sentence (commuted)
Jul-18	1 death sentence (one execution)
Sep-18	1 death sentence (commuted)

\* total number of cases = 104 as one soldier was given two death sentences

The first three publications looking into the cases of the 103 Foresters are already available on our blog as free downloads (distribute and quote as you like – non-commercial use only!):

## ***103 FORESTERS – ISSUE 1:***

*Introducing and contextualising our research project*

## ***103 FORESTERS – ISSUE 2:***

*The First Case – W Harvey's death sentence, Western Front, February 1915*

## ***103 FORESTERS – ISSUE 3:***

*Wipers, Helles and beyond – Three Foresters' death sentences, July 1915*

Please keep an eye on our blog for upcoming pamphlets in this series as well as and other news and updates. Please contact us with comments, criticism, etc.:

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