

British Military Executions in The Great War.

Part 3

Young Soldiers

It can be hard to imagine as we see secondary school-age boys walking home from school with earphones tucked into ears that just over 100 years ago boys of the very same age were lying about their age to enlist into the Army to join the in the war that many thought would be the great adventure. But walk around any of the Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries in France and Belgium and the evidence of under-age soldiers in the stark reality of Portland stone is there to see.

In his book, *Boy Soldiers of The Great War*, Richard Van Emden estimated around 250,000 teenage boys enlisted into the Army between 1914 and 1916. However, we have to remember that in 1914 the school-leaving age was 14 and by that age many working-class lads were much more mature and hardened to the harsh realities of life than their modern-day counterparts. By age 17 many lads would have been employed in either the conditions of hard, industrialised labour or more sedate and unexciting clerical work.

During the chaotic days of recruitment in 1914 many young lads were able to enlist by lying about their age, or by being told by an over-enthusiastic recruiting sergeant to take a walk and come back age 19. The Army did not carry out any checks on age and accepted the age given by a man on enlistment, which was then recorded as his 'army age' in his enlistment details. The minimum height requirement was five feet, three inches, with a minimum chest size of 34 inches, so a well-built 16 year-old was very likely to be let through. Another issue about a person's age in 1914 is that not all people knew their actual date of birth. Even as late as the 1890s, some births went unrecorded and many people relied upon knowing their birth date from what they had been told by parents, or relatives.

However, not everyone was happy to see boy soldiers going off to fight. Many parents were horrified that their son had been taken by the Army and when parents complained and gave proof of a date of birth for their son to the army authorities attempts were made to discharge the soldier, or depending on his age, return him to the UK for other duties. One such case was that of Stanley Smith, who, when he enlisted in 3/1st Battalion the Cambridgeshire Regiment in April 1915, claimed to be 19 years and one month old. In fact, the lad was only 15. The Army agreed and he was discharged on August 1, 1916, for what was termed a misstatement of age.

Unfortunately for many young soldiers they had already paid the ultimate price for their eagerness to enlist, while for others the harsh realities of war were too much to bear and British Army discipline was ever present.

An under-age soldier accused of a capital military offence and sentenced to death could state his age in a plea of mitigation. What is not known is if any of the commuted death sentences were for under-age soldiers sentenced to death who had given their true age in mitigation. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that some under-age soldiers were executed. One such soldier was Private William Hunter of the 1st Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. His 'army age' as stated at his trial was given as 20 years and 56 days. Hunter had joined his regiment in France on 4th January 1915, just after what

the Army believed was his 19th birthday. He had already been in trouble prior to embarkation by going absent for 14 days, for which he was given 14 days Field Punishment (FP) No2. On the 6th August 1915 Hunter went missing on his way to the trenches and was absent for 3 days, for which he received 10 days FP No1. On 15th August he again went absent for 3 days before giving himself up. For this he was tried by a Field General Court Martial for desertion, but was found guilty of the lesser charge of 'absence without leave'. He was sentenced to two years' with hard labour, commuted to one year suspended. He served with his battalion for one further month before again going absent and subsequently escaping from custody on two occasions. At his trial he chose to defend himself and called no witnesses in his defence. Answering questions from the prosecuting officer Hunter made some damning statements. He stated he did not go absent to avoid duty in the trenches, but did not give himself up as he was,

“...having a good time and thought that I would stay away a bit longer. If I had not been arrested I should have still stayed absent.”

This admission may have been a deciding factor in his fate as during his absence his battalion had taken part in the Battle of Loos in which 130 men of his battalion had been killed. In a plea of mitigation Hunter stated his real age as 18 on the 27th December 1915.

The court found him guilty of all the charges and he was sentenced to death, with a strong recommendation to mercy on the grounds of 'extreme youth, service in the field and the likelihood of being a good fighting man.'

The Army appear to have accepted Hunter's true age, with Lt-Gen Sir Henry Wilson writing, 'I think that this man ought to be shot except that he is very young, only 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ last September and therefore I recommend that the sentence be commuted to 5 years penal servitude, not to be suspended.'

However, despite differing opinions in the chain of command on Hunter's sentence General Monro recommended that 'the death sentence be put into execution. The man is very young, but his Commanding Officer says he is no good as a fighting soldier.'

Hunter was shot by a firing squad from his own regiment at 06.58 on 21st February 1916 and is buried in Maroc British Cemetery, France.

Another soldier who appears to have been executed under-age was Private Herbert Morris serving in the 6th battalion of the British West Indies Regiment. He enlisted in December 1916 during a recruitment drive in the West Indies and was posted to France in April 1917, before moving to the Ypres area. On the 20th August 1917 Morris was one of sixty men warned for duty at Essex Farm with the artillery. On arrival at Essex Farm Morris was missing. He turned up the following day at a rest camp in Boulogne without rifle or equipment and was arrested. This was not Morris' first offence, having previously been punished for absence in July 1917. Morris was found guilty and shot on 20th September 1917 and is buried in Poperinge New Military Cemetery.

There was no mention of his age at his trial and had it been checked in his enlistment records it would have shown his official 'army age', but from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission register he is described as the son of William and Ophelia Morris of St Catherine, Jamaica, aged 17. As this age appears in the register it is highly likely it was the age given by his family and his true age.

The youngest soldier to be shot was James Mitchell, an 18 year old private serving in Palestine with the British West Indies Regiment. Mitchell was executed on 22nd December 1917 for murder, an offence he would also have been liable for execution for had he been a civilian.

Following the war, the War Office reviewed all executions of soldiers under 21 years of age and listed them in the *Summary of First World War Capital Courts Martial* cases. It must be remembered, however, that they based their information on the soldier's 'army age', the age stated on their enlistment documents. The War Office review shows that eight men were executed for capital military offences aged 19 years. The youngest on the list are Herbert Burden age 19 years and 3 months, and Thomas Highgate 19 years and 4 months. William Hunter (above) is noted with his 'army age' as 20 years and 56 days, but only 17 years and 9 months when he committed the offence for which he was shot.

British military executions have and always will be a very contentious and emotional issue; the execution of young soldiers none more so. The dilemma for the Army was in knowing the true age of a soldier if they chose not to disclose it and apart from Private William Hunter none appeared to do so. Two other soldiers who have had questions raised about their age and featured prominently in the pardons campaign are Private Joseph Byers of the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers and reportedly only 17 at the time of his execution for desertion on 6th February 1915 and Herbert Burden (above) of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers, also 17 and shot for desertion on 21st July 1915. In both cases there is strong evidence to support the notion that both men have had their identities and service records mistaken with other soldiers of the same or similar names.

Another young soldier who does not appear on the list is James Crozier of the 9th Royal Irish Rifles; reportedly only 17 on enlistment in 1914, but giving a higher age in order to join. Tried for desertion he was executed on 27th February 1916 and is buried in Sucrerie Military Cemetery, Colincamps, France. His namesake, Brig-Gen Frank Crozier provided an epitaph in his memoirs for Private James Crozier.

'He was no rotter deserving to die like that. He was merely fragile. He had volunteered to fight for his country...at the dictates of his own young heart. He failed. And for that failure he was condemned to die – and he did at the hands of his friends, his brothers, with the approval of his church and to us what was he? He was poor Crozier. And we never made up our minds for whom we were sorrier – him, or ourselves. Such is war.'

Jeff Clare