

British Military Executions in The Great War.

Part 4

Officers

The enduring myth of British Officers during the Great War is one of Class distinction, detachment and incompetence. Myths perpetuated, amongst others, by Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, published in 1961 and Blackadder's Lieutenant George, the bungling subaltern and General Sir Anthony Cecil Hogmanay Melchett VC. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Around 78 generals were killed or died as a result of active service during the Great War, thereby dispelling the notion they were miles behind the front sipping claret in comfortable chateaus. As for junior officers they suffered the same privations as their men, although admittedly with some extra privileges that rank permits.

The underlying ethos of the officer corps, which underpinned their training, was paternalism, which stressed the need for officers to exercise patriarchal care for the men under their command. It was a sound principle of leadership which ensured that the morale of the British Army remained essentially stable during 1914-18.

Undoubtedly, the pre-war regular Army was largely made up of middle-class officers, but by the end of 1915 junior officer positions were increasingly being filled by 'rankers'; middle-class privates and NCOs with battlefield experience and an understanding of the importance of the paternalistic leadership principle filling the vacancies left by officer casualties. It was an important quality that sustained the BEF during four years of gruelling, attritional fighting on the Western Front.

Despite the quality of officer training and their effectiveness at maintaining morale and discipline the junior officers, Lieutenants and Captains, leading their men during periods of activity away from the trenches and during trench tours were also subject to the same pressures and stresses as their men.

As with the 'other ranks' alcohol played a part in helping to escape the sights and experiences they endured. *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire of the Great War*, published by the War Office in 1922 states that from 1914-20, 1,856 officers were court martialled for drunkenness; accounting for 30 percent of officer courts martial. 1,158 of those were against officers serving abroad. Christopher Stone, a Captain in the RFA, claimed in his experience 50 per cent of officers couldn't keep going without alcohol of some sort. If R C Sherrif's semi-autobiographical account of life on the front-line, *Journey's End*, is anything to judge by then alcohol was a supportive crutch for many officers.

During the years 1914-20, 2,702 officers serving overseas were court martialled for a variety of offences including:

- 18 - Desertion
- 390 - Absence
- 10 - Striking or violence
- 101 - Disobedience
- 19 - Quitting post

- 8 - Self-inflicted wound
- 55 - Scandalous conduct

Sentences awarded ranged from the following:

- 3 - Death penalty
- 19 – Imprisonment with hard labour (6-24 months)
- 8 – Imprisonment (6-24 months)
- 149 – Cashiered
- 597 - Dismissed

2nd Lieutenant Eric Skeffington Poole

The first British officer to be executed was 2nd Lieutenant Eric Skeffington Poole of the 14th (Service) Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment, in December 1916.

Eric Skeffington Poole was born in Nova Scotia in 1885. He had served in the 63rd Regiment Halifax Rifles, Canadian Militia as a Lieutenant for two years and was for a time attached to the Royal Canadian Regiment. His father was a mining engineer and by 1914 the family had moved to the UK and were living in Guildford, Essex, possibly because of his father's work.

At the outbreak of war Poole applied for a commission in the regular army and on 17th August 1914 he was approved for a temporary commission.



Lt Eric S Poole

On the 5th October 1916 Poole's battalion relieved another unit in the trenches at Flers on the Somme. Although Poole was present when the orders were issued by the time his platoon reached their allocated trench line he had gone missing.

On the 7th October Lance Corporal Homewood of the Military Foot Police approached Poole near water tanks on the Millencourt-Albert road and detained him. Lieutenant Cooper, the Quartermaster of the 11th West Yorks, was sent to return him to his unit.

On the 10th October Poole's Commanding Officer ordered a court of inquiry to be convened to determine the circumstances of his absence. A charge sheet was drawn up stating:

The accused, 2nd Lt. E.S. Poole, 11th West Yorkshire Regiment, an officer of the Regular Forces, is charged with, 'when on active service deserting his Majesty's Service' in that he near Martinpuich on 5th October 1916 absented himself from the neighbourhood of the

front line trenches and remained so absent until apprehended at Henecourt Wood by the Military Police on 7th October 1916 with intent to avoid duty in the said trenches.

The findings of the court of inquiry were sent to Brigadier General Lambert, GOC 69th Brigade. Lambert wrote:

I do not think it will be satisfactory to try this officer by Court martial. He was once before, on 7th July after the action at Horseshoe Trench on 5th July, admitted to hospital suffering from shell-shock and I doubt if he is really accountable for his actions.

Poole was later examined by an RAMC Lieutenant Colonel who noted:

I...find that he is in a good state of health, but he is of a high-strung, neurotic temperament, and I am of the opinion that it is possible that excitement...would make him not responsible for his actions at that time.

On the 25th October, on the orders of Second Army commander General Plumer, Poole was charged with desertion and to be tried by Court Martial.

2nd Lieutenant M Dawson of the 69th machine Gun Company was assigned to act as 'prisoner's friend' to defend Poole. He requested a medical board be convened to assess Poole's mental state, but this was denied on the grounds that it could not comment on Poole's state of mind when he deserted and its findings would not be admissible as evidence. Dawson was, however, free to call upon medical evidence in his defence.

Poole's trial by General Court Martial opened at Poperinge on 24th November 1916. Poole's CO repeated in evidence that Poole had been admitted to hospital previously with shell-shock. Lt Cooper who had collected Poole from the Military Police stated:

"He seemed to me to be in a very dazed condition and from conversation with him I came to the conclusion that he was not responsible for his actions. He was very confused indeed"

Poole gave evidence in his own defence and confirmed he had been in hospital previously with shell-shock and at times became confused.

Captain Riddell, the Medical Officer of the 11th West Yorks stated he had known Poole since May 1916 and:

"In times of stress or while under shell-fire the accused's mental condition is such he...might become so mentally confused that he would not be responsible for his actions."

At this stage of the war shell-shock was not a defence and the only defence was whether a soldier was capable of telling the difference between right and wrong. If Poole could he would be guilty of the charge.

In the summing up the Judge Advocate, 2nd Lt. Dowson stated the material facts of the case had not been challenged by the defence and the intention to desert had been proven.

The court found 2nd Lt Poole guilty of desertion and he was sentenced to death.

The court papers were sent up the chain of command for comments. Poole's CO, the Divisional Commander and the 69th Brigade Commander all recommended leniency in view of Poole's mental state and previous hospital admission for shell-shock. GOC Second Army, General Plumer disagreed noting:

Despite the evidence as to the accused's mental condition...I recommend that the sentence be carried out...in view of the seriousness of the offence when committed by an officer.

Before sentence was confirmed a Medical Board was convened to establish Poole's state of mind and if he was capable of understanding the nature of his actions. Despite his medical record of hospital admission followed by convalescence and a previous recommendation that he was unfit for duty, the Board reported that he was of sound mind and capable of understanding and appreciating his actions.

On the 6th December 1916 Field Marshall Haig confirmed the sentence and wrote:

This is the first sentence of death on an officer to be put into execution since I became C-in-C. Such a crime is more serious in the case of an officer than a man, and also it is highly important that all ranks should realise that the law is the same for an officer as a private.

The Adjutant General wrote to Second Army stating:

It should be noted under the Army Act an officer does not cease to be an officer by reason of sentence of death being promulgated. 2nd Lt Poole should not therefore be deprived of his badges of rank before the sentence is carried out.

2nd Lt Poole was executed at Poperinge at 7.25am on 10th December 1916 and is buried in Poperinge New Military Cemetery.

Sub-Lieutenant Edwin Dyett

Sub-Lt Edwin Dyett's father was a Merchant Navy captain, which no doubt influenced Edwin in his choice of service as he volunteered to join the Royal Navy and was commissioned in 1915. His mother was from Rock Ferry.



Sub-Lt Edwin Dyett

The Royal Naval Division was formed in 1914 for the defence of Antwerp before being transferred to the Dardanelles for the Gallipoli campaign. Following the evacuation from Gallipoli the RN Division was recalled to the Western Front and integrated into the Army command where it was refitted and retrained for operations in France.

In November 1916 The RN Division was selected to take part in the Battle of the Ancre as part of the wider Battle of the Somme. They attacked on the 13th November on a 1,200 yard front and whilst the assault battalions reached the first line of German trenches the attack broke down with many of the RN Division becoming casualties from German shell-fire.

Dyett was not involved in the initial assault, having been left in reserve to replace officer casualties as required. Later that same morning as news of the attack filtered back to Brigade HQ Dyett and a fellow officer, Lieutenant Truscott were ordered to HQ to receive orders. After receiving orders to make their way forward to where their battalion was last known to be the two officers arrived at the ruins of Beaucourt Station, where they found a Lieutenant Herring and a group of men. At this point Dyett and Herring began arguing, apparently over the chaos of the situation, with Dyett saying he was going to return and report the situation to Brigade HQ. Meanwhile, Truscott took control of the men and made his way forward. Nothing more was seen of Dyett until the brigade came out of the line on 15th November, when Brig-Gen Philips, on information received, sent for him to explain his behaviour. Following his 'unsatisfactory explanation' he was placed under arrest and charged with:

While on active service deserting his Majesty's service in that he in the field on 13th November 1916 when it was his duty to join his battalion, which was engaged in operations against the enemy, did not do so and remained absent from his battalion until his arrest in Englebelmer on 15th November 1916.'

The court martial was set for 26th December 1916 at a farmhouse in the village of Champneuf. The evidence against Dyett was compelling; with none of the officers or NCOs involved in the attack on the 13th able to say they had seen Dyett at the front. Petty Officer Ames stated he had seen Dyett at Beaucourt Station:

"As though he wanted to get out of it."

Dyett's defence called no witnesses and Dyett himself did not give any evidence on his own behalf. Dyett's defending officer was Sub-Lt Cecil Trevanion, a pre-war solicitor. He stated that Dyett was of a highly neurotic temperament and had submitted four previous requests to transfer to naval service. Dyett's company commander was also quoted as stating

"His nerves prevented him from taking an active part in the advance."

Dyett was found guilty of the charge of desertion and sentenced to death, but with a recommendation for mercy on account of his age, 21. His divisional commander Maj-Gen Shute also recommended mercy pointing out his youth and inexperience. However, Hubert Gough, commanding Fifth Army, noted on the record:

'I recommend that the sentence be carried out. If a private had behaved as he did in such circumstances, it is highly probable that he would have been shot.'

The sentence was confirmed on 2nd January by Field Marshall Haig.

Sub-Lt Dyett was shot at 7.30am on 5th January 1917 at St Firmin by members of his own battalion and is buried in Le Crotoy communal cemetery, France.

During the five days of the Battle of the Ancre the RN Division lost 260 officers and 3,000 men, killed, wounded or missing.

2nd Lieutenant John Paterson

Second Lieutenant John Paterson of the 1st Battalion the Essex Regiment was sentenced to death for the murder of a military policeman attempting to arrest him.



2nd Lt John Paterson

Paterson went missing from his unit on the 26th March 1918 when his battalion was stationed at Zillbeke near Ypres. Initially it was thought he was missing or had been killed during the German Spring offensive of that year and his wife was sent a telegram to that effect. However, it later became evident that he had gone absent from his unit.

On the 3rd July 1918 Paterson was spotted in the company of women by two Military Policemen near Calais. He was questioned by the two MPs who stated they believed him to be an absent British officer, which he admitted to. Paterson asked one of the MPs, Sergeant Collinson, if before going into custody, he could spend half an hour with his lady friend in order to have tea with, which, curiously Collinson agreed to.

Both Sergeant Collinson and his colleague, Lance-Corporal Stockton, kept watch outside the house; the time was around 7.20pm. At around 9.30pm Paterson came out of the house and called Sergeant Collinson over and spoke to him. Collinson in turn called Stockton over, but as he was approaching the house a shot rang out and Collinson was seen to fall. Stockton then claimed that Paterson aimed a shot at him, but missed. Stockton ran for help, but on returning Paterson had fled.

Paterson was eventually arrested on the 22nd of July in St Omer by local police acting on a tip-off. At his court martial Paterson stated in his defence he only wanted to frighten off the two MPs and had no intention of killing Collinson. Unsurprisingly he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

He was executed on 24th September 1918 and is buried in Terlincthun British Military Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France. Sergeant Collinson is buried at les Baraques Military Cemetery, Calais.