



St Catherine's Chronicle

Sound Architect Creative Media and St Catherine's College Eastbourne

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CRIME & PUNISHMENT in the First World War

Susanne Crosby Project Manager, Sound Architect Creative Media

During the First World War, maintaining discipline within the various armies was a subject of debate, concern and controversy. How best to deal with those men who broke, or were perceived to have broken, military laws and expectations would see some soldiers being sentenced to death.

Students from St Catherine's College in Eastbourne and volunteers researched into this emotive and still controversial time thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant.

To understand life in the Armed Forces during the First World War it was important to also understand the time: culture, class; life. They explored an era with different attitudes towards discipline and punishment. Awareness of mental ill health was very poor at the start of the War years, but soldiers suffering from 'shell shock' eventually led to the discovery of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: PTSD, as we know it today. They undertook specific research of those men who were sentenced for cowardice and desertion, with new consideration of some of the causes.

This project is about the importance of honouring the memories of the brave men who were fighting in a terrible war in horrible conditions: all of them.

Examples of Crimes and Punishments taken from the Army Act 1881

Crimes	Punishments
Desertion, including persuading others to desert	Death
Surrender to the enemy	Death
Assisting the enemy, even as a prisoner of War	Death
Cowardice	Death
Leaves post to go in search of plunder	Death
Leave his post without orders	Death
Striking a superior officer	Death
Leave ranks without orders	Penal servitude
Destroys property without orders	Penal servitude
Taken prisoner due to disobeying orders	Penal servitude
Drunkenness	Officers: fine, Soldiers: imprisonment
Absence without leave	Officers: fine, Soldiers: imprisonment
Neglects to obey orders	Officers: fine, Soldiers: imprisonment
Soldiers behaviour "disgraceful conduct"	Imprisonment



THE DEATH PENALTY

The British Commonwealth Military Command executed 346 of their own men. Those shot brought shame to their Country.

346

The 346 were executed for a variety of different things – the vast majority: 266, over three quarters, were executed for desertion, with a further 18 executed for cowardice. "If they ran away from German guns, they would be shot by British ones."

306

Men were pardoned in 2006 due to significant pressure from the "Shot At Dawn Campaign". The remaining 40 were those executed for mutiny or murder, who would have been executed even under civilian law. However, in 2016, the 3 executed for mutiny, which amounted to little more than a misdemeanour, were pardoned as well.

309

Men have been pardoned in total

left: At "In Flanders Fields" Museum in Ypres, Belgium; this is a replica of the statue designed by Andy DeComyn in the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, completed in 2001 to commemorate those executed in the First World War. It is said to be based on Private Herbert Burden, 17, who lied about his age to enlist.



Discipline in the Army

The maintenance of discipline in the Army has always been considered a very serious affair. Behaviour and treatment of the British Army during the First World War is from the Army Act of 1881.

Crimes included everything from matters of individual presentation such as being unshaven, untidy, losing kit, not saluting, addressing a superior officer incorrectly, dirty or incorrect equipment or being late on parade or after curfew; to serious matters such as desertion or cowardice.

The crimes would be detected and dealt with by the NCO's and officers of a man's own unit. By Brandon

Above: Students between the guns at the Imperial War Museum, with teachers Mrs Clifton and Mr Millen

To Whom it May Concern,

I do not support the decision not to grant pardons to the soldiers of the First World War who were shot at dawn.

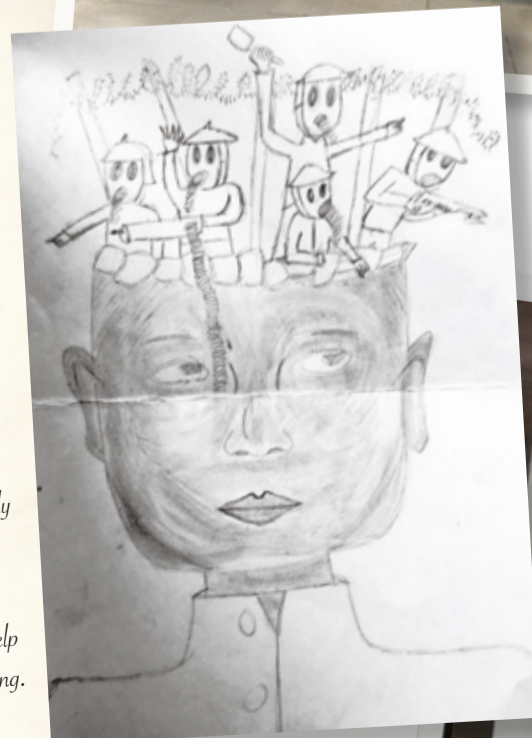
These men signed up for war, went to war and had to suffer the sights of people dying. Soldiers went through shell shock because of the way they had to live, with killing people, learning not to care, they had to be manly and not have the mental and physical support they need. Some of the men weren't even old enough to fight or be in the war.

The soldiers should not have been executed because they can't handle war, they needed to get away because of their health. It's a natural human instinct to run away and get away from what scares you. Running away from horrors is not weak.

Even though they fled, they provided great service to Britain as a soldier and fought courageously. Not all men are strong. But that shouldn't matter as they still tried their hardest. They were willing to give their lives in order to save ours, therefore, they greatly deserve to be remembered and honoured, just as any other soldier is.

I'm sure you can strongly agree that war is awful. They shouldn't suffer. Most were inexperienced and some were under age. They should have been allowed to get medical help without being executed. They should get their pardon, for seeing war, fighting and suffering.

By Sophie and Charlotte - imagining being part of the "Shot at Dawn" Campaign



FLANDERS

80 students and 10 adults went to Flanders in March 2018 for the Battlefield Tour. Father James held a service at Poelcapelle Cemetery which was very moving, and really helped us understand the human cost of war. We visited the Menin Gate and the "In Flanders Fields" Museum in Ypres where we researched more into life in the Armed Forces, including the men 'shot at dawn'. The visit to Caterpillar Crater and the Trenches brought everything home to us all.



'I felt quite surprised that children as young as 14 were shot for running away, when they were too young to be in the War in the first place'

Student



On Haig: 'He didn't understand how much people were getting mentally unstable because of what they saw'

Student

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

We visited the Imperial War Museum in January 2018, concentrating particularly on the First World War exhibition including the replica trench with sights and sounds of War. Various different aspects of it appealed to and enthralled different students and volunteers. The letter from the 9 year old boy to the King asking to volunteer to fight is always a draw and so poignant. The posters, the photos, models and film clips all start to make something that was so long ago very real. The students also had a go at making their own journalist type film, set up by the Imperial War museum with special equipment.



NEWHAVEN FORT

Newhaven Fort have a special exhibition on the First World War, including a model trench system; uniforms and equipment; and an extensive array of weaponry used in the War. This was open to all students and volunteers in the project.



COMMEMORATION OF THE CENTENARY AT WESTMINSTER ABBEY

A small group of volunteers went to London on 11th November 2018 for the Commemoration of the Centenary. Two volunteers had the huge privilege of attending the Service of Commemoration at Westminster Abbey, in the presence of Her Majesty The Queen. They afterwards visited the fires at the Tower of London.



'War has got quite a distorted image because of games and films and things like that.'

Student

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The Peace Pledge Union

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