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306 reprieved after 90 years

Group wins pardon of British soldiers executed as deserters in World War I

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LONDON - "I cannot stand it."

With those words, Pvt. Harry Farr refused to return to the trenches in 1916, and sealed his fate: to be executed as a deserter.

Ninety years later, the British government is preparing to pardon Farr and 305 other men who were hauled before firing squads in World War I for desertion or cowardice after summary trials.

Britain is formally acknowledging that many of the men suffered shell shock from the horrors of trench warfare and the relentless roar of artillery.

"The circumstances were terrible, and I believe it is better to acknowledge that injustices were clearly done in some cases, even if we cannot say which, and to acknowledge that all these men were victims of war," Defense Secretary Des Browne said.

John Hipkin, a retired teacher who founded the pressure group Shot at Dawn, said the government relented in the face of three lawsuits brought by families.

"The government does not like the idea of a third court case. They have realized that every time we have one, there has been massive publicity all over the UK, and they do not like it," Hipkin said.

The pardon proposal must be endorsed by Parliament, but given the government's backing that seems likely.

"All the courts-martial were flawed," said Andrew Mackinlay, a lawmaker who has campaigned for pardons.

Records demonstrate that punishment came swiftly. In one case, a soldier was tried and executed on the same day. Farr, of the West Yorkshire Regiment, was executed within a month.

Sgt. Maj. H. Haking testified that he had ordered Farr to return to duty, but later encountered him warming himself at a brazier. Haking said he asked Farr why he was there and was told, "I cannot stand it."

Another officer said Farr complained that he couldn't bear the noise of the artillery. "He was trembling and did not appear in a fit state."

Farr's widow, Gertrude, was informed of his execution but kept it secret. Her daughter, Gertrude Harris, 93, has said she was 40 when a relative spilled the truth.

Harris' daughter, Janet Booth, said she first heard the story 20 years ago, when she told her mother she hoped to visit Farr's grave.

"She turned around and said, 'He hasn't got a grave because he was shot for cowardice,'" Booth said Wednesday.

The Ministry of Defense said the executed men included 23 Canadians, three from New Zealand, two from the West Indies, a civilian laborer from Sierra Leone, two men from Ghana (then known as the Gold Coast) and one from Nigeria.

Among them was Pvt. Herbert Morris, 17, a Jamaican who served in the 6th British West Indies Regiment.

"I am troubled with my head and cannot stand the sound of guns," he said at his trial for deserting at Ypres, Belgium, in August 1917.

John McGeehan, who works with Shot at Dawn, said he was "elated and relieved" by the proposed pardon for his relative, Bernard, who was executed Nov. 2, 1916.

The Londonderry man was a groom in the King's Liverpool Regiment ("The Liverpool Irish"), who was drafted into the trenches after the disastrous first day of the Battle of the Somme, John McGeehan said.

After two months, "he finally cracked," McGeehan said. His commanding officer described Bernard as a man of "weak intellect and is worthless as a soldier."

Sam Starrett turned McGeehan's story into a play, *The Worthless Soldier*, which has been staged in Londonderry and Belfast in Northern Ireland and Dublin, Ireland.

"The trial, we figure, lasted no more than 20 minutes," Starrett said.

"I am quite sure the government is doing what the nation wants," said the Rev. Barry Simmons, who led an unsuccessful campaign six years ago to add the name of Pvt. Thomas Highgate to a memorial in Shoreham, southeast of London.

Highgate, 18, was the first British soldier in the war to be shot for desertion, on Sept. 8, 1914. He had become separated from his unit but said he was trying to rejoin it when he was detained.

Six years ago, when the local council considered renovating the monument, Simmons organized an unofficial referendum in the village, and 78 percent of the voters favored including Highgate, he said. The council, however, left Highgate off.

"These men weren't villains running away from battles as cowards, they were under tremendous pressure, and this is what we are realizing," Simmons said.

In 1993, then-Prime Minister John Major ruled out pardons, saying, "We cannot rewrite history by substituting our latter-day judgment for that of contemporaries."

In a debate in the House of Lords in June, Lord Dubs said he appreciated that attitudes had changed since the early 20th century.

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