

SHOT AT DAWN WW1

Among the list of offences warranting the death penalty was - desertion.

Execution of deserters was intended both as a punishment and a deterrent to others.

Thomas James Highgate was the first British soldier to be executed for desertion (cowardice). This punishment also existed for other countries. Canada Belgium etc.

Thomas was caught, tried and shot "as publicly as possible" within 48 hours in the first few weeks of the war. The 19 year olds grave is unknown and his name does not appear on the war memorial of his birthplace (Sidcup).

On the 6th September 1914 Highgate falls out to "ease himself" (go to the toilet). That was his desertion, later the same day, and almost before he was officially reported missing, he was found in the grounds of a nearby Chateau, he was dressed in civilian clothing.

Within hours his court martial convened, heard he had confessed to a gamekeeper "I have had enough of it, I want to get out and this is how I am going to do it". He defended himself by saying he had intended to re-join his unit. He could not explain why he had taken his uniform off, saying his memory was unclear. None the less he was found guilty and shot just after 07.00 hours on the 8th September, in front of soldiers from 2 other units.

There was much controversy, both then and now, and debate about these shootings as P.T.S.D or shell shock was largely misunderstood.

Highgate joined the army in 1913, and had a poor military record, including previous absences! A medical report weeks before the war began found he suffered from confusion and memory lapses. Possibly related to having yellow fever while serving on a ship.

Two of his brothers died in the war but are included on a memorial in Sidcup.

The last soldiers executed were; privates Louis Harris and Ernest Jackson on 07.11.1918, less than one week from the armistice.

On the 18th June 2006 all men shot at dawn received a blanket pardon from the Ministry of Defence.

At the National Arboretum there is now a Shot at Dawn sculpture commemorating the 309 soldiers shot for cowardice, desertion, striking a senior officer, disobeying a lawful order, casting away arms or sleeping at post in WW1. (23 Canadian, 22 Irish and 5 New Zealanders are included in this total. The remainder were British.

The statue by Andy De Comyns is modelled on Private Herbert Burden, of the 1st battalion Northumberland Fusiliers. He was shot at Ypres in 1915, he was aged just 17!!

He stands in front of 306 posts, bearing the names of the executed men. Opposite are planted six fir trees, representing the firing squad. The posts are arranged to represent a Greek theatre emphasising the tragedy of war.