



WW1 CENTENARY

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Soldier shot at dawn

This week, **RICHARD AULT** tells the story of Private George Everill, from Shelton, who was shot and killed by a firing squad of British soldiers after being convicted following a court martial of desertion

As the dawn light crept into his cramped cell, Private George Everill knew his time had run out. George had spent a sleepless night in the uncomfortable cell at Poperinghe Town Hall, trying to resolve himself to what was about to happen – yet at the same time praying for a last minute reprieve he knew would not come. An Army chaplain had shared his vigil through the night, and the religious instruction that had been imparted had given George some comfort. During those long hours of darkness, George had plenty of time to think back on his life – and the events that had brought him to that cramped cell. He thought about his wife, Lilly, at the home they had made at Trinity Passage, in Hanley, and of his mother Elizabeth, waiting for news of her son at George's childhood

home in Mount Pleasant, Shelton. Then came the long awaited, long dreaded, tramp of boots in the corridor outside his cell, the rattle of keys being jingled in the lock. The door was thrown open and George was met by a grim faced officer, ready to escort him to the courtyard outside, where an execution post and the 12 men who made up the firing squad waited. George stared at the man who would lead him to his death, holding the officer's gaze. He allowed the guards to take him outside, blinking into the light. The courtyard was deathly silent. The senior officer who had sentenced George to death just a day or two earlier presided over the grim ceremony. George was led to the thick wooden post which dominated the courtyard. His hands were bound behind his back as he was secured to the post. A medical officer walked over to him and pinned a white square of paper over his heart. He also went to secure a blindfold around his eyes, but George may have refused it – many did, instead preferring to stare directly at death, into the eyes of the men ordered to be his executors. The firing squad took up position, reluctant to carry out the duty they must perform, the execution of a

comrade, a man who, under other circumstances, could have been stood shoulder to shoulder with them on the battlefield. But George had been accused and found guilty of desertion. With an unenviable military record of dereliction of duty and insubordination, he was sentenced to death. That sentence, passed during a court martial at Poperinghe Town Hall, where he had then been jailed, had been confirmed by the commander in chief of the British Army, Field Marshall Douglas Haig. From that moment, George knew he had no hope left. He thought again of his mother and of Lilly, his wife. He thought of the tears they would shed when they were informed of his death. He wondered how they would cope with the manner of his death – or if they would even be told how he truly died. The charges against him, that he had deserted from his battalion, were read out once more, echoing around the courtyard. Gazing up, George took one last look at the sky above, before focusing his gaze on the firing squad ahead of him, now all lining up their rifles and aiming at his heart. The atmosphere was tense. None of the men in the firing squad wanted to be there. Most were

wounded soldiers recovering behind the lines, but who were still capable of firing a rifle and were forced to carry out the duty. The officer in charge of the firing squad tried to hide his nerves – there was a very real chance that the men could refuse to carry out such a macabre task. But in an instant it was all over. The last sound George heard was a shouted 'fire' and the retort of 12 rifles, all sounding at once, possibly some deliberately fired wide, but enough smashing through the white paper covering George's heart to kill him instantly. The sound, loud and shocking in the still morning, reverberated around the courtyard. Everyone who watched stood still, waiting for a cry or a groan which would signal the condemned man still lived. In that case, the officer in charge of the firing part would be forced to finish it with a revolver bullet to the head. But George, slumped against the rope which bound him still to the execution post, made no sound. The medical officer walked to the post and checked for signs of life. There were none. It was over, another brave man of the North Staffordshire Regiment had been killed – but unlike his fallen comrades, George had been killed by his own side.



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for disobeying orders

dishonourable discharge on April 28, 1905, for 'having made a misstatement as to age on enlistment'. George had claimed to be 18, when, in fact, he was only 15. So George returned home. He found work at an ironworks and married his wife Lilly, moving out of his parents house in Shelton to live with her in Trinity Passage, Hanley. But George was not done with the Army. Twenty days after war was declared on August 4, 1914, George returned to the Colours, admitting he had previously been kicked out of the Army for lying about his age. He joined the 1st Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment, and after training, arrived in France on May 1, 1915. But, just as he had as a young teenager, George found it difficult to take orders and adapt to the discipline of military life. George survived the Battle of Loos in 1915 and drudged dutifully through France with the battalion in often appalling conditions. But as he gained in experience, he began to question orders handed down by his superior officers, and worse, to willfully disobey. In March, 1916, he was hauled before a court martial to answer a charge of using 'insubordinate language to a superior officer'. He was sentenced to 12 months of hard labour in prison, but this sentence was suspended.



POIGNANT: The Shot at Dawn memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum, and below, Private George Everill's grave, at Poperinghe New Military Cemetery.

Within weeks he was back before the military court, this time for 'willful defiance'. A 10 year prison sentence was reduced to two years, but, in fact, George probably only served nine months. On his release, he returned to his regiment. But his time behind bars hadn't improved his attitude towards the officer class. On March 8, 1917, he was sentenced to 12 months in prison for being absent, but this was commuted to 90 days of Field Punishment Number One – which was where prisoners would be tied to a fixed object like a gun wheel for up to two hours a day. Three months later he threatened an officer and was sentenced to three years penal servitude, which was changed to another 90 days of field punishment. On July 29, 1917, he received yet another spell of field punishment for 'willful disobedience'. He was in the guard tent at Dickebusch, three miles south west of Ypres, when his battalion was warned to be ready to move to the front line, on August 24, 1917. The guard and the prisoners were also warned and fell in behind A Company. But by then he'd had enough of the Army, of the slaughter and of taking orders. When A Company set off for the front, the prisoners restored to the ranks, George did not go with them. He slipped away from his platoon, leaving behind his rifle and equipment. He was found just after midnight on August 25 at Reningelst, three miles south east of Poperinghe. He escaped again from the guard room he was taken to, but was finally arrested and detained on the Reningelst to Abele Road, heading in the direction towards the English Channel. He was hauled back before a military court at Poperinghe Town Hall. His trial was held on

September 3, 1917, at the town hall. He was granted legal counsel, but by now the Army top brass had finished with Private George Everill. Because of his poor record, he was sentenced to death. At 6am on Friday, September 14, 1917, George was led out of his cell, tied to the execution post in the courtyard at Poperinghe Town Hall, and shot. Officially, he was listed as being 30-years-old. But that information seems to have been taken from his original military service when he lied about his age. In fact, he was aged 27. He was listed as 'killed in action', a description which seems to have been believed by his mother Elizabeth Everill and his wife Lilly, who later moved from Trinity Passage to live at Southampton Street, Hanley. The inscription, 'They will be done. From his loving wife and children', was carved into his headstone. George was not a coward. Yet he had been branded as such by the very Army he had left his home and family back in Hanley and Shelton to join. As well as the Battle of Loos, he had been with regiment – despite his frequent brushes with authority – at the Battle of Delville Wood and the Battle of Guillemont, during the Somme Offensive, as well as during a gas attack by the enemy at Wulverghem. But like thousands of others, he had reached his breaking point. 'shell shock' wasn't a condition that was officially recognised by the Army in 1917 – and it would be years before the phrase 'post traumatic stress syndrome' would be used to describe soldiers suffering the effects of combat like George. But it wasn't until 2006 that the Ministry of Defence recognised the grave injustice which had been done to George and hundreds of others





DID YOU KNOW?

Firing squads were made up of at least six soldiers, but more commonly 12. One of the men in the party would be given a fake bullet, so that no-one in the firing squad could be sure that they had fired one of the bullets which killed the condemned man.

IN NUMBERS:

343

The total number of men executed during the First World War for a variety of crimes, but the majority (306) for cowardice or desertion. Only nine were conscripted men, the rest were volunteers.

35

How many men in the British Army were executed for murder.

4

The number of men who were put to death for striking a senior officer.