

'We were in the trenches', Private Abe Bevistein wrote to his mother in March 1916. 'I was so cold I went out and took shelter in a farmhouse. They took me to prison so I will have to go in front of the court. I will try my best to get out of it, so don't worry.'

A few days later, a court martial found Bevistein guilty of desertion. He was executed on 20 March, at the age of sixteen.

Bevistein suffered from shell shock, what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The condition was common in the Great War, due primarily to the peculiar conditions of that conflict. Soldiers are at their emotional best when marching or attacking, and most vulnerable when stuck in a trench. It was the relentless monotony of stalemate -- punctuated by rats, lice, mud and incessant bombardment -- that corroded the minds of these men. 'Pray you'll never know', wrote the poet Siegfried Sassoon, 'the hell where youth and laughter go.'

Understanding of the mental effects of war was rudimentary in 1916, especially so because of the unique nature of this war. Shell shock was easily confused with shirking, especially if the sufferer was an ordinary soldier and working class. It was widely accepted among the high command that the lower classes lacked moral fibre, therefore emotional maladies were blamed on the individual soldier instead of on the circumstances of this war. Greater compassion was shown towards officers, who were assumed to be incapable of disloyalty or cowardice.

A total of 306 men were executed, yet only one in ten guilty verdicts resulted in the firing squad. The 306 suffered the ultimate sanction not because of the seriousness of their 'crime', but for capricious reasons. They were chosen as examples, on the assumption that an occasional execution would knock the shell shock problem on its head -- as if men could be persuaded not to lose their minds. Time was an enemy to the forsaken; executions were carefully spaced for maximum psychological effect. 'Private Nelson is not a good fighting soldier', a senior officer wrote of one 'deserter'. 'I recommend that the sentence of death be carried out ... If [it] is commuted ... it will encourage others.' That refrain echoed through the years like the rifle shots at dawn.

Cruelty was compounded when men were forced to shoot their own comrades. Soldiers who returned from this duty were physically and emotionally sick for long afterwards. 'The men ... screamed out, begging not to be made into murderers', one officer recalled. On one occasion, a firing squad failed in its duty to kill. 'The officer in charge lost his nerve, turned to the assistant provost-marshal and said, "Do your own bloody work, I cannot."' He was then arrested.

In 2006, the British government granted a posthumous pardon to the 306. Corelli Barnett, a leading military historian, ridiculed the decision. 'Those who were shot for cowardice or desertion were', he argued, 'treated fairly, according to the standards of the time.' In fact, they were not. The military code was not designed for the dispensation of justice. It was a crude and ineffective system of discipline based on the misguided assumption that emotional trauma was a crime.

Memory is all we can offer the 306. *At the rising of the sun, we will remember them.*

Gerard DeGroot is a professor of history at the University of St Andrews and the author of *Back in Blighty*.