

# Dr. Guillotin

By Valentin de Marque

Doctor Joseph Ignace Guillotin was a man with the right idea of the time. He lived in an age of chaos and fury, when death was as common as seeing a neighbor on the street. Most of the time, however, death came at the hands of an executioner. But until the French Revolution, France had no official means of capital punishment.

Several popular methods of the time included hanging, often from street lampposts; burning at the stake, which was St. Joan of Arc's untimely demise; quartering, which is execution by tying the condemned to four wild horses and sending them galloping off in opposite directions, thus ripping the condemned into quarters; death upon the rack, which was a slow and merciless death where your body was stretched out until your organs burst; death by drowning, where the condemned was held underwater for extended periods of time; as well as death by torture. As you can see, the judicial system of France was a kind and benevolent system.

One method was used quite often – death by decapitation. Yet, at the time, this form of execution was sloppy at best. On many occasions, the executioner's ax missed the neck, and it took several strokes to do the job. Once, the executioner even had to take out his dagger and stab the victim to death instead.

Dr. Guillotin (Gee-o-TAN) decided that France should be consistent in its mean of capital punishment (the death penalty), and that the accepted means should be by decapitation. He also hoped for a machine that could supply a more efficient and merciful death. He took his plans to several architects and engineers, but note that he himself DID NOT BUILD A GUILLOTINE (Gee-o-TEEN).

However, Guillotin's machine was not quite functional. It was originally planned to deliver death with a horizontal blade, hitting the neck all at once. But Guillotin, who knew of King Louis XVI's great passion for riddles, took the plans to him for help, which is a little ironic if you know how Louis XVI died. Louis suggested that the blade come down on an angle, cutting its way into the neck at different speeds and locations. Marie Antoinette dismissed the machine as a "cumbersome scrap of flotsam that will never catch on." Who would know that these two would both soon lose their lives to this "cumbersome scrap of flotsam?"

Once the machine became accepted, it was simply known as "the machine." Yet, after its first execution, it became known as "the louison" in reference to the condemned criminal it had killed (aka Louis XVI). It wasn't until after Marie Antoinette died during the Reign of Terror that Dr. Guillotin's machine began to be called the Guillotine. It was made to rhyme with the word machine so they could use in a song during the French Revolution when Parisians made it a feminine noun by adding an "e" to the end of it. People even "prayed" to Saint Guillotine for deliverance from the aristocratic enemies during the Reign of Terror.

Until his natural death, Dr. Guillotin tried to rid his name from that dreaded machine, quite unsuccessfully. The Guillotine was used all throughout history since then, right up until the 1980s when the last public execution took place in France.