

Shot at Dawn

TASK:

Read the information about the following soldiers who were all executed. In pairs decide whether you think that they had done anything wrong and whether this was a fair punishment. Explain each decision.

Private Oliver W. Hodgetts (8662) 1st Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

The Battalion took up a defensive position in trenches facing Neuve Chapelle and came under heavy bombardment from the enemy during which 7 men were killed and 25 wounded. During the next 3 days (16th to 19th November 1914) a further 13 men were killed and 27 wounded. During this period Private Hodgetts went missing but on this occasion no action was taken against him.

On the 19th November 1914 the men of the 1st Battalion exhausted climbed out of the trenches frozen and in heavy snow fall made their way back to billets at La Gorgue, six miles away. Next day one man in four suffered with frost-bitten hands or feet and in many cases feet or toes had to be amputated.

On the 9th May 1915 just prior to the attack on Festubert, Hodgetts went missing yet again just as the Battalion prepared to go into action. On the 12th May he reported to a nearby unit and claimed he had sprained his ankle, but when he was examined by the medical officer no injury was discovered. On the 22nd May 1915 he was brought to trial where he was undefended. Hodgetts conduct sheet showed that he had been sentenced to 90 days field punishment on the 1st March 1915. His commanding officer Major George W. St. G. Grogan at the trial described Hodgetts as a worthless fighting soldier who was only intent on saving his own skin.

Corporal Frederick Ives (12295) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

Corporal Ives had only been in France just over a month when on the 15th September 1914 he went absent without permission during the fighting on the Marne. He was already on remand for an earlier offence. Ives managed to avoid capture for 9 months. He was eventually arrested on the 24th June 1915 by an officer of the Army Veterinary Corps. At the time he was wearing civilian clothes.

Private Ernest Fellows (9722) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

Private Fellows of Birmingham was a married man with children. At the start of the First World War Ernest Fellows as an ex Worcestershire Regiment soldier was on the Reserve List and as such was called up for service in September 1914. He re-joined his Regiment on the 29th September 1914.

Fellows was sent to France as part of reinforcements for the 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment early in 1915. Private Fellows was a well respected soldier in the Battalion and he had past experience.

Early in June 1915 the 3rd Battalion was holding a line of trenches from the Menin Road on the left to Sanctuary Wood on the right. After 4 days of fighting, on the 9th June 1915 the 3rd Battalion was relieved by the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles. The 3rd Battalion then moved out of the line to Busseboom just east of Poperinghe where they were billeted in bivouac and rested until the 15th June 1915. It was during this rest period that Private Fellows went missing without permission. Following an evening roll call it was discovered that he had gone absent. The Battalion had just received orders that it was to attack enemy trenches at Bellewaerde the following day.

Private John Robinson (7377) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

Private Robinson of Nechells, Birmingham was a regular soldier with 13 years previous service and had been with the 3rd Battalion since Mons in August 1914. On the 27th June 1915, Private Robinson and Private Alfred Thompson absconded together after they were told that they were to be on night duty in trenches near Hooze. The 3rd Battalion had been in action in this area since 16th June. On the 5th July 1915 both Private Robinson and Private Thompson were arrested at Abancourt while they were sitting on a train bound for Rouen.

At their court martial in a statement it said that both men were good soldiers, but that it appeared they were suffering from nervous strain at the time they went absent.

Private Alfred Thompson (7625) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

Private Thompson of Holloway Head, Birmingham was a regular soldier. He had joined the Battalion at the beginning of November 1914. On the 27th June 1915, Private Alfred Thompson and Private Robinson (see above) absconded together after they were told that they were to be on night duty in trenches near Hooze. The 3rd Battalion had been in action in this area since 16th June.

Sergeant John Thomas Wall (13216) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

Sergeant J. T. Wall of Bockleton, near Tenbury, Worcestershire had enlisted in the Worcestershire Regiment in 1912 and served on the Western Front from the beginning of the First World War. When he arrived in France with the 3rd Battalion on the 12th August 1914, his rank was that of a Lance-Corporal. He had fought with his Battalion in every engagement and was promoted to Sergeant.

In August 1917 the 3rd Battalion was in action near the Bellwarde Ridge, when Sergeant Wall went missing during the attack. This was unlike him and it could have been that he was suffering from "battle fatigue" which affected his mental state.

Private Robert Young (204232) 11th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

Private Young was already serving under a two year suspended sentence for absence and striking a superior officer, when he went missing again. This offence had been committed just two months before the end of hostilities, when Private Young found himself in action for the first time. During heavy shelling in which the dugout had been blown in, Young made his way to the rear.