

## Too Young to Go to War but Old Enough to be Executed

There is a poignant memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum near Lichfield, it remembers the 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers executed for 'cowardice and desertion' during the First World War. It is the first statue at the arboretum to get the morning sun.

The statue is of a frightened young British soldier blindfolded and tied to a stake ready to be shot by a firing squad and is surrounded by a semicircle of stakes on which are listed the names of every soldier executed in this manner. The blindfolded soldier was modelled on Herbert Burden from Catford.



Burden should never have been there – to sign up he should have been 18 but couldn't be sent abroad until 19, he was just 17 when court martialled and was one of the youngest shot. The recruiting sergeants turned a blind eye to under age recruits, they were incentivised to do so being paid by the recruit, and in any case most would not have had birth certificates to prove whether the would-be soldier was old enough.

According to the 1911 Census, Herbert Burden lived at 8 Doggett Road in Catford – almost opposite to the main entrance to Catford Bridge station, and was the child of Arthur and Charlotte Burden; his father was a cricket field groundsman who had been born in St Breward in Cornwall, his mother was from Westminster. At the time of the census, Herbert was the third oldest of the four children at Doggett Road – although two older brothers had left the family home since 1901 (when they lived next door at number

10)



From the notes of his 'trial' it is clear that he had first signed up with the Royal West Kent Regiment in 1913, aged just 15. He joined the Northumberland Fusiliers in May 1914 overstating his age by 2 years; he deserted and joined the East Surrey Regiment in November 1914 then, three weeks later, deserted again and rejoined the Northumberland Fusiliers.

All this should surely have raised questions within the army about his state of mind, if not his age, but he was sent to France in March 1915 once he reached his 'army' age of 19 and by June he was posted close to Ypres.

Herbert was warned that he would be required for a working party on 26 June 1915 which according to a transcript of the case was

*ordered to proceed to the trenches occupied by 9th Brigade near Hooge. The party was to remain there for 2 days and took their rations for that period with them. Their duty was to dig at night in the vicinity of the firing line etc. The duty was liable to the usual dangers to be met with in the vicinity of the line of trenches.*

Burden went missing and was arrested two days later amongst the Royal West Kent

Regiment lines and tried on 2 July. His defence was that “I went to see a friend of mine in the Royal West Kent Regiment ...as I heard he had lost a brother I wanted to enquire if it was true or not.”

The absences caused by switching between regiments were alluded to at the Court Martial, and Burden was described as being “of inferior physique, reported as untrustworthy” and had been sick.

His commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Clement Yatman noted at the trial that discipline in the battalion was good, thus inferring that an execution was not needed to make an example to Burden’s comrades. But despite this, the death penalty was called for and carried out on 21 July 1915. 3832 Private H. Burden was just 17 years and 121 days old when he faced the firing squad at 4:00 am.

It has been suggested that the killing may have been carried out, rather than commuted as was often the case, to frighten soldiers who were about to be “pitched into yet another futile and bloody assault on Hooze. Was Burden therefore executed in order to intimidate men who might possibly desert during the battle? If so, then his death reflects ill on the purported confidence British military commanders had in their men. If not, then it is difficult to gauge what other imperative, however justified, was served by killing the youngster.”

It is certainly difficult looking back at the case almost 100 years on, to come to a different conclusion as to what useful purpose the execution of a frightened young man of ‘inferior physique’ who had been sick would have served other than to strike fear into the older, more robust comrades in arms.

While not appearing on the memorials in Brockely & Ladywell Cemetery, he probably ought to be, he is commemorated on the Menin Gate at Ypres and at his local church in Catford – St Laurence.



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