

Part one: The truth behind the Irish soldiers shot at dawn

The Forgotten

By Stephen Walker

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Twenty-eight Irish soldiers were executed by the British Army during the First World War for desertion and disobedience. For decades, the full story of how they died remained secret. For the first time, award-winning BBC Northern Ireland journalist Stephen Walker tells their story

Outside the winter snow lined the ground. James Crozier's guards wanted him to walk the short distance to a small garden where the firing party was waiting. The young rifleman was too drunk to move, and he had to be carried out into the open space. By now he was practically unconscious. Bound with ropes, he was attached to the execution post. His battalion formed up on the open road close to the garden. Screened by a wall, they wouldn't see the execution but would hear the shots.

Crozier's namesake Frank Percy Crozier, the man who recruited him and promised his mother he'd watch out for her son, was now preparing to watch him die. Crozier later recalled how he was secured to a stake 10 yards from the firing squad. "There are hooks on the post; we always do things thoroughly in the Rifles. He is hooked on like dead meat in a butcher's shop. His eyes are bandaged - not that it really matters, for he is already blind."

Then James Crozier was shot.

"A volley rings out - a nervous volley it is true, yet a volley. Before the fatal shots are fired I had called the battalion to attention. There is a pause, I wait. I see the medical officer examining the victim. He makes a sign, the subaltern strides forward, a single shot rings out. Life is now extinct." The firing squad, made up of men from his own regiment, shot wide, so James Crozier was killed by a bullet fired by a junior officer. After the shooting, as Frank Crozier recalled, life resumed as normal. " We march back to breakfast while the men of a certain company pay the last tribute at the graveside of an unfortunate comrade. This is war."

Frank Crozier didn't want James' family to discover how he had died. He tried but failed to pass off his death as 'killed in action'. Details of the manner of Crozier's death leaked out - though the facts weren't made public at the time. Weeks later one of Frank Crozier's officers was tackled about the shooting while on leave. He was asked by a civilian about the Crozier execution, and it was suggested that it had brought shame on the battalion and on the city of Belfast.

Crozier's colleague angrily replied: "He tried and failed. He died for such as you! Isn't it time you had a shot at dying for your country?"

When James Crozier was shot he became the youngest Irish deserter to face a firing squad; but Frank Percy Crozier's career blossomed. He saw action at the Battle of the Somme and rose up the ranks to eventually become a brigadier-general. After the war his life took a number of unexpected and controversial twists. In 1919 he was promoted to general and appointed military adviser to the newly established Lithuanian army; but his new job was not a success, and within months he resigned. He then returned to Ireland and became the commander of the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary, and, as ever, controversy followed his every footstep. When he died, in 1937, the newspapers were full of details of his past exploits on the battlefield and his later days as an author and peace campaigner. His death received much national attention, in contrast with the secret demise of his namesake two decades earlier.

Lance Corporal Peter Sands Royal Irish Rifles

In his uniform, Peter Sands looked at ease, back in the familiar narrow streets close to his home in west Belfast. To the casual observer the lance-corporal looked like any other serviceman enjoying a few days' leave with his family away from the horrors of battle. However, the 26-year-old harboured a secret: he should have been with his battalion in France and was now officially listed as a deserter.

For weeks the stay-at-home soldier lived openly with his wife in their terrace house in Abyssinia Street, near the Falls Road. However, his respite in the world of domesticity would be short-lived. No one knows who informed the authorities in Belfast, but when Constable Clarke of the local Royal Irish Constabulary was told about the behaviour of Peter Sands, the lance-corporal's unsanctioned home leave came to an abrupt end.

Sands, a lance-corporal in the 1st Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, travelled legitimately back to Belfast with a comrade after being given temporary leave to return home. It was a chance for him to spend some time with his wife, Eliza-Lillie, and his daughter, Mary. The travel warrant was for four days' leave, and Sands and Sergeant Whelan were expected to return to France on March 1. On that day both men were due to board a train and begin the journey back to the front. However, when Sergeant Whelan turned up at the railway platform he was on his own and Sands was not to be seen.

It was most unusual for the lance-corporal to be missing. A regular soldier, he had some nine years' Army service and was well versed in the regulations governing home leave.

During his stay at home Sands claimed he lost his military travel papers, which would have secured his passage back to France. He said that on the day he was expected back for duty he went to a barracks in Belfast to obtain a fresh travel warrant. There he allegedly spoke to a Corporal Wright, who told him he knew nothing about him.

Sands would later tell his court martial that he left the depot empty-handed and that while he continued to stay in Belfast he wore his uniform at all times.

Over the next few months, as Sands readjusted to civilian life in Ireland, he and his former comrades lived in two very different worlds.

At the Western Front the men he had left behind took part in the battle of Neuve-Chapelle in March and two months later saw action at Aubers Ridge, where the British casualties would number 11,000.

At home in Belfast life was more comfortable for Peter Sands, though there were constant reminders of the war he had walked away from. Recruiting offices around the city were attracting hundreds of young men as the war effort became intensive. Belfast's hospitals continued to take in the injured from France, and in May the centre of the city came to a standstill as men of the 36th (Ulster) Division paraded in front of thousands of well-wishers as they set off for the front.

We do not know how all this affected Peter Sands, but the local war effort clearly inspired one public-spirited individual to turn Peter Sands in. In July, as a result of a tip-off, the police arrested him for desertion. A military escort was then organised to travel with him, and, as was customary, he was brought back to France for the court martial.

In his defence Sands recounted the story of going to the depot for a new warrant and added in mitigation: "Had I intended to desert I would have worn plain clothes, but up to that time I was arrested I always wore uniform. "

Sands was found guilty of desertion and sentenced to death. His character references were good ones. The brigadier-general commanding the 25th Infantry Brigade wrote: 'His commanding officer gives him a very good character, both in ordinary behaviour and as a fighting man.' But such kind assurances were only part of the story. The same officer wrote: 'I consider this a bad case of desertion and I recommend that the sentence be carried out.'

A series of senior officers endorsed this position, notably Douglas Haig, then commanding the First Army. He said the desertion was a bad case and recommended that the extreme penalty be carried out.

Little is known of Peter Sands' final hours. It is most likely that he was visited by a chaplain, was given a chance to write a final letter home, and possibly was offered alcohol. His military papers simply record that at dawn on September 15, 1915, he went before a firing squad at Fleurbaix, near Armentières. He was buried in the nearby churchyard, but after the war his grave could not be found, so his name was later commemorated in Cabaret-Rouge Military Cemetery at Souchez.

Private James Templeton and Private John McCracken Royal Irish Rifles

James Templeton (20), from Enfield Street in Belfast, had been an apprentice in a mill, but when war was declared he joined the Army. He enlisted in the Royal Irish Rifles 15th Battalion, also known as the North Belfast Volunteers.

A month earlier, in September 1914, John McCracken, a year younger than Templeton, also joined up.

The pair later travelled to England, arriving in France a year after joining the ranks. They had similar disciplinary records. Templeton quickly developed a reputation for going absent. Two days after Christmas Day in 1915 he disappeared and failed to turn up for a parade. A month later he missed two more parades in one day. In February 1916 he again went missing and once again missed the roll-call at another two parades.

McCracken's Army career included a series of misdemeanours, albeit minor ones. He had been absent from a parade, had once been found with dirty ammunition, and had left a working party without permission.

In February 1916 those minor crimes caught up with him, and, like his Belfast colleague, he found himself fighting for his life. The first of the men to go absent that month was Templeton. The battalion war diary records show that on February 20 the men were in a place called Beaussart, where for two days there had been heavy shelling. The attack continued at night where a succession of German barrages led to 14 casualties. That night Templeton went missing, then McCracken felt ill and was being taken to a field ambulance. He had fallen during operations and claimed to have hurt his back during a march. The medical officer couldn't find anything wrong with him, and the next day he was ordered back to the trenches, two-and-a-half miles away.

Meanwhile, Templeton was going in the opposite direction. He'd walked away from the frontline and encountered Lance-Corporal Holdsworth in a village some six miles away. The NCO was in Templeton's regiment and recognised his comrade, who by now had no rifle.

Templeton was arrested and detained overnight. By this stage McCracken was back at the frontline and on sentry duty with his platoon. At 8pm a routine check showed that another member of the battalion was missing and this time McCracken could not be found. He had left his post, but, like Templeton, he would eventually walk back to members of his own regiment.

Templeton and McCracken were charged with desertion and appeared before a court martial on February 27. Templeton's hearing was very short. In his defence all he said was that he was "sorry for what he had done". McCracken's defence was similar. He said: "I had only just come out of hospital and was not feeling fit. I am sorry for what I have done." The soldiers' contrition had no effect. Both were found guilty of desertion and sentenced to death by firing squad.

McCracken was medically examined and comments about his character were sought from his superior officers. Major W B Ewart, who commanded the 15th Battalion, wrote that although McCracken's character was 'poor' this may have been because shortly after he arrived in France his mother had died. The major added that the soldier's misdemeanours up to that time had been minor. Though he left the front line he added: "I think the man did not know the seriousness of his action." On March 19, as daylight broke across the Somme, the two men were placed before a firing squad and were shot side by side.