

HERBERT MORRIS

A Jamaican lad, shot at dawn



Herbert Morris' Grave in Belgium

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Joining up

Herbert was just a lad of 16 when he volunteered for war service. He was recruited in Jamaica for the 6th Battalion of the British West Indies Regiment (6BWIR) and, as he wished, he was sent to the trenches of Flanders where his

superiors noted in their records that he “behaved well”.

The reality of war

Some members of the 6BWIR became afraid of the guns and often showed signs of disorientation during the shelling. Eventually Herbert’s nerves gave way, and the shell-shocked youngster fled from the trenches. He went absent without leave and was reported to have stayed on the run for two days before being captured and arrested. His capture was inevitable because it was almost impossible for deserters to remain at liberty in France, and to find a way back home to England. Herbert was picked up at Boulogne and given fourteen days field punishment:

A second desertion

On 20 August, having seen seven of his comrades become casualties, Herbert absconded again, jumping from the lorry taking him to his

battery. He was arrested, once more at Boulogne, when he entered a rest camp with no ticket of leave. Morris had clear symptoms of battle fatigue or 'shell shock'. He pleaded to the court 'I am troubled with my head and cannot stand the sound of the guns. I reported to the Dr. [sic] and he gave me no medicine or anything.' The court made no attempt to adjourn the case for medical reports.

Shot at Dawn

As far as the British Army was concerned, desertion lowered the morale of the troops and punishment was harsh, especially in wartime. Herbert was court-martialled and sentenced to be shot for desertion from active service. His death sentence was confirmed by Field Marshall Douglas Haig. Herbert was paraded in front of 6BWIR as an example. In the early hours of 20 September 1917 Herbert Morris dictated a letter to Padre Horner for his parents in Jamaica, and was executed at dawn

by a firing squad that included seven West Indian and three white soldiers. He had just had his 17th birthday.

Pardon

Herbert Morris was buried in Belgium's Poperinge New Military Cemetery. Almost 90 years later, on 8 November 2006, he was pardoned along with 300 other soldiers who were executed for desertion and other offences during the First World War. Des Browne, the Defence Secretary, said, "This is not about rewriting history. I do not want to second guess decisions made by the commanders at the time. I believe it is better to acknowledge that injustices were clearly done in some cases – even if we cannot say which – and to acknowledge that all these men were victims of war." The pardon stands as recognition that he was one of many victims of the First World War and that execution was not a fate he deserved.