

3/20272, Private. Ernest Lawrence.

The sole member of the 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment to be executed during the Great War.

On 22nd November 1917, Private Ernest Lawrence, 3/20272, aged 21, faced a firing squad in the prison at Ypres, having been found guilty on three counts of desertion and awarded the death sentence.

Some six and a half months before that fateful day, on 5th May 1917, Private Lawrence absconded when he was sent back from a support line to fetch rations from a dump in the vicinity of Villers Guislains. Instead he made his way to Rouen, where he perhaps thought better of his actions and turned himself in, having fabricated a story.

He was returned to his unit, but on 8th May 1917, only three days after the first offence, he again absconded when he was sent to the front line on a working party. Again he went to Rouen, where he was arrested while trying to borrow money using a false name. He was also found to be in possession of a false paybook and movement order. Shortly after his arrest he managed to escape from his escort and could not be found. But Lawrence was nothing if not resourceful and gained employment at the Royal Flying Corps workshops at Rouen, working there for two and a half months before his true identity was uncovered, on 9th August 1917.

Private Lawrence's Field General Court Martial was held on 7th November 1917 in Ypres. If three convictions for desertion were not already enough to seal his fate, two senior officers also made damning statements against his character: Brigadier General G. W. St. G. Grogan, stated that, in his opinion, Private Lawrence's undesirable influence was likely to infect the fighting troops with whom he came into contact, and Lieutenant Colonel A. Tillett DSO MC, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Devons, submitted a statement to the effect that Private Lawrence had been a constant source of trouble in the Battalion and was of no fighting value. Inevitably, Lawrence was condemned to death by firing squad and the sentence was duly confirmed by the Commander-In-Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig.

Son of John Lawrence, of 101 Clifton Road, South Norwood, London, Private Lawrence was the only man of the 2nd Devons to be executed during WW1. No record of him exists in the 2nd Devon's War Diary; he is not mentioned in 'The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918', compiled by C. T. Atkinson; and his name does not appear in the 'Soldiers Died in the Great War' database. It is as if his very existence was expunged from the records following his execution, but however much the authorities might have wished it to be otherwise, Private Lawrence was a soldier who served with the Battalion and, consequently, his unique fate is recorded here.

He is buried in Ypres Reservoir Cemetery. Grave I.I.45.

The day following Private Lawrence's execution, on 23rd November 1917, the 2nd Devons moved up to the Front Line. One presumes that the details of the execution were read out to them on parade, culminating with the fateful words, "...and the sentence was duly carried out," before they marched off to the mud, blood and horrors of the Ypres Salient and Passchendaele.