**Fresh call to pardon war 'cowards'**

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**DEFENCE chiefs were last night under renewed pressure to pardon hundreds of soldiers executed for cowardice during the First World War after it emerged that several officers were spared the firing squad for the same offence.**

New research into the sentences meted out during the 1914-18 conflict has established that at least 15 officers, including one Scot, escaped execution. There is, however, no documented case of an ordinary soldier being spared, and more than 300 were executed.

The research also shows that, as well as avoiding the firing squad, the officers were granted retrospective clemency by King George V, both during and after the war. The King conferred revised sentences - notably four full pardons and a reinstatement - on the group, which included three majors and two lieutenant colonels.

The revelations, in a forthcoming book by the historians Gerard Oram and Julian Putkowski, reinforce long-standing claims that the lower ranks were treated more brutally than their superiors during the war. Only three officers are known to have been executed for similar offences during the campaign.

But the new development also blows a hole in the government’s long-term insistence that they could not justify retrospective pardons because such a dramatic judgment would be unprecedented.

Campaigners, who claim many of the executed men were suffering from crippling conditions such as shellshock, which was not recognised as an illness by army commanders, maintain the disclosures would bolster their demands for justice on the eve of the 90th anniversary of the outbreak of the war.

"There is no logical basis for the British government to claim its hands are tied on this issue," said Peter Mulvany, of the Irish section of the Shot at Dawn (SAD) campaign, which has waged a lengthy battle to clear the names of more than 300 soldiers, including 39 Scots.

"This evidence proves beyond doubt that there is a precedent for retrospective pardons, and they should follow it. These poor boys did not get the same treatment as their superiors in life, so the least they deserve from us now is some justice almost a century later."

Some 306 British troops were court-martialled and shot by their own comrades for ‘offences’ including cowardice, desertion and falling asleep at their posts in the trenches during the war. Most were led out at dawn to face firing squads blindfolded.

Read more: <http://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/fresh-call-to-pardon-war-cowards-1-1392964#ixzz3rDxbzk95>