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Special Feature: Shot at Dawn Pardons

The Life and Death of Private Harry Farr

Simon Wessely

Professor Simon Wessely is Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, part of King's College London. He is also Honorary Civilian Advisor in Psychiatry for the British Army. He gave evidence in the Judicial Review of the case of Private Farr on behalf of the Ministry of Defence. This article is drawn from a paper first published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine (Vol 99, September 2006). It is reproduced with some amendments by kind permission of the Royal Society of Medicine.

This summer Secretary of State for Defence Des Browne decided that he would no longer contest the ongoing judicial review of the decision of a series of his predecessors to refuse to grant a pardon to Private Harry Farr, shot at dawn for cowardice on 16 October 1916. At the same time, he announced he was seeking parliamentary approval to offer a statutory pardon not just to Private Farr, but all those executed for military offences during the First World War. The media coverage of Des Browne's decision confirmed that most people were pleased by the decision, and feel that justice has at long last been done. As one newspaper observed, those 'dry as dust' historians who expressed doubts about the decision were clearly out of touch with modern feeling. Either way, it is now dear that a pardon will be granted, and thus it is timely to step back and review what we know about the life and death of Private Farr.

Background

There is little dispute about the sequence of events on 17 September 1916 that led to the execution of Private Farr. Harry Farr was a member of 1st Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, who were taking part in the Battle of the Somme. That day his battalion was moving from their rear positions up to the front line itself. At 9.00 am that morning Farr asked for permission to fall out, saying he was not well. He was sent to see the Medical Officer (MO), who either found nothing wrong with him, or refused to see him because he had no physical injury – the Court Martial papers are unclear on this point. Later that night Farr was found still in the rear, and was again ordered to go to the trenches. He refused, telling the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM), Haking, that he 'could not stand it'. The RSM replied:

You are a fucking coward and you will go to the trenches. I give fuck all for my life and I give fuck all for yours and I'll get you fucking well shot.

At 11.00 pm that night a final attempt was made to get Private Farr up to the front line, and he was escorted forward. A fracas broke out between Farr and his escorts, and this time they let him run away. The following morning he was arrested and charged with contravening section 4 (7) of the Army Act – showing cowardice in the face of the enemy.

For the military, it was probably an 'open and shut' case. The evidence against Private Farr was overwhelming

The Field General Court Martial (FGCM) took place two weeks later. Four soldiers gave evidence against Farr, confirming the general sequence of events, which Farr did not deny. Farr was not represented by a so-called 'Prisoner's Friend' (this was not unusual), but spoke in his own defence. He was asked by the
President of the Court whether he had the opportunity to report sick between the night of the offence and now, and Farr replied that he had indeed had the opportunity but had not done so. Why, asked the President, and Farr replied, almost certainly unwisely for his future, that this was because ‘being away from the shell fire I felt better’. The Court then heard about his disciplinary record, which apart from a brief period of going AWOL in 1914 had been exemplary, and his medical history. Private Farr had spent several months in a rear hospital in 1915 with a diagnosis of shell shock, had been treated by the MO with the same diagnosis in April 1916, and again for one day in July 1916. Unfortunately the MO who had treated Farr was not able to give evidence, having been subsequently severely wounded. Despite intense searching, we have no other information about Farr’s medical history, since the records were almost certainly lost when the Public Records Office was bombed in 1940.

The Court Martial lasted less than an hour. For the military, it was probably an ‘open and shut’ case. The evidence against Private Farr was overwhelming. He had absented himself from duty on several occasions, despite being told forcefully the consequence of his actions. The events took place ‘in the face of the enemy’. He was found guilty, and sentenced to death.

Despite receiving the death sentence, Harry could still have comforted himself that he was unlikely to be executed, since he would have known that most of those who received a capital sentence from a Court Martial were soon reprieved. Private Farr was charged with cowardice. There were 551 Courts Martial for cowardice that resulted in a guilty verdict, but only 18 (3.3 per cent) executions. No execution could take place until it had been confirmed by the Commander in Chief (France), Sir Douglas Haig, and in nine out of ten occasions he did not. Yet Farr was one of the unlucky ones, and to understand why this was we need first to consider the military background to Farr’s offence.

**Haig’s Thinking**

What was going through Haig’s mind when he signed Private Farr’s death warrant? To answer that we must be careful not to read history backwards. By 1916 there were large issues that preyed on the minds of the senior British commanders. It was not a foregone conclusion that the British Army would be able to withstand the strain of the Western Front. Only a few months later the French Army would mutiny, and remain paralysed for most of 1917. The Italians collapsed at Caporetto, and the Russian armies disintegrated in the same year. In fact the British Army did withstand the almost unimaginable strain, and in 1918 would win what many historians claim to be its finest feat of arms, but that was still to come.

Haig had reason to be worried. By 1916 most of the regular army, the ‘Old Contemptibles’, had gone. In their place came the citizen army, the Kitchener Army, which would in turn be followed by the conscripts of 1917. For regulars such as Haig these were viewed with suspicion. They were not lacking in patriotism or morale, but they were not proper soldiers. They had no professional military training, or previous service. No one knew how the mass citizen armies would withstand the new and terrible environment of industrialized warfare. Haig and his colleagues were constantly on the alert for signs of a reducing of morale, or a worsening of discipline, that might precede a catastrophic collapse or mutiny.

Haig, like all his colleagues, believed that the main reason that his men fought was because of their patriotism, sense of duty, leadership, and local esprit de corps. But if those were the carrots, there was also no
dissent from the view that occasionally the stick was needed as well. If it was to endure, the new Army required a stern system of discipline much as applied to the pre-war regulars. The Regular army was expected to set the example — and Private Farr, as a regular, would be judged by those standards.

Yet even in the testing years of 1916 and 1917 it remained the case that despite all the pressures, Haig still showed clemency to the vast majority of those sentenced to death for military offences. Why was Farr the exception? Part of the answer to that question lies in the exact circumstances of the fateful day of 17 September when Farr refused RSM Haking's orders to go forward.

Fateful Day
The Battle of the Somme had been renewed the day before, in what historians now call the battle of Flers-Courcelette. The West Yorks were due to join this battle the following morning as part of 6th Division's assault against the notorious fortified German position known as the Quadrilateral.

The last act of the tragedy took place at Carnoy at dawn on 18 October 1916

Farr was moving through what was known as 'Chimpanzee Valley', where his unit was forming up, and was a particularly unpleasant location because of the proximity of the British artillery laying down the barrage for the attack the following day. It was those guns, not the German guns as some think, that so disturbed Harry. War diaries for that day report intense British artillery fire for much of 16 September, and then again intense fire directed at the Quadrilateral in the evening of the seventeenth.

It would have been common knowledge that the battalion was to go into action the following dawn. As indeed it did. And it would be common knowledge that this would be costly. As indeed it was. The battalion lost 150 casualties out of a total of 600. So Private Farr’s refusal to go to the trenches on the night of 17 September would have been interpreted by his comrades, NCOs and officers in the light of the forthcoming action. The four sergeants and privates who gave evidence against Farr all took part in the attack, and survived. And all would have had friends who did not.

It was a very bad night to break down. Usually soldiers facing a capital charge would have people to speak up for them, and give evidence as to their sound character, previous service and so on. Yet in Farr’s case this kind of testimony is either absent or ambiguous. As the papers of the FGCM processed up the chain of command, being first reviewed by the legal section (who found no legal anomalies, and hence no grounds to quash the conviction), six different officers had the opportunity to add their comments. Farr’s Officer Commanding (OC) was the first, and wrote:

I cannot say what has destroyed this man’s nerves, but he has proved himself on many occasions incapable of keeping his head in action & likely to cause a panic. Apart from his behaviour under fire, his conduct & character are very good.

This was not very helpful, but it would have been the comments from General Cavan, GOC 4th division, that sealed Farr’s fate:

The charge of 'cowardice' seems to be clearly proved & the Sergt. Major’s opinion of the man is definitely bad to say the least of it. The G.O.C. 6th Div. informs me that the men know the man is no good. I therefore recommend that the sentence be carried out.

Nothing was said at the Court Martial about what had happened to the battalion in the hours after Farr’s desertion, but nothing would have needed to have been said. Everyone knew. There were and are considerable differences in military honour and codes of behaviour between 'scrimshanking' — breaking the rules, stealing better provisions, avoiding onerous duties, missing out on parades and so on — and letting your mates down and leaving them in danger alone. The former is seen with approval by your comrades, if not the NCOs or officers, but the latter is not. It may have been for this reason that Farr’s comrades were so reluctant to speak up for him, testimony which if present would normally have led to a reprieve. None was forthcoming for Farr — rather the opposite. And so Rawlinson and then Haig endorsed the sentence, and the last act of the tragedy took place at Carnoy at dawn on 16 October 1916.

Understanding of Psychological Disorders
But there is another factor which to our modern mind seems to sum up the insensitivity and injustice of Farr’s fate. Prior to his refusal to join his comrades in the trenches ready for the attack on the Quadrilateral, Farr had on at least three occasions been invalided with a diagnosis of shell shock. Even his OC admitted that Farr’s ‘nerves’ had been destroyed. Surely that should have led to a more compassionate verdict? Was Farr not suffering from what contemporary psychiatrists call post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was the opinion of the modern psychiatrists who wrote in support of Gertrude Farr’s plea for pardon for her father? To understand why this did not happen, we need to think a little more about the concepts of psychological disorder that existed in 1916. Shell shock is not just another name for PTSD. Each disorder had different symptoms. We, for example, have shown that the ‘flashback’, characteristic of modern PTSD, is
absent from medical files of shell shock victims of the First World War, but this is not a significant point. More importantly, it is not true to say, as many do, that the military and medical authorities were blind to the psychiatric consequences of war. The sheer scale of the psychiatric casualties meant that this was impossible. But what was different was their understanding of why men broke down in battle, or more particularly, why they did not get better.

By 1916 it was accepted that many men could break down if pushed long and hard enough. But if a person was fundamentally 'sound' then this condition ought to be short lived, provided that he was managed correctly, and in particular not given a medical label nor sent to a rear hospital for a prolonged period of time. But if a person did not recover, despite good management, then the war was only the trigger; the real causes of the prolonged breakdown lying elsewhere. The true cause was either inheritance, some form of constitutional weakness, or genetics as we would say now; or alternatively, if the doctor was more aware of Freud and his theories, then it was the soldier’s early life and upbringing. Either way one’s card was marked long before the person joined the Army. A short term breakdown could be the result of the war, but the longer the condition persisted, the more likely it was to be the result of a defect in character. The officers and MOs of the First World War were Victorians and Edwardians, to whom character mattered, and mattered immensely.

At the end of the War a Royal Commission was formed to try and understand exactly what was shell shock, and why had it become such a problem. Rather than accepting that psychiatric breakdown was the inevitable result of modern war, and that 'every man has his breaking point' (a conclusion that was reached only after the Second, not the First, World War?), they instead preferred views such as those of Lord Gort, VC, who told them shell shock was a regrettable weakness, and was not found in good units. The Commission concluded that good soldiers, properly led, with good morale and good training, should not break down. All their witnesses also told them that shell shock was contagious and hence a threat to fighting spirit – so Farr’s OC’s comments that he was ‘liable to cause a panic’ awakened every suspicion about shell shock in the military mind, and did not help him. So how could one separate out those who refused to fight for legitimate reasons, and deserved sympathy, from those who refused to fight because they were cowards? It was not easy. What does modern psychiatry say?

Nothing. I searched in vain every contemporary textbook of psychiatry that the Maudsley Hospital possesses for any mention of the word cowardice, but it is entirely absent. We are never called on to even consider the question, thankfully. But back in 1916 they did not have that luxury, and the distinction was, literally for Private Farr, a matter of life and death. Eventually the best guidance that the Shell Shock Commission could give was that if a man had previously shown courage, then he should not be considered a coward. A man who had ‘done his bit’ should, and indeed did, receive more sympathy and understanding than one who had not. It was a moral matter. Even in the modern army it helps to have ‘earned’ your breakdown.

So the label of shell shock, which to our modern mind is synonymous with psychiatric disorder, and should automatically have meant mercy for Farr, was more ambiguous to the people of 1916. It was already falling into disrepute, and was being increasingly seen on both sides of the Trenches as a convenient medical label for people to avoid their duties, and would be banned completely as a diagnosis in 1917. It was not, however, the case that mental illness could never be a defence to a capital charge. Lt Sidney Stuart Hume, for example, shot an orderly in 1918, but was found insane by the same rules that still apply today, and was committed to Broadmoor, where he remained until 1976. But Harry Farr was not insane. Others were sometimes reprieved because they had obvious signs of other mental disorders – but at his trial Farr was found to be in a ‘satisfactory’ mental condition by the MO, even if we do not know what that meant. More importantly, Farr himself had unwisely told the President of the Court Martial that away from the guns he was now better, which would have been seen as incompatible with a total nervous collapse. MOs did not infrequently send soldiers back down the line for nervous problems – it had happened to Farr on three previous occasions – but not the night before a big attack. Only two months before Farr’s fateful day, Lt Kirkwood RAMC, a medical officer with the 11th Border Regiment, had certified that Farr, was more ambiguous to the officers of 1916. It was already falling into disrepute, and was being increasingly seen on both sides of the Trenches as a convenient medical label for people to avoid their duties, and would be banned completely as a diagnosis in 1917. When the needs of the military conflicted with the needs of the individual, there was no doubt on whose side was the Medical officer.

We can be sure that on the night of 17 September 1916 Harry Farr was in a state of intense fear. There were no psychiatrists available on the Western Front (psychiatrists were mainly asylum doctors anyway who looked after the insane), but if a modern psychiatrist had made the
journey back in time to interview Farr, it is probable the diagnosis would be of some form of anxiety, phobic or post traumatic stress disorder (the diagnoses are not exclusive). A phobic disorder is when a person experiences severe irrational disabling symptoms out of proportion to any actual risk. There is no rational reason to be crippled with anxiety when confronted with a spider, nor to have panic attacks inside a supermarket. But even our increased knowledge of the nature and mechanisms of anxiety might not have been as helpful as one might think. There was little that was irrational about Farr’s fears that night – indeed, one might argue that refusing to go ‘over the top’ was the most rational response to the situation, a veritable Catch 22. And that night Farr would not have been alone in experiencing intense fear – there were probably few around him who did not feel something similar as they faced the prospect of attacking the notorious Quadrilateral the

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following morning. What the Court Martial had to consider was that Farr did not control his fears, whilst his comrades did.

Modern psychiatrists like myself can count themselves lucky that we will never be placed in the situation of judging Harry Farr’s behaviour and those of his comrades. Instead, those who did have the task of judging Farr’s actions were faced with a dilemma. They wished and usually did show concern for the welfare of the individual soldier. But they also wished to promote order and discipline and to ensure that people continued to risk their lives in combat. They believed that this required sanctions up to the supreme penalty if people tried to avoid those duties. It was always a balance between showing mercy and enforcing discipline. Although the usual outcome was the former, for Private Farr they chose the latter.

Speaking now, personally, I wish they hadn’t. It seems very probable that Farr was suffering from a psychiatric disorder, even if we do not know which one. It is also probable that if he had been an officer, more note might have been taken of his mental state before the fateful day of 17 September. We are more sympathetic towards psychiatric breakdown now, although perhaps not as much as we think we are. Anyway, irrespective of Private Farr’s mental state, I remain utterly opposed to the death penalty for any reason. But that was not the view in 1916, either in the military or in civil society. Our social climate has changed, both towards the death penalty and towards psychiatric illness, and thank goodness for that.

But greater compassion is not necessarily the same as greater understanding. We should be careful of viewing the past through our modern sensibilities. The best we can do is to try and understand the actions of all the men of 1916, including Private Farr and those who judged him, and not to make apologies for either. Nor should we succumb to the temptation to rewrite history to make ourselves feel more comfortable about the past.

In his recent social history of the British soldier in the First World War, Richard Holmes‘ probably got it about right when he gave his thoughts on the subject of military executions in the First World War:

The most that one can say is that the overwhelming majority were justly convicted by the law as it then stood ....it was indeed a hard law but it was, in general, fairly applied. But like so much else about the war, the issue divides

head from heart and if my head applauds the logic of capital sentences, they still break my heart.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. Between August 1914 and October 1918 there were around 240,000 Courts Martial, of which 3060 resulted in a death sentence. Of these 3060, 346 (11 per cent) were carried out, 2734 were not. Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson, Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War (London: Cassell, 2001).