

ANZAC DAY

Five young men, Frank Hughes, John Sweeney, John Braithwaite, Victor Spencer, John King. Volunteers for King and Country.

An engineer, miner, builder's labourer, a journalist. Told the night before they were to be shot at dawn. We think of them today. Of their families. Of the unnamed mates who had to raise their rifles and shoot them in cold blood. Of the medical officers who certified their deaths. Of chaplains, like Parata, who sat up with them through the night. Of fellow prisoners in the detention camp in France who were marched out to watch the executions, stage-managed as a grim deterrent to them and others.

Today we are here to remember them. "Don't bandage my eyes. I want to see them shoot", said Frank Hughes. John Braithwaite couldn't believe he was being accused of starting a mutiny, when his aim had been to defuse tension. We ask: why were these young men shot for being terrified? What does that tell us about this war?

This autumn in particular we focus on Gallipoli. Many of us wonder at the courage of individual soldiers. Many wonder at the absolute folly of the Gallipoli campaign, indeed of the whole War. Apart from toppling the German Kaiser and ushering in the Russian Revolution it achieved nothing at all. Did it? What did it do for New Zealand? These young men were caught in the middle. Their name became like the mud of the Somme. There are no memorials to them.

Until now.

We remember the top brass, the Russells and the Haigs. Their determination to maintain discipline meant that individual soldiers, often with proven records of bravery, became means to ends. Although stunned, concussed, their nerves shot to pieces by the inhuman bombardment on the Somme, or elsewhere, they were branded as cowards, deserters. What sort of army had to rely on this systematic terror?

There was a structure of military justice. These men were not strung up by kangaroo courts. They were given a defence counsel. The decision of the court martial was referred to company commander and up the line to Haig himself. Many death sentences were in fact commuted. We are not here to point accusing fingers at anyone.

It is the machine-line inhumanity of the whole process which these executions highlight. Private Sheehan, himself undergoing Field Punishment, was outraged by it. He refused to fill sandbags to form a wall for the execution of John King: "I will not fill sandbags to shoot a boy wearing the same uniform as myself."

It is good that this War is not being forgotten. But why are our leaders so gung ho on celebrating it as something to be proud of? What was so glorious about it? What can we today learn from its butchery? Local Frenchwomen laid flowers on the grave of Frank Hughes a hundred years ago. We follow their compassion today. We mourn these forgotten men.

We are not here to make heroes of them. They were broken. When ordinary guys, driven beyond endurance, their nerves gone, chain-smoke, get drunk, go AWOL, do anything rather than face the trenches again, what is that telling us? What sort of Imperial values, what sort of military discipline, what sort of political leadership rewarded terror with humiliation and the firing squad?

We hope this memorial will stir up compassion, and nudge the passer-by to ask some of these questions.

Peter Matheson. April 2015