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NEWS

Bohemian Jack shot dead by firing squad for 'a simple act of peace-making'

'Shot at Dawn' tribute for First World War New Zealand soldier after lobbying from historians



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MIKE LOCKLEY

Staff Reporter
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IN the mist of an anaemic French dawn, the weak sunlight burning through leaden skies, they placed the blindfold over Jack Braithwaite's eyes.

He stiffened against the white-washed wall, the wisps of breath from his open mouth quickening.

These were Jack Braithwaite's horrifying last moments.

At 6.05am on October 29, 1916, Jack was executed by firing squad, joining the ranks of those slaughtered by his own side.

His death on that barren patch of land in Rouen came minutes after one Gunner Lewis was shot.

Jack, aged 31, heard the rifles crackle and the sound turned his legs to jelly.

His crime: mutiny. But that incendiary word paints a picture that does not fit the act that cost Jack his life.

Jack, who openly admitted at his court martial, "I am not a born soldier, just a Bohemian journalist", was guilty of a misdemeanour, not mutiny.

On August 28, 1916, the New Zealander, who had proved truly troublesome to Army top brass, found himself at Number 1 Prison, Blargies, a military lock-up noted for its toughness.

The simmering ill-feeling among inmates turned into open rebellion on that day.



This document records that

Pte J Braithwaite of the 2nd Battalion,
Otago Regiment

who was executed for mutiny on
29 October 1916 is pardoned under Section
359 of the Armed Forces Act 2006.

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.

John
Secretary of State for Defence

Private Jack's official pardon was signed by British Secretary for Defence Des Browne in 2006

A tough Aussie named Private Little complained bitterly and loudly about the lack of hot water in the showers.

The matter escalated, with Little banging on tables and demanding his meal. Others joined the insurrection, seizing the moment to air their own grievances.

It was then Jack, known as "Bohemian Jack" because of his artistic bent, made his fatal mistake.

In a bid to defuse a potential riot, Jack, who was on mess duty, led furious Little to his tent and fed him.

He had, however, taken Little from the custody of a staff ser-

geant. And that, in the army's book, constituted mutiny.

Now, following a lobby by New Zealand historian Geoff McMillan, together with Richard Pursehouse and Lee Dent of Cannock-based Great War group The Chase Project, the trooper is to be honoured at a Staffordshire war memorial.

Jack's name will be included in the 'Shot at Dawn' tribute at the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas.

Created in 2000 by Birmingham artist Andy DeComyn, the area is a circle of 306 stakes, bearing the name of men posthumously pardoned after being executed by their own side, sur-

rounding a statue of a blindfolded soldier.

It is hoped Jack's stake will be installed before the centenary of his death.

At the court martial, Jack, who spent every day of active service wondering what he was doing amid the mud, blood and brutality of the trenches, pleaded for his life.

He was attempting to stem trouble, he insisted, and pointed out that in Egypt, where he had served, such actions had been punished with 14 days imprisonment.

"I cannot understand that a simple act of peace-making could be brought to look like deliberate mutiny," he protested.

Jack, a member of 2nd battalion Otago Regiment, also pointed out the sacrifices his family had made for the war effort. Two brothers had been killed in action, two wounded and invalided back home. Two more were