



■ 'Bohemian' Jack Braithwaite, circled

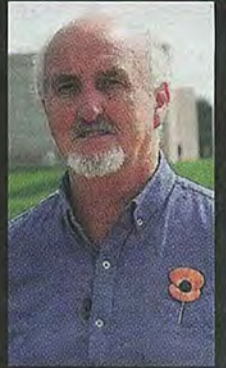


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It would seem that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and his luck had run out



■ David Braithwaite OBE with his uncle Jack's medals

MISSING MEMORIAL



■ Geoff McMillan

JACK'S tribute at the National Memorial Arboretum was secured after Geoff McMillan, from Waikanae Beach, New Zealand, visited the site last April.

"I could only find four stakes for the five New Zealanders executed during the Great War," he said.

"There was not one for Jack Braithwaite, who had been pardoned by the New Zealand Government in 2000 along with the other four under the Pardon for Soldiers of the Great War Act."

News of Jack's honour has been welcomed by Richard Pursehouse.

"I think it's great, like picking up on something that has been missed," he said. "I feel very humbled to have been involved."

"There is no date yet, but we hope it happens before the centenary of his death."

"What happened was the law at the time, you had to have the ultimate deterrent. In contrast, not a single servicemen was executed in World War Two."

Bohemian Jack is buried in St Sever Cemetery, Rouen.



training to join the fray. The Braithwaites had paid a heavy price.

In an attempt to win sympathy, Jack added to the mix the fact he was due to marry "the best girl in the entire world".

He partially won over the trial's convening officer, Lieutenant-General Clayton, who recommended that the sentence be commuted to 10 years penal servitude, concluding the evidence bore out the defendant's version of events.

But his recommendations were not accepted by the court. Jack and three Australians involved in the prison clash were sentenced to death by firing squad.

There is credence in claims made by Jack's family that he was a "sacrificial lamb".

Despite being sentenced to death, the Army knew there was little chance that the Australians would face a firing squad. The

execution of any trooper from Down Under needed the approval of the Australian Governor General.

And he did not share Allied chief Sir Douglas Haig's appetite for killing our own men.

The three Aussies, who all played a greater role in the near jail riot than Jack, had their sentence commuted to two years hard labour.

But Haig and his cronies had to make a point, had to show that flagrant disobedience would result in death.

That factor, plus the powder keg atmosphere at the prison and Jack's poor disciplinary record meant clemency was not an option.

He had, after all, proved more than problematic during his stint on The Front.

In May, 1916, Jack lost his stripes for going AWOL and didn't seem to give a fig about it. He allegedly retorted: "Let duty

and soldiering go to hell." His only time in the trenches, from May 14 to 22, ended ignominiously. He again went missing from his unit, armed with a forged "leave pass". That earned him 60 days field punishment, but by this time Jack had decided war was not for him.

He again escaped on July 7, was caught and sentenced to two years hard labour. Even then, he tried to do a runner while being transferred to the British Army's Blargies prison.

Jack's own family seems to have been ashamed of the reluctant trooper. His own uncle, Brigadier W. Braithwaite, urged authorities to lock up his nephew and send him back to New Zealand as soon as possible.

Quite simply, in the British Army's eyes, Jack was a coward. In reality, the man was a sensitive soul, intelligent enough to realise the madness he was immersed in. The Bohemian had

been flung into a meat grinder and wanted none of it. In all, he was court martialled four times.

His approach to military life is best summed up by writer Mary Vidal in a superb blog on the Western Front Association website.

She said: "Poor Jack. He seems to have been somebody who was totally unsuited to become a soldier and perhaps left to himself, and without the patriotic fervour sweeping Britain and the Empire in 1915, he would not have enlisted."

"He was unable to accept military discipline and acted in a foolhardy, perhaps stupid, manner and was dealt with firmly by the authorities."

"In his final, fatal, brush with military law he found himself cast in the role of a sacrificial victim. It would seem that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and his luck had run out. In his last hours how much he must

have wished he had stayed a 'Bohemian' journalist."

Great War historian Ian McGibbon wrote: "Braithwaite was foolhardy, even stupid, in his failure to take military discipline seriously and was treated firmly by the New Zealand divisional authorities. But in his final hearing he was more unlucky than criminal."

"But he found himself cast in the role of sacrificial victim and paid the supreme penalty."

In his last, poignant written missive to the court, Jack, pinning his hopes on his prowess as a writer, stated: "Unfortunately I have made a serious mess of things, and where I came to win honour and glory, I have won shame, dishonour, and everlasting disgrace."

He was wrong. Disgrace did not last forever.

His pardon was signed by British Secretary for Defence Des Browne in 2006.