



## Story of Private Herbert Burden

### Northumberland Fusiliers

Herbert Burden was the son of a gardener from Lewisham in London. He was born in 1898. It appears that he joined the Northumberland Fusiliers in May 1914 claiming to be 18 years and two months (two years older than he actually was). The army did not ask to see any birth certificate for him or for any other volunteers who joined up below the age of 18 (the law did not allow boys to become soldiers if they were younger).

Later in 1914 Herbert Burden deserted the Fusiliers and joined the East Surrey regiment instead. In November 1914 he deserted the Surreys and rejoined the Fusiliers again.

In March 1915 Burden was sent to the Western Front.

On 26 June 1915 at Ypres he was ordered to join a party of soldiers digging trenches. He went missing for two days but was then discovered and arrested.

On 2 July 1915 Burden was tried by court-martial (a military court). The trial was very brief. Burden claimed that he had gone to visit a friend in another regiment to speak to him because he had heard that the friend's brother had died. Four other soldiers gave evidence that Burden had gone missing and one said that Burden claimed he had had permission to visit his friend. He was found guilty of desertion, accused of going missing seven times in Britain and in France plus other offences. There were no officers or men from his own regiment who knew him to speak up for him as they had all been killed. The court could have punished him in other ways but his death was ordered. This was so that his execution would discourage other soldiers from deserting. Two other soldiers were tried at the same court that morning. One soldier was punished with a year's imprisonment and hard labour for sleeping on guard duty while the other got Field Punishment No 1 (being tied hand and foot to a post for two hours a day) for 30 days for using threatening language.

Burden was executed at dawn on 21 July 1915. The prisoner would have been blindfolded and tied to a post. He would have had his army badges and the army strip on the shoulder of his uniform ripped as a sign of his dishonour. A white piece of cloth would have been pinned over the prisoner's heart or a metal disc would have been hung round his neck covering his heart. This made it easier to shoot accurately.

Six soldiers would have formed a firing squad lined up in front of the post. One of the soldier's rifles would have been filled with a blank cartridge so that none of the soldiers would be sure who actually shot the prisoner. If he did not die immediately from the firing squad then the officer in charge would have had to shoot the wounded prisoner with his revolver.