

British Mutinies in France

Pages of Revolutionary History

Tom Brown

May 1944

Simultaneously with the strike action of the British Army in England came the strikes of British Army units in France. Little of these is recorded and many are entirely without printed word. Fortunately there existed the *Herald*, a weekly paper, which, early in 1919, became a daily, run by George Lansbury. The *Herald* and the *Daily Herald* of those days were very different to the *Herald* of the T.U.C. and Odhams Press. The files of Lansbury's old paper give us a glimpse, though only a glimpse of the unrest in the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders.

Of the hitherto unrecorded mutinies one shall serve us as an example of many. The 4th Middlesex stationed at Caudry, Belgium was, like every other fighting unit, glad of the promise of relaxed discipline and parading brought by the Armistice. But the end of November, 1918, found them parading more often than ever, all the while being subjected to an intense "spit and polish" campaign. Utterly fed up, the men refused to parade further and, after holding a meeting, marched into the village where they were loudly cheered by the French inhabitants. Their action resulted in the immediate repeal of the "spit and polish" order, the lessening of parades and the relaxation of discipline.

Many protests against these and other grievances took the form of parading, but responding to all orders by the singing of soldiers' songs, not the songs of Peter Dawson or Rudyard Kipling, but real soldiers' songs—*Mademoiselle from Armentieres* and *Charlotte the Harlot*. Others just did not parade.

Certain other mutinies were much more serious. B. G. A. Cannell in his book *From Monk to Busman* describes one of them which he witnessed while at the Ordnance Depot at Vendroux.

"After the Armistice things began to get very unsettled. We heard that two men had been arrested for sedition, and were at Boulogne, and might be shot in the Tower.

A strike committee was hastily formed, and every soldier in the district marched down to Calais on January 27th, 1919."

Two divisions of troops, recently recruited boys, were sent against the strikers, but with little effect. The men took over the camp. When they reorganised the feeding of the troops they found the camp well stocked with food. Mr. Cannell states that this confirmed the belief of the men that their food was being illegally sold.

“Our food was being ‘flogged’ to the French people. In fact, I saw with my own eyes, clothes-baskets full of bully, cheese and bacon going out of the camps at night.” (Ibid).

After about a week of the strike, General Byng held a conference in Calais and promised remedy of the mens’ grievances. The two prisoners were released, food improved, new huts were built and Saturday afternoons and Sundays were made general holidays. The two prisoners, however, said they had been badly treated in prison and one of them died soon after. From their miserably small pay, the soldiers collected nearly £150 for his widow.

About this time a serious mutiny threatened at Dunkirk which was held by the 178th Brigade. The threatened outburst was staved off by the promise of immediate demobilization.

The most serious mutiny of all occurred at Calais, chief port of the British Army in France. In a rather obvious attempt to minimise the revolt and discredit the British soldiers, Winston Churchill wrote:

“A regular mutiny broke out at Calais. Between the 27th and 31st of January the Army Ordnance detachments and the Mechanical Transport, which were the least-disciplined part of the army, had seen least of the fighting and were most closely associated with political Trade Unionism, refused to obey orders. They met the Leave-Boats and induced a large number of returning soldiers to join them. In twenty-four hours the ring-leaders were at the head of about three or four thousand armed men and in complete possession of the town.”

Churchill, *The Aftermath*.

Churchill’s account is important, not for what it tells, but for what it leaves out. Only from sheer necessity does he even mention the mutinies in his “history” of the war and its aftermath.

T. H. Wintringham’s *Mutiny* contains a good account of one of the mutinies in the Calais district, written by an unnamed private soldier. An agitation for demobilization began in the Valdelievre camp and one of the ringleaders was arrested and given fourteen days field punishment for being a quarter of an hour late at work. The news quickly spread and, although, it was pay day, the men, forgetting their pay, demonstrated outside the C.O.’s office. The officers began a long-winded argument of which the men soon tired. Refusing to be put off any further, they smashed open the prison and released their comrade.

Later an attempt to re-arrest him was prevented by the vigilance of the men who “by prearranged signal, swarmed out like bees.” The imported military police then arrested the sergeant of the guard for failing to prevent the rescue. The angry soldiers at once released the sergeant. The C.O. then met the soldiers’ committee and made general concessions, including a shorter working day.

Still suspicious, the men helped to organise the other camps in the district. A few days later came the news of the re-arrest of their comrade. Strike action was decided.

“Although, as prearranged, every man was on the parade ground, not one fell in when the bugle sounded, and our pickets had already taken the places of the sentries.

During the morning news came that at another camp, Vendraux, 2,000 men were all out and were marching down that afternoon. They arrived headed by the regimental

band and with all their N.C.O.s participating. Both camps then joined in a march on the headquarters of the Calais area to interview Brigadier General Rawlinson.

Our bands were in attendance and the frightened French shopkeepers put up their shutters as 4,000 very determined men marched through the streets. The headquarters were surrounded and a deputation entered.

After a futile attempt to induce the besieging army to withdraw, the general agreed to release our comrade (who had been transferred elsewhere) and that he should be in camp by Tuesday¹ midday.

The deputation resolutely refused to discuss any of our grievances or calling off the strike until our comrade had been released.”

T. H. Wintringham, *Mutiny*.

From Calais the strike organisation spread, greatly aided by the strike committee's control of road transport and the military railways. In this they were aided by the French railmen who, in a strike a short time previously, had been supported by the action of the British railway section of the Royal Engineers. The strike organisation was known as “The Calais Area Soldiers' and Sailors' Association.”

Everywhere such organisations were victorious. Briefly, the fruits of victory were:

1. Rapid demobilization of millions of soldiers.
2. Pay was doubled.
3. Food, shelter and other conditions were improved.
4. Stupid parades and discipline were relaxed.

And perhaps greatest of all, the new war, the war on Russia, was checked.

¹ *It was Monday.*

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