

Mutiny in the British Army

Pages of Revolutionary History

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Present discussion of post war demobilization should naturally recall the discussion of the subject in 1918. Then, as now, the politicians had well-laid plans abundantly reported by the Press. How true is the comment of Burns, “the best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley”. In a few weeks the demobilization plans of the politicians were shattered by the soldiers who almost demobilized themselves.

But it was not demobilization alone which caused the mutinies of 1918 and 1919. It was also a revolt against tyrannous discipline, low pay and senseless parades. The first post-war mutiny occurred on November 13th, 1918 at Shoreham, only two days after the Armistice. The strike was led by a Northumberland sergeant, G.P., who in response to an act of tyranny by a major against a private, marched the troops from the naval docks, the guard of marines opening the gates to allow them to pass. Some distance from the camp he held a meeting urging the soldiers to stand firm. The next day the General arrived and addressed the troops, G.P. being made to stand to one side. The General invited any man to step out and go to work.

“You can imagine my feelings (wrote G.P.) as being an old soldier of twenty years service, of course, I knew the consequences of my act.

But I never saw such loyal men in my life, not one man moved. I could hear the sergeants in the rear of the men telling them to stand by me, and it was well they did, or I should have got ten years or so.

The following Monday one thousand of us were demobbed, my name at the head of the list, and one thousand every week afterwards.”

Mutiny, by T. H. Wintringham.

Troops mutinied at Folkestone on January 3, 1919, Two thousand men met and agreed that no military boat should be allowed to sail to France, only Canadian and Australian troops being allowed to go, if they wished. The Colonials stood by the English mutineers. Troop trains arriving in Folkestone with troops *en route* to France were met by pickets. In a mass the returning soldiers joined their comrades.

An armed guard which was posted at the docks with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets fell back before the demonstrators who set up their own harbour guard. The rebels, now about 10,000

strong, held a mass meeting and decided to form a Soldiers' Union, and elected delegates and spokesmen.

The Chief of Staff, Sir William Robertson, hastened from London and at once agreed to the men's demands. All with jobs to go to were demobilized at once. Men who claimed prospects of a job were given a week's leave to make arrangements. Complete indemnity for all acts of mutiny was promised. By this time 4,000 men at Dover demonstrated and would have stopped troopships the following day if the Folkestone settlement had not been made.

A few days later 400 soldiers *en route* to Salonica refused to board the boat train at London. Within the next few days the revolt spread to Shortlands, Grove Park, Kempton Park, Sydenham, Park Royal, Maidstone, Aldershot (where a serious riot took place) Bristol, Chatham and other places.

An outstanding feature of most of the mutinies was the distrust and scorn of the men for their officers. The promises and cajolery of officers, even colonels and brigadiers, were scorned. The men refused to talk to any but the "top notchers". The Army Service Corps, Mechanical Transport at Kempton Park and Grove Park seized army lorries and drove to London, where they blocked the traffic in Whitehall while their deputation was inside.

On January 15, 1919, Winston Churchill became Secretary of State for War and Air. He did not have to wait long for a visit of the troops. At half past eight on the morning of February 8 he received an urgent summons to the War Office. Arriving there by car he saw a battalion of Guards drawn up in the Mall: A report of mutiny awaited him. 3,000 soldiers of many units had arrived at Victoria Station the previous evening on their way to France after leave. The Director of Movements (according to Churchill) had failed to make any arrangements for the feeding, housing or transport of these men, most of whom came from the North of England. Most of them had waited all night on the platform, without tea or food.

"They had suddenly upon some instigation resorted in a body to Whitehall, and were now filling the Horse Guards' Parade armed and in a state of complete disorder. Their leader, I was informed, was at that very moment prescribing conditions to the Staff of the London Command in the Horse Guard building."

Churchill, *The Aftermath*, page 63.

What Churchill calls a "state of complete disorder" was simply the refusal to continue obeying the orders of the military commanders. So far as public conduct is concerned the men were most orderly, self disciplined and organised.

Now, one might think this a glorious opportunity for the fire-eating hero of pen and radio to stalk out and address the troops, to give them some "fight on the beaches" stuff or a basinful of "blood and tears". Not likely! Winston regarded discretion as the better part of valour—indeed the whole of it. The whole of Churchill's account of the affair consists of reports. Although he was only a hundred yards away, he remained in his office.

"Sir William Robertson and General Fielding, commanding the London District, presented themselves to me with this account, and added that a reserve Battalion of Grenadiers and two troops of Household Cavalry were available on the spot. What course were they authorized to adopt? I asked whether the Battalion would obey orders, and was answered 'The officers believe so'. On this I requested the Generals

to surround and make prisoners of the disorderly mass. They departed immediately on this duty.

“I remained in my room a prey to anxiety. A very grave issue had arisen at the physical heart of the State. Ten minutes passed slowly. From my windows I could see the Life Guards on duty in Whitehall closing the gates and doors of the archway. Then suddenly there appeared on the roof of the Horse Guards a number of civilians, perhaps twenty or thirty in all, who spread themselves out in a long black silhouette and were evidently watching something which was taking place, or about to take place, on the Parade Ground below them. What this might be I had no means of knowing, although I was but a hundred yards away. Another ten minutes of tension passed and back came the Generals in a much more cheerful mood. Everything had gone off happily. The Grenadiers with fixed bayonets had closed in upon the armed crowd; the Household Cavalry had executed an enveloping movement on the other flank; and the whole 3,000 men had been shepherded and escorted under arrest to Wellington Barracks, where they were all going to have breakfast before resuming their journey to France. No one was hurt, very few were called to account, and only one or two were punished and that not seriously.”

Churchill, *The Aftermath*.

The soldiers' movement proved to be one of the most successful strikes ever attempted. Immense gains were won in a few weeks, but the story is incomplete if limited to Britain's shores. The success of the soldiers' strike was due to its sweeping movement over England and France. Beyond the Channel was half of the British Army, armed and battle seasoned. How did the veterans of the battlefields of France and Flanders respond to the strike call before they marched to the occupation of the German Rhineland?

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