

1919: The Calais mutiny



A short history of the strike and mutiny of British troops stationed in France following the end of the First World War which won concessions and helped speed up demobbing.

As the end of World War I was nearing, the British Army was being used more extensively in France, as the French military had largely disintegrated due to widespread mutiny. However, as time progressed, British soldiers were proving equally unwilling to fight and to obey.

A court martial following the [Etaples Mutiny](#) on September 22, 1918 sentenced five youths aged seventeen to nineteen to ten years imprisonment for acts of indiscipline. This led to further agitation for their release. There was a growing campaign against the censorship of news from home and soldiers at Calais elected delegates who also acted as distributors for the then prohibited Daily Herald. There were also demands for instant dismantling of the Val de Lievre workshops.

The stability of the Army on the Continent was affected by the mass industrial unrest back home. In France, in the war zone, official brutalities were rife. One example was at the prison at Les Attaques, where men were detained for trivial offences such as overstaying their leave by a few hours. Prisoners were only supplied with one blanket, during one of the severest winter for decades. They were flogged and manacled for merely talking to each other.

At the end of January 1919, the men of the Army Ordnance and Mechanical Transport sections at the Val de Lievre camp called a mass meeting which decided to mutiny. Conditions in the camp were bad, and reports of several incidents had already found their way into the newspapers.

The Calais mutiny began after agitation for demobilisation*. It coincided with the arrest of Private John Pantling, of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, while delivering what the authorities described as a 'seditious speech to an assembly of soldiers.'

On pay night the men at Val de Lievre smashed open the jail and let Pantling out. The authorities tried to recapture him. When this failed, fresh military police were brought in. They arrested the sergeant of the guard for failing to prevent the prisoner's 'escape'. Anger was now rising. The Commanding Officer - by now a very frightened man - released the sergeant, and called off the attempt to recapture Pantling. He also agreed to a meeting with the men to discuss their grievances. The next day many concessions were made, including shorter hours.

While this was taking place there was a distinct hardening of the attitude of the officers. The soldiers spent the weekend organising the other camps into Soldiers Councils. On Sunday the officers struck back and rearrested Pantling. The news spread quickly. On Monday the newly

organised Soldiers Councils called a strike. Not a single man turned up for reveille. The sentries were replaced by pickets. That same morning, at another camp in nearby Vendreux, over 2,000 men came out in sympathy. Later that morning they marched to the Calais camp as a gesture of solidarity. After a mass meeting both camps marched behind brass bands towards the headquarters, where Brigadier Rawlinson was stationed. By now the mutineers totalled 4,000. The headquarters were quickly surrounded and a deputation entered. They demanded the release of Private Pantling. The authorities capitulated and promised that he would be back in his camp within twenty-four hours.

On Tuesday morning he was returned. But by now some 20,000 men had joined the mutiny and the strike was spreading. French workers were cooperating and a total embargo was placed upon the movement of British military traffic by rail. In fact the rail stoppage was a significant factor in the escalation of the struggle. 5,000 infantrymen due to return home, finding themselves delayed, struck in support of their own demand for immediate demobilisation.

In an attempt to intimidate the mutineers General Byng and fresh troops were sent for. Unfortunately Byng made the mistake of arriving before his men. His car was immediately commandeered by the mutineers and replaced by a modest Ford. Byng's troops were delayed for a further two days by the blacking of British transport. When they arrived machine guns were placed at strategic points, such as food stores and munition dumps. Byng's troops, in the words of a participant, were 'bits of boys who were sent out just as the war ended.'

Fresh from the growing unrest at home, they were even more reluctant to be in khaki than the Calais mutineers themselves. They started fraternising with them and before long had joined the mutineers. The strike continued.

Some barrack room lawyer pointed out that Pantling could be rearrested at any time. It was decided that it would be to his advantage to be court-martialled whilst the soldiers were still in control. His acquittal would then be binding and he would be safe from further arrest. Reluctantly, the officers had to agree.

The strike was now total. It was led and coordinated by the strike committee, which now took the title of 'The Calais Soldiers' and Sailors' Association.' Their method of organising was strictly democratic. Each hut or group of huts elected a delegate to the Camp Committee. These committees then sent delegates to the Central Area Committee. By-passing the officers, these committees issued daily orders from the occupied Headquarters.

The quality and quantity of the food increased. The food surplus served to confirm the rumour that officers had secretly been selling food to French businessmen. S.C.A. Cannel, who was working as a clerk at the Ordnance Depot testified how "our food was being "flogged" to 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."

Eventually a conference was arranged, at which major concessions were won. But the mutiny was drawing to a close. On the evening of the conference, whilst most of the soldiers were attending a local cinema, a surprise vote was taken. The result was acceptance of an officer's ultimatum to return under orders. These men then had to face the wrath of their comrades, who returned to discover that the mutiny had virtually collapsed.

During the mutiny contacts had been made with French workers, and with allied forces on the Rhine. Troops at Dunkirk were also ready to come out, and there was little doubt that they would have found support amongst workers and troops back home. Had the movement continued it could clearly have developed a revolutionary character. A further significant sign

that the army was crumbling was when women of the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary stayed away from work, in solidarity with the Calais strike.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, the Clyde strike had also collapsed. This played a part in lowering the morale of the Calais mutineers, who drew back from a course of action leading to revolution.

This incident had shaken the authorities to the core. British troops had shown they were capable of highly sophisticated forms of struggle, forging important links with other sectors of the army and with the civilian population. Although the strike was over, the authorities never felt strong enough to victimise the strike committees or to re-impose the old type of military discipline. Soldiers were free to return to camp whenever they felt like it, and to enter cafes and the like during 'prohibited' hours, without fear of disciplinary action. The food was improved. New huts were erected. Weekend work was abolished. The Calais Area Soldiers' and Sailors' Association continued to meet and applied for representation on the newly formed Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Union.

The mutiny had ended on January 30 1919. Within three months demobilisation began in earnest - only just in time to avert another wave of mutiny. The lesson that the military machine could be beaten had been learnt. Churchill commented at the time that "if these armies had formed a "united resolve", if they had been seduced from the standards of duty and patriotism, there was no power which could have attempted to withstand them."

From [Mutinies](#), by [Dave Lamb](#), which is extensively footnoted

* Demobbing is short for demobilisation: being permitted to leave the army and return to civilian life