

When Dover Faced an Army Mutiny

Terry Sutton

The day in 1919 when British soldiers in Dover were on the verge of mutiny and marched through the town to demonstrate caused consternation among the military and civil authorities.

This was a time when revolution flared across Europe and there were fears of Communist infiltration in the army and Royal Navy.

In Düsseldorf, Germany, troops of the occupying powers discovered the "Reds" information sheet giving comrades the "Rules for Revolution".

The 1914-18 war was over with an Allied victory and British troops were among those occupying a section of Germany.

There was considerable transit through Dover docks with soldiers arriving from the Continent to get demobbed while others were being ferried across the Strait to carry out British Army of the Rhine occupation duties in Germany.

Many, indeed most, of the soldiers who in 1919 were coming through Dover, had served in the trenches of Flanders under horrific conditions. They had had enough of army life.

Trouble began in Dover in early January when hundreds of troops, after spending Christmas and the New Year at home with their families, refused to leave their Dover transit camps to board the ships for the Continent. Some of the officers in command were newly appointed and had not served in the trenches and when they threatened the disobeying troops with

punishment they were told to get lost. The situation grew tense and several hundred of the rank-and-file decided to march through Dover town centre to demonstrate about their various complaints.

They marched, singing, along Snargate Street from the Oil Mills in Limekiln Street (now a petrol filling station), through the main street to the Town Hall.

There they demanded to see the mayor. There were negotiations between the men and their worried Headquarters' officers and eventually the troops, without any violence, returned to their transit camps. And eventually sailed to France.

At the time there were scores of demob happy servicemen in Dover who just wanted to get out and get home. Some of them had joined in the demonstration, complaining of demob delays. Their dispersal centre was among the huts then standing in Northfall Meadow (near where Jubilee Way now passes) while they slept in houses in Victoria Park, the Oil Mills, and the rest camp at South Front Barracks then at the Western Heights.

Some of the agitators among the demonstrators were believed to have been influenced by the real mutiny across the Channel in Etaples, near Boulogne, in September 1917.

This blew up after the arrest of a New Zealand soldier who disobeyed regulations by visiting the "posh" community of Le Touquet, reserved for officers. He was picked up by MPs as he returned to camp

over a linking bridge.

His arrest was followed by a full-scale disturbance. Scuffles broke out and a military policeman shot and killed a Gordon Highlander corporal. His bullets also injured a passing French woman.

More than a thousand angry British, Australian and New Zealand troops chased the MPs who fled before army reinforcements were brought in to quell the mutiny.

It all ended in tears. Many of the mutineers were charged, one was sentenced to death and shot in Boulogne, and three others were given 10 years penal servitude, while others were jailed for a year with hard labour.

They were interesting times. Dover has no military now.



*Shot At Dawn Monument,
the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire*

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