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Title

'Hardship and boredom; marauding and drink.' How to research British military deserters

Summary

Desertion was a huge problem in the British armed forces to the 1850s at least as men rebelled against the appalling conditions and harsh discipline. Australia and New Zealand with their burgeoning economies was a favourite place for men to desert. This presentation will look at the phenomenon of desertion from the eighteenth to after the Second World War and suggest ways to research ancestors who were deserters from Their Majesties' forces.

Abstract

Desertion was once a major problem for both the Army and Navy. Men unhappy at the conditions they had to endure or having decided that they no longer wished to serve the crown would leave their posts. In many cases this was almost involuntary – many men deserted fearing the punishment when they found themselves overstaying furlough or even returning late from the pub one evening.

Otherwise most men deserted, in the words of one writer, because of: 'Hardship and boredom; marauding and drink.'

Desertion on active service was always a problem. When in port Naval ships rarely allowed their crew onshore for fear that they would desert – or 'run' in Naval terminology.

Punishment could be severe for men who were caught. Until the 1870s it was the death penalty, but more often the man was flogged or on occasion transported overseas. More commonly the offender would be imprisoned or confined to barracks. Desertion was less of a problem during the two world wars, but it is not uncommon to find on a man's service record that he was disciplined for being absent without leave or having overstayed his leave.

More seriously the vast majority of the British soldiers 'Shot at Dawn' during the First World War were deserters, men such as 17-year old Private Thomas Highgate. Unable to bear the carnage at the Battle of Mons, he fled and hid in a barn. Caught, he was shot as a warning to other potential deserters.

But how do find out whether your ancestor was a deserter? This paper will describe the major causes of desertion between about 1760 and 1960 and the attempts by the authorities to stamp it out.

It will also consider the major records that can be used if delegates have a deserter in their family tree. They include courts martial, description books, records of the adjutant general as well as newspapers and publications such as *Hue and Cry* and the *London Gazette*.

Audience

Advanced