

IRISH SHOT AT DAWN CAMPAIGN PETITION LAUNCHED

From Journalist Andrew Bushe

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A petition calling on British Prime Minister Tony Blair to grant pardons for 26 Irish-born soldiers shot for alleged cowardice by military authorities in World War I was launched yesterday (sat Feb 22) by the Irish Shot at Dawn campaign.

"We are appealing for public support to have the wrongs of the past corrected," said Irish co-ordinator of the Shot at Dawn campaign, Peter Mulvany when he launched the petition outside the GPO in Dublin.

The collecting of signatures here, in the North and in Britain will continue until Remembrance Day on November 11.

Mr Mulvany, who described the executions as "judicial murders", said most of those who died were clearly suffering from shell-shock.

"There was no proper justice or medical evidence at the courts martial. They were shot - not in the name of justice - but as a stupid, spiteful and shameful example to others. It was incredible what went on.

"The men on the front line were simply cannon fodder and justice demands that those who were executed should now be given full reviews and pardons."

The new development in the Shot at Dawn campaign follows the major boost it received last year when the Government rowed in behind it.

Foreign Affairs Minister Brian Cowen asked officials to begin discussions with their British counterparts "to re-establish the good names of these Irishmen".

The campaign has also received backing from the main churches, trade unions and politicians on both sides of the religious divide in Northern Ireland.

Mr Cowen said that as part of reconciliation efforts arising from the peace process the country was embracing the "sacrifice" made by Irishmen who joined the British Army prior to Independence on the basis that they were fighting for small nations."It is an intrinsic part of this process that we show our concern at the treatment of those men,

particularly in regard to treatment which resulted unfairly in their disgrace and execution."

The Department said the execution statistics were "compelling" with regard to a pattern of discrimination experienced by Irish troops.

"In comparison to British, Canadian and New Zealand troops, Irish soldiers were four times more likely to be executed as a result of courts-martial.

"Soldiers suffering from shellshock, post traumatic stress disorder, mental breakdown etc received little or no medical assistance, and the effects of these conditions on the mental state of the executed men were not taken into account in any substantive manner."

Mr Cowen said the offences for which the Irishmen were charged - such as desertion, cowardice, and falling asleep at their post - were repealed by the British authorities in 1930.

"That itself indicated serious public concern at the time about the credibility of the convictions and sentences passed by the British military system of justice in the awful conditions prevailing on and near the battlefields."

Mr Mulvany said some of the cases were unbelievable.

"Private Patrick Downey, 19, a volunteer from Limerick, was shot for disobedience when he refused to wear a soaking wet cap. He was undefended at his trial and executed on 27 December, 1915, despite having previously fought bravely at Gallipoli.

"The court martial records state 'his guilty plea to this capital charge was erroneously accepted'. Discipline in his regiment was poor, so he was shot as an example," Mr Mulvany said.

"Downey's last remarks were noted by an army doctor as spirited to the end. He laughed when he heard his fate: 'That's a good joke. You let me enlist and then you bring me here and shoot me'."

Ends

<http://www.shotatdawncampaignirl.com>