NEWSLETTER

NEWENT & DISTRICT PROBUS CLUB

JUNE 2025

Message from our Chairman

As I write the sun is shining and all my plants need watering after one of the driest spells I can remember since 1976 (the year Borg first won Wimbledon). Hopefully the weather will stay kind to us as we officially start summer. With any luck we will also enjoy a sunny day on July 22 for our summer party which I hope as many of you as possible will attend. We had 58 members and guests last year and our target is to beat that total.
Fraser has arranged a great programme of talks and it is good to see that attendances at these is rising steadily. Remember that guests are always welcome, especially where they might decide to become members.
Something that has concerned me in taking over from Fraser is that I am following on from a master in the art of telling jokes. I have often wondered where he finds them. As you know, the secret of telling a good joke is a combination of timing with the relevance to the subject matter concerned, in our case to the talk we have just heard. I am writing this just before our last meeting in May where with immaculate timing the subject of the talk Fraser has chosen is being shot at dawn!
Now where can I find a couple of funny jokes on that happy topic?

Mike

PUB LUNCH
TUESDAY 3 JUNE 2025

Mine Host:
John Weeden

The Dog and Muffler,
Wellmeadow Lane,
Joyford Hill,
Coleford, GL16 7AS
12.30- 13.00

What 3 Words

Suspended Banana Desktop

SPEAKER: 10 JUNE 2025

GILL GIBBONS

"WHO WERE THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR"

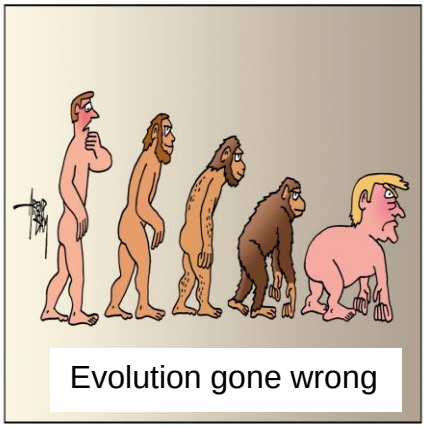
The Knights Templar were a medieval Catholic military order formed in the 12th century to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land. They became a powerful financial and military force in the Crusader States and Western Europe, ultimately facing persecution and dissolution in the 14th century. Their sudden end led to the development of numerous legends and myths surrounding them.

SPEAKER: TUESDAY 24 JUNE 2025

PETER PETRIE

" The History of the Modern Calendar"

The Gregorian calendar, now widely used globally, was created in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII as a reform of the Julian calendar. It aimed to correct the inaccuracies in the Julian calendar, which had caused a drift between the calendar and the seasons.



Evolution gone wrong

OMG I'm rich and didn't even know it!

I have Silver in my hair, Gold in my teeth, Crystals in my kidneys and an inexhaustible supply of natural gas.

I never thought I'd accumulate so much wealth in my old age!

The Wizard of Oz is 86 this month. If Dorothy were to encounter today, men with no heart, no brains and no courage she wouldn't be in Oz she would be in DC

At school, Little Johnny's classmate tells him that most adults are hiding at least one dark secret, so it's very easy to blackmail them by saying, "I know the whole truth."
Little Johnny decides to go home and try it out. Johnny's mother greets him at home, and he tells her, "I know the whole truth." His mother quickly hands him £10 and says, "Just don't tell your father."
Quite pleased, the boy waits for his father to get home from work, and greets him with, "I know the whole truth." The father promptly hands him £20 and says, "Please don't say a word to your mother."
Very pleased, the boy is on his way to school the next day when he sees the postman at his front door. The boy greets him by saying, "I know the whole truth."
The postman immediately drops the mail, opens his arms, and says, **"Then come give your Daddy a great big hug!"**

A group of engineers were about to fly in a new aircraft. Just before take off they were informed that the aircraft had been designed and built by their students. Frantically, they all scrambled to get off the aircraft except one elderly engineer. He was asked as to why he had decided not to leave the aircraft. He calmly said " I have full confidence in my students, knowing them for a fact I can asssure you this plane will never even start!

The fact that Jellyfish have survived for 650 million years without brains gives hope for many people.

WHERE WILL THEY GO?

Many of us are reaching that age when we wonder “what will happen to our possessions when we are no longer on this Earth?” I am not referring to the obvious major items such as our house or car for example.

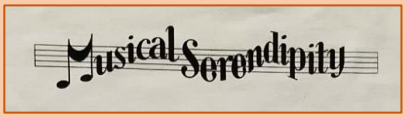
No. I mean the quirky, intensely personal ones such as the lovingly preserved back editions of a Wisden cricket annual or the membership cards of the sports and social club of which you were a member for maybe half a century. They all have some meaning of your younger days but, in today’s modern world, little or no relevance to your heirs.

Increasingly, I look around what passes for my office, the garage or, most likely, the loft and survey the ever-increasing piles which defy all my attempts to reduce them.

In a closely fought race, a likely contender is surely my collection of elastic bands. What started as what is known as an ODIWCIU* project, it had its origins back in the days when the postman (remember those?) dispensed with string for tying up his bundles of letters and used elastic bands instead, These invariably were dropped on the floor where, equally invariably, came into my possession. At first I thought that if ever they reached the size of a golf ball I would cease but we all know how collectors can and do become obsessive and so, like Topsy, it just grew and grew and grew. Now it is rapidly approaching the dimensions of a cricket ball and I console myself that one day, when it is of football size, perhaps I can play kickabouts with my grandchildren. From my wheelchair perhaps!

Now that is sorted, are there any takers for my pristine collection of used paper-clips, all lovingly salvaged from official letters?

*One Day It Will Come In Useful pph



SERENDIPITY: The happy knack of making unexpected and delightful discoveries by accident

APPLAUSE: Noises made by the audience (often at the wrong time) to express a desire to end the performance and go home.

ORCHESTRA: The result of musicians having discovered that there is safety in numbers

CONSONANTS: A subject of manic obsession among choirmasters. It is said that, by their use, one word may be distinguished from another.

FRENCH HORN: The French Horn is actually German and not to be confused with the English Horn which is French.

ENCORE: A nasty method by which performers get back at the audience for its feigned appreciation in the form of applause. Audiences would be well advised not to applause at all, so everyone can get home that much sooner.

PRIMA DONNA: The most important female role in an opera. This is of course, largely a matter of opinion. Derived from an Italian phrase that may be roughly translated as “pain in the neck”, although some have a lower opinion.

RHYTHM: A faculty in great demand, unfortunately in very short supply among those involved in music.

Having just stepped down from being on the Committee after a good many years, I'm reminded of the following.
"Ode to a Committee".

Oh give me your pity, I'm on a committee
which means that from morning to night,
we attend and amend, and contend and defend
without a conclusion in sight.

We confer and concur, we defer and demur,
and reiterate all of our thoughts,
we revise the agenda with frequent addenda,
and consider a load of reports.

We compose and propose, we support and oppose,
and points of procedure are fun
but though various notions are brought up as motions,
there's still very little gets done.

I must say however that although I have had the misfortune to be on committees which bear a close resemblance to the above description, in my experience, the PROBUS Committee is certainly not one of them. I have found this to be a good committee with a common sense of purpose and no hidden or personal agendas. Like all such gatherings, there have been one or two minor bumps along the road but nothing which couldn't be resolved amicably, so my sincere thanks to all my fellow committee members past and present for making my time enjoyable and allowing me to feel I was doing something useful.

John Martin

A tongue-in-cheek definition of a committee might be a group of people who collectively decide that nothing can be done, even when they are individually capable of doing something.

During a lull at a White House dinner, Melania Trump leaned over to chat with Elon Musk. “I bought Donald a parrot for his birthday,” she said “ The parrot is so smart, Donald has already taught him to say over two hundred words”
“That’s very impressive “said Musk.”But you do realise he just speaks the words. He doesn’t really understand what they mean” “Oh, I know “said Melania, “But neither does the parrot”

THINGS YOU SAY AFTER 70

1. Where the heck is my phone?
2. How did I get this bruise?
3. That isn’t my password either.
4. How do you expect me to read this small print
5. Where have I put my glasses.
6. I don’t care if it’s not fashionable its comfortable
7. Who the heck is calling at 9.30pm?
8. Does anyone ever say please or thank you anymore?
9. These scales can’t be right

Things are not always what they seem!

A taxi driver was driving a nun when he asked her if he could make a request, but didn’t want to offend. She said, “my son I have been a nun for a long time and I am sure you won’t offend me”.
He said, “I have always wondered what it would be like to be kissed by a Nun”. “The nun replied that’s not a problem as long as you are single and a Catholic”. “The driver replies excitely, I am single and I am a Catholic”. The nun tells him to pull over in the next layby. The diver gets into the back of his cab and is kissed by the nun in a manner which would put a hooker to shame. He then got out and continued on their journey. She then noticed the driver crying, “whatever is wrong my son”. The man says that he had sinned, he was actually married and was Jewish.The nun consoled him and said, “don’t worry, my name is actually Kevin and I am on my way to a Fancy Dress party” !!

EVERYTHING HAS TO HAVE A NAME

Names given to decades in which you are born

1901 – 1924: The Greatest Generation. ...
1925 – 1945: The Silent Generation
1946 – 1964: Baby Boomers. ...
1965 – 1980: Generation X. ...
1981 – 1996: Millennials. ...
1997 – 2012: Generation Z. ...
2013 – 2024: Generation Alpha. ...
2025 – 2039: Generation Beta.

The real story behind the picture

On Tuesday 6 May, 18 members and wives visited the Jet Age Museum in Gloucester, thanks to John Martin, a former volunteer at the Museum, for organising such an interesting visit.
The museum is Home to Gloucestershire's aviation heritage from the early days of flight, through the birth of the Jet Age to the present day.
Dedicated to the preservation of Gloucestershire's rich aviation heritage, Jet Age museum is a registered charity run exclusively by volunteers. It tells the story of aviation in the county from the early days of flight, through the birth of the Jet Age to the modern aerospace industry of today. Their mission is to preserve the past and inspire the future by telling stories of the people, places, aircraft and companies that have made Gloucestershire a major centre of aviation and aerospace development for over 100 years.
I was very interested in the Trident section, having flown in one and poignantly, I was involved with the one that crashed at Staines in 1972. The volunteers were excellent with their knowledge of the aircraft. Although it wasn't a locally built aircraft, it was the 1st passenger aircraft to adopt the Smiths Autoland system, which was developed at their factory in Cheltenham.

Sitting in the cockpit, it was mind boggling seeing the number of dials and switches that the crew would have to have been familiar with.
One of the most amusing items, a lever at the side of the pilot and co-pilot seat was a metal cup holder and…..an ashtray (Those were the days?)
Interestingly, it was explained what was surmised to be the possible cause of the Staines crash.
Also fascinating were the "Black Boxes" (Actually bright orange) Flight Data Recorders, their function was explained in great detail.
A lot of the volunteers have personal experience which brings it so much to life.

Amongst the huge display of aircraft engines and artifacts is model bi-plane made by two of the volunteer Chris Radford and Keith Eagles who constructed it in 1995 over 12 weekends.
Known as "Biggles" it's a much loved
'fund raiser' which regularly appears at air shows and is a popular attraction with children who visit the museum.
Volunteers. Initially it was a publicity stunt to appear in the Gloucester Carnival parade mounted on top of a Range rover.
Unfortunately, in the Carnival, Biggles was not placed in the top three.
An investigation took place, and the organisers were under the impression **that Biggles was a real aircraft, therefore he had been excluded!**
Having the museum opened especially for us was a real bonus, as there was no pressures on time and we were able to spend as much time as we wished on the various displays

One of the highlights of the visit for me and I am sure quite a few others was being able to climb or “crawl” up a very steep ladder into the cockpit of the Avro Vulcan, an icon of the Cold War “V” Bombers fleet. During my service in the RAF they were regular visitors to RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. Such an awesome sight as it flew over. I also saw one of its last flights at Throckmorton Air Show some years ago. The whine of the engines so distinctive.

I think the overriding memory of sitting in the cockpit was of how confined the space was for the crew. Our former chairman Tony Pearson flew one of these beasts and at 6ft 3” he only just fitted inside. He had to remove his helmet to prevent his head touching the roof !!. The other crew of three were in an equally small area below the pilots. During the Falklands War two of these air craft flew for 10 hours to the Ascension Islands and 16 hours to the Falklands and back after bombing Port Stanly Airport. Unimaginable endurance of the crew.

Hawker Hurricane

The Hawker Hurricane played a major role in the Battle of Britain. The Hurricane was built by Gloster Aircraft Company who produced 5 per day at the peak of operations in WWII.
Whilst it was overshadowed in the public imagination by the Supermarine Spitfire during the Battle of Britain in 1940, the Hurricane inflicted 60% of the losses sustained by the Luftwaffe in the campaign and fought in all the major theatres of the Second World War.

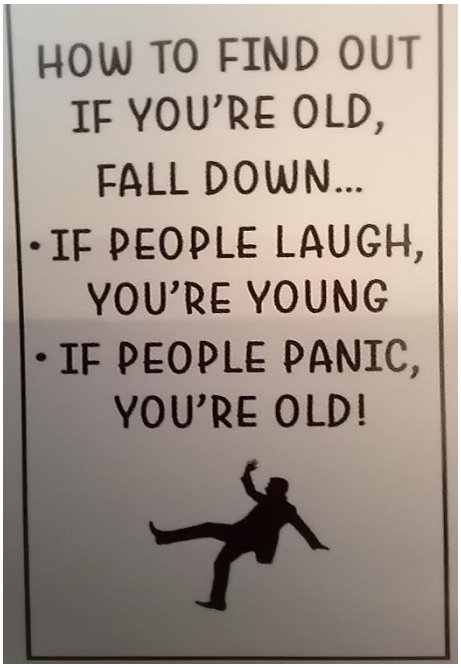
“Note that our exhibit is a reproduction of the original airframe” (This was built by Pinewood Film Studios for the film “Battle of Britain”)

“Boys of all ages love to dream”

Members then retired to the Aviator” Pub just around the corner where they were met by other members and wives for an excellent lunch. It’s an unusual venue as it is right at the bottom of the busy runway.

Thanks John, a jolly good day out enjoyed by all.

Ed



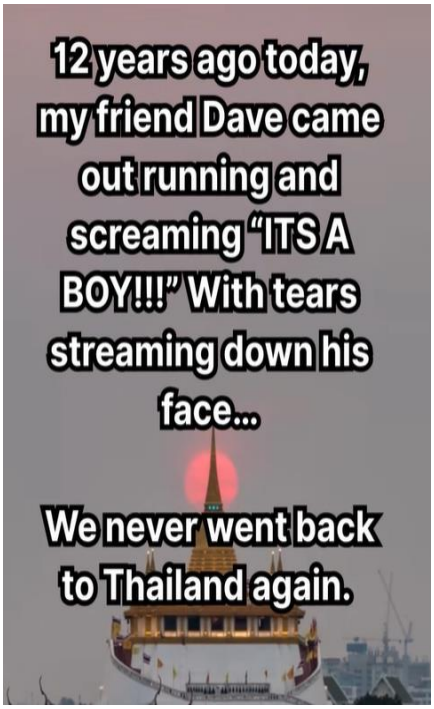
Not so Woke Nicknames in the workplace:

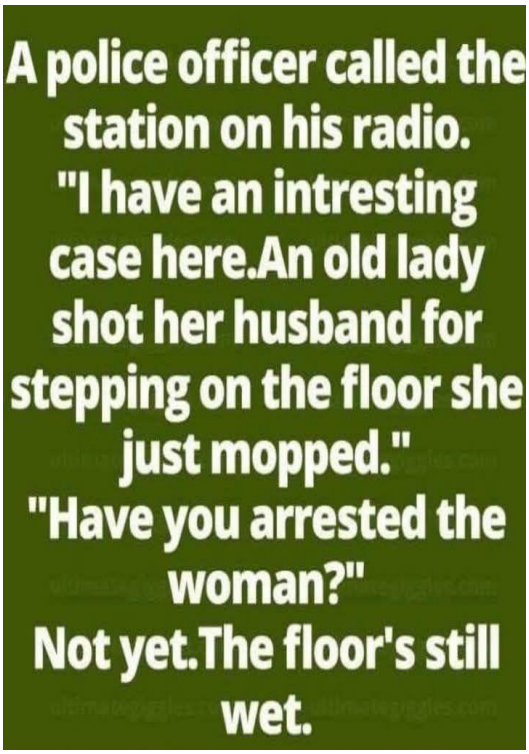
A chap who worked in a factory was called “Keth” (Because he had an eye missing!!!!)

In the Fire Service everyone had a nickname. When a young Asian lad joined a watch he was given the nickname “Nic”….(Ethnic)

A man had one leg shorter than the other, he was referred as “Snipers nightmare”

In a sales office one of the team was called “Lantern”, the reason was that he always had to be carried and wasn’t very bright.





CAN PUZZLES STOP ALZHEIMER'S ?

It's one of those pieces of received information that's probably been quoted to you many times. Keep your mind agile, do plenty of crosswords and sudoku and it will reduce your chances of getting Alzheimer's disease in old age.....But is it true ?

Environment vs Heredity

Only partly. This is an area that has seen several studies and just as many inconclusive results. However, there appears to be a gram of truth in it. Around one in five people carry a gene variant -APoE4- which doubles the risk of developing Alzheimer's in later life. For those people, doing crosswords, sudoku and any other mentally stimulating activity has been shown to help delay the build-up of abnormal protein deposits on the brain. These have been strongly implicated in the development of Alzheimer's.
Conclusion: Keep doing crosswords, sudoku and any other activity you find stimulating: It can't do any harm.

Exercise can be fun

It was suggested to ensure an all-round lifestyle change, older people should take on extra or different activities. Dancing is less intimidating to going the gym, plus it can be fun and some social interaction as well as exercise.

Higher Education

There are increasing indications that a higher degree of education may also help the susceptibility to dodge a bullet when it comes to Alzheimer's. A study by the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm found a correlation between the odds for contracting Alzheimer's disease and the level of education reached by the subject. Each year of additional education past the primary stage resulted in lower odds for Alzheimer's, all the way up to completing a university degree.

Keep Dancing

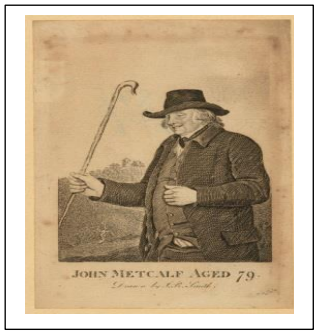
During a study between 2009-2011 a group of people between 60 and 75 were given exercise and aerobics classes and brain training with graded computer games, while their diet was overhauled to include plenty of vegetables, fish and healthy oils. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, at the end of the period the revamped sample did substantially better than the control subjects in a range of tests, including an 85% improvement in tests of their brain's organisation of thought process and a staggering 120% in the speed at which they could process information.
A group who had been given straightforward health advice offered by a doctor but nothing else, remained at the cognition levels of their original tests

SIX STAGES OF SEPARATION

On the 13th may our guest speaker John Peters gave a talk based on a game of “Six Stages of Separation” which proposes that within the maximum sequence of six contacts each one of us is linked to a famous character either of the present time or a historical figure.

In his own family tree, John found links to John Metcalf(1717-1810) known as Blind Jack of Knaresborough or Blind Jack Metcalf, who was the first professional road builder to emerge during the Industrial Revolution. Whilst he himself is an interesting character in history. John then explained how, through a number of links from Blind Jacks family, through the early Royal Navy, he traced a link to Lord Horatio Nelson, thereby demonstrating the process of six stages of separation.

John Peters



John Metcalf

Horatio Nelson

John went on to describe several other interesting links through this process before moving on to his own link, via his involvement with the trade unions, to one of the most important Russian spies of the Cold War period.

As an officer with the UCU (University & College Union) and a member of an Education Teacher’s Committee, John came into contact with Hilary Norwood (formerly Nussbaum) who was of Jewish-Russian descent and a Communist. In 1935 Hilary Norwood had married Melita Sirnis whose father Alexander had been born in Latvia and had worked for Leo Tolstoy, before being exiled overseas. Both of them had strong political beliefs.

Melita had been born in Bournemouth in 1912. Her father was a member of a small Marxist group and, during the First World War, became a strong supporter of the Russian revolution.

Following her education in Southampton, and a short period at the University, she had spent a year in Heidelberg in 1931 where she became involved in anti-fascist activities

On her return to England she joined the Independent Labour Party.

In 1932 she had started work as a secretary with the British Non-Ferrous Metals Company and during her time there had married Hilary Nussbaum, who later changed his name to Hilary Norwood. It is thought that at this time Melita had secretly joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, where she was recruited to work for the Russian NKVD (the Interior Ministry and Secret Police of the Soviet Union) in 1935.

During the Second World War Melita Norwood's work with British Non-Ferrous Metals made her an important spy.

In 1943 she began working as a P.A. for a director of the company, who was a member of the advisory committee of Tube Alloys, the cover name for Britain's atomic bomb project. In March 1945, through the work carried out by British Non-Ferrous Metals for Tube Alloys, she gained access to documents which she was able to pass on to her Russian contacts. It is thought that this information permitted the Soviet Union to build and test an atomic bomb which was based on the British, rather than the American design, many years sooner than expected.

In 1958 Melita joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and during a trip to Moscow where she was accompanying her husband on a Philatelic tour, she was secretly awarded a prestigious medal by the KGB and offered a pension, which she declined.

Melita Norwood was exposed as a spy in September 1999, following the defection of a Russian agent. She was now an 87-year-old great-grandmother who had been betraying British secrets to the Soviet Union for decades. The Government decided that it could not prosecute her so long after the event and in such a frail condition. There was clearly some embarrassment that her obvious communist views and the ease with which she was able to access highly sensitive information, did not lead to her exposure as a spy much earlier.

At the time, she told the BBC "I did what I did, not to make money, but to help prevent the defeat of a new system which had, at great cost, given ordinary people food and fares which they could afford, a good education and a health service." Melita Norwood died of cancer and heart disease at New Cross Hospital, Wolverhampton, on 2nd June 2005.

Of course, while John Peters talk was going on, members were frantically counting on their fingers to see if, however tenuously, they were connected , or even related to any celebrity.

Peter Hayes did some classic name dropping when he revealed that he was just two clicks away from Anthony Blunt, Keeper of the Queen's Pictures and master spy, for the Russians and not her Majesty, by virtue of Blunt being the nominal owner of a property that he was purchasing.

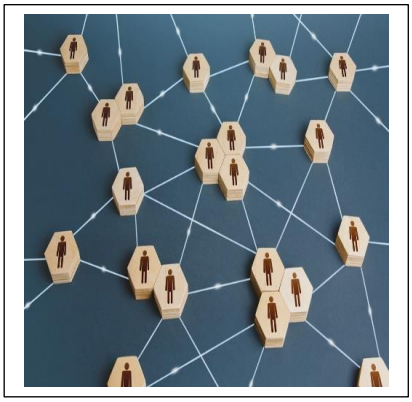
Other notables in Peter's lexicon were Lord(Joel) Joffe, Nelson Mandela's legal adviser worked for a while and Frank Macaskie, sometime solicitor to the Kray Twins who was his son's one time landlord.

The six degrees of separation theory posited that we are all only six Steps away from everyone else in the world

Peters talk and members' examples seemed to support this.

Graham Mawdsley

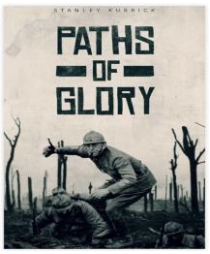
Six degrees of separation is the idea that all people are six or fewer social connections away from each other. As a result, a chain of "friend of a friend" statements can be made to connect any two people in a maximum of six steps. It is also known as the six handshakes rule.



"Shot at Dawn" – Military discipline in the French army during WW1

Speaker: John Reid

In the mid-1950s, there was a controversial war film, Paths of Glory, starring Kirk Douglas, which dealt with alleged cowardice in the face of the enemy (of which more later) and, in a case of art imitating life, John Reid's talk dealt with this and even mirrored a quartet of the accused.

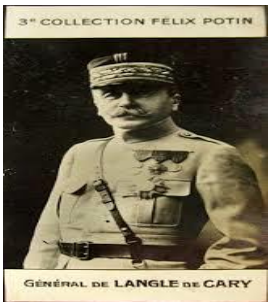


In the first world war, the belligerent powers, in particular the French, imposed draconian penalties on those servicemen who were adjudged guilty of, *inter-alia., desertion, mutiny and cowardice* (as judged by the accusers!) John opened by giving thumbnail sketches of the principal officer class who, with some enthusiasm in some cases, carried out this policy for at least the first two years of the conflict.

In all, some 740 French soldiers were executed by firing squad during the two years that the policy operated; this compared with 306 by the British executed under similar, but arguably more lawful rules, and figures in the low teens in other belligerent countries.

Under the French code, in addition to cowardice in the face of the enemy, desertion, refusal to obey an order, self-mutilation and many more could attract a capital punishment. Under the French system, the prisoner was denied any legal assistance, there was no right of appeal against sentence, which was usually carried out within 24 hours and even on the same day. To give one instance, even if a soldier had been shot, for instance, in the hand, an officer would adjudge if it was the result of enemy fire. Should he decree otherwise then death by firing squad would result, again with no appeal by the accused. Even General Earl Haig a noted hard-liner of the time, was appalled by this barbaric practice, writing in one formal document confirming a death sentence "*If we behave like this, how can we expect to win the war?*"

John then gave many examples of the unfortunates who were shot during the brief period that the policy of rough justice operated. An example of this was the case of Francois Laurent who was cut down by the French army's own bullets, as one of hundreds of soldiers shot "as an Example" for supposed indiscipline. This 29 year old had not fallen for France but been executed in disgrace; his widow was denied a pension and had to raise their two children destitute and humiliated.



Laurent's fate was set on 1st October 1914, just eight weeks into hostilities, when he received a bullet wound on the hand while serving in the trenches. Twelve days later – after an order by General Fernand de Langle de Cary decreeing the arrest of any man suspected of wounding himself in order to escape the front line – Laurent was hauled before a military tribunal.

Orders had been given for “simplified” trials with as few participants as possible, to allow a “rapid and severe repression”; coupled to the instruction that courts-martial not be subject to appeal, this posed high odds to any defendant. But this soldier from outlying Brittany also couldn’t understand French and received no help to explain himself.

Executed along with twelve of his army comrades on 19th October, Laurent was one of hundreds of French soldiers shot during the war’s opening months to set a disciplinary “example” able to send a chill up other men’s spines.

After the armistice in 1918, some such cases were reopened under pressure from families and veterans’ groups, critical of this hasty “justice”; in 1933, the verdict against Laurent was overturned. But the impossibility of retrieving evidence from memories sunk in mud and blood left hundreds of families without even such a belated reprieve. This dragged on until 13th January, 2022, as France’s National Assembly voted to rehabilitate all those “shot as an example.”

Five months after François Laurent’s execution, tiny Souain-Perthes-lès-Hurlus was the scene of another of the most infamous cases of men being “shot as an example.”, the 21st Company of the 336th Infantry Division were ordered to mount a bayonet charge against the German positions just north of the village.

The heaped remains of dead comrades starkly counselled against a further rush toward enemy fire, and the men refused to go ahead. Six corporals and eighteen privates were selected almost at random, as a “representative” sample of the men who ought to have gone over the top.

The case of these corporals is poignantly illustrated in the case of the film, mentioned above, illustrative of how discipline was enforced, with an unfortunate few plucked out for exemplary punishment that would sow terror among many others.

John’s talk gave a glimpse of the sobering reality of war and showed that there are no limits to “Man’s inhumanity to Man”

Peter Hayes

Where am I this month?

Thanks to all those who submitted articles and assisted with production.
Ed