

# THE UNKNOWN DESERTER

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Nine Drawings by Clifford Harper



*“Wars will cease when men refuse to fight.”*

The brief war of private Aby Harris, no.11-1799, 11th Battalion Middlesex Regiment, described in nine drawings by Clifford Harper, and dedicated to all deserters everywhere.





The story of Aby Harris was taken from *Shot at Dawn: Executions in World War One by Authority of the British Army Act* by Julian Putowski and Julian Sykes, Wharncliffe Publishing, 1989.



Aby Harris was one of thousands of teenagers who, swept up in the summer fever of patriotism that infected Britain in 1914, volunteered to fight in France. Born of Jewish parents and raised in the sweatshop ghetto of Whitechapel in London's East End Aby found no relief in the army from his life of poverty, with army pay he could hardly afford cigarettes or extra bread, and was soon forced to beg for money in letters to his mother.



Abraham Harris was the seventy-fourth British soldier executed in the war, and he was followed by two hundred and sixty eight more. On 3 April 1916 his parents received this communication from Infantry Records, Hounslow: "Sir, I am directed to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office to the effect that no. 11/1799. pte. Harris A, 11th Battalion Middlesex Regiments, was sentenced after trial by court martial to suffer death by being shot for desertion, and the sentence was duly executed on 20th March, 1916."



Hunger and poverty were not the only constant companions of the British soldier. He also marched in step, at double time, shoulder to shoulder with the long hours and exhaustion of basic training. The mind numbing days and weeks of drill on the parade grounds of Aldershot military camp, the bare squalor of the barrack room and the never ending orders of the drill sergeant would soon, however, seem like a holiday compared with what was to come.



Abraham Harris was court-martialled on March 4. The court officers chose not to believe his explanation that the grenade explosion shattered his nerve and his senses went all to pieces and they sentenced him to death by firing squad. This verdict was upheld by the senior officers who reviewed the sentence and Aby faced the British rifles at Labourse on 20 March 1916.





Aby Harris was posted to the 11th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, in the trenches of France. Ill equipped and poorly clothed the men froze through the winter of 1915, at Givenchy near Bethune. In christmas week the Germans tunneled under the British line and exploded an enormous land-mine, following up with a massive artillery barrage. Those who survived had just enough time to recover when, a few days later, the Germans did the same again.



On February 13 Aby quit the trenches and reported to company headquarters. He explained that his nerves had gone to pieces after a grenade exploded close to his post. The medical officer found nothing wrong with Aby and he was ordered back to the line. Instead he walked away from the front. Tired, frightened and cold he sheltered in an empty farmhouse, where the smoke of the fire he lit to warm himself attracted a passing officer, who arrested Aby as a suspected deserter.



Among the wounded and broken men was Aby Harris, badly injured in his back. On 15 January 1916 his parents were informed that: "11/1799 pte. Harris A is ill at 38th Field Ambulance, France, suffering from wounds and shock (mine explosion)".



Now in its third year the war on the western front was hungry for men and within three weeks Aby was discharged from hospital as fit for the front. In February he re-joined the 11th Battalion to march up to the line and take position opposite the notorious German Hohenzollern redoubt.