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From the Archives: Military Justice, 1863

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From the Archives

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Military Justice, 1863

Military justice systems often must preserve law and order under very difficult circumstances. In former times, punishments were harsh. Those who believe that little has changed should consider the following excerpt from the entry of 23 July 1863 in the diary of Corporal William W. Cluett, a drummer of the 57th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, part of the garrison of Corinth, a strategic railroad junction and the main Federal stronghold in northeastern Mississippi:

This morning we are ordered on review at 8 o'clock in the large field to the south-east of Corinth, to witness the execution of a deserter named Johnson, from Company A, 1st Alabama Cavalry. At the appointed time the troops are all in line, the sun is intensely hot, and from the movements of the troops it is very dusty; soon the procession, with the unfortunate man, appear at the right of the column, a brass band playing the dead march; then the company of which he was a member; then four men carrying his coffin, the prisoner following, assisted by the Chaplain of the 66th Indiana; and then came the detail of twelve men who were to carry out the sentence of the Court Martial--that he be shot to death--passing along the line of the troops from right to left. The procession then marched to the center of the column, the place of execution. The prisoner was placed upon his coffin in a sitting position, a solemn and impressive prayer was offered by the chaplain after which he was blindfolded; the executioners take their position; the Provost Marshal gave the command and the unhappy man was launched into eternity. May his ignominious death prove a warning to all those who might be tempted to do likewise.

Source: Richard J. Sommers, ed., *Vignettes of Military History, Volume III* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army Military History Institute, February 1982), Vignette No. 177, contributed by Lieutenant Colonel Gerald C. Brown, drawn from William W. Cluett, *History of the 57th Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*.

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