

2 The Methods of Execution

Although both the British and the Americans referred to their method of executing the death penalty as “hanging”, the methods employed were fairly different.

British practice : Executions in the UK

In October and November 1945, seven German POWs were hanged. Five were executed at Pentonville prison on Saturday 6 October for the murder of fellow POW, Feldwebel Wolfgang Rosterg and a further two were hanged there on 16 November for the murder of POW Unteroffizier Gerhardt Rettig.

16 men were executed for spying during World War II. One of them was shot by military firing squad at the Tower of London, the remainder being hanged at Pentonville (six) and Wandsworth (nine). A further two men were hanged for treason after the War, John Amery and William Joyce (“Lord Haw Haw”) at Wandsworth. Private Theodore Schurch of the Royal Army Service Corps was hanged for treachery at Pentonville. All of these executions followed standard British practice as set out below.

Executions were normally carried out at 9 A.M. in London and 8 A.M. in the rest of the country and followed a standard set of rules laid down by the Home Office. A small number of people were required by law to be present, notably the Governor of the prison, the Sheriff or Under Sheriff of the county, the prison doctor, the prison chaplain or a priest of the prisoner's religion, two or more warders plus, of course, the hangman and his assistant.

The prisoner was weighed and their height measured the day before the execution. The hangman would secretly view the person to enable him to modify the drop from that indicated by the 1913 table of drops, if their physical appearance indicated that was desirable. From 1939 an additional nine inches was normally added to that shown in the table.

The length of the drop determined was carefully set, using a mechanism that allowed for adjustment in half inch increments. The gallows was tested, whilst the prisoner was out of their cell, using a bag of sand, of approximately the same weight as them, which would be left on the rope overnight to remove any stretch. Around 7 A.M., the executioners would re-set the trapdoors and make a final adjustment to the length of the drop, caused by stretching of the rope. The rope was coiled up and secured with a piece of pack thread so that the noose dangled at chest level to prevent the inmate falling over it.

The prisoner was given his or her own clothes to wear and would be attended by a priest and if necessary, the prison doctor. If the condemned person appeared to need it, the doctor would give them a glass of brandy to help them cope but they were not normally given tranquillisers.

Just before the appointed hour the execution team formed up outside the condemned cell and, on the signal from the Governor, the hangman entered the cell and strapped the prisoner's hands behind their back with a double buckle leather strap. The hangman went straight to the gallows and the prisoner followed, supported by a warder on each side. The hangman turned to face the prisoner and stopped them on the “T” chalked across the divide of the trapdoors, thus positioning their feet exactly over the middle of the trap. In case they fainted at the last moment, they were supported by two prison officers. The hangman pulled the white hood over the prisoner's head and positioned the noose round the neck, with the eyelet

positioned under the angle of the lower jaw, whilst the assistant strapped their ankles.

As soon as all was ready, the hangman removed the safety pin from the base of the operating lever and pushed it to release the trapdoors. The prisoner dropped through the trap and would be left hanging motionless in the cell below, unconscious, and with their neck vertebrae dislocated and/or fractured and the spinal cord crushed or severed. The whole process would have occupied about the same length of time as it takes to read this paragraph - somewhere between 15 and 20 seconds.

The body was then left to hang for one hour before being taken down for autopsy, in the prisons where this happened, followed by the formal inquest and burial.

Everything was done to make the execution as speedy and humane as possible so as to spare both the prisoner and the witnesses, from any unnecessary distress. Once the signal had been given by the Governor to enter the condemned cell, the hangman was in total charge of the proceedings and did not have to wait for a further signal from the Governor before the releasing the trap, thus the prisoner did not to have to wait a moment longer than was necessary, hooded and noosed.

Executions at Hameln in Germany.

The British military had no experience or history of hanging. Soldiers sentenced to death by courts martial in World War 1 had been executed by firing squad. Those sentenced to death in civilian courts for murder were hanged by the hangman of the day in the county prison, in exactly the same way that civilians were. The British Army did not possess a hangman and thus appointed Albert Pierrepont to carry out hanging sentences at Hameln.

Although those hanged at Hameln had been tried and sentenced by military courts and their death sentences confirmed by the Commander-In-Chief, executions at Hameln largely followed British civilian practice and were carried out as humanely as possible and in strict privacy. Newspaper reporters and cameramen were not permitted to be present, only official witnesses. The army issued a signed death warrant for each prisoner, the lower portion of which had to be completed by the governor of Hameln and returned to Headquarters following the execution. This gave only the date and time of the hanging and was signed by the governor and one witness.

As stated above the last published table of drops was issued by the Prison Commissioners in 1913 and from 1939 onwards it was normal to add nine inches to the 1913 figures. This could be varied if the prisoner had either a weak neck or a strong muscular one but was adhered to fairly closely in most cases. For instance Irma Grese weighed 150 lbs and was given a drop of 7' 4", eight inches more than the 1913 table, while Elisabeth Volkenrath (given as Elizabeth on her death warrant) who was one pound heavier got a drop of 7' 5" which was nine inches more.

The first series of executions at Hameln took place on Friday 13 December, 1945.

Albert Pierrepont was allowed to view the prisoners on the Thursday afternoon, but unlike in Britain, he was also responsible for weighing them. In his autobiography he recorded that Johanna Bormann (given as Juanna on her death warrant) limped down the corridor looking old and haggard. He said she was forty two years old, only a little over five feet high and 101 lbs in weight. She was trembling as she was put on the scales. In German she said "I have my feelings".

As shown on a surviving plan, the cells at Hameln were about 4' 2" wide by 12' 6" long and were deemed too small for the pinioning to take place inside them, so this had to be done in the corridor. Immediately prior to execution the prisoner's arms were secured behind their back, prior to being led down the corridor into the execution room and onto the trapdoors, which had a chalk "T" marked on them to show the person where to stand. Their legs were secured with another strap once in position. A white hood was drawn over their head and the leather covered eyelet noose poisoned around their neck with the thimble under the angle of the lower jaw on the left side of the head. As soon as these preparations were completed Pierrepoint pushed the lever to release the trap doors. Thus the time taken from entering the gallows room to the drop was minimised.

Each of the ten women hanged at Hameln were executed individually and a female prison governor or deputy governor had to be present. The deputy governor of Strangeways prison in Manchester, Miss Wilson, was present for the first three. The "ladies first" rule applied, with women always being hanged before men. It is assumed that women were made to wear canvas underpants as in Britain, but this cannot be verified.

As in British prisons there was no reading out of the charge and death warrant. This was a practice that Albert Pierrepoint found objectionable in the hangings of US servicemen at Shepton Mallet prison, as it added significantly to the time taken.

Men were typically executed in pairs, which meant that the preparations took a few seconds longer, as although Pierrepoint normally had two assistants, he still had to hood and noose each man. Double executions were still permitted in Britain at this time.

One departure from normal domestic practice was to reduce the time that the body remained suspended from the traditional one hour to 15 - 20 minutes, when no audible heartbeat could be detected.

When the officers in charge saw that there were to be 13, 15 or 16 hangings on a single day they asked F.E. Buckland, the assistant director of pathology, British Army of the Rhine, for his views on giving a lethal injection to the prisoner immediately after the drop.

Buckland proposed that the medical officer present would inject 10cc of chloroform into the prisoner 30 seconds after the drop had been given. It was found that if the chloroform was injected directly into the heart, it immediately stopped beating and if injected intravenously into the arm it would stop in seconds. This procedure was first used at the execution of the 10 men and three women in the first series of executions in December, 1945.

On 8 March, 1946 eight men were hanged and it was decided not to inject chloroform. The medical officer listened to their hearts with a stethoscope in the normal way and recorded his results. These showed that it took between 10 and 15 minutes for audible heartbeats to cease. On 15 May, 1946 a further ten executions were carried out and this time the condemned, having been taken off the rope, were wired up to an electrocardiograph, which recorded the electrical activity of the heart. It showed that impulses were produced for a further ten minutes, taking the total time to 25 minutes. During this series of executions, two men re-started breathing and had to be injected with chloroform. In one case, this took place 7 ½ minutes after execution. It is thought that this was the last time chloroform was used.

The army did not use LPC4 forms to record the details of executions but did keep their own records. In 53 recorded hangings it was noted that unconsciousness had been instantaneous in every case. No perceptible movement was observed in 51 instances and in the other two there were "slight contractions of the knees."

After execution the bodies were carefully lifted up for removal of the noose and then lowered back down and placed in simple coffins which were assembled on site from flat packs. Each coffin was lowered into the grave dug in the prison yard and a foot of soil shovelled in on top. A three inch deep layer of charcoal was added as a marker so that future grave diggers would know that there was already a coffin below. Bodies were buried three deep and were marked only with a number.

U.S. practice.

The US Army had a long tradition of hanging as this was felt to be a more ignominious death than musketry, as they quaintly called shooting by firing squad.

Except in Britain, volunteer military hangmen carried out the Army's hanging executions and at this time a standard drop was used. This involved giving the condemned man a drop of approximately their own height, irrespective of their weight. It can be seen in some of the filmed hangings that the prisoner's head is only just below the level of the platform. The rope was tied to a metal hook or eye on the beam and so there was no accurate method of setting a specific drop. Inevitably the standard drop cannot be guaranteed to cause fracture/dislocation of the upper cervical vertebrae and severance/crushing of the spinal cord in every instance.

It was not until 1947 that a table of drops related to the prisoner's weight was included in the revised "Procedure for Military Executions".

Most of the hangings carried out by the US Army in Germany, at Bruchsal, Landsberg and Rheinbach, took place on traditional style American black painted gallows set up in the open in the prison yard. As noted elsewhere the Nuremberg hangings took place in the prison gymnasium and the last ones at Landsberg were carried out on an indoor gallows.

At Bruchsal and Landsberg the prisoner was led from their cell into the yard, with their arms and hands free, accompanied by a Military Police guard and a minister of their religion. At the bottom of the steps leading to the gallows platform their wrists were bound behind their backs with thin cord and then they were led up the 13 steps onto the platform. Here their legs were strapped with a cord or a webbing belt and their death warrant was read out which appeared to take about 40 seconds. The prisoner was allowed to make a final statement if they wished. The black hood was then drawn over their head and shoulders and the 13 coil noose adjusted around their neck. In the filmed hangings carried out by US soldiers the coils are typically positioned in the nape of the neck. There was a delay of several seconds while the minister gave a blessing and the assistant held the noose coils upright, before the hangman operated the trap, with either a lever or by cutting strings to release a heavy ball connected by a cord to the trap door, as at Bruchsal. In one instance at Landsberg, Master Sergeant John C. Woods holds the rope steady for almost a minute after the drop and continues to look down at the hanging body. One assumes that this man struggled for some seconds.

Typically there were quite a large number of witnesses present in the yard, including in at least one instance, a young woman at Bruchsal in January 1946. Still photographs of these executions were taken together with cine film as video was called then. This practice was later stopped and there are no film records of hangings after May 1946.

The German executioner, Johann Reichhart who worked without an assistant, used a broadly similar method but secured the prisoner's wrists with handcuffs and used a shorter hood that came down just to the shoulders. He placed the coils of the noose under the left ear and held them with his left hand while operating the lever with his right hand. From the time the prisoner reached the platform until they dropped was about one minute and 20 seconds. His filmed hangings do not show any evidence of struggling.

All of the executions in Germany were single hangings. At Landsberg two gallows were used for large batches of prisoners, as happened on 28 and 29 May, 1946. When one prisoner was suspended, a second was brought out and hanged on the other gallows. Once the medical officer had certified death, the body was cut down and placed in a simple wooden hexagonal section coffin with a white cross on the lid and a label bearing the person's name attached, prior to being removed for burial.

No women were hanged by the US Army.