

**NOTE: HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF MERCY KILLING**

Our search uncovered one instance of mercy killing actually being carried out. It appears on pp. 159-60 of Robert Graves, Good-bye to All That (NY: Doubleday, 2d ed, 1957; JS), when he speaks of overdosing wounded comrades with morphia pellets. However, the evidence is tenuous and inferential.

Examples of mercy killings contemplated but not executed are more easily documented. See Charles Edmonds, A Subaltern's War (NY: Minton, Balch, 1930; D640C366), pp. 154-55:

"...We found this Boche: there was the C.O. and me and a runner; and the C.O. said to the runner, 'You'd best shoot the poor fellow,' and the Boche just lay there and groaned. He knew. But, you know, the runner couldn't do it. He unslung his rifle and fingered the trigger and just couldn't do it. So the C.O. turned to me and when it came to the point no more could I: so the C.O. drew his gun himself and went up to the Boche and looked fierce, and the Boche squirmed and I'm damned if the C.O. didn't weaken too. Damned funny, wasn't it? And we just left him there, so I suppose he'll die in the mud to-night."

Leon Wolff, In Flanders Field (NY: Viking, 1958; D541W7), pp. 228- 229, says "while on an individual basis the campaign was fought by both armies with reasonable decency, sometimes hopelessly mangled men were administered the coup de grace by their opponents." This remark is notable for two reasons: he associates mercy killing with indecency, and he fails to document his assertion that coups de grace were administered. In fact, in the one example that he cites (from Edmonds), the victim was not killed, as transcribed above.

A unique perspective is found in Nurse Ellen La Motte's Backwash of War (NY: Putnam's, 1916; D640L36), a book banned when the US entered the war. With great power, yet detachment, the American La Motte describes on pp. 167-178 the case of Grammont, an acrobat and thief from the streets of Paris, who served in the Bataillon d'Afrique.

"He was pretty ill when brought in, and if he had died promptly, as he should have done, it would have been better. But it happened at that time that there was a surgeon connected with the hospital who was bent on making a reputation for himself, and this consisted in trying to prolong the lives of wounded men who ought normally and naturally to have died..."

La Motte learned how important morphine was in the care of the wounded, learned that it was the agent of mercy. Yet sometimes the nurses could not administer sufficient morphine to kill the pain without killing the patient.

"...We gave him morphia, but it did not help. So he continued to cry to us for mercy, he cried to us and to God. Between us, we let him suffer eight hours more like that, us and God." (p. 122).

Interestingly, after the war La Motte began a crusade to end the peacetime traffic in opium, from which morphine is derived. She had probably provided great amounts of the drug to her soldiers and, seemingly, had come to fear the lure of an easy death.

On additional examples of morphine used for mercy killing, see Home Before Morning (DS556.4V36), pp. 170-71, and Alden Brooks, Fighting Men (PZ3B79196F1), pp. 295ff.

In A German Deserter's War Experience (NY: Huebsch, 1917; D640G4), the nameless author paints a portrait of battle that is harsh and without humanity. He mentions shooting the wounded, but does not interpret the action as mercy, instead as madness (see pp. 90-91). Again, on pp. 67-68, wounded are encountered and murdered "without mercy." Sometimes wounded but living soldiers are even covered over in graves by burial parties (pp. 59-60). The author's experiences, if one can believe them, were unrelievedly horrible. As he tells it, class conflict was rife in the German Army and the murder or "fragging" of officers was common (e.g., pp. 65-66).

Professor Jay Luvaas suggested Napoleon's order that his plague- infected soldiers in a Jaffa hospital were to be poisoned with laudanum (27 May 1799). He was preparing to abandon the city to the Turks, whose cruelty to the captured was legendary. Because of a shipping crisis, the plague victims could not be taken with the fleeing army. See:

Herold, J. Christopher. Bonaparte in Egypt. NY: Harper & Row, 1962. pp. 307-08. DC225H4.  
See also other studies of Napoleon in Syria, such as Theodore Dodge, Napoleon (DC151D64v1), p. 551, and David Chandler, The Campaigns of Napoleon (DC151C48), p. 241.

An example appears in John Masters, The Road Past Mandalay (NY: Harper, 1961; D811M36), according to LTC Frasche, but I have not had the opportunity to read through this un-indexed World War II memoir.

Dr. Richard J. Sommers vaguely recalled an account of Antietam where a Union officer heeded the appeal of a grievously wounded soldier to put him out of his misery. No sooner had the officer shot the soldier than the officer was himself decapitated by a cannonball-which the story-teller interpreted as divine displeasure with mercy killings.

Mr. David Keough suggested examination of John Keegan, The Face of Battle (NY: Viking, 1976; D25K43) & Harold Parker, Three Napoleonic Battles (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1944; DC202.1P3). Parker includes a surgeon's account that may report on such mercy killings. British archers at Agincourt killed French armored men-at-arms to put them out of their misery, according to Keegan.

**See also:**

- MHI Vignette of Mil Hist No 222.

- Asprey, Robert B. Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma. NY: Ticknor & Fields, 1986.  
p. 204. DD404A75.

He notes of the non-walking wounded on the battlefield: "They are the charge of the provos, who must clean the battlefield. They kill the helplessly wounded...."

- Holmes, Richard. Acts of War (U21.2H625), pp. 187-88.