



**AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter**  
Global Thought Leader  
Real Insights & Authority



## MILITARY MUTINIES

There were stories of American military personnel refusing to take orders in Iraq. The soldiers were tired of all the fighting and just want to go home. There have been mutinies in many conflicts. Some have lasted for only a short time, while others have had lasting effects.

The most well known American mutinies occurred in Vietnam. The war began as a popular cause but by the late 1960s, American public opinion had begun to turn against it. Some military personnel thought the US could not win the war.

‘Fragging’ was done by rolling a fragmentation hand grenade into the tent of an unpopular officer or NCO. The death was blamed on a surprise Viet Cong attack the base at night.

A 1973 US Congressional study said that about 3 per cent of all officer and NCO deaths in Vietnam between 1961 and 1972 were due to fragging. Hardly anyone was caught for killing their officers or NCOs.

Other unpopular officers and NCOs were shot dead in the field by their own troops, with the Viet Cong blamed for their deaths. Their next of kin were told that they were “killed in action”.

Desertion was another form of mutiny. Military personnel refused to return for duties. At least 65,000 soldiers deserted to avoid having to go back to Vietnam. Some civilians refused to be listed for conscription and fled to Canada or Scandinavia to live.

Another tactic was the sabotage of military equipment. In the early 1970s, a few US ships due for deployment back to Vietnam, had nuts, bolts and chains inserted into their machinery to wreck it and so delay the dates of sailing.

On the other hand, some US mutinies have later been rewarded. On March 16 1968, US troops massacred civilians at My Lai. The number of casualties would have been even higher had not Hugh Thompson and Lawrence Colburn placed their helicopter gunship between the US troops and their Vietnamese victims. In March 1998 – 30 years later - they were awarded the US medal of honour for their courageous action.

US military forces were segregated on racial lines until 1948, when the US government began ending segregation in the defence force. A turning point in ending segregation occurred in March 1945. Black aviation officers were denied access to the whites' only officers club at Freeman Field, Indiana. They entered anyway and 101 got arrested.

The charges were dropped in mid-April 1945 once the military top brass and politicians realized the irony.

Black personnel had fought bravely against Hitler who had proclaimed the superiority of the white race. Now they were badly treated at home.

The war helped raise Black American awareness of the dangers and evil of racism. The incidents such as at Freeman Field showed that equality of sacrifice should mean equality of treatment in the US military.

Compared with the mutiny in some countries, the US has got off lightly.

Mutinies changed the nature of World War in three main ways. The war, which begun in 1914, dragged on for much longer than most people expected.

The first country to crack was imperial Russia. The Tsar had had a warning in 1905, with the mutiny on the battleship "Potemkin" when sailors objected to the poor quality of food. Their anger with the authorities was similar to increasing unrest within the civilian population throughout Russia.

The "Potemkin's" captain ordered that the ringleaders be shot. But instead the firing squad joined with the rest of the crew in throwing the officers overboard. The crew fled to Romania.

In July 1917, with Russia in turmoil following the abdication of the Tsar, the army failed to make the most of the offensive which the government had planned. The interim republic government did not know how to organize the army. Russia at home and on the Western Front continued to fall into greater chaos and the communists took over in October 1917. They then took Russia out of the war.

The largest single mutiny in history took place in April-May 1917 within the French military on the Western Front. Commander in Chief General Robert Nivelle devised a plan involving 1.2 million troops. But it achieved very little and there 187,000 French casualties.

The French soldiers rebelled. Over 30,000 decided to walk home. Many men had not been home in the three years since the war began. Even British soldiers got home leave more often than the French troops who were fighting in their own country.

For several months about one half of the French army refused to obey orders from commanding generals. The French army was finished as an offensive force. The French Government was gripped by panic. It sacked Neville and many of the other senior generals. The new commander in chief, Henri Philippe Petain, introduced better food and home leave.

But the real impact – which was not made clear to the public at the time – was that the French would never again lead an attack against Germany in the war. They would defend their own country but they had no enthusiasm for leading the eventual final offensive. This meant that the bulk of the offensive fighting would now have to be done by the British Empire and Commonwealth forces.

The war was finally ended by another mutiny. German sailors and soldiers in late 1918 decided that they had had enough. The Allied naval blockade was stopping the supply of food and other essential supplies and so civilians at home were suffering.

The German High Seas Fleet was ordered to go to sea to break the blockade. But the German navy did not want to take on the Royal Navy and, besides, it already felt that the war was lost.

The mutiny began at the Kiel naval base and soon spread. The army joined in. The Kaiser fled Germany into Holland (where he lived for the rest of his life). The republican government began negotiations with the Allies and the US on how to end the war.

Mutinies in western forces are now much rarer than in World War I. Most of the armies (except Australia's) were composed of conscripts. Many men had volunteered for service in 1914 but by 1917 their enthusiasm had declined and so men had to be forced to serve. Nowadays most western defence forces are composed of volunteers – the men and women want to serve in the defence forces. The morale is generally much higher.

Also, the nature of warfare has changed and so the large fighting formations of World War I are no longer required. Defence forces are now composed of a small number of well-educated people, with sophisticated equipment.

Governments treat them a lot better than they treated the grandfathers and great grandfathers in the trenches. There is a greater respect for the lives of the military personnel – they are not just seen as “cannon fodder”. The media and public opinion demand that the personnel be treated better.

For example, we now know far more about the dangers of “combat fatigue” and the importance of having time away from the battle front (“rotation”) for rest and recreation. This was a contributor to the 1917 French mutiny.



Of course, if a war goes badly, with military personnel thinking that the overall strategy is flawed and their lives are being jeopardized, then some may refuse to follow orders. This is not the war they were expecting.

Keith Suter