



Press Release

12 October 2005

90 years on: The fight to save Edith Cavell

On the 90th anniversary of Edith Cavell's execution, a recently completed cataloguing project of Prisoner of War files at The National Archives in Kew has revealed the ineffectual efforts of government officials to prevent the death of the British World War One hero.

Launching next month, the newly catalogued Foreign Office documents give an intimate insight into life in WWI Prisoner of War camps including - treatment of prisoners, conditions in camps and personal correspondence between prisoners and their families.

The documents reveal the frustration, anger and eventual horror of the Government's failure to save Ms Cavell, despite being notified of the nurse's arrest and subsequent trial - on charges of aiding more than 200 allied troops to escape occupied Belgium – almost two months before her execution on October 12 in Brussels.

Examples of documents within file FO 383/15:

24 August, 1915 (7 weeks before execution)

"I have news through Dutch sources that my wife's sister a Miss Edith Cavell has been arrested in Brussels and I can get no news as to what has happened to her since August 5." – Personal Letter from Edith Cavell's brother-in-law, Dr Longworth Wainwright informing the Foreign Office of her possible arrest.

21 September, 1915 (3 weeks before execution)

"Ms Cavell has informed the Legation that she has indeed admitted having hidden in her house English and French soldiers. The legation will of course keep this case in view and endeavour to see that a fair trial is given Miss Cavell." – Inter-governmental correspondence from American Minister to Brussels, Brand Whitlock, confirming Edith Cavell's arrest. (Received on September 28).

1 October, 1915 (2 weeks before execution)

"I'm afraid it is likely to go hard with Miss Cavell. I'm afraid we are powerless." – In-house memo from Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Horace Rowland.

9 October, 1915 (3 days before execution)

"Dr Wainwright will be very grateful for any further information that may be obtained and also for instruction as to whether it is possible to communicate with or send comforts to Miss Cavell." – Letter from Dr Wainwright. (Received October 11).

11 October, 1915 (1 day before execution)

“(Miss Cavell’s) trial has been completed and the German prosecutor has asked for sentence of death penalty against her. I have some hope that the court martial may decline to pass the rigorous sentence proposed.” – Inter-government correspondence from Brand Whitlock.

That night, at 2am on the morning of October 12, 1915, Edith Cavell was executed by firing squad, less than ten hours after sentence was passed.

Following Edith Cavell’s execution: letters, reports and newspaper articles (found in FO383/15) give an insight into the horror being felt at the events that took place. Included are the official report from the American Legation in Brussels on the circumstances leading up to Edith Cavell’s death; and the harrowing blow-by-blow account of their desperate efforts to save the nurse as the Germans rushed to execute her less than ten hours after sentencing.

Examples of documents within file FO 383/15:

13 October, 1915 (Execution day plus 1)

“Miss Cavell sentenced yesterday and executed at two o’clock this morning despite our best efforts continued until the last moment.” – Correspondence from US Ambassador to London, Walter Hines Page.

14 October, 1915 (Execution day plus 2)

“Dear sir, Forgive my worrying you again so soon, I had a wire dated from Holland yesterday morning, ‘*Miss Edith Cavell died this morning*’ from Gahan chaplain, Brussels. Have you any information on what this implies.” – Letter from Dr Wainwright.

“I had hoped that the Germans wouldn’t go beyond imprisoning her in Germany. Their action in this matter is part and parcel of their policy of frightfulness and also I venture to think a sign of weakness.” In-house memo from Sir Horace Rowland.

15 October, 1915 (Execution day plus 3)

“The Foreign Office desire to state that in this country no woman convicted of assisting the King’s enemies, even found guilty of espionage, has hitherto been subject to a greater penalty than a term of penal servitude.” – Foreign Office Press Release.

Notes to Editors:

Edith Cavell, nurse at the Red Cross Hospital at Berkendael. She helped about 200 allied soldiers escape from German-occupied Belgium. Kept in solitary confinement for nine weeks and tried by court-martial, she was found guilty and sentenced to death. Cavell's execution by firing squad on October 12, 1915 received worldwide press coverage and served to harden popular opinion against the Germans particularly in the then-neutral United States.

Press Enquiry / Images of Documents:

For press enquiries please contact Stuart Brennan in The National Archives Press Office on 0208 8392 5277 or stuart.brennan@nationalarchives.gov.uk

Available document images from the FO 383/15 file:

- The official report from the American Legation in Brussels, Belgium, on the arrest, prosecution and execution of Edith Cavell.
- The blow-by-blow description of attempts to save Edith Cavell on the night of her death.
- Personal correspondence between Dr Longworth Wainwright and the Foreign Office.
- Foreign Office internal memos.
- Official correspondence between Britain and United States regarding the events surrounding Edith Cavell.
- Newspaper articles from America on the Cavell case which helped to sway public opinion on U.S involvement in WWI.

The Catalogue:

The National Archives Catalogue contains 9.5 million descriptions of documents from central government, courts of law and other UK national bodies, including records on family history, medieval tax, criminal trials, UFO sightings, the history of countries and many other subjects.
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue

The National Archives, Kew, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk has one of the largest archival collections in the world, spanning 1000 years of British history, from Domesday Book to newly released government papers. The free museum and research rooms are open to the public 6 days a week.

Over nine million records are available to view at Kew and some, including wills, First World War Army medal cards and Second World War Merchant Seamen's medal records are also available online at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline

The Family Records Centre, Islington, which is jointly managed by The National Archives and the Office for National Statistics, holds the indexes (not the certificates themselves) for births, deaths and marriages for England and Wales from July 1837 and also copies of wills, before 1858, from the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) and some other church courts.