THE STORY OF EDDIE SLOVIK

THE ONLY AMERICAN SOLDIER SHOT FOR DESERTION IN WW2

HISTORYNET

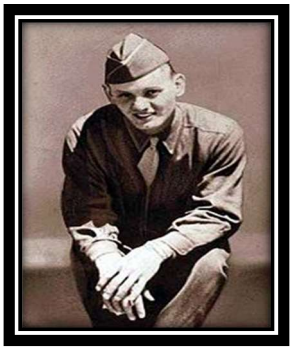
232

During the Second World War, the United States Army came under colossal strain. Faced with the shock of fighting in the Pacific and North Africa, then grueling campaigns in Italy and Northern Europe, many men lost the will to fight. With officers ill-trained to distinguish between cowardice and trauma, the management of this issue was inconsistent, but steps had to be taken to deter desertion.

Despite this, Edward Donald Slovik (February 18, 1920 – January 31, 1945) was a private in the United States Army during World War II and the *only American soldier to be executed for desertion since the American Civil War.*

TROUBLED BEGINNING

Eddie Slovik didn't have an easy upbringing. Born in 1920, he grew up in poverty during the Great Depression. As a child, he spent time in a reformatory before graduating to prison time as a young man.



Called up to the Army in 1944, Slovik trained as an infantryman. He was still training when the Allies invaded Normandy in June 1944, beginning the year-long campaign that would end the Second World War in Europe. When he finished training, he was shipped out to Europe, arriving in France in August.

Slovik was small and nervous, hardly the ideal combat soldier. But America's more prestigious forces drew off the best recruits, leaving the infantry to take what they could get. What they got was Eddie Slovik.

INTO THE WAR

The chain of events leading to Slovik's death began before he even reached the fighting front. Slovik and his friend, John Tankey, were among thirteen replacements sent to cover losses in Company G, 109th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division.

The Division was attacking the French town of Elbeuf, held by a small group of Germany's fanatical S.S. troops.

This sort of fighting characterized the conflict in northern France. The Germans clung tenaciously in place, using terrain to make life difficult for the Allies. A greater weight of human resources and resources meant that the Americans kept advancing, but often at a terrible cost.

Slovik and Tankey had not even reached their unit when the trouble began. In the darkness outside Elbeuf, the replacements came under fire from German artillery. They leaped for cover and started frantically digging foxholes while the air around them was filled with terrifying noise and the blast of exploding shells. By the time dawn arrived, Slovik and Tankey were alone. The others were either dead or had moved on in search of their unit.

DESERTION

Slovik and Tankey had seen all the combat they wanted to. Rather than continue the fighting, they found a group of Canadian military police, the 13th Provost Corps, and attached themselves to the unit. At that time, the job of the 13th was to roam the French countryside, putting up notices explaining the martial law applied in Allied-occupied zones.

Slovik and Tankey made themselves worthwhile to the Canadians as they traveled through France and then Belgium. They traded for luxuries on the black market and found French girls for the M.P.s. They never explained how they came to be detached from their unit, and the Canadians didn't ask. Through a policy of don't ask, don't tell, the deserters and the military police officers established an ironic yet comfortable arrangement.

BACK TO THE REGIMENT

In October, Slovik and Tankey decided to return to their unit. This proved easier than expected. The first fighting on the German frontier had shaken the 28th Division. In the confusion that followed, officers were willing to accept the men's return without asking too many questions or pressing charges.

Tankey returned to combat, where he was wounded a month later. He missed most of the rest of the campaign. Slovik lasted only a few hours. Assigned to a rifle platoon by Captain Ralph Grotte of Company G, he soon turned around and walked away from the front. Tankey tried to stop him, but it was no use.

Within weeks, Slovik had turned up again. He told how he had warned Grotte that he would desert if sent to combat again. He seemed to think that this would get him off the hook. On October 26, he was imprisoned at the divisional stockade at Rott.

SLOVIK'S NOTE OF CONFESSION

"I, Pvt. Eddie D. Slovik, 36896415, confesses to the desertion of the United States Army. At the time of my desertion, we were in Albuff [Elbeuf], France. I come to Albuff as a replacement. They were shilling the town, and we were told to dig in for the night. The flowing morning, they were shilling us again. I was so scared, nervous, and trembling that at the time the other replacements moved out, I couldn't move. I stayed there in my foxhole till it was quiet, and I was able to move. I then walked into town. Not seeing any of our troops, I stayed overnight at a French hospital. The following day, I turned myself over to the Canadian Provost Corp. After being with them for six weeks, I was turned over to American M.R. They turned me loose. I told my commanding officer my story. I said that if I had to go out there again, I'd run away. He said there was nothing he could do for me, so I ran away again, AND I ran AWAY AGAIN IF I HAVE TO GO OUT THERE.

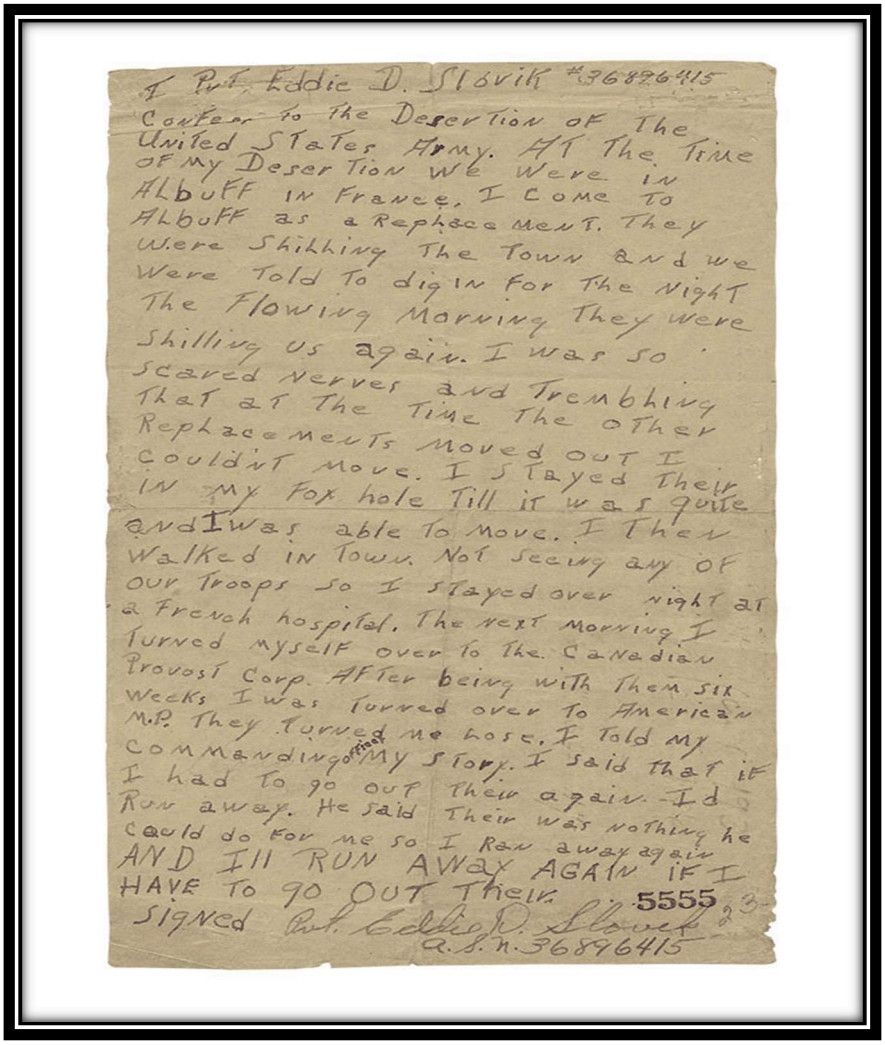
—Signed Pvl. Eddie D. Slovik A.S.N. 36896415"

He waited while the cook got an officer, who phoned for an M.P. to place him under arrest. After being transferred to a prisoner stockade on October 26, Slovik was interviewed by both the division judge advocate and the division psychiatrist.

***The judge advocate, the Division's chief legal officer, offered to quash all charges if Slovik would take back his statement and agree to serve*. Slovik refused.**

The division psychiatrist interviewed him and found him "to show no evidence of mental disease...& I consider him sane & responsible for his actions..." Private Slovik was *ordered to stand trial on November 11, 1944, before a general court-martial of the 28th Division.*

PVT SLOVIK'S HANDWRITTEN WRITTEN CONFESSION



I Pvt. Eddie D. Slovik #36896415
Confess to the Desertion of The
United States Army. AT The Time
OF My Desertion We Were in
ALbuff IN France. I Come To
ALbuff as a Replacement. They
Were Shilling The Town and we
Were Told To dig IN For The Night
The Flowing Morning They were
Shilling us again. I was so
Scared Nerves and Trembling
That at The Time The other
Replacements moved out I
Couldnt Move. I Stayed Their
IN my Fox hole Till it was quite
and I was able to move. I Then
Walked IN Town. Not Seeing any of
our Troops so I Stayed over night at
a French hospital. The next Morning I
Turned myself over to the Canadian
Provost Corp. After being with them six
Weeks I was Turned over to American
M.P. They Turned me loose. I Told my
Commanding officer My Story. I said that if
I had to go out Their again. Id
Run away. He said Their was nothing he
Could do For me so I Ran away again
AND Ill RUN AWAY AGAIN IF I
HAVE To go OUT Their. 5555
Signed Pvt. Eddie D. Slovik
A.S.N. 36896415

THE TRIAL

The trial took place in the grimmest surroundings, and during the worst time the Division had endured, a stalemate in the Hürtgen Forest. For nine days, the Americans had been wasting their men and firepower against impregnable pillboxes expertly placed years before.

The casualty lists were high, with one-third of the casualties killed in action or dying of wounds and with no ground gained. As the losses mounted without progress, discipline deteriorated.

The site of the trial was a scarred two-story building in the village of Rötgen, Germany. It was a cold, gray day, with snow off and on.

Slovik elected to stand mute. His defense counsel pleaded him "not guilty." Witnesses gave testimony to Slovik's identity and the dates and places of his defections. His written statement was placed in evidence with his and his counsel's permission.

I recall that at one point, some member of the court *suggested that Slovik might withdraw his statement about refusing to go out there in the future in return for our dismissal of the charges and the removal of the risk of his receiving the "full penalty."*
The scene in my mind is of Slovik's turning silently to his defense counsel, *who declared, "Let it stand," which seemed to satisfy Slovik. This was the second time that he turned down an offer for his benefit.*

Slovik's court-martial began at 10 am on November 11. By 11:40, it was all done. **The officers wanted to set an example. Slovik was to be dishonorably discharged and executed by a firing squad.**

Despite the outcome, Slovik wasn't worried. Hundreds of soldiers had deserted, and many had been condemned to death. But while the Army shot men for other crimes, *it hadn't executed a deserter since the Civil War*.

None of us in closed court had voiced any doubts about his guilt. There was brief disagreement about the nature of the death penalty to be imposed, whether *it should be by hanging or firing squad,* but consensus was quickly reached on the firing squad as the less dishonorable means.

As the war continued, one of the judges, a Lt Col, on Slovik's court-martial was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and later said: *"I railed against the injustice of executing one deserter while closing eyes to the raft of new offenses committed in the Battle of the Bulge."*

Slovik's case now went to General Norman Cota, a courageous frontline commander with little patience for either psychiatry or deserters. On November 27, Cota approved the death sentence.

Approval for the execution still needed to come from General Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied forces in Western Europe. Eisenhower's legal staff was amazed to learn of the precedents relating to the case, namely, no executions for desertion since 1865.

But by the time the case reached Eisenhower in December, desertions had soared again, thanks to the Battle of the Bulge. *Eisenhower felt that he needed to set an example*. On December 23, he confirmed the judgment. Slovik would be shot.

EXECUTION

On the morning of January 31, 1945, Eddie Slovik was brought from the stockade to the mining village of St. Marie aux Mines. The ground was draped in a shroud of snow.

Slovik resigned to his fate and tearfully handed letters for his wife to the chaplain. The charges against him were read out. He was then strapped to a pole and had a hood placed over his head

The execution by firing squad was carried out at 10:04 a.m. on January 31, 1945, *near the village of Sainte-Marie-aux-*Mines in the French region of Alsace. The unrepentant Slovik spoke to the soldiers whose duty it was to prepare him for the firing squad before they led him to the place of execution: ***"They're not shooting me for deserting the United States Army; thousands of guys have done that.***

They need to make an example out of somebody, and I'm doing it because I'm an ex-con. I used to steal things when I was a kid, and that's what they are shooting me for. They're shooting me for the bread and chewing gum I stole when I was 12 years old."

Slovik, wearing a uniform stripped of all insignia with a G.I. blanket across his shoulders against the cold, was led into the courtyard of a house chosen for the execution because it had a high masonry wall. The commanders did not want the local French civilians to witness the proceedings. Soldiers stood him against a six-inch by six-inch post. The soldiers strapped him to the post using web belts.

One went around and under his arms and hung on a spike on the back side of the post to prevent his body from slumping following the volley. The others went around his knees and ankles. Just before a soldier placed a black hood over his head, the attending chaplain said to Slovik, "Eddie, when you get up there, say a little prayer for me." Slovik answered, "Okay, Father. I'll pray that you don't follow me too soon." Those were his last words.

Twelve picked soldiers were detailed for the firing squad from the 109th Regiment. They used standard-issue M1 rifles with just one bullet for each gun. One rifle was loaded with a blank. On the command of "Fire," Slovik was hit by eleven bullets, at least four of them being fatal. *The wounds ranged from high in the neck region out to the left shoulder, over the left chest, and under the heart. One bullet was in the upper left arm. An Army physician quickly determined Slovik had not been immediately killed. As the firing squad's rifles were being reloaded in preparation for another volley, but before the rifles were completely reloaded, Slovik died. He was 24 years old. The execution took 15 minutes.*

AFTERMATH

Slovik was buried in Plot E of the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial in Fère-en Tardenois, alongside 95 American soldiers executed for rape and/or murder. Their grave markers are hidden from view by shrubbery and bear sequential numbers instead of names, making it impossible to identify them individually without knowing the key. See much more information on this Cemetery and especially the burial plot in article # 539.

REMAINS WERE LATER MOVED

Slovik's case was taken up in 1981 by former Macomb County Commissioner Bernard V. Calka, a Polish-American World War II veteran, who continued to petition the Army to return Slovik's remains to the U.S. *In 1987, he persuaded President Ronald Reagan to order their return.* Calka raised $5,000 to pay for the exhumation of Slovik's remains from Plot E *and their transfer to Detroit's Woodmere Cemetery, where Slovik was reburied next to his wife.*

The grave marker of Eddie Slovik, Woodmere Cemetery, Detroit, Michigan

OTHER INFORMATION

Slovik's criminal history couldn't have affected the outcome of his trial because the judges didn't know about it; they were told he had no record. His convictions entered the picture on review, but only as a factor militating against clemency.

Nor does the timing of Slovik's case appear to have played any role in the final decision. He was tried while the 28th Division was engaged in fierce combat in the Hürtgen Forest, and Eisenhower's review occurred during the Battle of the Bulge.

None of the records of the decision-making process, however, mention those battles or suggest any special desire to target deserters due to the heavy fighting.

Since January 31, 1945, no other American deserter has faced a firing squad. The Uniform Code of Military Justice has replaced the Articles of War, and execution is still allowed for wartime desertion. The country has not fought a declared war since VJ-Day; however, *attitudes toward capital punishment have changed.* Whether seen as a provocateur or a victim, Eddie Slovik is likely to remain the last American soldier to pay the ultimate price for desertion.

Antoinette Slovik and others petitioned seven U.S. presidents (from Harry S Truman to Jimmy Carter) for a pardon for Slovik, but none were granted and she has never received any of his pension.

A member of the U.S. Army's Judge Advocate General's Office noted that of the *2864 Army personnel tried for desertion* for the period January 1942 through June 1948*, 49 were convicted and sentenced to death, and 48 of those sentences were voided by higher authority.*

During the Second World War, in all theaters of the war, the U.S. military executed 102 of its soldiers for Rape and/or unprovoked murder of civilians, but only Slovik was executed for the military offense of desertion.

Antoinette Slovik (here, in 1974 at 59) did not learn the details of her husband's death until a 1954 book spelled them out.

Calling Eddie "the unluckiest poor kid who ever lived," *she fought to clear his name and secure life insurance funds the Army had denied her. Unsuccessful, she died in 1979 at 64.*

IF THE ARMY PLANNED to use Slovik as an example to discourage desertion, it did a poor job. Only the 109th Regiment announced his execution, and then only in a message from the regimental commander to his men. *Neither Eisenhower nor Cota notified their commanders of the execution, and no civilian or military newspaper reported it.*

S. L. A. Marshall, chief army historian for the European Theater*, insisted Slovik's case was so little known that he did not learn of it until 1954 when he read Huie's book*.

Even Slovik's widow was kept in the dark, told only that her husband had died under *"dishonorable circumstances."*

HOLLYWOOD TURNS IT INTO A MOVIE

When *The Execution of Private Slovik aired 44 years ago this past April*, it became, according to *some sources*, *the most-watched made-for-television movie in American history.* It starred Martin Sheen, Gary Busey, and Ned Beatty and even brought us the screen debut of Sheen's son Charlie. But casting does not explain why this grim, harrowing film had such broad appeal in 1974 — or why it's largely forgotten now.

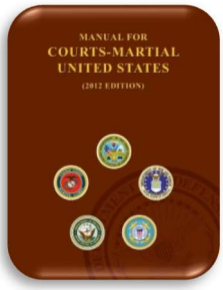
Explaining that requires us to look at three historical moments: the one late in World War II that saw the execution of Eddie Slovik; the one when the film came out, as Americans were confronting their withdrawal from Vietnam; and the one we're living in now, which has had its wars, though sometimes you wouldn't know it.

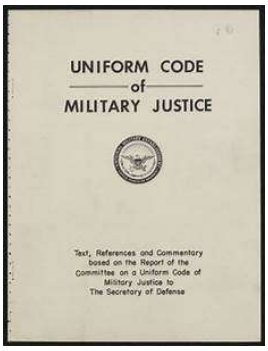
TO VIEW THE ENTIRE MOVIE, COPY AND PASTE THE BELOW LINK INTO YOUR BROWSE

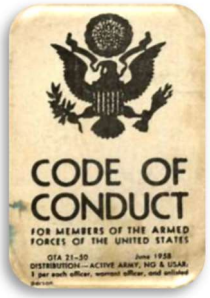
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7FDhGJOnG0 - **Movie**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2QiWZuKaDU – **Trailer**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqO98PF4fkI - **About This Article**







UCMJ

885. ARTICLE 85. DESERTION

PUNITIVE ARTICLES

A. ANY MEMBER OF THE ARMED FORCES WHO –

(1) **Without authority, goes or remains absent from his unit, organization, or place of duty with intent to stay away from there permanently;**

(2) **Quits his unit, organization, or place of duty with intent to avoid hazardous duty or to shirk important service; or**

(3) **Without being regularly separated from one of the armed forces, enlists or accepts an appointment in the same or another one of the armed forces without fully disclosing the fact that he has not been regularly separated or enters any foreign armed service except when authorized by the United States; is guilty of desertion.**

***b*) Any commissioned officer of the armed forces who, after tender of their resignation and before notice of its acceptance, quits their post or proper duties without leave and with intent to remain away from that place permanently is guilty of desertion.**

(c) Any person found guilty of desertion or attempt to desert shall be punished, if the offense is committed in time of war, by death or such other punishment as a court-martial may direct, but if the desertion or attempt to desert occurs at any other time, by such punishment, other than death, as a court-martial may direct.

PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WEBSITES & OTHER SOURCES THAT APPEAR TO BE AUTHENTIC, I CAN NOT ENSURE THAT ALL THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS ACCURATE AND CORRECT.