

Mere Military Tragedy  
R.F.A. Gunner Charged with Murder  
Accused Committed for Trial

The magisterial inquiry into the tragedy which occurred at Mere on the early morning of February 7<sup>th</sup> when Gunner John William Horrigan of B Battery, 115 Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, was stabbed through the heart by a comrade, Gunner John Edwin Allen, was held at Mere Petty Sessions on Saturday, when Gunner Allen was brought before the magistrates on a charge of wilful murder. The magistrates on the Bench were Sir Walter Grove, Sir Henry Hoare, Mr T Standerwick, and Mr A.R. White.

The accused, who it will be remembered, cut his throat with a razor after his arrest, appeared to be in a poor state of health. He is a big man, and during the time he has been under arrest has grown a beard. His neck was still bandaged. He was represented by Mr W H Creech of Sturminster Newton and during the proceedings carefully listened to the evidence given against him. Mr Donald Prynne appeared on behalf of the Director of Public Prosecutions. The police were represented by the Deputy Chief Constable (Superintendent Buchanan) and Superintendent Hillier.

Mr Prynne, in opening the case for the prosecution, explained that Gunner John Edwin Allen was charged with the wilful murder of Gunner John William Horrigan, a married man of some 34 years of age. He did not know whether it was possible to differentiate in a case of murder, but, if it was, this was one of a very serious and bad description. The accused struck down a fellow soldier with a deadly weapon, and in such a way as to cause his immediate death. The facts were these. The deceased and a friend of the name of Smith joined the Army in December of last year. Prisoner was in the Battery when they joined. About Christmas time, 16 of them, including the prisoner, the deceased, and Smith, were billeted in Mere at the house of Mr Cowley. The three mentioned occupied one room, and the deceased and his friend shared a double bed in the same room. During the time they had been in Mere there was no doubt that the prisoner had been the cause of very considerable annoyance to his companions, and in particular an annoyance to the man with whose murder he was charged. Prisoner appeared to have set himself to annoy Horrigan, and to say things which perhaps they would not think very much about but which, when said repeatedly, as they were, were extremely annoying. When prisoner was talking he referred to Horrigan as a dog or a 'bow-wow', and on another occasion he said that if he could not do much there, he would have a chance of showing he was the better man someday. This sort of thing went on until the evening of February 6<sup>th</sup>.

On that evening the 16 of them were on entirely good terms and they had a musical evening together. Prisoner appeared to have been quiet and peaceful, and all the rest of them were enjoying themselves. During the evening the 16 of them appeared to have consumed between them a bottle and a half of whiskey, which was probably not very much for that number. About ten minutes past eleven they started going to bed. Two of the men, named Higginson and Boughton, went to bed at that hour. They occupied a room upon the same floor as that occupied by the three men in question.

At that time there was apparently a candle burning in the window. Deceased was asleep, but Smith was awake. Shortly afterwards a man of the name of Alcock, who was billeted in the house, appeared to have gone into the room and had some conversation with the prisoner. In a joking way, Smith threw a pillow over towards Allen and said 'Get to bed' to something of that kind. Allen threw the same pillow back. After that Alcock left the room. Prisoner appeared to have gone on talking to Smith, and eventually said he was going out to see some of the other boys, whereupon he left the room. Then a very mysterious thing happened. The magistrates would hear from Higginson and Boughton that they suddenly saw what appeared to be a light shining through into the room which they occupied, and that one of them, if not both, called out 'Who's there?'. There was no answer. One of them called out 'Is that you, Jack?' but still there was no answer.

One of the men then prepared to get out of bed to see what it was and as he was doing so he saw someone apparently crouching in the neighbourhood of the door which led into the passage from this further room. As he got out of bed, he heard someone scuttle away, and the light which had been shining disappeared. Almost at the same moment the prisoner appeared to have run back into his own room and to have gone straight over and blown out the candle. He then proceeded to sit on his bed, and Smith would tell the magistrates that apparently he undressed himself. He appeared to have been somewhat slow in undressing, and after a little conversation, he got into bed. This was about half past one or two o'clock on Sunday morning. Almost directly after he got into bed, prisoner called out 'Hello! Someone has been having a game. This is not my pillow. I had a big pillow last night this is a small one'. He followed up the remark either by getting out of bed, or certainly by leaning out of bed, and seizing the pillow which was underneath the head of the deceased man, who was asleep.

Prisoner pulled the pillow away and of course woke up Horrigan who, very properly indeed, claimed his pillow back. Prisoner then appeared to have used a very offensive expression towards him, which the deceased merely answered by saying he was not such a person. Horrigan then quietly got out of bed and apparently, from what Smith said, he commenced to put on his trousers or some clothing. Having done that, he went towards his overcoat, which was hanging in the corner between the window and the prisoner's bed. Smith heard him open a match box, no doubt with the intention of lighting the candle, and probably getting his pillow back, or wanting to know why he should not have it.

The next thing that was heard was a groan from one of the two persons. The room was still in darkness. Smith twice asked what the matter was, but received no answer and thereupon he got out of bed and lighted the candle. He then saw the prisoner sitting at the end of his bed and he noticed that one of his arms was covered with blood. He asked prisoner, 'Has he bitten you?' but got no reply. He then looked round and saw the deceased lying right across the bed, apparently covered with a quantity of blood, and he said to the prisoner at once, 'You have stabbed him'. Prisoner made no answer, but simply sat at the head of the bed. Smith shouted out to the other men in the house and some of them entered the room, including the sergeant who was in charge of the men in this particular billet. The sergeant spoke to the prisoner, and said 'Hello! What's the matter here?' and prisoner replied 'I never meant to do any harm'. Prisoner's knife, open, was found lying between the bed and the window. It was a very dangerous weapon, and one which required some pulling open. It was attached to prisoner's belt and was covered with blood. The doctor was sent for as soon as possible, but his services were of no avail, because this unfortunate man was stabbed right through the heart, and death must have been practically instantaneous.

On the arrival of the police, they took possession of the knife, and also went to the unfortunate dead man's overcoat pocket, in which they found his knife unopened. The knife had not been touched, so there was no doubt that he had no weapon and that he was absolutely defenceless when the blow was struck. Prisoner was removed to the guardroom by certain of the men in the house and while being taken there he said 'I will take my punishment like a man, and keep as cool as a lamb'. Later, he was charged with murder and in reply said 'I had no intention of doing it'.

On the following day a very unfortunate thing happened. While in the cell, prisoner asked for his kit bag which had been brought to the station. He said he wanted a wash or something of that kind, and the kit bag was handed to him and he used the razor which it contained upon himself, and inflicted a somewhat serious injury upon his throat. When discovered, prisoner merely said he had done it because he could not stand the strain. Those were the facts in the case and it would be idle of him, on behalf of the prosecution, to do otherwise than to ask the Magistrates upon that very serious evidence to commit the accused upon a charge of wilful murder.

George Henry William Smith, a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery, at present station at Mere, said he knew the deceased, John William Horrigan, with whom he joined the Army on December 10<sup>th</sup> last. On joining he found the prisoner was a member of B Battery. About Christmas of last year the three of them were billeted at Mr Cowley's home at Mere. Witness and Horrigan occupied a double bed and prisoner occupied a single bed in the same room.

Mr Prynne: Do you remember Saturday evening, the 6<sup>th</sup> February?

Witness: Yes

Did all the men billeted in that house together, 16 of you, have a musical evening?

Yes. Twelve of us were billeted in the house and we had some friends with us.

Allen and the deceased were present at the musical evening?

Yes.

Were you all good friends?

Yes.

Quite? Yes. There was not a bad word passed between us.

Did you have any drink between you that night?

Yes, a bottle and a half of whiskey.

Between the lot of you?

Yes, from half past eight until half past twelve, when we went to bed.

Were you all perfectly sober that night?

Yes.

Witness, answering further questions, said he and deceased went to bed at half past twelve. The prisoner was not present when they were making preparations to go to bed, but came into the room a few minutes afterwards. He only remained a minute and then went out again. He returned about half an hour later, when witness and the deceased were in bed. Horrigan was then asleep.

What did he do when he came into the room then?

He sat down on his bed and took off his boots. There was a candle alight in the window.

Did he say anything to you? Yes. He said to me 'Is Jack asleep?' (meaning Horrigan). I replied yes and he said 'He can't half sleep'.

Did anyone come into the room? Yes. Corporal Alcock who was billeted in the house.

What did he do when he came into the room? Prisoner and Alcock laid across the bed.

Then you did something? I threw my pillow over to them. It was thrown back to me, and Alcock left.

Shortly after that, did prisoner say what he was going to do? He said he was going in to see the other boys.

And after that he left the room? Yes. He was out about half an hour.

When he came back did he come in quickly? Yes, he came in very quickly and went straight and blew out the candle.

What did he do then? He sat on the bed and began to undress. Meanwhile he talked to me and then got into bed.

All this time the deceased was asleep and did not wake or say a word? No.

When he got into bed, did prisoner say something directly he got in? He said 'One out of the two of you is having a game. I had a big pillow last night and this is a small one'.

What did he do then? He leaned out of bed and pulled the pillow from under Horrigan's head, which woke him up.

After that, did prisoner say something? Horrigan pulled his pillow back and prisoner called him an offensive name, which he denied.

Deceased then jumped out of bed and put on his riding breeches and went to his overcoat to get matches to light the candle. I heard matches rattling in his pocket and the box slide open.

While he was doing this, did he say a word to the prisoner? No, sir. When he put on his trousers he said 'I was never rotten in my life'.

Did you hear him at any time make any threat of any description towards the prisoner? No, sir.

What was the next thing you heard? I heard a groan and a fall.

What did you do when you heard that? I said, 'What's up?' and got no answer. I got out of bed and got some matches out of my overcoat and lit the candle. I saw the prisoner sitting at the head of his bed with his arms folded.

Did you notice anything on his arm? Yes, his right arm was smothered with blood.

And you asked him something in consequence of that? I asked him "Has he hit you, Jack?" and he made no reply.

Did you then turn round? Yes, and I saw the deceased at the foot of the prisoner's bed, lying across it, and I noticed blood on his right hand.

And you said to the prisoner? I said, "What have you done? Have you hit him?" He made no reply. Witness added that he informed other soldiers and Sergeant Stephens and others entered the room. Witness had already discovered blood oozing from Horrigan's breast. On his arrival, Sergeant Stephens asked 'Hello, who has done this?'

What did prisoner say? 'Sergeant, there was an accident. I did not mean to do it'.

Witness said he subsequently found prisoner's belt with knife attached, lying on the floor. The knife was open and there was blood on the blade. Sergeant Stephens conveyed the prisoner away and as he went he said something to the effect that he would stand his ground like a man. He started to cry.

Mr Prynne: 'Whilst you and the deceased were there that evening had you made any alteration in the pillows or touched the prisoner's bed?' No, sir.

Whilst you have been in this billet have the prisoner and the deceased man got on well together? Yes, except a little argument now and again, but it passed off and there was nothing much. He called Horrigan and me bow-wows now and again.

Did deceased take that sort of think quietly, or did it arouse him? It annoyed him but he did not cause a quarrel.

Cross examined by Mr Creech, witness said that when the three of them came to Mere they were billeted in a room together at their request. They were on friendly terms, with the exceptions of the arguing. Prisoner used to shave witness and to sharpen Horrigan's razors. On the night in question at the sing-song, prisoner sang several songs.

Mr Creech: Do you know prisoner suffered from a bad toe? Yes, sir.

Do you know the doctor had told him that the skin should be pared off? Yes, sir.

Witness said he did not see the defendant take off his belt, open his knife, or take any of his clothes off. He could not have done so because immediately he came in, he blew out the candle, but when he last entered the room he was partially undressed. He did not complain about the pillow before the candle was blown out.

Mr Creech: Did the deceased jump out of bed in a passion? Yes, he jumped out as if he was going round to give the prisoner a thumping.

I put it to you that when the deceased got out of bed, the prisoner was not in his bed? Yes, he was in bed.

Witness admitted it was dark. He said he thought he heard him get into bed, judging by the noise which was made. He did not hear him get out of bed again. When witness lighted the candle after the groan and the fall, prisoner had only got his shirt on.

Re-examined, witness said he had seen the prisoner using the knife in question to his feet, but not for a week before this occurrence. When he found the deceased lying on the prisoner's bed, he noticed that the bedclothes had been pulled back.

Henry Charles Phillips, surveyor, practising at Mere, produced a plan of the second floor of Mr Cowley's house at Mere.

Thomas Bert Stephens, a Sergeant in the Royal Field Artillery, said he was in charge of the men who were billeted at Mr Cowley's house. About ten minutes to two on Sunday morning, February 7<sup>th</sup>, he was called up and he proceeded to the bedroom occupied by the deceased, the prisoner, and the last witness. He saw Horrigan lying on the prisoner's bed. There was a considerable quantity of blood and a wound in Horrigan's left breast. Prisoner was standing in the room when he entered. He said 'What's up here?' and prisoner replied 'It's an accident, Sergeant, I didn't mean to do it'. He saw the open knife and belt lying on the floor between prisoner's bed and the window. Witness sent him under an escort to the guardhouse. Prisoner repeatedly said it was an accident and that he did not mean to do it, and when he left in charge, he was on the verge of crying.

Mr Prynne: While you have been in charge of this billet, what have been the relations between prisoner and the deceased?

Witness: On their first arrival there they seemed to be very friendly, but since that time there seems to have been very strained relations between the two men.

Through whose fault was it? Something the deceased did? No, sir, through the accused nagging and chipping the deceased.

Did the deceased take it quietly? Yes, very quietly and endeavoured to pass it off.

Were they all sober on this occasion? Quite sober.

Cross-examined by Mr Creech, witness said the accused was very upset after the occurrence. When he went into the room he found the prisoner had his trousers and shirt on.

Mr Creech: You never saw the deceased do anything why the prisoner should do him harm? No, sir, I never did.

The chipping and nagging was not anything very serious? You never heard a threat? No, sir, I never heard a threat.

Would 'ill-natured chaff' describe it? Yes, sir.

Dr F B Rutter, of Mere, stated that early on the morning in question, he went to Mr Cowley's house where he saw the deceased. On examining the body he found a small wound, half an inch long, between the fourth and fifth ribs. He heard the prisoner say he had opened his knife. On the following day, witness made post-mortem examination and found that the wound had penetrated the heart. Death must have been instantaneous. The wound could have been caused by the knife in question. Considerable force must have been used, because the knife went in up to its hilt. The wound could not have been self-inflicted.

Frederick John Boughton, bombardier in B Battery, R.F.A. stationed at Mere, said he was present at the musical evening referred to, and about 11.10pm, accompanied by a man named Higginson, he went to bed. They occupied a room, with others, on the same floor of Mr Cowley's house as the bedroom occupied by the prisoner, the deceased, and Smith. He heard the other men go to bed about half past twelve. Between 1.30 and 1.45 he heard a noise as if the latch of the door of the adjoining room had been opened, and a faint light shone through the opening into his bedroom. He raised his head from the pillow and believed he saw the form of a man in the opening. He thereupon called out, but received no reply. He started to get out of bed when he heard a scuffle in the direction of the figure and the light disappeared. About five minutes afterwards, he heard Smith shout that Allen had stabbed John. They afterwards went into the prisoner's room. Witness went for the doctor and with Bombardier Higginson and others took prisoner to the guardroom.

Mr Prynne: Have you ever heard prisoner say anything to the deceased in an annoying way?

Witness: Only sneering remarks, now and again, like 'bow-wow'. Prisoner was inclined to make these remarks to all of us.

Mr Prynne: Have you heard prisoner say anything else to Horrigan?

Witness: About a week before this occurrence, I heard the prisoner say, 'There is not much chance here in billets for doing much, but when we are away from here we shall be able to see who is the best man'.

William Mitchell C.L. Higginson, a bombardier in B Battery, R.F.A. gave corroborative evidence. He added that on the way to the guardroom prisoner said 'I will take my punishment like a man and remain as cool as a lamb'.

Cross examined by Mr Creech, witness said he heard prisoner make the remark stated by the last witness. He called Horrigan a 'bow-wow' and the deceased seemed to get annoyed, whereupon prisoner said he would prove who the better man was elsewhere.

Enos Cowley, motor agent, of the Square, Mere, said twelve men had been billeted in his house since Christmas. On the evening in question he asked the prisoner to go to bed. Sometime afterwards prisoner came down to him and saying he had been singing and was dry, asked for a glass of ale, which witness gave him. He was quite sober. About ten minutes later, witness heard singing and laughing in the three bedrooms. He called out to prisoner and asked him to get into bed and go to sleep and he answered that he would and shouted 'Goodnight'. On two occasions witness had been called into the kitchen to speak to the prisoner, who had been 'chipping' the others, who were annoyed by it.

P.C. Perrett, stationed at Mere, said he went to Mr Cowley's house about 2.15am on Sunday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, and saw the dead body of Horrigan lying on a bed. He subsequently saw the prisoner at the guardroom and he cautioned and charged him with wilful murder. He replied, 'I had no intention whatever of doing it' and witness conveyed him to the police station. Later in the day witness received prisoner's kit bag, which included in it a razor. On Monday morning witness was called to the police station where he saw the prisoner lying on his back in his cell with an injury to his throat. He said 'I could not stand the strain'. Accused, when charged, said 'I am not guilty. It was an accident. I wish to give evidence at my trial. I am not well enough today'. He was committed for trial at the next Assize for the county of Wiltshire.

#### The Adjourned Inquest

The adjourned coroner's inquiry into the circumstance of the death of Gunner Horrigan was held by Mr F.A. Trethowan, the coroner for South Wilts, at Mere, on Wednesday. Only two further witnesses gave evidence and it was not thought necessary for the accused to attend the proceedings. Among those present at the inquiry was the widow of the deceased.

Enos Cowley, motor agent, living at The Square, Mere, said that deceased, Gunner Allen and other soldiers were billeted in his house. On Saturday evening, February 6<sup>th</sup>, the men, including deceased and the accused held a special evening together. Witness went out with Horrigan and Smith about 7.15 for half an hour, and when they left Allen was playing the piano. On their return at 7.45 deceased was quite sober and every one of the 16 men present was in good spirits. They remained with the party until about midnight when the deceased went to bed. Allan remained downstairs for a short time longer. The men had a bottle and a half of whiskey to drink between them. When they broke up no-one was worse for drink. Deceased and Allen appeared to witness to be on good terms, but on two occasions he had had to speak to Allen a matter of complaints. These complaints were not from the deceased and on each occasion Allen was spoken to he proceeded to behave better in the future.

William Mitchell C.L. Higginson, bombardier in the R.F.A., stationed at Mere, said he was billeted with Mr Cowley and was staying at the house on February 6<sup>th</sup>. In the evening of that day witness, in company with the other men, arranged a musical evening. Everyone was quite sober throughout the proceedings and all were on friendly terms together. Witness went to bed earlier than the rest of the party, about 12.30am. About 1.45 he noticed a faint light in the wall of their room, and shortly afterwards saw the head and shoulders of a man in the passage between their room and the next. The man was in a stooping position. Witness heard Bombardier Boughton call out 'Who's that?' and getting no reply, say 'Is that you John?' As he got no answer Boughton repeated his last question and sat up in bed, whereupon the figure disappeared. Witness heard someone run through the next room, and then the light was blown out. About five minutes after he first noticed the man in the passage, witness heard Smith call out something like 'Come on boys, I think Allen has stabbed John'. Witness went at once to the deceased's room and found him lying across the bed near the foot. Allen was sitting at the head of the bed. Witness saw blood flowing from a wound on deceased's body, and noticed that Allen's right arm was smeared with blood. Sergeant Stephens was called, and on his instructions witness took Allen to the guardroom. On the way he said to witness 'I will take my punishment like a man and remain cool as a lamb'. Witness heard the accused charged at the police court and heard Allen reply 'I'm not guilty, it was purely an accident'. On several occasions before 6<sup>th</sup> February, if deceased made a remark, Allen would say 'Listen to the bow-wow' and witness heard him say on one occasion to deceased that when the Battery was moved from Mere he would see who was the better man. Witness had never heard deceased give any provocation to Allen. Allen was rather quarrelsome at times, but on fairly good terms with the bombardiers. There might have been a certain amount of jealousy about the promotions.

The Coroner, in summing up, reminded the jury that the fact of Allen not being present at the inquest must not have any effect on their verdict, because there was no necessity for him to attend. He heard at the police court all the evidence that was going to be made against him at present, and there was need for him to hear it over again. With regard to the verdict, the Coroner said it came to this, that a man must be taken to have intended the natural consequences of his actions, and that although Allen has said, apparently, that it was an accident, the jury had no evidence so far with regard to that. The jury returned a verdict of "Wilful murder"

*Salisbury & Winchester Journal, Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> February 1915*

#### Murder Charge at Wilts Assize

At the Wilts Assize, at Salisbury, yesterday, John Edwin Allen, a soldier, was indicted for the wilful murder of John William Horrigan, at Mere, Wilts on February 7. The two men, comrades in an artillery unit of the new Army, were billeted in the same house at Mere, Wilts. After a midnight quarrel in a dark bedroom, Horrigan was stabbed in the heart. Accused alleged that Horrigan rushed at him to attack him and fell on a knife with which he was cutting his corn. The jury found prisoner not guilty, and he was discharged.

*Western Daily Press 27 May 1915*