



SOUTH WILTSHIRE CORONER'S INQUESTS



Sutton Veny

William SHANNON

29th October, 1915

Soldier Killed by High Explosive

An inquest was held at the Military Hospital, Sutton Veny, by Mr F. A. P. Sylvester, Coroner for Mid Wilts, touching the death of William Thomas Shannon, a Private in the Royal Scots. The Rev. F. Vernon was elected foreman of the jury, which numbered 13.

Edward Shannon, a private in the 15th Battalion Royal Scots, said his brother had been in the service since December 6th, 1914, and his home was at 28, Milton Street, Longsight, Manchester. He was 25 years of age.

Second-Lieutenant L. W. Knott said he was in charge of the grenadier party, and was assisted by Shannon. They had been carrying on their work independently, and had been practising trench formations, etc., when Lieutenant James, the divisional officer in grenade work, sent a message to witness to take his men to a lecture he was about to give. The lecture was one dealing with explosives. Witness took the men up, and they sat or lay down on the grass all round in a hollow square, with Lieutenant James working in the centre. He carried out a series of experiments, and then gave the experiment which proved fatal. This was an explosion with 15 ounces of wet guncotton and one ounce of dry guncotton, attached to about 16 inches of iron railing, which he tied to some barbed wire entanglements. His object was to show the explosive force of a single slab of guncotton. He moved the men back to a safe distance and warned them to lie down, lit the fuse himself, and moved back. The explosion followed, and witness, who had been lying down, got up. After the explosion, he was proceeding to view the result when he heard Private Gibson call out. His exact words were, "Lieut. Knott, Shannon's killed." Witness replied, "Nonsense; he's fainted," and went to him and saw immediately that his injuries were fatal.

The Coroner: Were any pieces of metal found?

Witness: No. We made an exhaustive search but found nothing.

The Foreman: I take it you did not see Shannon actually struck?

Witness: No. I am morally certain that if he had been lying down, by virtue of his height, he would not have been struck.

The witness King, recalled, stated that he did not hear any order to lie down given. Witness was not lying down.

Lieut. Knott said that the order to lie down at a demonstration was generally made. It was a precaution invariably taken.

King said he did not know it was the general practice to lie down when explosives were being fired.

Second Lieut. Henry James, of the 24th Northumberland Fusiliers, said he carried on the lecture for about three quarters of an hour. It was dealing with high and low explosives. About 280 men were present. He gave particulars on the final experiment, which was to show the effect of guncotton on barbed wire. He ordered the men to get to a safe distance and lie down. He considered a safe distance would be about 50 yards. When he saw they were all clear, and to the best of his knowledge he believed they were all lying down, he lit the fuse, turned his back on it, walked about 35 paces and got down. The closest man to him would then be about 30 yards away. The fuse was a 10 seconds fuse, 4 or 5 inches long. After the explosion he heard that Shannon was dead, but until he saw him thought he was stunned by the concussion. He thought that a strain might have been caused in the piece of iron railing and the explosion might have torn a part of it off. Similar experiments had been carried out when the metal had only been lifted about six feet in the air. There was nothing to stop the metal.

The Coroner: Have you any theory as to what caused Shannon's death?

Witness: Well, he was standing, and a piece of the metal might have caught him, or it might also have been a flint.

Lieut. J. Fiddian, RAMC, stated that he had examined the body, which bore a wound on the right side of the head. The bones of the skull were broken into fragments and the brain was lacerated. There were no other injuries. This appeared to have been caused by a heavy blow with a missile about the size of a fist, and which must have weighed at least one pound.

Private Gibson stated that the order to lie down was "Men who wish to lie down can do so."

The Coroner: There was no direct order to do so?

Witness: No, sir. Shannon lay down, but just before the explosion occurred he got up.

The Coroner asked whether Lieut Knott would like to say anything further about the order to lie down.

The Lieutenant said it was always understood. Shannon, however, was a trained grenadier who had a perfect right to get up and move about. The other men were novices.

This concluded the evidence, and the Coroner, in summing up, recommended that the understanding that the men should lie down, should be converted into a definite order.

The jury returned a verdict of "Accidental death," and endorsed the Coroner's remarks.

The Coroner said he would ask the officers to take this into consideration.

Lieut. James said that they fully realised the sanctity of human life, but with these explosives there was always a danger. Full precautions had been taken.

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