

THE MACHINE GUN ACCIDENT

A SECOND DEATH

EVIDENCE AT THE INQUEST

The deplorable accident which occurred at the Curragh Camp on Friday afternoon, has unfortunately resulted in the death of another member of the Irish Horse. From fuller details concerning the affair, it appears that on Friday afternoon a section of 15 men belonging to the gallant corps, which is being prepared for active service in South Africa, were engaged at machine gun practice, working with a Colt quick-fire, capable of discharging 196 rounds per minute. The gun, which is discharged by a trigger, consists in its full equipment of four parts, namely the tripod head, the tripod on which is mounted, the gun barrel, and the ammunition case. The men commenced firing at the 900 yards range, and then proceeded to practice at 800 yards. After a time, they were ordered to resume practice at 900 yards, and in removing the gun barrel from the tripod, a charge, which, through some unexplained accident, had evidently been left in the ammunition chamber, suddenly exploded and instantly killed Private Thomas Johnstone, aged 23, who was shot through the brain. Close to Johnstone was another member of the corps, Corporal Archibald J. Taylor, aged 29, who was also shot through the head, but in his case death did not supervene until two hours or so afterwards. He never regained consciousness. All the other members of the section were uninjured, but in some few incidences there were narrow escapes. Private Johnstone was formally employed in the General Post-office, and was a son of Mr. George H. Johnstone, 41 Lower Gardiner Street. Corporal Taylor was for some time a clerk in the Irish Land Commission, and resided in Rathmines. He was married some time ago. The upmost sympathy is expressed for the relatives of the deceased in the distressing circumstances in which they suddenly found themselves placed.

THE INQUEST

Dr. Michael F. Kenna, Coroner for South Kildare, held an inquest on the bodies of the deceased in the hospital on Saturday. Marshal, Lieutenant W. Butler, was in attendance.

The Earl of Longford, who is in command of the Irish Horse, was the first witness examined. He deposed that he was present when the accident occurred, about half-past 4 the previous evening. Lieutenant Smallwood was responsible in the first instance for the charge of the gun. While the gun was being charged witness heard a report, and on turning around saw Johnstone and Taylor lying on the ground. It was customary to see that the gun was safe

before it was removed. When witness saw the men, they were lying either side of the gun rather in front of it. The gun at this time was dismounted off the tripod and lying on the ground. The duty of seeing that the gun was safe before removal was deputed to one particular man of the section.

Sergeant Reginald Bate, who was with the gun section on the occasion, examined, stated that they had completed their firing at the 800 yards range, and he repeated to the section the order to change given by Lieutenant Smallwood. He did not see the gun taken asunder, and he did not examine it or see the men of the section examine it at that time. It was not his duty to see that the gun was safe before removal. Lieutenant Smallwood was about 20 yards away when the accident occurred, and witness was about 15 yards away. The gun was moved twice during the firing practice, and he saw it examined the first time only it was removed. When the section began to move it the second time the gun might have been loaded. The gun should be properly unlimbered before being removed. It was Corporal Taylor's duty to have examined it on the second occasion. Witness did not see the accident occurring.

Lieutenant Arthur Smallwood, examined, disposed that he had 15 men under his command on the occasion, and both deceased belonged to his section. After firing at 900 yards the section proceeded to fire at 800 yards. After they had fired at the 800 yards they were to return to the 900 yard range. The men in charge of the gun, a Colt automatic, were Sergeant Bate, Corporal Taylor, Privates Johnstone, Carothers, Kennedy, Gallagher, Skelley, and Wright. Before removing the gun from the 900 to the 800 yards range witness saw the gun correctly unloaded and chamber emptied. It took four men to remove the gun from range to range, and the men in charge were Taylor, who had charge of the tripod and legs, Johnstone, who had charge of the tripod head, Carothers, who charge of the gun itself and Wright, who had charge of the ammunition. Witness did not see the accident occurring. He received sanction of Lord Longford to return to the 900 yards range, and he gave the order to Sergeant Bate. Before returning to the 900 yards range witness did not examine the gun. While moving to the rear of the section to select a site for firing at the 900 yards range witness was brought up by the report of a shot. He was then about 20 yards distant from the gun, and on looking round saw two men lying on their backs, close to the tripod, shot through the head. The gun was dismounted, and the men were lying on either side of the tripod. Witness could not say in what position the gun was in at the time of the accident. If the gun was properly unloaded and the chamber emptied it would be impossible that a round of ammunition should remain in the chamber. If the gun got jammed it must be free before being fired again. He did not examine the gun after the accident, as he was busy with the wounded men. He gave orders to Private Wright to take the gun back to be cleaned and examined.

Private Reginald Wright, examine, said he did not know who was the last man who fired the gun. He was present when the accident occurred. The muzzle of the gun was pointed to the butts, and it had been raised from the tripod when the accident occurred. Witness had removed the box of ammunition, and was on the left-hand side when he saw Johnstone fall. His body went on the ground was laying in front of the muzzle of the gun crossways.

Private Thomas Carothers deposed that it was his duty to lift the gun off the tripod head. Corporal Taylor examined the gun when it was about to be removed from the 900 to the 800 yards range, but to the best of witness belief, it was not examined on the second occasion. When the accident occurred, witness was raising the gun off the tripod, he could not give the actual position of the other men. When he had the gun in his hands it went off, and he dropped it. He then saw Johnstone on the ground, with the wound in his head, and he also saw Taylor on the ground, but in his case witness could not say that he saw the wound. After the accident the gun was examined and found to be all right.

Dr. J. B. McCutcheon deposed that Taylor was unconscious when brought to the hospital There was a mark of a bullet having entered the skull at the right temporal region. Blood was flowing freely from both wounds, and brain matter was protruding. Death took place at 6.10 p.m., the deceased never having regained consciousness. In his opinion death was due to compression and laceration of the brain. He should say the gun was level with the man's head when the accident occurred, deceased might have been leaning on the ground in a crouching position at the time.

Surgeon M. J. Johnson gave evidence as to the wounds on the body of Private Johnstone. There were two scalp wounds which would have been caused by a bullet, one on the left temporal region, which appeared at the back of the head, which appeared to be the exit, the bullet having apparently passed through the head. Witness did not discover the bullet. Laceration of the brain substance was, in his opinion, the immediate cause of death.

Sergeant O'Brien, R.I.C., said he had not been able to find the bullet. This concluded the evidence.

The Coroner, in summing up, said it would be for the jury to consider what was the cause of death of the men, and whether proper precautions had been taken by the authorities on the occasion.

The Jury, after a brief consultation, returned a verdict to the effect that the death of the two men was due to the accidental discharge of a Colt automatic gun, and that they had no evidence to show negligence on the part of those in charge of the firing party at the range.

The Foreman of the Jury (Mr. Richard O'Mahony) said they desired to express their sympathy with the families of the deceased men, and hoped that the commanding officer would recommend them to the consideration of the authorities.

A military Court of Inquiry was held after the inquest, and was attended by Lord Longford and the other witnesses examined at the inquest. The result will be submitted to the authorities at headquarters in due course.

It is expected that the Irish Horse will leave the Curragh for South Africa about the 15th of April.

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The **Colt-Browning M1895**, nicknamed "potato digger" because of its unusual operating mechanism, is an air-cooled, belt-fed, gas-operated machine gun that fires from a closed bolt with a cyclic rate of 450 rounds per minute. Based on a John Browning and Matthew S. Browning design dating to 1889, it was the first successful gas-operated machine gun to enter service.

Transcribed by Matt McNamara
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