

Joseph O'Neill

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### ISLAND RIFLE RANGE TRAGEDY

#### MARKER ACCIDENTALLY SHOT AT PARKHURST

A tragic occurrence took place at the Rookwood Rifle Club's miniature range on Saturday during the opening match of the season with Carisbrooke B team, when ex-Sergeant, Joseph Thomas O'Neill, aged 41, army pensioner, living at the Carisbrooke Brewery Bar, Trafalgar-road, Newport, was fatally shot in the head while acting as marker for the Carisbrooke Club, which he had recently joined. Only a few minutes before being killed O'Neill had volunteered to take the place of the appointed marker, and it was while commencing his duty in marking sighting shots that he momentarily exposed himself at the side of the butt without giving warning to those at the firing-point. The slightest projection of his head from the protecting wall brought it immediately in front of the target, which was close to the wall of the butts instead of, as is usually the case, several feet away, hence the great peril of the slightest exposure.

This was the first fatal accident in connection with the Island Civilian Rifle Club movement since it was started by its founder and president, Major-General the Right Hon, J. E. B. Seely, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P., nearly 20 years ago, after his return from the South African War. The Parkhurst Prison range, which is situated behind the old printing works, was passed as safe by a competent military authority nearly nine years ago, and up till Saturday had been free from accident. Before the war targets which moved up and down were used, and with them a greater degree of safety was assured for those at the butts than has apparently been the case since, as during their use by the military an alteration was made. There are now two targets on either side of the markers' shelter, which is substantially constructed of concrete, with a thick sloping bank behind it and an arrangement for sliding the targets screens to and fro so that the markers can pull them towards them without exposing themselves. The movement of the targets was demonstrated to the Jury before the inquest on Tuesday as showing that there was no necessity for the marker to expose himself at all, but it was freely admitted that other markers besides the deceased had gone outside the shelter to mark sighting shots that afternoon, to the alarm of some of the visitors at the firing-point. This would seem to indicate either a disinclination to use the safe means of moving the targets or some difficulty about it. As the slightest obtrusion of any part of the body through the exit of the shelter brings it in the direct line of fire, there would appear to be good reason for taking greater precaution against the possibility of accidents on this range. Deceased was a cheery fellow, never happier than when doing someone a good turn. It was this feeling which prompted him to volunteer his services as marker, and as he was going away to Parkhurst on Saturday he cheerily remarked to friends "I am going up to mark for the club. My wife said to me when I came away 'Mind you don't get shot.'" He apparently ridiculed any idea of the possibility of such a happening as he smilingly departed, never dreaming that there was anything prophetic in the warning. He came to Parkhurst in 1914 with the Royal Warwickshire Regt, and married the daughter of Mr. F. Booth of the Sun Inn, Newport, with whom the deepest sympathy is felt. She lost two infant children during the war. He served

through the war, and came through the fighting safely, except for slight wounding and shell-shock. He served for 14 years in India. He was a native of Birmingham, and his late father fought in the Crimea. He took a prominent part in the promotion of the comic football match in aid of the Nursing Association funds and was an active helper of the committee.

The inquest was held at Parkhurst Prison on Tuesday, after the deputy coroner and the jury had inspected the rifle range. Major F. J. Smith, M.C. (Newport) was foreman of the jury. Insp. Salter attended.

Fred Booth, of the Sun Inn, Newport, said the deceased was his son-in-law. He had been 21 years in the Army, and had been a machine-gun sergeant. He was doubtless accustomed to rifle range marking. Deceased served in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and left the Army about three months ago, after going through the war.

Edward Riley, principal-warder cook, of Parkhurst Prison, said that on the afternoon of the 3rd inst, there was a rifle match between Rookwood and Carisbrooke B. They had finished shooting at the 25 yards range, and were just beginning at 50 yards. Witness was marking in the butts, and O'Neill and a lad named Burt were also there, deceased having offered to mark in place of Burt, so he was told. Witness was marking on the right hand and deceased and the lad on the left; the lad was sitting down in the corner. Mr. Bunce and Mr. Barton were firing on the left-hand targets, Mr. Bunce on No. 2, which was close to the side of the butts. Witness called out "all correct." The two sighting shots arrived, and witness was marking off the second sighter on the right side when he heard deceased say "I must mark off these two sighters." At the same time he heard another shot fired on the left-hand target, and also a noise as if someone had fallen, and then saw deceased in a stooping position with his head resting on the parapet underneath the inside target on the left. That was only shot fired after the four sighters had come up. — Q. Is it the practice for the marker to put his head outside the butts to mark the sighters? — We do get visitors rather careless with regard to marking, but there is no occasion for them to go outside the butts, which are perfectly safe. — Q. Do you know whether the sighting shots on the left-hand targets had been signalled? — I could not say as I was attending to my own targets. Q. The man should not fire again until his sighting shot was duly signalled? — No, sir.

The Foreman said there should be regulations for the information of members.

The Coroner said he should think the Government would issue regulations. Rules were provided for the use of members of the rifle clubs, a copy of which he handed to the foreman. — (To witness): Is it the practice to go out of the butts to mark the sightings shots? — No sir. I have seen men go out, but of course they do it at their own risk.—Q. Who is in charge? — There is a captain of each team. Unfortunately Mr. Bunce was captain of the Carisbrooke team. Mr. Marchmont was captain of the Parkhurst team. He did not see the targets pulled in by deceased. The marker would not be exposed to danger by putting his hand forward and pulling the target along on the screen on which they could be moved to and fro in order to mark the sighter. The man at the firing point would not wait for any further signal after the sighter had been signalled to finish his firing at that range. Deceased seemed proud of the honour of doing the marking for the team; he seemed overjoyed at it. Deceased should have pulled in the target or put out a signal to stop the firing. A red flag was there for that purpose. The captain of a team would naturally select an experienced

man as a marker, and witness did not think it necessary to caution deceased or explain the workings of the targets to him.

George Spencer Burt, 16, son of Charles Burt, of Whitcombe Cottage, general smith, said he was in the Carisbrooke B team, and shot at the 25 yards range. He then went to mark at the 50 yards range, he had marked at the 25 yards range. Deceased came into the butts and asked if he could take his (witness's) place. Witness handed over to him and sat down in the left-hand corner. Deceased stood up in front of him. He walked out to mark sighters. Witness did not know whether he signalled the sighters. He did not hear any shot fired at that time. He did not hear deceased speak. Deceased leaned forward through the exit of the butts as he passed witness, and he then saw him fall, with his head towards the bank on which the target was situated. Deceased might have signalled the sighters without witness seeing him. — Q. Have you been taught not to put your head outside to mark the sighting shot? — Yes, sir. — Q. Have you been instructed to pull the targets along by a string or otherwise to mark them? — Yes, sir. — Q. You thought it dangerous for deceased to move out as he did? — I saw him pass, that was all. — Q. You did not think to stop him? — No sir. He had got too far. — Witness added that he did not know there were red flags there for use. It would have been very easy for deceased to have put out a red flag. — Q. You would not be stupid enough to put your head outside during firing? — No, sir.

Charles Edwin Bunce, jobbing mason, of Switzenhurst, Medina-avenue, Newport, said he fired his sighter first and Mr. Barton and the two Rookwood men followed. He fired at on No 2 target and glanced across the range and saw someone moving about as if he had just come from the targets. He then glanced at the dummy target above to see what they were going to give him, and they marked a bull for his sighter. It was rather confusing, as there was only one dummy target for signalling the shots of all four men who were firing, but when he saw the bull signalled he thought it was his, after he and Barton had fired their sighters he saw the Rookwood men's sighters scored and Mr. Riley step out to mark his targets. — Q. Is it not rather risky for one to do that? — It is but he must have given a signal to his people, and then that would have been in order. He must have given a signal by moving his hand before coming out. — Q. Surely the red flag should have been shown on that occasion? — Yes, quite so. As it was then his turn to fire again he looked up the range and saw it was all clear. As the sun was shining on his face he pulled his hat over his eyes, took steady aim on the bull, and fired. He saw no signal and no one move at the butts, and he did not hear anyone call or speak before he fired. He did not find out whether Mr. Barton's sighter had been marked before he fired. He naturally concluded that deceased was experienced in marking. When he fired his second shot Mr. Riley jumped up and shouted "Stop, man down." — Q. Yours was the only shot that could have struck him? — Mine was the fifth shot fired at the range. It was the first shot I counted for scoring. There was no shot fired afterwards. That was the first time he had been on that range.

The Coroner said he heard that the range had received the sanction of the military authorities, if that was any protection for anyone.

Witness said he fully believed that his sighting shot had been duly signalled, or he should not have fired again.

Stanley Archibald Barton, advertising contractor, of Mount Pleasant, Newport, who firing with the last witness, said Mr. Bunce fired first and his sighter was signalled, as also was witness's sighter. It was quite possible to get confused about that. After Mr. Bunce had fired again he heard a cry "Man down." But did not see anything of the marker outside the butts before or at the time Mr. Bunce fired, and did not know till he heard the cry "Man down" that deceased had been hit. He saw two sighting shots signalled, and thought they were his and Mr. Bunce's. It was the only range he knew where the marking was done on one dummy target.

Mr. F. F. Wadham in reply to the Coroner, he believed as a matter of fact that during the war they had been rather lax, but before that no one was allowed to shoot on a range before it was passed by an N.R.A. official. — Q. Have you ever seen only one dummy target used for the marking of four different targets? — No, never.

The Coroner said he had come to the conclusion that deceased must have exposed himself to mark the target instead of pulling it in, and that he did that without giving any warning signal. Mr. Bunce had the right to assume in the absence of warning that the range was in order for his next shot. He had given his evidence most fairly (hear, hear). He said he thought his shot must have been that which killed the deceased. Whether the Jury thought the target and marking arrangements were what they should be was a matter for them to consider. He, as a layman, thought there was an element of risk about the range which did not exist on ranges generally. Whether they would think it necessary to make any recommendation to the authorities was for the Jury to determine.

Mr. Wadham said that Mr. Bunce had been a member of the Carisbrooke Rifle Club for over eight years, and was looked upon by them as a most consistent and careful shot. They had never had to find fault with him for breaking any of the rules, and he had become quite a competent rifleman, as his official position showed. It was important for the jury and the public to remember that Mr. Bunce was using an orthoptic sight through which the range of vision on the target was only ten inches, and he could not see what was above or below that. It was important to remember that open sights were not being used.

The Coroner agreed, and said Mr. Bunce had the right to assume that the range was in order for firing in the absence of a flag or other danger signal. That was his view; and that it was the fault of the target arrangements being what they were more than anything else that the accident occurred.

Dr. Charles N. Slaney, deputy medical officer at Parkhurst Prison, said that at 4.10 on Saturday afternoon he was informed that a man had been shot, and went and at once to the range. He found deceased in a dying condition with a small puncture wound just above the left ear. The bullet had penetrated well into the brain, and there was no exit mark. Deceased was removed to shelter, and everything possible was done for him, but he died at 4.40.

The Coroner asked as to whether there had been any Government inspection of the range.

Dr. Slaney said he had been rather interested in the range. The secretary told him it had been made about 8½ years, and that it was passed by a staff captain of the Royal Fusiliers, who had something to do with musketry, and came on the range and fired a few shots, and passed it as safe and suitable for rifle practice. But latterly he believed the targets had been altered and put lower. They used to have two dummies, but to meet the requirements and be up-to-date they altered it.

The Coroner said it was obviously very risky with a target so close to the side of the butts if a person exposed himself in the slightest way. It appeared to him that the risks were of more than ordinary character run by markers on the rifle range generally. He thought it awfully dangerous at that point.

Mr. Mason (a juror): It is the most dangerous I have seen.

The Witness: It might be in accordance with new regulations. One never dreamed that a marker would leave the butts during firing without putting up the red flag.

The Coroner said he must say the evidence had exonerated Mr. Bunce from blame (hear, hear). If anyone was at fault it was the deceased, who went out to mark the sighter without putting up the red flag or giving some other warning to stop firing. He did not know whether the Jury would think it necessary to call attention to the danger of marking the targets in that way. The Foreman said he thought it should be brought to the notice of the Rifle Club authorities. It should be urged that they should issue instructions that men should be thoroughly drilled in the duties before being allowed to go into the butts to mark. No soldier was allowed to go behind the butts before being properly drilled in the duties.

The Coroner said that was hardly a matter for a rider, but if that was published in the Press their opinion would be known by the authorities concerned.

In the course of conversation it was stated that the range was constructed for up and down targets, and had been altered, and that was where the danger came in.

The Coroner: Then you simply record a verdict that deceased was accidentally shot, and you do not add a rider calling the attention of anyone to the conditions of the range.

The Jury agreed.

Mr. Wadham, on behalf of the Carisbrooke Club, expressed their deep regret that a recently elected member who had had such a long record of Army service should have been killed in that way, and their sincere sympathy with the widow and other relatives.

The Foreman said the Jury also wished to express deep sympathy with the widow, and with Mr. Bunce in the painful position in which he had been placed.

A letter of sympathy was also sent by the Governor of the Prison and the Rifle Club.

The funeral took place with military honours accorded by the 1st Royal Irish Rifles (Parkhurst), on Wednesday, in the presence of a large assemblage, the first part of the service being at the Catholic Church, Newport, and the interment at Carisbrooke Cemetery,

the Rev. Father Ahern officiated. Sergeants of the Royal Irish Rifles acted as bearers, and in addition to the band and firing party of the regiment, representatives of the Anti-Aircraft Depot at Parkhurst also attended. Lieut. McCoy, of the Royal Irish Rifles, was in command of the military. The coffin wrapped in the Union Jack, was borne in a hearse covered with choice floral tributes. On the way to the church the band, at the head of the cortege, played Chopin's "Marche funebre." The mourners included deceased's widow, mother, and sister, Mr. and Mrs. F. Booth (parents-in-law), Mr. F. Booth, jun., Miss B. Booth, Mrs. Cheshire, Mr. J. Wright, Mrs. F. Wright, Mr. Shufflebotham, Mr. and Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Carr, Mr. and Mrs. Fulwood, Mr. and Mrs. Ayley (Cowes), Mr. and Mrs. N. H. T. Mursell, Mr. W. K. Baker, Major F. J. Smith, M.C., Messrs, Fulwood (chairman), A. S. Burt, and Noble (Primrose Club), Messrs. Duff and Robson (Sunflower Club), Messrs. Ryan, P. Webb, W. Holloway, and Wright (who served in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment with deceased in India and elsewhere). Principal Warders Riley and Kennard and other members of the Rookwood Rifle Club, Mr. G. Tharle (secretary of the I.W. Civilian Rifle Clubs Association), Mr. A. R. Scott and other members of the Carisbrooke Rifle Club, and Sergt. King (1/8th Hants Regiment). At the church the organist played the "Dead march" in "Saul" and other selections. The band played funeral marches on the way to the cemetery, where the usual three volleys were fired and the buglers sounded the "last post." There were over 40 beautiful floral tributes, these being sent in addition to the family and other friends, by members of the Rookwood and Carisbrooke Rifle Clubs, the Primrose Club, the Sunflower and Carisbrooke Clubs, the comic football teams, and old comrades of deceased. Mr. H. W. Parnell carried out the funeral arrangements.

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Mrs. O'Neill and Mr. and Mrs. F. Booth wish to return their heartfelt thanks for kind expressions of sympathy with them in the death of Sergt. Joseph O'Neill, also for beautiful floral tributes.

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