

THE SUTTON VENY CAMP MURDER

One of the earliest uses of an experiment in ballistics in the detection of a crime took place in Wiltshire in 1917 – after a murder was discovered at Sutton Veny Camp.

In 1917 Britain was in the last painful throes of the First World War. Salisbury Plain was, for hundreds of thousands of doomed men, their last home on English soil.

The Plain was then, as it is now, a huge training area. Hutted and canvas encampments were situated all around. From dawn till dusk the thunder of horses' hooves, rattle of machine gun fire and rumble of artillery could be heard.

Thousands of miles from home, for thirty-one-year old Australian Verney Asser, the War consisted of training young Australians to use the Lewis machine gun at the Sutton Veny firing range.

Asser shared a hut with another Australian, Corporal Durkin, also a Lewis Gun Instructor. Durkin and Asser were competing for the affections of a young widow. Durkin was the luckier of the two and, despite an engagement to an Australian girl, he began to see the widow on a regular basis.

Towards the end of November 1917 he wrote to ask her to visit the camp on the 28th. The night before she was due to arrive, both men finished duty early and visited the canteen. Both appeared to be in good spirits. The two returned to their hut at about 9pm.

During the evening, no doubt, Corporal Durkin informed Asser that he was expecting to see the woman on the following day. At 9.30pm Asser called at the musketry store almost next door to his hut, and told Corporal Milne, who was in charge, that he wanted some empty magazines. He was allowed to help himself.

Five minutes later, as Corporal Milne was preparing to go to bed, he heard a shot from Asser's hut – a bullet came smashing through the wall, passing through a tunic and a haversack, before exiting through the other wall on the far side of the hut.

Milne, believing the shot to be an accident, thought nothing more of it. He undressed and went to bed. Forty minutes later Asser was again at the musketry store. He rummaged around for a minute or so and left once more. When questioned afterwards Corporal Milne did not know what Asser had taken.

Ten minutes later the Corporal heard another shot from the same direction and, at just after 11pm, Asser turned up with the Sergeant of the Guard to say that Durkin had shot himself.

The body was found undressed and covered by bedclothes. Durkin's body was lying on its right side, with the arms outstretched and a rifle lying across the wrists. There was a bullet wound on the left cheek and an exit wound on the opposite side of the head, just below the ear.

Asser claimed that he had been woken by the shot at 10.45pm. Jumping out of bed, and by the light of a match, he saw that Durkin had shot himself. Before he had alerted the Sergeant, Asser claimed that he had snatched the rifle away, ejected the cartridge and replaced the rifle in the position in which it had been found.

Asser's bed, however, was rolled up – so he couldn't have slept on it. When questioned further, Asser gave the unlikely explanation that he had slept on the floor!

Furthermore when Asser had alerted the Sergeant, he had been fully dressed and was wearing both his puttees and his boots. He denied all knowledge of the shot which had penetrated Corporal Milne's hut.

The facts were reported to the local police constable and, at the following day's inquest, Asser gave evidence that he believed Durkin had been depressed about his relationship with his fiancée and the young widow. The jury returned a verdict of suicide.

In the meantime Superintendent Scott visited the scene of the tragedy. After experimenting with the rifle, and hearing Corporal Milne's evidence, Scott concluded that Durkin had been murdered. The crime was reconstructed and it was proved beyond doubt that suicide was impossible. With the muzzle of the weapon pressed against the cheek, the trigger was too far for a man of Durkin's build to reach.

When the fatal wound was examined it was noted that there were no signs of singeing at the point where the bullet had entered the face. The shot must have been fired at some distance from the cheek rather than from directly against it.

In order to disprove the theory of suicide it was decided to conduct one of Wiltshire's first experiments in ballistics. The aim was to produce a wound that resembled the one causing Durkin's death.

A leg and shoulder of newly skinned mutton was chosen as a target. By firing at the mutton from varying distances, with the same rifle and similar bullets, it was discovered that a very similar wound could be produced from a range of five inches.

With Durkin's slight build and the muzzle of the rifle five inches away it would have been impossible for him to pull the trigger with his finger. Suicide could have been committed – but only if he had used his toe to pull the trigger, and then only if he had been uncovered.

Accordingly Asser was arrested on 3rd December and committed for trial at the Devizes Assizes on the 18th January 1918. The only problem for the prosecution was in establishing a motive for the murder. There was evidence of quarrels in the past, and that the two men had both visited the same woman – but there was no proof that there had been jealousy over her affections.

However, the jury's attention was drawn to the results of the experiments with the rifle, the significance of Asser's visit to the musketry store and the dress of the defendant at the time.

The judge also asked why Asser took the gun from the deceased and ejected the cartridge. The defendant replied that he didn't know. He also denied that he had visited the musketry store. This, said the judge in summing up, was a question of either accepting the defendant's word or the Corporal's. Asser also denied firing the shot that penetrated the Corporal's hut.

Asser was convicted of murder and leave to appeal on the grounds of insanity was refused. He was hanged. The Director of Public Prosecutions commended Superintendent Scott for his initiative.