

Extraordinary Events on Army Manoeuvres 1910

Officer v Civilians



The alleged extraordinary incidents which marked the recent Army manoeuvres at Winterbourne Stoke, on the border of Salisbury Plain, were the subject today of further magisterial proceedings at Salisbury.

Much has been written regarding the occurrences which took place at this Wilts village on September 21st and 22nd, but so far no official recital of the allegations.

These are that Captain John Montague Benett Stanford, J.P., Hatch House, Tisbury, an officer with the South African War experience and a Transport Territorial officer, ordered a local publican to close his premises on the grounds that soldiers were being supplied with drink.

The publican refused, it is stated, and altercations followed between the Captain and certain civilians.

Since the case was before the County Bench a fortnight ago, summonses had been issued by Capt. Benett-Stanford against three civilians, namely Wm Bradbury, foreman to Messrs Holloway and Webb, Army Contractors; Albert Burge, chauffeur to Col C A Nicholson, and Samuel Barber, builder and member of the Town Council of Salisbury.

There were two summonses against Bradbury, one charging him with an offence under the Military Manoeuvres Act 1897, the other with committing a common assault upon Capt Benett-Stanford.

Burge was charged with an offence under the same Act and further with unlawfully obstructing the highway with a motor car, of which he was the driver.

The charge against Barber was that of committing an offence under the Manoeuvres Act.

Mr C A S Garland, barrister, appeared on behalf of the complainant, Mr F R Y Radcliffe, KD, presided over the Bench and Mr S H Emanuel, barrister, appeared for Bradbury and Burge, and Barber was represented by Mr Trethowan, a local solicitor.

The keenest interest was taken in the proceedings, the Captain being a well-known figure in the district.

War Office Investigation

Bradbury was the first of the defendants called and was charged first with an offence under the Military Manoeuvres Act. To this he pleaded not guilty.

Mr Garland thereupon stated that, in respect of this case, he suggested that it should be adjourned sine die to permit an investigation into the circumstances by the War Office. Mr Emanuel opposed the application pointing out that the case had already been adjourned at the instance of the complainant, and it would be unfair to defendant to put him to the expense of again appearing. He submitted that if the case was not to be proceeded with, it should be dismissed. It was not necessary, so far as he knew, to obtain the permission of the War Office to proceed with the prosecution, though that might be the usual course in practice.

The Alleged Assault

Eventually the case of assault was proceeded with. Bradbury pleaded not guilty. The decision as to procedure on the other charges was deferred till later.

Mr Garland, outlining the circumstances of the case, said the case was one of violent and brutal assault. Until recently, said counsel, complainant held a commission in the Dragoon Guards, and at the present time, was a lieutenant on the Reserve of Officers and captain of the 1st South West Mounted Brigade Transport of the Territorial Forces, and it was in the latter position that he took part in the manoeuvres, being in command of the Transport and Supply column.

On 21st September, Capt Benett-Stanford was at Winterbourne Stoke in charge of some 37 wagons, driven by civilian drivers, who were not so amenable to discipline as military men. As there was some congestion in the roadway in front of the Bell Inn, caused by a crowd of civilians, bicycles, carts, and a motor car, and to prevent the drivers from falling into the temptation of going into the inn to drink, Capt Benett-Stanford ordered that the public house be closed. Mr West, the innkeeper, appeared to be agreeable and this was done. Capt Benett-Stanford himself locked the back door and in going through the premises, found the defendant Burge, who looked at him insolently. Capt Benett-Stanford knocked a cup out of Burge's hand, and struck him. Eventually he cleared the inn and closed the door.

The Whip Incident

As Capt Benett-Stanford emerged from the inn, proceeded counsel, he had in his hand a whip. By way of a jest, the thong of the whip was around West's neck and it was thus linked together that they appeared, the parties all laughing and jesting together. This and other incidents, said counsel, had been grossly misrepresented and exaggerated in the Press.

Borrowed a Sword

As Captain Stanford appeared from the porch of the inn, loud cries were raised by the civilians in front of the inn. The captain was struck two or three times from behind, and the whip was torn from his hand.

In the middle of the roadway was an Officer, Lieut Alexander, from who Captain Benett-Stanford borrowed a sword, that he might defend himself (laughter). He received two more blows from behind, and turning round sharply, he grasped his assailant, who turned out to be Bradbury. The assault was absolutely unprovoked and was so serious as to produce a bleeding wound which might have been attended with disastrous consequences. The Captain's conduct had been subjected to adverse criticism, but he had been placed in circumstances of great difficulty and, said counsel, he had done nothing to justify these animadversions.

The Captain's Story

The first witness called was the complainant who, asking that he might take the oath the old fashioned way, repeated the statutory words and kissed the Book. It was to prevent congestion, he said, that he cleared the inn and the roadway in front of it, as other wagons were coming for supplies from the transport wagons, which were drawn up along one side of the street, and as a body of artillery were expected to pass through the village. Mr West, the innkeeper, was quite agreeable to the inn being cleared. Many of the civilian drivers were in the inn and they left when requested. Burge, however, said witness, was extremely insolent to me.

Mr Garland: did he defy you? He did. His whole manner was offensive and impertinent, and I knocked the glass out of his hand as he lowered it from his mouth. I also hit him with the thong end of my whip after he struck at me with his fist. I then turned him out and locked the door. As I emerged from the inn, witness proceeded, I was struck three times over the back of the head with a stick. I ran or stumbled into the middle of the roadway. There was a rabble of London drivers, and others and they shouted, "Hit him!" and "Kill the b.....!"

What exactly was the composition of the crowd? – Drivers from London, Bristol, and Bath, and camp followers generally. It was a cowardly attack, concluded witness.

The Cross-Examination

Capt Benett-Stanford was subjected to a long and searching cross-examination by Mr Emanuel.

Do you conceive you had any powers to close a public-house, asked counsel - Yes

Under what Statute? - I cannot tell you

Counsel, reading from the Military Manoeuvres Act, declared that the publican was expressly excepted from the officer's interference. Did you think you had power to knock a glass out of a man's hand? - Yes

Had you a right to put your whip round the landlord's neck? – No

You thought it would inspire discipline among your drivers to see you drag a man by the neck? - My drivers were well behaved, decent men

Mr Emanuel: Excuse me saying so, but I cannot say that for you

The Chairman suggested they should avoid personalities.

Further cross-examined, Capt Benett-Stanford admitted a conviction at Guildford for assaulting a man.

Did a whip appear in that case too? - No; it was for tying a man's wrist with reins. The man was half drunk.

Witness also admitted that he had once proposed to tie a man up to be whipped.

He swore that he used no foul language on the occurrence in question, and denied, categorically, a number of foul expressions which counsel suggested he had used. He denied having sworn at Bradbury in the public house and smashed his glass, also having first tackled Bradbury. He admitted kicking somebody out of the inn, but not Bradbury. He denied cutting a number of bicycle tyres, but admitted puncturing one.

Were you afraid at all, asked Counsel - No, I'm never afraid, answered the Captain, a big, corpulent man. It was at witness's instructions that Bradbury was handcuffed. Whether all his actions were legal or not, they had the desired effect of clearing the mob. He had only used his crop in self-defence.

In answer to final questions by Mr Emanuel, witness denied shaking a stick in Bradbury's face after he was arrested.

Bradbury, giving evidence stated that the Captain opened the attack, and he, in hitting back, acted in self-defence. Burge, in the witness box, also bore out Bradbury's statement and stated that the captain had assaulted witness.

Harry Smith, a London youth, one of the remaining witnesses for the defence, said the captain came into the inn raving like a madman, crying "Out of it!" Out of it!"

Counsel: How did Bradbury leave the inn? He came out on the end of Capt Benett-Stanford's boot. (laughter)

The Bench decided that the summons against Bradbury in respect of the assault be dismissed and the other summons under the Manoeuvres Act, also fell to the ground.

The defending counsel asked that the other summonses be also dismissed. Mr Garland asked that they be allowed to stand over for the present.

The Chairman said the Bench was convinced that there was no obstruction. Accordingly, both summonses against Burge were dismissed. The case of Barber, which related to alleged incidents on September 22nd, was adjourned sine die, defendant in this case being allowed costs in respect of today's proceedings.

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