

Tucked away in an old folder - I have no idea as to when and where this was published but all credit must go to its author William J. Drinkwater and to the publishers.

The mutiny at Portsmouth Barracks

How a seemingly harmless order led to a near riot and a nationwide scandal.

If any readers are picture postcard enthusiasts they will probably be acquainted with the works of Joseph Welch & Sons who were postcard publishers around the early part of the century in Mile End, Portsmouth.

Among the millions of cards produced by this firm during the Golden Age is one which must have puzzled many collectors who have happened upon a copy while browsing through dealers' boxes.

It depicts a naval officer, complete with stick, in a schoolmasterly stance apparently lecturing a small white dog sitting obediently on a desk top. On a blackboard in the background a caption is written. It all seems harmless enough.



Yet this seemingly innocuous picture is coupled with an event which rocked the Naval Establishment, angered the entire country, and drove many in Portsmouth to near anarchy. Fuelled by the national press, it reached headline status and continued to do so for some weeks, in addition to sparking off questions in Parliament.

This remarkable affair started innocently on the parade ground of Portsmouth Barracks on the Sunday evening of November 4, 1906. While quarters were in progress rain commenced to fall and divisions were dismissed. When the order was given to dismiss the stokers' division, they made a noise while doubling back to the block.

Whether the reason was because they had been kept too long in the rain, or because it was past canteen opening time, or, as was hinted in evidence later, many of them were new entries and resented the discipline — we are not told. What we do know is, because of it the stokers were then ordered by the officer in charge, Lieutenant Collard, to fall in in the drill hall, which they did. There they were told of the necessity of leaving the parade ground quietly.

Lieutenant Collard, before addressing the men, gave the order "on the knee" a command claimed later to be common at that time, and said to be used when large gatherings of sailors were on parade to enable the officer in charge to address himself to those at the back more easily.

The stokers however, on this occasion appeared to take umbrage and were slow in "going down" — one man especially, Stoker Robert Acton, who remained standing after the first order and reluctantly obeyed the command at second asking.

When finally dismissed the Company departed their several ways, one which was the canteen, grumbling and obviously annoyed. But all was quiet by 10.00 pm when the canteen was cleared. It seems that this was only a lull before the storm because by 10.30 pm Commodore Stopford, who was in command of the barracks, was called to the parade ground to quell an unruly mob.

Immediately the Commodore ordered assembly to be sounded, a command which was obeyed promptly and quietly by the bluejackets, but with much grumbling by the stokers. When silence was established he spoke to the men, and as some of the stokers were still inclined to interrupt and be noisy he had them put under arrest.

The remainder of the stokers were marched off to their blocks in parties of 20 in charge of officers and petty officers. Many turned in, but about 100, still restless and noisy, demanded to see the Commodore and insisted that the men in the guardroom be set free. The officer agreed that, if they all retired to their hammocks and made no more trouble, he would release the three men detained. This being done all was quiet again by 11.45 pm.

The next day about 140 stokers preferred a request to see the Commodore in the usual way. On the parade ground after evening quarters they aired their grievance on being ordered to kneel on the previous evening.

The Commodore explained to them their stupidity in taking exception to an order, which he claimed, had been well-known in the services for years, although they did not know it probably, owing to lack of experience as many of them were young stokers. When he had finished speaking they marched off the parade ground in a quiet and orderly manner, apparently quite satisfied.

Then at 10.00 pm, obviously by pre-arranged signal, the noise began again on the parade ground. The assembly was sounded. They came into divisions after some little while, and following further aggressive behaviour, went to their rooms. At about 11.30 pm a great noise was heard outside the gates in the street from a crowd chiefly of stokers and civilians.

Strong patrols were sent from the ships in the harbour because the crowds were attempting to get into the barracks, but they were kept out by the guard on the gates. Shortly afterwards the Portsmouth borough police received a report from a constable in Edinburgh Road, asking for assistance.

The disturbance on the parade ground had been supported by liberty men outside, and as a consequence the crowd had quickly begun to multiply. A large number of extra police, including a force of mounted men, from all parts of the town, were sent to the spot.

A cry of "justice for stokers" was heard from the barrack square, which had the effect of exciting those outside to make a demonstration. Queens Street roadway having been recently scarified, there were loose pieces of stone lying about which the stokers used to pelt the windows of the officers' quarters.

Guards of seamen were placed across the road of these quarters thus preventing any influx of people from the streets, but although disturbances continued for some time the police did not make any arrests as it was difficult in the darkness to discover who actually threw the missiles.

At length the barrack gates were opened and those returning from leave were allowed to enter. A large armed party arrived at 1.00 am made up of Marines and Bluejackets, after which the streets quieted down. Most of the police were withdrawn but patrols were kept in the vicinity.

It was estimated that about 900 stokers and ratings were implicated; 120 men were arrested in the barracks but only thirty ringleaders kept in custody.

Commodore Stopford afterwards contradicted statements that ball cartridges were served out to men on guard, and that the fact of their bayonets being fixed was just normal guard custom for men on duty.



The Victory – venue of the court-martial of Lieut. Collard

The subsequent courts-martial which continued for ten days were held on H.M.S. Victory and opened on November 26, 1906. They aroused much public interest but none more so than the one which involved the Lieutenant on the last day.

The charges were "that he did on November 24, 1905, at the Naval Barracks, Portsmouth, commit an act to the prejudice of good order and Naval discipline in giving unauthorised punishment to Stoker Robert Acton, of His Majesty's ship Victory and using abusive language to the said Robert Acton, and that he did on November 4, 1906, commit an act to the prejudice of good order and Naval discipline in making an improper use of the order "on the knee" to a number of stokers when assembled after evening quarters in the gymnasium in the Royal Naval Barracks."

When cross-questioned, Lieutenant Collard said he was officer in charge on the afternoon of Sunday, November 4, 1906, and had been attached to the barracks since March, 1905. He told the court that he first used the order "on the knee" at Whale Island while on the Junior Staff in July 1901.

Q. "Did you use it all the time while you were in the barracks?"

A. "I've used it now and then."

Q. "Have you used it to single men as well as to parties?"

A. "Yes"

Q. "Why did you give the order on 4 November?"

A. "I gave the order in an endeavour to get the upper hand of the stokers who were thoroughly out of control, and if possible, to pick out the men who were trying to incite the others. It was not possible to see all the men as some endeavoured to take cover behind the

others. The number of men in the gymnasium totalled 420. There were 31 petty officers. 110 of the men were Nelson stokers.”

Q. “Did the men readily obey the order?”

A. “No.”

Q. “Was any man singled out as not obeying the order for a very long time?”

A. “One man was later than all the others on going down on the knee, and I told the petty officer to take him off the knee and bring him into the centre of the drill hall. When all the other men had gone down, he looked round and saw that everybody else was down, he then went down himself.”

Q. “Were any steps taken about that man afterwards?”

A. “No. I told the petty officer that he was not much worse than the others and he was to be sent away, thinking there would be an enquiry next day, when I should be able to proceed against him.”

Q. “I understand that after the men were dismissed you went to a telephone and communicated with the Commodore.”

A. “I went over to the officers’ quarters and made out a report and rang up the Commodore and told him exactly what had happened. The Commodore asked if it was all over and I told him that it was. He asked me if there was any necessity for him to come into the barracks. I told him there was no necessity now as it was all over.”

Q. “As commanding officer did you take any steps to take the names of the men who did not obey your order?”

A. “It was quite impossible, the whole lot were implicated, and I could not take every man’s name.”

Q. “You had 31 Petty Officers, surely they were useful?”

A. “No, Sir. That was the number of Petty Officers that would have been there — I did not count the actual number who were there. There were 31 in barracks that afternoon.”

Q. “Did you speak to any individual stoker after they were dismissed, or use any epithet?”

A. “I did not speak to any man at all.”

Collard was also questioned by a stoker about calling a man “a dog,” but the court considered it was not relevant to the case.

In his defence the Lieutenant gave an impassioned speech which warrants quoting as it reflects the wide publicity the mutiny received.

“I would submit that no case has been made out for me. I welcome this first opportunity I have had of refuting the most unfair attacks made upon me, both in Parliament and in newspapers. I have been attacked by mercenary halfpenny press throughout the Kingdom for things that I have done, and things that I have not done, with a virulence which I do not think that anyone or anybody in such a humble position as myself has ever before had to put up with. Wherever it has been possible to place a false construction upon my actions it has been done. I have been condemned even for declining to speak. Hostile critics have dissected my evidence in an occurrence which has specifically had no connection with the court-martial — namely the incident upon which the first charge is based, having already given my evidence to a court of enquiry I preferred to wait until I could place the whole facts before my superior officers for their impartial judgement. In spite of all that has been said against me, I know that it is unexpected of me to ask the court to banish entirely from their minds anything excepting that which has been brought against me in evidence. I only wish that the first charge had been brought against me a year ago, then the evidence of Stoker Acton would have been available. As it is no two witnesses against me give the same version. Do not agree as to the abusive words used, or that there were any abusive words at all. As to whether the man was on the knee or both knees. As to whether he was in the ranks or several yards clear. The time he was “on the knee” varies from one minute to ten seconds. Is it upon such evidence that I am to be convicted of this serious charge? I absolutely deny having used any abusive expressions when addressing men. I defy anyone to produce evidence to the contrary.

I put the man on his knee it is true, but as to punishment — authorised or unauthorised — no such idea entered my head, and would not, I think, I have entered the head of anyone else but for the late unfortunate occurrences. The punishment was to follow that laid down in the report book. Placing “on the knee” was to make it plain to everyone what I was then correcting. After all what is there in this position “on the knee” which has been so much discussed? What is there humiliating to the stoker and not to the seaman? To a single man and not to a body of men? I am a gunnery lieutenant, I’ve been “on the knee” myself, I’ve been addressed — apart from the actual firing exercise — I’ve given the order myself for five years. And never before this mutinous outbreak have I ever heard that anyone was humiliated, or that there was any complaint about it whatever, nor has anyone else, so what reason had I to think that it was now being regarded as a punishment? I am speaking now of a year ago, before the present experts had aired their views on the subject.

Acton did not think that it was objectionable. He did not complain about it, neither did anyone else, until a body of stokers after having been admittedly insubordinate and then good-humouredly submitting to chaff for some hours, and perhaps drinking too much beer, are driven to resent it by a few agitators, who wishing to air imagined grievances, encouraged open mutiny. And not even then is the general objection to the order, for after

clamouring for hours for an apology from myself it is only be appeal of “come mates don’t let them be down on us” that the men are induced to sign a request to see the Commodore, as they thought on the question of their leave being stopped.

I am going to prove all this by the evidence so ably drawn by the prosecutor from the witnesses called for the defence. The mutinous stokers have freely stated that I apologised to Acton and also paid him compensation, the amount of which varies according to the versions from £100 to £200. That is absolutely false, and without a shadow of foundation. I never apologised to Acton, I never had any reason to, I never paid Acton a penny, I was never asked to."

Regarding to the second charge, he said:-

"I am not accused of using an illegal order but of improperly using a legal one."

He admitted that the proper use of the order “to place a man on his knee” under circumstances the witness for the prosecution had spoken of, as affairs of a trivial reason.

Following the evidence the court sat with closed doors practically the whole afternoon considering its findings. At twenty minutes to six the finding was announced :-

“The court finds the first charge is partly proved inasmuch as it proved that an act of prejudice to good order was committed by Lieutenant Collard in ordering one single man to go “on the knee” in order to reprove him, contrary to the custom of the service, but does not consider that this constitutes a punishment and that the part of the charge of using abusive language is not proved. “The court finds that the second charge is not proved. The court accordingly orders Lieutenant Collard to be reprimanded and acquits him of using abusive language."

It seems the person who came out of the whole affair best was the postcard publisher who sold thousands of his lampooning cards, not only to amused service personnel and civilians in Portsmouth, but also to retailers throughout the country.



The Great Rope House – No. 18 Storehouse



A contemporary group of stokers – the author's father-in-law is seated in the front row (left) smoking a pipe.

FOOTNOTE

The "halfpenny press" to which the defendant referred was the Daily Mail. Its brightest columnist, a man named Edgar Wallace, sent down to Portsmouth to cover the "mutiny" produced one of the most sensational and controversial stories for which he was becoming famous.

Collard, cleared of the court-martial, laid a complaint against the paper. They apologised, but this was not enough for the lieutenant. In 1907 he sued for defamation of character, got an abject withdrawal and received a cheque for £5,000 with which he built himself a country house before marrying.

The Daily Mails proprietor, Sir Alfred Harmsworth, took revenge on the journalist by sending him on a detestable West African assignment, then sacking him. In such an environment "Sanders of the River" came forth, setting up Edgar Wallace as a novelist and playwright.

Twenty years later Collard's name returned to the headlines as an admiral, but by then his bitter chronicler at Portsmouth in 1906 was riding around London in a cream-coloured Rolls-Royce and earning a millionaire's income.

After the court-martial, the Admiralty restricted the use of the command "On the knee" to small-arms drill and, in effect, it was abolished.