

JOHN SLY

# Tragic Incident Or Tragic Intent:

## The Untimely Death of Stanley Burnett Kay

I BOUGHT the 1914–15 Star Trio to Stanley Burnett Kay from an online auction. The information provided by the auction company was that he served in the 7th Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment, and later the Royal Flying Corps, and that he died on January 28, 1918. That was about it, but it was enough to stimulate my interest, as I am particularly attracted to this battalion which suffered so badly at Fricourt on July 1, 1916, and which was disbanded in the re-organisation of winter 1917–18. I did not undertake any serious research before the end of the auction as I was not certain to be the successful bidder, but while the auction process was going on I was looking forward to researching an officer whom I confidently assumed was present on the First Day of the Somme.

Eventually I became the successful bidder, but when I did undertake the research I was initially disappointed. Not only did Kay not take part at Fricourt, but he also served in the RFC only in an instructional role, which appeared clearly to have nothing to do directly with his death. In fact Kay's military career was very disappointing from a military historian's point of view, but the manner of his death was utterly fascinating for anyone interested in psychology and human nature.

Kay was born on December 23, 1891, at 28 Norwood Terrace, Headingley, Leeds, the son of Stanley Robert Kay, a mining engineer, and his wife Hettie (née

Tidswell); his forenames were originally registered as Frederick William Stanley. Norwood Terrace still stands today and appears to consist of comfortable family houses. He attended Leeds Grammar School, where he played cricket, apparently indifferently.

His correspondence file at the National Archives (WO 339/13061) provides a fairly superficial view of his career, although there are certain documents which offer some insight. He applied for a temporary commission, from the University of Leeds, where he was studying, on August 18, 1914; at that time his home address was High Mead, Wood Lane, Headingley, but he was based at Ackton Hall Colliery, Featherstone, where he was training to be a mining engineer. When he was examined by the Royal Army Medical Corps doctor at Pontefract he was in good physical condition, standing five feet seven inches tall, and

weighing 132 pounds (60 kilos). He was gazetted Second Lieutenant on September 12, 1914. Promotion came quickly: he was made Lieutenant by November 19, 1914, and Captain on March 13, 1915. Additionally he was recorded by Colonel Harold Carmichael Wylly, CB, in *The Green Howards In The Great War* (Richmond, 1926) as one of the original officers of 7/ Yorkshire Regiment in November 1914.

Kay was twice wounded. The first occasion was at Dickebusch, on February 14, 1916, when the 7th Battalion was in reserve; the Germans made an attack preceded by shelling; a fragment of shell went through his right lower leg. The Battalion War Diary recorded: "About 5 pm small HE and a few shrapnel began to fall in DICKEBUSCH, which the leading Coy was first leaving. Capt S. B. KAY and 2 Lt L. A. D. DAVID were wounded, neither seriously". However, the wound was serious enough, according to a letter he sent to the War

CAPTAIN S. B. KAY  
7th BATT<sup>n</sup> YORKSHIRE REGT  
1914 - 1918.

Kay's medals in the named wallet.

Office (dated June 3), for him to be hospitalised until March 21, and even then he was not passed fit for general service. The second occasion was on November 5, 1916, at Le Transloy (according to his own letter to the War Office); in a small attack on a trench which rested on the Le Transloy road, gunshot wounds broke his right forearm and left leg. The War Diary recorded only: "During . . . the shelling of our trenches Capt S. B. KAY was wounded . . .". He was in hospital until June 21, 1917, as the wound in his arm turned septic; cellulitis set in, and resulted in the contraction of the fingers of the right hand, rendering the hand virtually useless. This made him unfit for anything other than home service. It is clear that the letter sent from his home to the War Office on June 25, enquiring about a wound gratuity, was actually written by someone else, as the handwriting is different from that of the letter of June 3, 1916.

After a medical board in Oxford, he went on leave until taking up a post of recruiting duties at Lewisham Town Hall. On September 1, 1917, he attended another medical board at Caxton Hall, London, where one of the comments was that the fingers of his right hand were "in a state of semiflexion and cannot be extended owing to the binding down of the flexor muscles. He is only fit for the present duties as Recruiting Officer". All this sick leave, as well as the time he had off for a tonsillectomy in September 1915, meant that he had spent relatively little time on active service during his career. Some time after this he was attached to the RFC, but his last entry in the Army List was February 1918, when he was shown as the senior Captain in 7/ Yorkshire Regiment.

He died on January 28, 1918 at 106 Marina, St Leonards-on-Sea, Sussex, having (according to his death certificate) "accidentally shot himself with a revolver causing laceration of the brain". This was the outcome of an inquest held on January 30. According to the inquest report he was attached to the Royal Flying Corps as an instructor in photography. His obituary in the *Green Howards Gazette* recorded that he had been educated at Leeds Grammar School, and entered his father's business as a mining and civil engineer in Leeds. Another obituary, in a local newspaper, recorded that he was to have been married the following week to Marjorie Dodds of Penketh House, Warrington.

He is buried in Leeds (Lawns Wood) Cemetery. In the probate of his will, his estate was valued as £869 6s 2d (between £33,000 and £248,000 at today's value, depending on which measure of inflation one uses).

So, how had he accidentally shot himself with a revolver? The inquest called several witnesses, and each one contributed something to the body of knowledge concerning Kay's death. The account included in his correspondence file appears to be written like a newspaper report, although it is not set out that way.

## LEEDS OFFICER'S SUDDEN DEATH

### HIS MARRIAGE ARRANGED FOR NEXT WEEK.

The tragic death is reported from St. Leonards of Captain Stanley B. KAY, Yorkshire Regiment, only son of Mr. Stanley Robert Kay, of High Mead, Headingley, a partner in the firm of Messrs. Mammatt, White, and Kay, mining and civil engineers, Leeds.

Captain Kay, who obtained his commission from the Leeds University O.T.C., in 1914, had several times been wounded—the last time very seriously. That was in November, 1916, and after nine months in hospital he was posted to special duties St. Leonard's. Before the war he was a pupil at Acton Collieries.

An especially pathetic circumstance in connection with Captain Kay's death is that he was to have been married next Wednesday to Miss Marjorie Dodds, daughter of Mr. James Dodds, of Penketh House, Warrington.



Captain KAY.  
Photo: Rosemont.

The report of Kay's death in the local newspaper.  
[reproduced courtesy of ww1-yorkshires.org.uk]

It is headlined: "Gallant Officer's Death. Tragic accident at St Leonards. Loaded Arms in Officers' Kit." The inquest was held at the Bopeep Schools with Mr H. Davenport Jones, the Deputy Coroner for the Borough of Hastings, presiding.

The first witness was Kay's father. Bearing in mind that the inquest was taking place only two days after the death of his son, his evidence betrays little emotion. He said that he had seen his son, who was attached to the RFC as photography instructor, "about three weeks ago when he was quite cheerful and fit. . . . He had no worries of any kind. . . . He had a revolver since 1915 and had a good deal of experience in the use and care of the weapon."

The next witness was the man who found the body, Captain Lewis Islay Ferrier Muirhead, 1st Highland Cyclist Corps and Balloon Officer, RFC. He said that he had known Kay for about three weeks, and that:

"he was a very cheerful man and did not appear to have any troubles. About 10 pm on Monday [Muirhead] was in the room at 106, Marina, next to [Kay's], and heard a report. Going into [Kay's] room, [he] found him lying across the bed in a sitting posture on his right side. He had been shot in the head, and there was blood on the blankets



Kay's grave in Leeds.  
[reproduced courtesy of ww1-yorkshires.org.uk].

... A revolver (produced) was lying at his feet. [Muirhead] also noticed an oil bottle with the cork off on the floor close to the revolver and under his arm ... was a piece of cleaning rag ... [Muirhead] formed the opinion that [Kay] accidentally met his death by looking down the barrel of the revolver while cleaning it and something may have touched the trigger and made it go off. [He] did not think it customary to keep revolvers loaded. [His own] revolver was returned to him when he was in hospital, with the rest of his kit, loaded, probably as he had left it. He at once unloaded it. He might have easily had an accident himself."

The following witness was Captain George Henry Evans, Royal Fusiliers, attached RFC. He said that Kay was:

"one of the most cheery chaps he had ever met ... [He] went up to the room and found [Kay] as described ... The cleaning rod of the revolver was lying on the floor to the left of [Kay] and the revolver appeared to be loaded in all chambers. He looked upon the incident as a pure accident. Men were liable to be very careless in the handling of firearms through long acquaintance."

Next in succession was Captain H. G. L. Allford, RAMC:

"About five minutes past ten on Monday [he] was called and found [Kay] lying as described ... There was a wound [sic] in the middle of the forehead just above the nose, blackened all round. There was a clean bullet hole and a bulge at the back of the head just below the base of the skull apparently due to a spent bullet. [He] had no doubt that the wound was accidentally inflicted. Captain Fellows unloaded the revolver and informed [Allford], that it was quite clear that the revolver had not been unloaded for a considerable time."

Last came Mr A. T. Field, police surgeon, who had performed the post mortem. He reported that "there was a wound in the forehead as previously described. The base of the skull was fractured and the bullet (produced) was embedded there ... The wound caused death, it was self-inflicted ...". Davenport Jones added that "he had personally unpacked kits which contained loaded fire-arms and much care did not appear to be taken in the packing of kits."

The jury returned the verdict of accidental death, but would that have been the verdict a hundred years later? From the evidence given it was clear that even in the UK officers would routinely carry loaded revolvers, possibly even doing so unconsciously. Carelessness in the handling of weapons was apparently common. The make of revolver was not specified in the report, but if it was the standard Mark VI Webley, it could be fired without being cocked first, so Kay could have fired it by putting pressure on the trigger while cleaning the gun. Given his damaged right hand, such clumsiness might well have been the reason for the accident. On the other hand, Kay's father stated that Kay was well versed in the handling of revolvers.

"... Kay's father stated that Kay was well versed in the handling of revolvers ..."

Would he have been so careless with this weapon? Captain Fellows did not believe that the revolver had been unloaded for some time. Why not, and why was Kay cleaning it late on that particular night? I am certainly not a trained crime scene investigator or post mortem examiner, but I wonder whether the path of the bullet could be as described if the gun had gone off by accident. If the entry wound was above Kay's nose, would the bullet have come out (or become embedded, the evidence of Allford and Field seems to be contradictory in this respect) at the base of the skull?

It might be that Kay had had a change of mind about his condition. By his own admission we know that his right hand was virtually useless, and his arm was badly injured; Field, the police surgeon, also mention numerous superficial scars on the right arm. Almost certainly he had a limp. There is no record of how much pain he had to cope with on a regular

basis. It would not be unreasonable to suspect that Kay had been pondering his forthcoming marriage with some anxiety, given his physical condition, and its unattractiveness. This condition had prevented him from pursuing his Army career, from fighting at the front, and from possibly gaining promotion. He would never be anything more than he was in January 1918, and as a result he might have had serious misgivings about a future career after the end of the war.

There is another, and very personal, reason why Kay might have been apprehensive about that impending marriage. On April 16, 1915, he reported sick, having "jammed his testicles against the pommel of a saddle". Kay had claimed on his application form for a Commission

that he could not ride, and so this was probably not an inconceivable accident to happen to a 22-year-old man who had only recently learned to sit on a horse. It resulted in double orchitis, which can lead to sterility, and it could have been on Kay's mind that he might not be able to produce the expected children.

It is almost impossible to come to a conclusion about whether Kay killed himself or not; the evidence is ambivalent, and it was clear that his father and his fellow officers were keen to emphasise the fact that he was in good spirits, had everything to live for, and was not the sort of man to contemplate suicide. A century after the event no-one can be certain what was in Kay's mind on that evening in January. Whatever it was, he ended his life and his future. Ironically both his parents lived long lives: his father died in the winter of 1947, and his mother in spring 1948. They were given plenty of time to mourn the untimely death of their son.

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