

**Southern Times Saturday 29 September 1917**

**Inquest Report – Reginald Percy Aherne**

**AUSTRALIAN DROWNED IN THE HARBOUR**

**Curious Revelations at the Inquest**

The Coroner for South Dorset (Mr. G P Symes) held an inquest at the Guildhall on Monday morning on Reginald Percival Aherne, a private in the Australian Imperial Forces, whose body was recovered from the harbour on Monday morning.

John Mockridge, a diver, living at 1, Hope Square said that at 11.30 on Sunday morning he was on the barge SUNSHINE, and a Customs House officer drew his attention to a man in the water. The body was almost upright, and had a greatcoat on. Witness went to the Police Station, and afterwards put a rope round the body and pulled it ashore. He had dived under the barge the day before, but saw nothing there then. He thought that the body came down the harbour on the first ebb tide. From the condition, he thought that the body had been in the water for a fortnight.

Detective Richardson said that the man had been missing from the camp since Monday night the 17<sup>th</sup>. There was no suggestion whatever of foul play.

Lance-Corporal Norman Cooper, A.I. F. gave evidence of identification. He saw deceased two or three days before he was missing. He had been feeling very depressed and melancholy.

The Coroner: When had a Doctor seen him before?

Witness: About a week previous when he was before the Medical Travelling Board.

The Coroner: What was he suffering from?

Witness: Neurasthenia. He had been to the front and had served in Gallipoli and had been wounded. Deceased had been at Westham 14 months.

Coroner: And he did not get any better?

Witness: Replied "No" He was classified C1 (Home Service duty) and at Westham was in charge of the incinerator. The man felt very depressed on the particular Monday and told him that everyone was "getting on him" in the hut. They tried to cheer him up, and intended bringing him into the town. But while witness went for his pass at seven o' clock he apparently got away.

Coroner Said that the Police had a report that the man was missing from the Camp suffering from Delirium Tremens.

Witness said that was entirely wrong.

Coroner Who is answerable for sending the reports in? Who signs this report and sends it into the Police?

Witness I suppose that it comes from the Main Orderly-Room

Coroner: Someone ought to be here. How did the Main Orderly-Room get the idea that he was suffering from Delirium Tremens? The report says that he was missing since reveille, Tuesday, September 18<sup>th</sup>. "This man has been suffering from delirium tremens, and it is thought likely that he has done away with himself judging by his conversation the night previous". Where did they get this from, who did he have the conversation with?

witness said that it was totally wrong about the delirium tremens. He was a little depressed and morbid but he was not at all violent. Fits of depression came over him.

Coroner: Did you not get a doctor to see him?

Witness: replied that it was not usual in such cases.

Coroner: said he should have thought that the man ought to have been sent away and put under careful supervision. Do you get many men like this? He asked

Witness: said that there were men suffering from all kind of things.

Coroner: How many doctors have you?

Witness: Five or six.

Coroner: when a man is in this state a doctor should insist on seeing him. He should go to the hut and see him and look after him.

Witness: said he did not think he was so far gone as that. They had to use a lot of discretion.

Coroner: You have six doctors and here is a man suffering from neurasthenia, and who is allowed to stay in an ordinary hut with ordinary men doing his work and not looked after. It is a very extraordinary story to me. It is not a question of discipline. A man suffering from neurasthenia means that he is suffering from disease of the nerves, and he ought to have been put into a proper hospital. He is suffering just as much from illness as if he had broken an arm or a leg. Don't you take any steps to get a man well if he is suffering from a disease of the mind?

Witness: Every man who comes to the camp has something the matter with him.

Coroner: said that such men ought to be seen by a doctor every day.

Witness: He is certified fit for Home Duty

Coroner: I wonder what evidence was given before the Medical Board when they examined him. Did you give them any evidence as to his state of mind? Who goes before the Board?

Witness: just the man himself.

Coroner: and he was passed for Home Duty on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup>?

Witness: said the man had been like this for 15 months

Coroner What I want to know is why the Police were told that he was suffering from delirium tremens? Why should they say so if they haven't any evidence of it? Who told them? You say that you told them afterwards that it was not right. We ought to have had the Commanding Officer, the Doctors and everybody here. The Coroner said that he had a good mind to

adjourn the enquiry and get these witnesses. It was very unsatisfactory not to have the Adjutant there, or someone from the regiment.

A Juryman Did that report come from the Colonel?

Witness No, from the Orderly-Room. In reply to the Coroner Witness said that he had seen the man drunk but he had been “going straight” for a month. He did not get drunk during the week after he was seen by the Medical Board.

Coroner Then how could he have been suffering from Delirium Tremens?

Witness Winzar (member of the Jury) I think that it is unfair to the man himself to accuse him of it when he was not suffering from it.

The Coroner reiterated that there was no evidence of it and it gave the impression that the man was a drunkard.

The Jury returned a verdict of “Found Drowned” and the Coroner said that he should make a report to the Commanding Officer.

(Transcribed by David Lane 2012)