

Weird War II (2010 Campaign) – Volume 4

Post: MI20, Division HQ, Jerusalem.

CO: Major Guilder

Case Location: Lydda (derived from the name: *St. Jorge de Lidde (Saint George)*, whom the city was named after when it was conquered in 1099 during the crusades, in honour of it being his birthplace. Population: Approx 20,000—18,500 Muslims and 1,500 Christians.



Approx 23 miles from Jerusalem (Division HQ), 42 miles from Cairo (Army HQ), 10 miles from coast

Lydda Cavalry Brigade, CO: Brig. John Scot-Morgan (Royal Engineers), 2IC: Lt.Col. Edward Livingstone

Inc. components of: Royal Scots Greys; 4th/7th Dragoon Guard; 2nd Batt W.Yorks Brigade; Royal Engineers.

The Journal of 2nd Lt Jimmy McKie – Volume 4

Tuesday 4th July 1939

Phone call from Major Guilder assigning us to investigate death of a Capt John Bannerly at Lydda.

SITREP: Case is an apparent suicide. In early hours of today Capt. John Bannerly (OC No. 8 Railway Company, Royal Eng.) was found in a ditch at Lydda railway yard (that he commanded). Cause of death appears to be the result of a gun being inserted into his mouth at an upward angle and then fired.

- Capt. Bannerly was only 24 years old, which is very young for a captaincy.
- He reportedly had a serious drinking and gambling problem; and had large gambling debts.
- The reason for MI20 interest in this case is his family:
 - Son of Major Douglas Bannerly (ret'd)
 - Grandson of Brig. Sir Augustus Bannerly
 - He spent 6 months in a Turkish POW camp before escaping back to the UK
 - The circumstances of his capture and escape were unusual; and he behaved strangely upon his return to the UK.
 - He was placed on MI20 watch-list until 1919, at which time active surveillance ceased due to budget cuts for MI20.
 - He died in 1923 of apparently natural causes.
 - As a result, MI20 interested in any events surrounding this family.

Assigned Squad:

- (Command) 2nd Lt Smyth (Huw)
- 2nd Lt Jimmy McKie (Me)
- 2nd Lt Williams (Martyn)
- Cpl Jim Arnold (Richard)

We request the MI20 files on Brig Bannerly, in order to understand why he was put on the watch-list (i.e. what were his suspicious actions?) and head to Lydda by train.

We arrive at Lydda station. The railway station/yard is a military operation, but also used for public/commercial travel. The yard is not a secure or fenced site, there is only one secure/fortified building on site: the Royal Engineers main office building. Boundary is rough land marked by ditches, fairly desolate region.

Site of incident is only 500 yards away from where we arrive so we start investigation immediately. Local RMP running investigation is Sgt Boswell. Body was found by civilian railway worker at approx 06:00 this morning (Tuesday). Estimated time of death is sometime on Saturday night, body was dressed in Mess Kit.

Body was found in one of the ditches near the edge of the yard, in an area of sidings used for marshalling trains as they are put together for departure. Site is approx 10' away from nearest rails, is unlit and fairly unremarkable. Searches (both RMPs and our own) find nothing – except that I notice that there is no blood/brain splatter or signs of the remains of the back of Capt Banners skull (which was reportedly blown off).

Thus the death must have occurred elsewhere and been dumped here afterwards – so is now formally a murder case.

We head to Lydda Officers Mess in order to trace Capt Banner's last movements and find out more:

- He had a substantial private income from his family.
- Although he often ran up large gambling debts, he always paid them all off in full each month when he received his allowance.
- Drank very heavily and frequently. Was never violent or abusive, but almost constantly drunk.
- He currently owed money to several officers and a 'Count Vassilef' (a local civilian dignitary of Russian origin). Apparently the Count often socialised with officers at this Mess and at his own residence in town.
- Capt. Bannerly was last seen in the Mess bar in the early evening on Saturday, barman reports:
 - He mostly drank single malts, with occasional beers.
 - He appeared to be very homesick and frequently talked about missing his wife and two kids (who were back home on the ancestral estate).
 - He turned up at the bar last Saturday at about 17:00 as the barman was opening up. He started drinking heavily immediately and stayed in the bar until it closed at 19:30 for the evening meal to be served.
 - He did not return when the bar reopened at 21:30 after the meal was finished (and no-one seems able to recall seeing him during the meal either – but he might have been there).
 - The whole Mess was a little quiet and subdued that evening as the West Yorks members of the mess had been tired from working in the heat all day and other Mess members absent due to attending event in Jerusalem.

Is now quite later in evening so we turn in for the night.

Wednesday 5th July 1939

Smythe and I interview people at the Mess whilst rest of team investigates the railway yard further.

Interview with Bannerly's CO (SO1) here, Lt. Col. Livingstone:

- Capt Bannerly's duty was to run the whole section of railway, yards and station in this area.
- His RSM effectively did his job for him because he was constantly too drunk to do anything.
- His Batman was Pte Robinson, who usually managed to get him to bed each evening.

Interview with Bannerly's Pastor, Padre Roberts:

- He was a "troubled soul"
- Seemed to dislike the church and never really confided with Roberts.
- Padre didn't see him at evening meal that night.

Interview with Bannerly's Batman, Pte Robinson:

- He bats for 3 captains
- He didn't follow Bannerly around, just waited for call to go and collect him from wherever (often the Mess, sometimes residence of Count Vassilef)
- Bannerly stated drinking early that day, but that was not unusual.

- The Friday night was a Mess Function, so no guests had been around.
- Bannerly usually sleeps through Saturday mornings, so probably hadn't been out of the Mess on Saturday – but cannot be certain about this.
- When Bannerly goes to town he usually orders a taxi to take him – none was ordered for him on Sat.
- Believed that the last time he met Count Vassilef was a week to 10 days ago.

The file on Brig Bannerly arrives, key features are:

- Started WWI as Capt. Promoted through to full Colonel in two years before his capture.
- He escaped from the POW camp and travelled 100's of miles through hostile territory unaided.
- When he made it back to UK was treated as a hero and rapidly promoted to Brig Gen.
- Soon became obvious that something was wrong.
 - Frequently absent from duty
 - Started acting bizarrely, odd orders etc.
 - Somehow became very rich, very quickly
 - Was pensioned off quickly due to his bizarre behaviour and fear he had been sent back to UK in this condition by Turks to cause disruption/trouble.
 - MI20 main interest was due to Brig Bannerly's unusually fit and healthy condition. He could frequently out-perform soldiers who were 20 or 30 years younger than him. He had strange strength also; would actively box against younger opponents and easily knock them out.
 - He bought his own estate after being knighted.

Meanwhile the others investigating the railway yard and activities over the weekend find nothing noteworthy. Was very quiet over Saturday/Sunday as fairly little traffic/trains had been scheduled.