

# The Court Martial

By Lloyd Nelson

Father Gregarious Anselm Y. Orlando is conducting Mass at London's famous Oratory in Brampton Road. It's probably the nearest thing to a Celebrity Church in the Roman Catholic Spectrum, though as Fr Greg wryly notes there are a few defectors this morning. They are over at Westminster Cathedral where Archbishop Hume is conducting Mass for lot notables including the current Prime Minister & most of his Cabinet, in that Victorian Relic that is as dark inside as Victoria Station was before the clean up.

He scans his congregation, as he regularly does, he notes Clarissa Dickson, one of the famed two fat ladies from the B.B.C television series. They are Chefs and outrageous ones at that.

Clarissa is a good mixer but she sees as an occasion to commune with God & no one else.

When the sign of peace Handshake bobs up she gives the priest two fingers (discreetly of course) and ignores her neighbors. Fr Greg hears much later that when she shuffles off this mortal coil she leaves the Oratory 2.6 Million pounds without strings. There is a sprinkling of Theatre, T.V. Banking & Civil service here today as well as the common herd.

As he surveys this from the alter he sees tall austere Sir Charles Staniforth + Smythe rise to limp up to read. He has a damaged knee. A legacy of service in the International Brigade in the closing stages of the Spanish Civil War.

Sir Charles turns his back on ornamentation. He is straight up and down, buttoned cuffs, never cufflink's, no tie pin or indeed lapel badges. He's entitled to wear these of His Distinguished services cross, Legion of Honor and other flags.

He reads from Eclipses, for everything there is a season in his clear incisive Barristers voice.

Outside in pleasant sunshine Fr Greg stands on the Oratory Steps passing the time of day with this one & that one. Sir Charles walks out. He has stiffened his gait with a stout Blackthorn stick. He is quite social & invites Father Greg to his opening Grouse shoot at his estate Priory Park in Hampshire. You can shoot or load he says whatever suits your fancy.

Thus Father Greg goes out to shoot on stand 19 of the Priory Park opening.

The stand is downhill from the shooting line, out of line of sight of other shooters & even the beaters. Stand 20 abuts the Pine Forest margin & Sir Charles is loading there for General Sir Richard Keyes-Parkinson. This latter is an old famous General who butchered his troops with the best of General Haig's uncaring & incompetent subordinates on the Western Front.

Keyes Parkinson later miss foots at El A Lame in when he is there in an advisory role to General Montgomery. Monty, true to form doesn't want advice from anybody. He puts this chap in a vulnerable spot and Rommel's men scoop him up and he spends the rest of the war in a P.O.W. Camp & thus rendered unable to make the life of the allied troops more difficult Parkinson- Keyes rise to fame came in the Great War. He went to France as a Lieutenant Colonel of Cavalry & in the shot & shell of 1<sup>st</sup> Ypres rose to command a Brigade. Eventually like many another Cavalryman he rose to General Officer rank.

It may have been no would have been better for his troops had he not. However he was probably no better or worse in command than his compatriots.

Fr Greg is concentrating on his shooting. It's a very blustery day & with a strong tail wind the birds are coming over high & fast.

Thus he never sees what actually happens on stand 20 & due to the drop in the landscape he is the only one that could really observe that station.

But he does see the results. Parkinson Keyes is laying face down in the grass; the back of his head seems to be missing.

Sir Charles is standing back a bit, the Purdy double barrel shot gun that has done the damages still in his hand. Julius his black Labrador is jumping up and down.

Sir Charles, gun still in hand walks over to the General but it is obviously all over Red Rover for him. Father Greg comes quickly down the mound, takes in the scene.

Sir Charles notices him, says "I think Father Gregory that the last rites need attending to quite promptly. After a trip back to the shooting brake Fr Greg has the necessary to do just that and does. By this time he has a gallery of curious bystanders on the scene. Charles shrugs Old Julius jumped and bumped me, bad timing and a very bad result for the General.

Thus the shoot wraps up and the Police people the scene, take statement ask questions.

Though they go through the formalities they are never going to press Sir Charles too closely. They can't get too near to the Bone with arguably the best barrister in Britain famed for his ability to totally master a brief and to make the people he is invisely questioning squirm and duck & dive.

In due course the Inquest is held in the local village Hall. Fr Greg as the shooter nearest the scene is called to this but he is unable to add to what he told the Police on the day, he was there in effect but never saw what took place though he surely saw the after effects.

The corner not surprisingly brings in a finding of accidental death and that should have been the end of the matter. However on the following weekend the times print a curious article by a famous former was correspondent now living in Retirement in Brighton. This chap who spent much of the Great War writing very vivid & down to earth accounts of the maelstrom that he had been sent to observe found his job terribly frustrating as the bulk of his articles never got past the censor. He kept them all and published them under the 50 year rule in 1969. They took the world by storm & put some huge dents in the reputations of the chaps managing or more correctly miss managing the ten war effort. He is not too

popular when his account comes out but he makes so much out of the serial rights sold to the Philadelphia Examiner that he gives up journalism & retires to the South Coast.

This chap, Brendon Johnston, tells the curious tale of a court Martial held in Amiens early in 1917. The officer presiding was then Lieutenant Colonel Richard Keyes Parkinson. It's been a field court, that is to say it was assembled in the field & took advantage of war time conditions & thus contained only three members. The lawyer representing the man charged was Lieutenant Charles Staniforth + Smythe. The charge was Coder dice before the Enemy & the often result of this was a death sentence. The soldier under charge was 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Justin Hyde-White, Staniforth Smythe was handed the brief by the Advocate General Department on the Monday when he returned from leave with the court martial set down for Thursday. He naturally objected to this but had to be content with his instructions & the explanation that "Colonel Keyes Parkinson has just been given a Brigade & promotion & that he wanted to clean this matter up & set an example before he left Amiens."

The upshot of all this was that Hyde White was found guilty & received the death sentence. He was held in detention in Amiens while the allowable appeals were set in motion. The result of the appeal sat at Haigs Headquarters at Montreuil for about a week. As the article set out it seems somehow that knowledge that the death sentence had been confirmed got out.

Someone dropped a crate of spiked champagne at the Military prison on Good Friday night & when the muzzled guards returned to life Easter Saturday the Prisoner, and only the prisoner had flown the coop.

Despite recriminations, investigations & punishments he never re surfaced. However well typed telegraph forms were posted and received by the three members of the court. They spelt out that sentence of death had been passed on them for their inhumane treatment of Hyde White. Within two months the two lesser lights of the court were dead & a further posted form

informed Keyes Parkinson that his sentence would be carried out at a time convenient to the writer.

The story got around the army & shrewd observers noticed a lessening of death sentence being carried out over the next year. The wise heads speculated that the number of soldiers sentenced to death for cowardice would have made 1000 by the end of the war instead of finished at a bit over half that number.

The Times article sort of spelled all of this out and went on to commend the evidence given to the court by the Australian War artist/ sniper & trainer of American Snipers Frances Colless. A lot of Colless's work can be seen in the British War museum. Two other of his pastel portraits are also still in London. The Plaque on the one in the National Gallery reads Captain Siegfried Sassoon M.M. & P.C. Carswell in Green Park August 12<sup>th</sup> 1919.

The other is a small Pastel Hanging among huge oils in a state room in Buckingham Place. It's of the Queen Mothers Brother, a brave chap, Lord Fergus Bowes Lyon killed at the Battle of Loos. Story has it the Palace offered him an O.B.E. for his fine war artist work. He's a Banker in Western Australia these days; he wrote back most courtesy but declined. Most unusual Colless's testimony was succinct & he handed the court a pastel drawing of the scene of the alleged crime. This also is at the British Army museum but is just too graphic to have on display.

Lieutenant Stanford Smythe and Lieutenant Frances Coles are at one in their opinion that Hyde + White should never have been found guilty in the first place. But the war moved on and both men suffered recriminations for their fearless conduct at the court martial by the powers that be. However they both survived the war.

Brendon Johnston gets well paid for his interesting article which included an interview with Staniforth Smythe who gives a blow description of his visit to the front to talk to the surprisingly full platoon (53 soldiers) that Hyde white commanded for just 45 minutes back in 1917. He also talk of meeting the famous Colless & helping him a bit in sniping the German sniper who has been the reason he was on this bit of the front at that particular time. It's all

quite fascinating as his pen picture of the dark down Hyde Whites nominal platoon has on the Court Martial people. The whole platoon come from Dartmoor & Bodmin. They are not people that Staniforth Smythe would like to be taking on a dark night.

The investigators of the whereabouts of the missing man also visit this same platoon asking questions. They leave with a flea in their ear, officer rank withstanding Staniforth symthe adds few interesting words to his interview when Johnston ask him why in the world a was fighting with the International Brigade before Madrid. His rejoinder was that the visit to the front in 1917 in connection with his case made him realize what a soft & safe war job he had. "I felt a complete fraud he says, I was never at physical risk & I emerged with a good decoration. To make up for this 18 years later he went soldiering in Spain & came home with a game leg. Painful he said but I felt better inside for having made the effort.

Father Greg who played a part in this story earlier is a Jesuit Priest & is working in the Vatican archives when he is dispatched at short notice to London. It seems the Spanish Ambassador felt he should have a Spanish Priest to hear his confessions hence the speedy re location to London. He doesn't cavil at this as London is quite a fascinating city and he makes many friends in his time there.

He meets Staniforth Smyth but claim the following summer when he's on leave at Huila on the Bay of Cadiz. A nice spot looks almost due south and enjoys marvelous cooling afternoon breeze is a welcome relief.

Fr Greg is sitting his ease in a steamer chair on the dock of his brothers bar & restaurant when a decent size yacht coming in from the sea under power ties up. A rowdy crew emerge carrying overnight bags & catch a taxi. The last man to come on shore is the very recognizable figure of Sir Charles in long white shorts white polo neck shirt & cap. He spots Greg immedaley & comes over. Anchor watch he says, the boys are going into Madrid to ap[ply a spot of red paint. Greg drags up another steamer chair & goes into the bar to emerge with a couple of iced bottled of Brentano, a local wine. They enjoy.

What an interesting Times story Sirs Charles Greg observes well, half a story perhaps Sir Charles replies. Old Johnston has been pestering Francis Colless, the war artist, for the rest.

And does he know it Greg asks. Perhaps not Charles says but I'm sure he knows who knows it all.

I don't think Greg says that the press will give up on it how the stones been turned over.

Charles laughs. Well it was a long time ago, or least some of it, some of it was very very recent.

The nasty thought that the death of Keys Parkinson was not entirely accidental into Greg's consciousness. It was an accident Sir Charles? He asks. Charles takes a pull on his Tall glass of light pink wine & looks at Greg. Let's just say that it doesn't sit heavily on my conscience. Did I tell you Colless is coming over to London in the autumn? Perhaps we can meet up then and see of Captain Francis is willing to round the story off that is if he can & will.

And they do just that several months later.

They gather at Victoria station & train to Exeter and a car takes them out to Bovey Tracy. It's like this Colless says the main player that we need is a bit like Mahomet & his pro verbal mountain. He lives on Dartmoor, never leaves it, so we must needs go to him.

Thus they eventually meet Devers Oliver, a short oldish dark complexioned fellow. Lieutenant, Francis says as they shake hands & who the Devil is this? Nodding toward Fr Greg's short & swarthy person. Oh he's the Chaplain on this occasion Charles says. It's certainly a few years since we met. Ah Devers says it seems Colonel that you carried out the agreed sentence so I'm extra pleased to see you.

They decide to walk up to the Bull and Bush for a bit of refreshment & settle down to a few pints and an up market ploughman's Lunch, Fr Greg has been trained in his calling to be a facilitator in getting groups up to speed in

intellectual discussions in the Seminary at Vitoria. Once a pint or there has been absorbed he start to skillfully drop in a word here & there to see if he can get the story out in the open. How'd it all start he says, looks at Devers= Ah said Devers, innocently enough. We were somewhat staggered to see young Hyde White turn up as our new officer. We knew him as one of Dartmoor's real oddities. Always out on the Moor in summer with his net scooping up butterflies just like the famous character in the Hound of the Baskervilles, what was his name?

A Stapleton supplier Sir Charles, Stapleton of Merriest House that's right says Devers. His dad is the Prison Chaplain at Princeton. This young bloke was a bit fey, perhaps homosexual but he was well liked too. A Great you could have knocked me over with a feather when he is brought up to the front at 1530 hours that day & introduced as our new commanding officer. We made him welcome of course, he was one of ours but it was all over and he was gone by 1615 hours, must be a record I expect. So what happened Fr Greg asks. Well he moved over a bit to see what Francis was doing & the Krauts who were also interested and from whom we hadn't had a peep out of all day except for a fixed rifle on a low bit trench parapet threw over some super doper mortar shell & it blew three men standing near together to smithereens & the bits & pieces of them drenched young Justin with lost it and ran scream over the back of the trench & just kept going. And Greg says, well they stopped him about three miles back and when he calmed down charged him with Cowardice in the face of the enemy. As far as I remember it the enemy beggared has been dozing in the sun all the day before the shell arrived in the trench.

Greg says and Sniper Colless you saw what happened. Francis takes a of his tankard. Yes I was looking right at the group of men hit; it was bloody dreadful & dreadful bloody. It was an unusual shell, sprit zed up perhaps.

And Fr Greg asks. Well knowing the ways of the army I wrote an account of what happened, took my sketch block drew the scene. As far as I know it still in the War Army Museum down nears the Elephant & castle.

And you handed it to me Devers said, told me to use it if things came up turnip shaped. And you did Francis says, it was produced a court martial. And how I got involved Sir Charles says, with three days to get a defense together I had no option to go to the front line to take deposition from Devers and his men. I never expected to get hold of Francis, he was one of the most mobile soldiers in the war, sniping here, sketching the great & famous, or infamous & training the Yanks in sipping.

Oh Francis says the boys sent one of the more men to get me. I didn't mind coming back as I never succeeded in getting Herman the German at my previous efforts. Charles says it was astonishing, there I was with my clip board and pen & notary public stamp & there was old Francis standing there per scoping very carefully over the parapet. I tell him I'm here to take depositions & he says not yet, not yet, give me your cap and I do. Francis continues, I had this very efficient sniper sighted but to do so he would have spotted the per scoping going on at that spot so I put Charles smart stiff cap on a dummy head, tied a bit of twine around his knee & told him I was going down to the next step taking the ball of twine with me and once I'd given it a trail tug to just hold on until I gave it two tugs & then to very slowly raise the cap over the top. I did all that Charles says & Francis pinks the beggar, you could see him slumped over. Francis comes back & says thanks for your help, hers your cap back now what do you want to know.

They \* Devers finish up back at Amiens on Thursday where in probably once the most bitterly fought Court Martial's of the way they were unable to divert the sentence of death for Cowardice in front of the enemy. The court is clearly being railroaded but Keyes Parkinson & tells Charles and the witnesses that they are overlay defending an obviously guilty man.

So he finished up military Goal awaiting the appeal Fr Greg says. What'd you do next? Do next say Devers, we informally sentenced them all to be shot & drew lots on who was to do the shooting. I drew the first two, they were in or near the field and they were taken out within days of the sentence getting out. The General was far more inacceible to us so Charles volunteered.

Actually says Charles I was only a stand in as Anderson drew the marble but he went out in the big strafe near St Quentin so I had to stand in Took me a while though, we lawyers tend to live to delay things.

And assuming you sprung Hyde White from Goal what the devil did you do with him.

Easy pasty says Devers with a sardonic grin. We put him in R.A.M.C. Uniform, a friendly medic put a plaster cast on his perfectly sound right arm & we made like a patrol & stashed him in a shell hole quite close to the enemy's front trench in Normans land. He was quite calm & lucid and he clearly understood that although we were leaving him in a very iffy situation it was probably less of a death sentence than Amiens Goal. Anderson had a German Phrase book for when he was on listening duty near the Bache outposts & he wrote a note explaining the circumstances in German & pinned this to his tunic & left him there with two canteens of water, tinned bully bead & army biscuits. A roll of worded him up that if a British patrol springs him he's to play very dead but if a German one turned up he was to greet them with a sharp Jowl Friend without delay.

We didn't think that a German would shoot a medic with an arm in plaster. The pester was of course only there to prompt them to question before open in fire. Very creative Fr Greg says, and what in the world happened to him.

Devers grins. You can hear him play the organ at Koln Cathedral at 7a.m & 9 p.m. Mass any Sunday he says. His epiphany came through. The huge German Sergeant that he made a match with comes along to his service too.

Sir Charles is astonished. Devers he says you never told me. Not at all Devers says that Bustard got what he was sentenced too although you took too long to do it.

Colless pulls on his pipe. I was consulted Charles he says we decided to keep you out of the loop. We didn't want our man to get away scot free from what was in every since an unconceivable act.

They sit bemusedly in the listening afternoon sunshine looking out onto the edge of Dartmoor. It's a pretty, deucedly different.

Later in the week Fr Gregarious Anselm Y Orlando sedulously records the back and forth of the afternoon.

Given his age and the extended age of the others he knows that what he has heard is not protected by the rules of the confessional and that one day in the years to come he has a golden goose of a Television script that will bring a deal of money to his order.