

More bloodshed at Work Point Barracks

This week we continue the story of the murder of Captain Peter Elliston by Gunner Thomas Allan at Work Point Barracks in August of 1910.

Captain Elliston was only 34 years old. He had transferred, like many men of the Garrison, to the Canadian Service from the British following the transfer of Esquimalt's defences from Imperial control to Canadian in 1906. Captain Elliston was given a military funeral on Wednesday, the 3rd of August, two days after the capture of his murderer. He was buried at Cedar Hill Cemetery (St. Luke's Church) beside his wife, who had died the previous year. Their two young children were left in the care of Captain Elliston's sister.

Gunner Allan was committed to trial at the October Assizes following a Corner's Jury verdict of 'Wilful Murder.' During the inquest, Allan appeared sunk in apathy and did not avail himself of the opportunity of cross examining any of the witnesses. He was not represented by counsel at that time.

Allan eventually appeared for trial before Chief Justice Hunter on Wednesday, the 5th of October. The Crown Prosecutor, J.A. Alkman, declared that the murder was one of the most cold-blooded and deliberate ever committed in Victoria. While Allan had been reported as being in a profound

state of melancholy while being held in the provincial gaol on Hillside Avenue, he now stoutly denied his guilt, claiming he was drunk at the time of his arrest and had no memory of what he said. He further denied having any knowledge as to how three rifle cartridges, which were found on his person at the time of his arrest, came into his possession. He also made a futile attempt to cast doubt on Bombardier Corrigan's testimony — it was Corrigan who stated that Allan had said the morning of the murder, "I've a bullet for him and it will find it's billet."

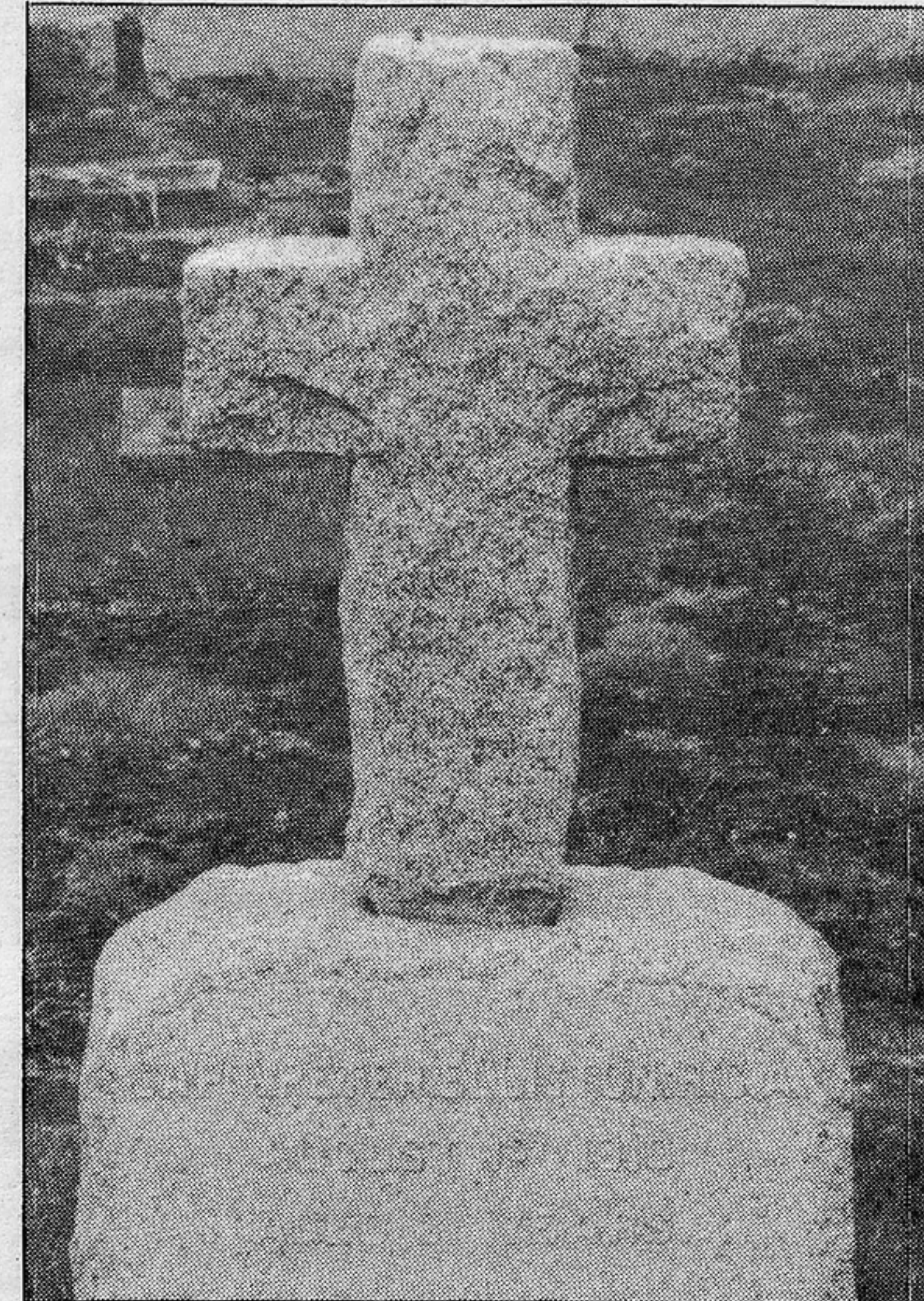
Justice moved more swiftly than now, for Allan was found guilty the very next day, after the jury had deliberated barely two hours. Allan's defence counsel, Cyril Francis Davie, tried the defence of alcohol, and ended with the comment that "to hang an insane man is murder." The next day, before sentencing, when asked if he had anything to say, Allan could only say, "I have nothing to say, only I must have been mad." Justice Hunter then delivered the sentence that Allan was to be hanged on December the 2nd, 1911.

Work Point Barracks had been relatively peaceful for the two months following Captain Elliston's murder when it was rocked by yet more bloodshed. In the early morning hours of November 11, 1910, Corporal John Bowman

of No. 5 company, R.C.G.A., was shot through the heart and killed by Gunner Charles Ratcliffe at Macaulay Point Fort. Shortly thereafter, having defended himself against capture with his rifle, Gunner Ratcliffe turned his weapon on himself and took his own life. He left a simple note stating "I, Charles Ratcliffe, did shoot and kill Corpl. John Bowman for a good reason, and I am down and out myself."

It was reported that the men were good friends, but members of No. 5 Co. stated that, while Ratcliffe was not a heavy drinker, he had shown signs of a deranged mind. The only reason that appeared to be a motive for the murder was that Bowman had rebuked Ratcliffe for boisterous conduct at the Garrison banquet the previous evening. Corporal Bowman was buried in the Esquimalt Naval Cemetery following a service at St. Savior's Church, which was attended by the Garrison in full strength, as well as by men from HMS Shearwater and the newly arrived HMCS Rainbow.

Meanwhile, C.F. Davie, Gunner Allan's legal defence, had appealed Allan's conviction on the grounds that the Crown Counsel had quoted testimony from Gunner Corrigan's testimony given at the preliminary hearing, although Corrigan himself was not present at the trial. This objection was sustained by Chief Justice Hunter during the trial, but



Captain Peter Elliston was murdered at Work Point Barracks on August 1, 1910. He is buried at Cedar Hill Cemetery. (Esquimalt Municipal Archives photograph)

Hunter had not instructed the jury to disregard the testimony. On the basis of this, Davie was able to get Chief Justice W.H.P. Clement to grant a stay of execution until February 2. Allan was to be granted a new trial.

To be continued...

Paul Lengevin, a volunteer at Esquimalt Municipal Archives, deserves special credit for his research on this story. He first noticed reference to a murder at

Work Point while transcribing an oral history tape. With very little information, he found the first murder — that of Capt. Peter Elliston — by searching newspapers at British Columbia Archives and Records Service. Then he found the tale of the murder-suicide of Corpl. Bowman and Gunner Charles Ratcliffe unfolding in the daily press. Paul visited Cedar Hill Cemetery where he found Capt. Elliston's tombstone and photographed it.