

“J” Special Company RE
Appendix No 28

ERVILLERS 11/9/17

From:- O.C. J Special Company R.E.
To:- C.S.C.R.E. Third Army
Ref attached map

I beg to report on gas casualties caused by drums which fell short, and wide during the discharge of drums at 8.0 am on the 9th inst. The casualties were all in one battalion viz, the 7th LEINSTERS. The M.O. of the 7th LEINSTERS gave me the following figures:-

1 Officer, 18 O.R. gassed, of which 1 Officer and 4 O.R.s have since died, and several others very slight cases who remained at duty.

These were all caused by drums bursting in our own front trench. As far as can be ascertained 20 drums fell in our line, of which 16 were duds and 4 burst. There is also evidence of 3 more which burst, but of these 3 no trace can be found of portions of drums.

Previous to discharge I arranged the details of clearing the line in front of the discharge, on the sections of line marked in green on the attached map, with G.S. 01. 16th Divⁿ and other arrangements were as given in the attached copy of 16th Divⁿ order No A.S. 1248/18

As the projectors were carefully laid and well tamped, I considered that the positions cleared would be sufficient precaution. I also arranged that all troops on the line should be warned before hand that the discharge was taking place.

On the evening of the 8th the Bde Major of the 47th INF BDE went round the line and warned all Coy Commanders and in addition they all received notification by Brigade or Battalion Orders on the subject.

The drums fell along the portion of the line marked with brown on the attached map. I have spoken to the two Company Commanders (A & C 7th LEINSTERS) and they state that though they were warned of a probable discharge of gas, they did not understand that the noise of the explosion of the charges was in any way connected with the discharge of gas, and they were very surprised when the drums fell in our line.

The majority of the men, who were gassed, appear to have been more concerned in getting out of the way of the falling drums, than in putting on their respirators, and all appear to have associated the sound of the explosion with a mine, and considered that this was in no way connected with the discharge of gas.

The batteries have been examined and there is nothing to show any probable cause of these shorts. The charges were prepared at Coy H.Q. and so far as the usual testing is concerned, every charge

that went up to the batteries was in perfect order. A heavy shower fell on the afternoon of the 6th and wet the powder of some 40 charge blocks, but this was replaced by dry powder from stock on the following day. This shower may have wet some charges already in the projectors, but projectors containing charge blocks at that time, were 300 of No 1 target and 40 of No 2. No shorts fell from these batteries therefore

No rain fell on the position after this date, so it is not possible that any of the bags of powder in the remainder of the projectors could have been damp. I have examined the fuses of the 16 drums which fell in our line. They classify as follows:-

Shear wire not broken	12
Shear wire broken & cap not hit	2
Shear wire broken and cap hit	2
	16

In the latter 2 the cap does not appear to have been hit with sufficient violence to detonate the pistol cap, and the shear wire may have been broken in all the 4 latter cases by the shock of falling. I cannot put forward any explanation to account for these drums having fallen short or for the fact that some burst while others did not, except that they may have hit each other in mid air, and so been turned out of their course. Machine gunners holding the line at the time are reported to have said that they saw this actually recurring, and one of the dud drums which we have collected, has an indentation such as would have been caused by this, and not on that portion of the drum on which it fell.

A Court of Enquiry was held on the afternoon of the 10th at which I gave evidence to the above effect. I will endeavour to obtain a copy of the proceedings when the finding has been confirmed

(Sgd) C Laycock Capt R.E.
O.C. J Spec Coy vR.ER.