

Edward Barnett

Killed at Havelock
On 1 February 1858

Like many early member of Victoria Police, Edward Barnett was from Ireland; he was born in Waterford, Tallow Co. He joined the Force as a foot constable in September 1854, aged twenty-five years. As in the case of John McNally before him, Barnett did not have a Registered Number. Barnett's District Number was S37, but there are few other records of his time in the Force.

We do know that by early 1858 Barnett was a Senior Constable and serving in the Carisbrook District. In the early hour of Monday, 1 February 1858 he was on duty on the new goldfield of Havelock Rush at White Hills near Carisbrook, about five miles from the provincial centre of Maryborough.

It was a clear moonlit night.

On the goldfield, Charles and Rosa Lopez conducted a thriving business called the Gum Tree Restaurant. They conducted their business from a large tent, big enough to accommodate seven lodgers, which stood among a number of less salubrious establishments. Sunday evenings were their busiest time and on this particular occasion the couple had a hard day. They had been made uneasy also by news from a friend, Mrs Price, the she said had noticed a suspicious looking man pacing up and down outside.

At about 1.00 a.m. both proprietors were in the restaurant counting the day's takings - £29 in total – when three middle-aged men pushed their way in and ordered a bottle of brandy. One of the three was the man previously noted by Mrs Price and almost immediately he grabbed Charles Lopez. The pair struggled outside. Lopez called to the police, shouting that he was being robbed. At this, the attackers fled but were pursued by Lopez, Robert Bradley (one of his staff), and a number of lodgers.

Hearing the call for assistance, Senior Constable Barnett hurried to the scene. At the same time Lopez, who was armed with a knife, made ground in his pursuit of the main offender, Joseph Brook. Brook then fired a shot at Lopez, which missed. But a second shot at very close range struck him in the chest. Although mortally wounded, Lopez threw himself on Brook and stabbed him three times, before dying. Such was the frenzy of the attack that the knife was broken.

The attack on Brook greatly reduced his speed but he continued his getaway; close behind, Barnett now lead the party of pursuers, consisting mostly of local miners. Two more shots were fired before the policeman was hit by a bullet through the heart, fired at almost point blank range. The crowd then pounced on Brook to prevent further injuries, and took him to the lock-up. He was placed on a bed in the corner of the police office.

As morning broke, news of the tragedy spread quickly. Miners assembled outside the station and demanded admission. During the next sixteen hours some 5000 men, in groups of twenty, crammed into the tiny room and glared threateningly at the offender. Part of the large crowd outside peered through the windows, ready to lynch the injured man.

Efforts to establish the identity of the accomplices were in vain. Brook insisted the he had first met the men at the Star and Garter shortly before the robbery attempt and did not know their names. True or not, he took this story to the grave, for he died at eleven o'clock that Monday night. Brook was mourned by very few; about sixty years of age, when he was not imprisoned, the man was well known as a criminal at Ballarat and other Victorian gold fields.

Later in the morning of the killings there was a riot by minors at Havelock Rush, sparked by the arrest of three notorious men in a well-known tent. The three men – William Shaw, James Johnson and Ed Rowland – were charged with being accomplices to the attempted armed robbery. Contemporary accounts report that as many as 1500 men wreaked havoc among the grog shops and shanties, most of which were the haunts of villains and ruffians. Three of the worst establishments, the Magpie, the Manchester and the Star and Garter, were quickly destroyed; notwithstanding the best offers of their proprietors mollify the angry crowd with bottles and decanters. Many of the rioters were armed with picks and other mining equipment, and fixtures and fittings such as timber supports and billiard tables all fell victim to their anger. Even the skittle alley was destroyed. It was remarkable that injuries did not occur. The crowd also marched to Bet Bet, almost two miles away, and destroyed that settlement.

In the aftermath, the police unsuccessfully applied for warrants against a number of rioters, although few people believed they would be found guilty by a jury.

At two o'clock on the same eventful day, Monday, 1 February, the District Coroner, Francis Laidman, opened the inquest before a jury of twelve men at the Charles Napier Hotel. The jury viewed the bodies of Lopez and Barnett and listened to evidence from Mrs Lopez, Robert Bradley and Doctor Cooper before adjourning for a week to enable a complete post-mortem to be conducted. This was held in the same premises. In a macabre moment, a number of spectators slit the sides of the tent to watch the gruesome proceedings.

Senior Constable Barnett's funeral was held the next day. The officer-in-charge of Carisbrook police district, Superintendent Samuel Furnell, and Inspector Hare from the Maryborough Police Station read the lessons at the service in the New Cemetery, Carisbrook. Much later, in the 1870's, a headstone was erected on Barnett's grave by the Force, to honour their murdered colleague.

Interestingly, some years later it transpired from documents lodged by Barnett's father in association with probate of his son's estate, that their name was not Barnett but Barnetti.