

Lore of the Corps

The Shooting of Major Alexander P. Cronkhite: Accident? Suicide? Murder?

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At lunchtime on 25 October 1918, while his Soldiers were on a break and “at mess,”¹ Major (MAJ) Alexander P. Cronkhite, the training officer for the 213th Engineer Regiment, decided that he would do some informal target shooting with his .45 caliber pistol. Cronkhite was an excellent marksman and, although regulations prohibited off-range shooting, he apparently concluded that firing a few rounds at an old tobacco can atop a post could not do much harm. Major Cronkhite’s first two shots missed, but after firing a third time, Cronkhite turned around and said to Captain (CPT) Robert Rosenbluth, who had accompanied him, “I got it that time, Rosie.”

What happened after that is not entirely clear except that a fourth shot rang out, and Cronkhite fell to the ground. His last words were “My God, I’m shot.” In a matter of minutes, MAJ Cronkhite was dead; the bullet had passed through his right shoulder, hit both his lungs, and severed the aorta.² Rosenbluth and Sergeant (SGT) Roland Pothier, who was standing nearby and was Cronkhite’s orderly, must have been shocked; the twenty-five-year old Army officer was dead.

Was this an accident? Was it murder? Could it even have been suicide? On 30 October 1918, an Army investigation determined that it was a tragic accident. But the deceased’s father, Major General Adelbert Cronkhite, refused to accept this explanation and forced the re-opening of the case. Almost six years later, as the direct result of pressure from the elder Cronkhite and others, CPT Rosenbluth and SGT Pothier were indicted by a federal grand jury for MAJ Cronkhite’s murder. What follows is the story of the Cronkhite shooting and its remarkable legal aftermath—including a surprising and pivotal role played by a future Judge Advocate General.

Alexander Pennington “Buddy” Cronkhite was a remarkable officer by any measure. Born in September 1893, he entered the U.S. Military Academy in 1911. Cronkhite was a handsome and popular cadet; his “natural genius for studies” and his “capacity for hard work placed him well up toward the top of his class.”³ Consequently, when he graduated in June 1915, far ahead of his classmates

Dwight D. Eisenhower and Omar N. Bradley, Cronkhite was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant of Engineers.⁴

He then served with the 1st Engineer Regiment in Washington, D.C., and did map work in Georgia and Texas. Cronkhite had “almost perfect efficiency ratings,” and at the same time, had “an informality and friendliness that made him popular with subordinates, officers, and enlisted.”⁵ Once the United States entered World War I, Cronkhite made rank quickly: he was promoted to first lieutenant in July 1916, captain in June 1917, and major in December that same year. In May 1918, MAJ Cronkhite joined the 213th Engineer Regiment and traveled with that unit to Camp Lewis, Washington, in September.⁶

After his death in October, a board of inquiry consisting of the three senior officers from the 213th Engineers, Lieutenant Colonel William J. Howard, MAJ Henry Tucker, and MAJ John F. Zajicek, conducted an investigation into the facts and circumstances surrounding the shooting. The board heard from CPT Rosenbluth, who testified that MAJ Cronkhite’s pistol must have slipped from his hand when he turned after firing the third bullet and “when his fingers had instinctively tightened to straighten the twisted gun—which had a lighter trigger pull than most such weapons—it discharged.”⁷

Cronkhite apparently prided himself on being able “to cock and fire a pistol with one continuous, sweeping motion,” and the theory was that this “flourish had cost the major his life.”⁸ In this era, officers and enlisted men in the field wore the “smokey-the-bear” campaign hat (worn exclusively by Army drill sergeants today) and some thought this hat was perhaps the best explanation of what had happened. The belief was that, as Cronkhite quickly cocked, raised, and then brought his pistol down to fire on the tobacco can, the .45’s barrel had brushed his hat, which caused it to twist toward his body. As Cronkhite tried to recover his grip on the weapon, he hit the trigger, causing the hammer to drop and fire the bullet that killed him.

¹ *Ex-Soldier Admits He Killed Major*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 20, 1921, at 1.

² Bill Wood, *Death at Ft. Lewis: The Cronkhite Case*, ARMY, Feb. 1984, at 62.

³ ALEXANDER PENNINGTON CRONKHITE, FIFTY-FIRST ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES, U.S. MILITARY ACADEMY 50 (1920).

⁴ Cronkhite was 7th in a class of 164; Bradley finished 44th and Eisenhower was 61st. ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES, REGISTER OF GRADUATES 192–95 (1992), (Class of 1915). This class is sometimes called the “Class the Stars Fell on” because so many graduates reached flag rank.

⁵ WOOD, *supra* note 2.

⁶ CRONKHITE, *supra* note 3.

⁷ WOOD, *supra* note 2, at 62.

⁸ *Id.* at 63.

Sergeant Pothier corroborated Rosenbluth's claim that the shooting was accidental. Since there were no other Soldiers who had witnessed the event (they were too far away), the board concluded its work fairly quickly and ruled that MAJ Cronkhite's death was a tragic accident.

While this was the official explanation, a few Soldiers in the 213th speculated that Cronkhite might have committed suicide. He had only recently been released from the hospital where he had been bedridden with the flu. The influenza epidemic of 1918 had sickened millions of Americans, including Cronkhite. He had recovered, however, while hundreds of thousands were dead.⁹ Some Soldiers thought that Cronkhite's illness might have had a depressive affect, and that the shooting was self-inflicted. But it was so out of character that virtually everyone rejected this theory.

Regardless of what the board of inquiry had concluded or what Soldiers who knew MAJ Cronkhite thought, the dead Soldier's father, Major General Cronkhite, was convinced otherwise. After relinquishing command of the 80th Division and returning from Europe in 1919, the senior Cronkhite refused to accept that his son's death had been accidental. He had the body exhumed and another autopsy performed. When doctors told Cronkhite that the bullet path in the body was such that his son could not have shot himself, Major General Cronkhite was convinced that Buddy had been murdered.

Major General Cronkhite hired a team of private detectives and soon "accused the War Department of covering up both a slipshod inquiry and a conspiracy by senior officers at Camp Lewis to murder his son."¹⁰ When asked to explain why such a conspiracy would exist, Cronkhite insisted that it was part of a plot to smear his reputation. Central to Major General Cronkhite's reasoning was that, since no West Point graduate would knowingly violate a regulation against off-range shooting, foul-play was the only possible explanation for his son's death.

While Major General Cronkhite, now in command of the Army's Third Corps Area, and stationed in Baltimore, Maryland, agitated for justice for his dead son, ultra-conservative newspapers joined his efforts by publishing stories insisting that CPT Rosenbluth was guilty of murder. Automobile manufacturer Henry Ford's *Dearborn (Michigan) Independent*, for example, insisted that

⁹ World War I claimed some sixteen million lives; the influenza pandemic that swept the globe in 1918 killed as many as fifty million people. In the United States, 25 percent of the U.S. population was infected and, in one year, the average life expectancy in the United States dropped by twelve years. For an excellent account of the event, see JOHN M. BERRY, *THE GREAT INFLUENZA: THE STORY OF THE DEADLIEST PANDEMIC IN HISTORY* (2005).

¹⁰ Wood, *supra* note 2, at 63.

Rosenbluth was a "dirty German Jew spy." After Rosenbluth, now out of the Army and working for President Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration, visited the Soviet Union, the *Independent* "speculated that he might have committed the murder in his capacity of Bolshevik Jew agitator."¹¹ No wonder at least one historian has called Rosenbluth "the American Dreyfus," after the French Army officer whose Jewish background figured prominently in his being wrongfully convicted of treason in the 1890s.

These anti-Semitic rants, combined with Major General Cronkhite's efforts, ultimately caused the Department of Justice to investigate the shooting. According to the *New York Times*, "federal agents" located former SGT Roland Pothier in Providence, Rhode Island where, having left active duty, he was working as a railroad brakeman. Pothier was arrested in March 1921 and, while in police custody, "broke down and admitted that he shot Major Cronkhite."¹² But the shooting had been an accident; Pothier explained "that the shot was fired accidentally as he was cleaning his pistol."¹³

Later, reported the *Times*, Pothier also "confessed to federal authorities" while still in jail "that he was ordered by his superior officer, Captain Robert Rosenbluth, to bring out a loaded gun and 'get' Cronkhite." The newspaper reported that Pothier had made the following statement:

[Captain Rosenbluth] said, "I want to get Major Cronkhite." When I asked him what he meant he said, "I want to kill him." I asked him what his reasons were for wanting to kill the Major, and he said: "Because we want him out of the way."

...

I joined Major Cronkhite on the maneuver grounds at Camp Lewis and when about two feet behind him, I loaded my revolver with three shells. I fired one shot into the open field and as the Major was turning around in my direction, I fired my second shot at the Major, hitting him in the right breast.¹⁴

When former CPT Robert Rosenbluth, then staying at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., was asked by the *New York Times* correspondent about Pothier's statements, Rosenbluth exclaimed—one would imagine rather hotly—

¹¹ Gene Smith, *The American Dreyfus*, AM. HERITAGE MAG. (Nov. 1994), www.americanheritage.com/print/58543?nid=58543.

¹² *Pothier Is Acquitted of Cronkhite Murder*, SEATTLE DAILY TIMES, 12 Oct. 1924, at 1.

¹³ *Ex-Soldier Admits He Killed Major*, *supra* note 1.

¹⁴ *Says He Shot Major on Captain's Order*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 17, 1921.

that “Pothier is either an outrageous liar or he is crazy, or he has been induced to say this.”¹⁵

Based on Pothier’s admissions and confessions, both he and Rosenbluth were indicted for murder in U.S. District Court in Tacoma, Washington; both men were arraigned in September 1924.

Roland Pothier’s trial began on 30 September 1924. Two of his three signed confessions, all of which contradicted each other and which Pothier had repudiated prior to trial, were suppressed after the men questioning Pothier “admitted they obtained them under ‘undue duress.’”¹⁶ The jury did, however, consider a third confession made by Pothier, the substance of which was that he and Rosenbluth had “planned the shooting.”¹⁷ The problem for the government was that no witness could provide a motive for either Pothier or Rosenbluth to want MAJ Cronkhite dead. While motive is not an element of proof for any offense, the inability of the prosecution to answer “why” certainly hurt the government’s case, especially after other witnesses testified that Pothier was known to tell “far-fetched stories.”¹⁸

The gist of the government’s case was that the wound suffered by the deceased could not have been self-inflicted. A medical expert, who was paid \$250 a day to testify at the trial in Tacoma—a huge sum of money for the day—insisted that “the only way the major could have shot himself was with his thumb on the trigger and his revolver held at arm’s length. Obviously, he would not have done this accidentally.” A second prosecution witness, an expert in firearms, concurred with the medical expert.

In rebuttal, Pothier’s defense counsel called CPT Eugene M. Caffey, a friend of MAJ Cronkhite’s and a future Judge Advocate General of the Army, to the stand. His testimony on direct did not add much to what had already been presented. But then the Assistant U.S. Attorney (AUSA) made a mistake. Handing the .45 caliber pistol to Caffey, the prosecutor asked Caffey to show how Cronkhite could have shot himself.

Caffey raised the pistol, cocked it with his thumb and then showed how it could have swung around. When the pistol was aimed at Caffey’s chest, the AUSA demanded: “Now try to pull the trigger one-half inch!”

The click that followed as the hammer fell forward was a shock to one and all in the courtroom. And, with that

¹⁵ *Rosenbluth Calls It a Lie*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 17, 1921.

¹⁶ Wood, *supra* note 2, at 64.

¹⁷ *Pothier Is Acquitted of Cronkhite Murder*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁸ *Rosenbluth Calls It a Lie*, *supra* note 15.

“snap,” the case against Pothier collapsed. The jury found him not guilty the following day. Pothier, who had been in jail for more than two years, was released and went home to Rhode Island.¹⁹

The murder charge against Rosenbluth was dismissed shortly thereafter and he, too, returned to civilian life. In the years that followed, Rosenbluth married and had two sons. He worked as assistant commissioner of social welfare in New York before settling in Chicago, Illinois. As for CPT Caffey, he remained in the Army. His final assignment on active duty was as The Judge Advocate General.²⁰

So ends the remarkable story of a shooting and its highly unusual legal aftermath.



Place of MAJ Cronkhite’s untimely death.

More historical information can be found at

The Judge Advocate General’s Corps
Regimental History Website

*Dedicated to the brave men and women who have served our
Corps with honor, dedication, and distinction.*

<https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/History>

¹⁹ *Pothier Is Acquitted*, *supra* note 12.

²⁰ Born in Decatur, Georgia, in 1895, Eugene Mead Caffey graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1918 and then served in the Engineer Corps. After completing law school in 1933, then Captain Caffey transferred to the Judge Advocate General’s Department (JAGD). He was a judge advocate until February 1941, when he returned to the Engineers. After World War II, then Colonel Caffey returned to the JAGD. He was promoted to brigadier general in 1953 and to major general in 1954. Caffey served as The Judge Advocate General, U.S. Army, from 1954 to 1956, when he retired. Major General Caffey died in New Mexico in 1961. JUDGE ADVOCATE GENERAL’S CORPS, U.S. ARMY, THE ARMY LAWYER: A HISTORY OF THE JUDGE ADVOCATE GENERAL’S CORPS, 1775–1975, at 218–20 (1975).