

WEDNESDAY, 20TH AUGUST, 1902.

Quartermaster WILLIAM CLOUSTON sworn and examined. (No. 6.)

1. *The Chairman.*] Will you tell us your name, please?—William Clouston.
2. What contingent did you belong to?—The Eighth.
3. Were you on board the “Britannic”?—Yes, sir.
4. Had you served in any other contingent before the Eighth?—The Second, sir.
5. What rank did you hold?—Trooper in the Second.
6. But when you came in the “Britannic”?—Acting quartermaster-sergeant.
7. You volunteered to give evidence: would you like to make a statement?—No, sir; if you will ask questions I will answer them.
8. Are you prepared to speak generally as to the condition of the food, the blankets, and accommodation, &c.?—I would sooner answer questions.
9. Where did you march from to go on board the steamer?—We were taken right down on the wharf from the train.
10. From what place in South Africa did you start?—From Elandsfontein.
11. You were not from Newcastle?—We came from Newcastle later.
12. And marched straight on board?—Yes, sir.
13. Did you know anything about the general condition of the men as regards lousiness when they started from Newcastle?—As far as I know, there was none.
14. How long notice did the men get that they were about to embark?—About 2 o'clock in the morning. We left next morning about 8.
15. Did you suppose you were likely to march?—Yes, it was rumoured we had to go.
16. Had the men made preparation for the march?—We had no idea when we were going.
17. You think that the men when they embarked were clean, and that their things were in good clean condition?—Yes, sir.
18. How long had they been away trekking when away from Newcastle?—We were trekking about three months from Newcastle.
19. Do you know anything about the condition of the bedding which was served out to the men?—It was issued to me at dark. I did not know in respect to mine till later. I think the blankets were lousy.
20. When did you notice the lice on your blankets?—A week or two after we started—before we got to Albany.
21. Did you not notice before you got near Albany?—About a week out from Durban.
22. Do you imagine that there could have been lice on your own blankets for a week without your discovering it?—Yes, I do.
23. You would not have perceived them if they were on the blankets when they were issued?—I would not notice them.
24. They were visible to the naked eye, were they not?—Oh, no, sir. You never found them on the blankets.
25. Had you anything to do with the issue of the blankets?—Yes, sir.
26. As quartermaster-sergeant, you had to issue them to your own squadron?—Yes, sir.
27. Did you remark whether there were lice on them when they were issued to the men?—I asked when they were being issued if there was any lice on them, and was told there was no lice, as they had been washed.
28. Why did you ask that question?—Because there were lice on the “Tongariro” when we came back first, so this time I asked the question.
29. Did you search for lice on the blankets?—No, sir; it is impossible to search for lice amongst these blankets.
30. Did they look clean?—Yes, they looked clean.
31. Do you think there had been any neglect on the part of the transport officials in Durban over the blankets?—No, I do not think so.
32. You think that if they were lousy it was unavoidable?—Yes.
33. Is there any means of cleaning a blanket?—I suppose so, but we had no means on board ship.
34. Was there any effort made to clean them on the boat?—No; because there was no possible way of doing it.
35. Would it be possible to put them in a steam-chest and kill the vermin by super-heated steam?—I do not think so, sir, on the boat.
36. Not with fresh water?—No, not on board the boat. There were no possible means.
37. If the blankets were lousy, who were to blame for it? Do you imagine that it was the transport officers before the blankets were served out?—I could not tell you who ought to be blamed for it. The rumour was that the blankets had been used for prisoners of war. When these lice get into the blankets it is very difficult to get them out.
38. Did you know where the “Britannic” came from?—I have no idea, sir.
39. In her last trip had she been carrying Boer prisoners?—So we heard; but I could not vouch for it.
40. You heard she was bringing Boer prisoners back to South Africa?—Yes.
41. As quartermaster-sergeant, then, did you make any comment to anybody upon your belief that the blankets were not clean?—No, I did not, sir.
42. Did you make any report to any one?—No; I thought they were clean when they were first given to us. I thought at the time they were issued they were clean.
43. But you found a week or ten days afterwards that there were lice on them?—Yes.
44. Is it possible, or is it probable, that those lice spread from men who unfortunately came on board the steamer?—No; they were not spread in that way.