

Francis (Frank) Coen

Frank Coen enlisted 1 March 1915 having resigned his AMF commission to contest unsuccessfully in the Senate election. He was recommissioned prior to embarking on *Ceramic*, 25 June 1915 with the 19th Battalion.

He transferred to the 18th Battalion on Gallipoli as temporary captain, 27 August. Crossing to France in March 1916, he was promoted captain 27 May.

The devoutly Catholic Coen wrote about the time in France to his mother 18 April 1916.

I pushed on and half an hour's walking brought me to the Front Line. Just before reaching the Front Trenches I came face to face with a miracle. About 400 yards in rear of our front trenches there are a few buildings. One of these was of brick, built around a large size wooden cross with crucifix attaches. A shell had landed on this edifice, demolished three of the walls and 2/3 of the remaining one, also the room, and yet the cross and crucifix were still standing there without a scratch on them. This made a great impression on me; one hears so often of such incidents that they fail to convince us deeply. But to see them is most convincing. The buildings all around are a mass of ruins, yet the cross and crucifix are intact . . . In the afternoon I attended Rosary and Benediction in the church of St Vincent de Paul. The congregation numbered some 600. I noticed only three men: the remainder consisted of women, girls and children – all in mourning. It is not on the Boulevards or in the Cafes that one sees the grief of la belle France, if you wish to look into the heart of the unfortunate country you must visit the churches. There you can arrive at some estimate of the grief and suffering in this hateful struggle. ¹

Coen wrote his idealistic reasons for why Australia should be in the war in letter to his mother 2 May 1916.

The Huns were through here on their advance to Paris – so these poor people know the horrors of war. . . They are wonderful. It is a privilege for one to be given the opportunity of spending a portion of this life in fighting for the liberty of a people so truly noble. He saw the children playing games within the sound of the guns, and with their gas masks in satchels around their necks. He recorded that his own opinion was that France will march with all the determination of which she is pre-eminently capable, to a victory more glorious than ever she achieved in the past.

Coen knew Arthur Ferguson, the son of Justice Ferguson and wrote to the judge about Arthur after his death. Frank Coen serving in the headquarters of the 2nd Division and indicates the strong sense of duty and responsibility typical of the lawyers at that time. He wrote that: “the poignancy of your grief may well be allayed by the pride you may so justly feel at the thought that Arthur has gone to his reward, bequeathing a record of duty nobly done, which will always serve as an inspiration to those who had the privilege of knowing him. At the earliest opportunity I shall visit his last resting-place, and in a later letter give you further information.”² This was the last letter Francis Coen wrote to Justice Ferguson.

Coen was killed in action 28 July near Pozieres. According to three witnesses, Coen took a party of men to the front trenches in the morning to join up two positions. As he was examining the ground before deciding

¹ Coen, F Letters quoted in Mongan C and Reid R *We Have not Forgotten: Yass & District's War 1914 – 1918* Milltown Research & Publications Yass, 1998. 107 - 111

² Coen, F. Letter to Ferguson, 14 July 1916, *Ferguson Papers*, Mitchell Library NSW

where to commence the work he was struck in the head by a sniper's bullet. It was just before noon. He was buried where he fell. The man who made the cross for his grave wrote that Coen "was well liked by all the men. He was a soldier." CEW Bean puts the time of Coen's death as slightly earlier. He wrote that "the night was a disturbed one, the artillery of both sides firing heavily, and in the 18th Captain Coen (was) among others killed."

Coen's death caused great grief in the communities that knew him: law; politics; sport, the town of Yass, the Catholic Church, especially his schools, St Ignatius Riverview and St Patrick's Goulburn. As a successful barrister, he was known throughout the legal profession. He had debated and rowed for his school and university, and managed the University of Sydney rugby team while at St John's College. In 1914 he had been a Liberal candidate for the Senate. Local historians, Mongan and Reid, in their account of local district of Yass in the First World War report that Frank Coen's stepbrother Father Alphonsus had travelled to the family home to bring the news to their mother. Yass was deeply grieved by Frank Coen's death. There was much sympathy for the family. The Municipal Council adjourned its meeting as a mark of respect. The Mayor of Yass was also Frank's older brother, Michael.

There was a prolonged period of public grief for Frank Coen. A Requiem Mass was held for him in the spectacular setting of Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral on 28 August 1916. Father Alphonsus celebrated Coen's Requiem Mass in Latin. There were representatives of all those who had connections with Frank: his family: the Catholic Clergy including Jesuit priests and others who were close to him and his brother; sportsmen who had rowed or played rugby with him, barristers, school friends and the military. His old headmaster, Father Gartlan, gave the panegyric A week later Father Alphonsus celebrated another Requiem Mass for Frank in St Augustine's Church in Yass where Bishop Gallagher spoke and said of Coen: "He was so young, so strong, so talented so buoyant in spirit. He had before him the prospect of a brilliant and successful career."³

Coen is commemorated on Villers-Bretonneux Memorial.

³ Rodgers, J. To Give and Not to Count the Cost: Riverview and the Great War. St Ignatius College, Riverview, 2009, 68 - 73