

Desmond Gavan Duffy

Desmond Gavan Duffy was the son of Franks Gavan Duffy, a justice of the High Court of Australia. Desmond was born in Melbourne but educated at St Ignatius College, Riverview, in Sydney. He studied law, and was associate to his father in 1913. He was admitted to practise in Victoria in 1913 then the New South Wales Bar in May 1915, operating out of Denman Chambers. He had served in the Field Artillery and was a member of the University Rifle Corps before he enlisted 15 November 1915 at the Town Hall in Sydney before going into camp at Casula in December.

Gavan Duffy embarked for service at Sydney on *Demosthenes* on 18 May 1916 with the 1st Reinforcements of the 3rd Divisional Cyclist battalion. Also on board ship with the Cyclists were 21 years old Keith Ferguson, the law student son of Justice David Gilbert Ferguson of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, and the well-known Sydney barrister, Edwin Mayhew Brissenden.

The Cyclist Battalion was disbanded in England and the men redeployed in other units. Gavan Duffy was sent to the 20th Battalion – the same unit whose Comforts Fund was chaired by Justice Ferguson. Justice Ferguson's son, Arthur, had been killed with the unit on 16 June 1916. The battalion saw action at Pozieres then later at Flers also on the Somme Front. Desmond Gavan Duffy was killed on 15 November 1916. In the bitterly cold November weather Desmond was reportedly suffering from trench foot. After duty in the trenches at Flers he retired to a rest area called Carlton Camp about three kilometres behind the lines. Around midday he was playing cards in a tent with two other officers when a German long-range artillery shell landed on them. Eyewitnesses said that the officers, including Gavan Duffy were 'blown to pieces'. The three men had survived the extreme battles only to be killed almost at random when they must have thought they were safe. Desmond Gavan Duffy had been with his unit in action for a little over three weeks.

Also serving near Flers was Percy Valentine Storkey with the 19th Battalion. He was wounded in action on 14 November. Storkey had been born in New Zealand but completed a law degree at Sydney University. He was to go on to win the Victoria Cross in battle and subsequently be appointed a Judge of the District Court of New South Wales.

Sir Frank Gavan Duffy wrote a poem to his son which was published in the *Anzac Memorial 1917* and newspapers at the time. The poem reads:

How can I shut my ears to Honor's call
I cannot stay, Dear Father, bid me go"
"Answer it then", I said "And if you fall
God take you, and God help us in our woe."
So you strode unfearing, proud, elate,
To quit the ordered quiet of your life
And share the soldier's harsh, uncertain fate,
Your eyes aflame with rapture for the strife.
And we who stayed behind foreboding ill,
Counted the cost, but put our fears aside
And set a halting but insistent will
To dream of meeting in some happier tide.
Or summon pleasant pictures from the past –

the smiling babe frank schoolboy, trusted friend,
...And now our foolish hopes and fears are cast
Into oblivion, for the dreaded end
Has come upon a battlefield in France.
Sleep, son, beneath the soldier's rugged cross,
Your duty done, nor time nor evil chance
Can stain your name, or bring you sense of loss.
And we – we whisper while the hot tears run
Down our worn cheeks, "Dear Lord,
Thy will be done.

Further information: Rodgers, J. *To Give and Not to Count the Cost* Saint Ignatius College, Riverview, 2009.