

VC Biog 3 Downie, Robert, VC, Royal Dublin Fusiliers 671 words

Morag Cross 6 Feb 2014

*****VC3.1**

Sergeant Robert Downie, of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Dublin Fusiliers, was born in Springburn, Glasgow in 1894, one of thirteen (out of 15) surviving children of an Irish father and Dundee-born mother. Like two brothers and his father, he worked in Hyde Park Locomotive Works, Springburn. Possibly inspired by his eldest brother, a sergeant in The Royal Scots Fusiliers, Downie joined the army in 1912, aged 18. [Sources: Statutory Deaths (Service Returns), and Census 1911, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; O'Moore Creagh and E M Humphries, 1924, *The VC and DSO: A Complete Record*, London, Vol 1, p227; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Nov 1916, p7].

*****VC3.2a and b use both**

Early in 1914, Downie married Ivy Sparkes in Kent, and was sent to France with his regiment when war broke out in August. The Fusiliers fought at Aisne, Messines and Ypres, enduring hard fighting on the Western Front from the outset, and Downie suffered the effects of a gas-attack. He had already received the Military Medal for bravery, when he such showed outstanding courage on 23 October 1916, the 115th day of the First Battle of the Somme. Gen Haig's report on advances round Les Boeuks and Morval: 'Constant rain turned a mass of hastily dug trenches ... into channels of deep mud ... roads broken by countless shell-craters ... became almost impassable'. This meant no further supplies of ammunition reached the exhausted troops, and it became 'an easier matter to take a battered trench than to hold it'. [Sources: *London Gazette*, Issue 29884, *Supplement*, 29 Dec 1917, p12729; O'Moore Creagh and E M Humphries, 1924, *The VC and DSO: A Complete Record*, London, Vol 1, p227].

*****VC3.3**

The 4th Division, including the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, suffered frequent German counter-attacks; on the 23rd, the Fusiliers were in action around Combles, 'a bloody encounter, so much so that Sgt. Downie never spoke about the day to anyone again, not even his own family.' The objective was a fortified, strategically-important German machinegun position east of Lesboeuks called 'Gun Pits', which had resisted capture, and after the 2nd Battalion went 'over the top' at 2.30pm, they were machine-gunned at close range, and some crawled back to safety. [Sources: '1st Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers in France', *Royal Dublin Fusiliers, A Forgotten Regiment*, at www.dublin-fusiliers.com; 'The Royal Dublin Fusiliers', *The Long, Long Trail: The British Army ... 1914-1918*, at www.1914-1918.net].

*****VC3.4**

One of Downie's officers, Lt Col R G B Jeffreys, described the fighting of the 23rd October: 'We had one big battle ... and simply went for the Hun ... the [Fusiliers] saw 'red' all the time and got at him with the bayonet. The German fought like a beast at bay ... actual hand to hand fighting ... Considering the carnage that ensued, we got ... light casualties.' In this tactical emergency, Jeffreys explained 'The dead Hun was appalling. I gave orders that no prisoners were to be taken ... in case of a counter attack and it takes too many men away to send escorts to the rear with them ... so you can imagine what happened with the bayonet'. [Source: 'Lt Col R G B Jeffreys: Letters', *Online Museum, Royal Dublin Fusiliers Website*, at www.royaldublinfusiliers.com].

***VC3.5

After his officers had been killed, Downie rallied the troops, 'under heavy fire ... At the critical moment he rushed forward alone, shouting 'Come on, the Dubs'... the line rushed forward at his call. Serjeant Downie accounted for several [Germans and] captured a machine gun, killing the team.' He was wounded, but the position was taken, albeit at appalling cost: three officers and 14 men killed, five officers and 124 men wounded, and 36 missing. [Sources: *London Gazette*, Issue 29836, Supplement to 24 Nov, Published on 25 Nov 1916, p11526; '1st Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers in France', *Royal Dublin Fusiliers, A Forgotten Regiment*, at www.dublin-fusiliers.com].

***VC3.6 a or b, and use c also

Downie, a keen amateur boxer, had joked to his wife (a munitions factory inspector during the war) that 'I'll fetch you something worth looking at'. 'I said', Mrs Downie remarked, 'That will be a German helmet'. Downie also told his former schoolteacher, and several friends, 'Next time I see you, I'll bring a VC'. However, he afterwards told the press 'Every man in the regiment won the VC that day'. [Sources: O'Moore Creagh and E M Humphries, 1924, *The VC and DSO: A Complete Record*, London, Vol 1, p227; *Evening Telegraph*, 28 Nov 1916, p3; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Nov 1916, p7].

***VC3.7

At Downie's rapturous homecoming on 31 December 1916, 'many rows of streamers ... includ[ing] all the flags of the allies' decorated Carlestone Street, Springburn. From that single street, 'over 200 [residents] have joined the army, sixteen have been killed' and five lost limbs. Downie was presented to the City Council, attended a reception in Springburn Public Halls, and was feted by St Aloysius Church and School and local dignitaries. [Sources: O'Moore Creagh and E M Humphries, 1924, *The VC and DSO: A Complete Record*, London, Vol 1, p227; *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Jan 1917, p9; Jan 5 1917, p8].

***VC3.8 a and b use both

Two of the five Downie sons in the armed forces were killed. Sergeant David Downie, The Royal Scots Fusiliers, and Private Richard Downie, The Seaforth Highlanders, who both welcomed him home after winning the VC, died in France in 1917. [Source: 'Casualty Details: D Downie, No 7674', and 'R Downie, No 204408', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, at www.cwgc.org; *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Jan 1917, p9; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Nov 1916, p7].

***VC3.9 a and b if b is needed

After the war, Robert Downie VC became a groundsman and turnstile cashier at Celtic Football Club. He died in 1968, and is buried in St Kentigern's Cemetery, Glasgow. [Sources: 'Supporters: Robert Downie', *The Celtic Wiki... Celtic Football Club*, at www.thecelticwiki.com; 'Sergeant Robert Downie', *Medals: Victoria Cross, Royal Dublin Fusiliers Website*, at www.royaldublinfusiliers.com; '1st Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers in France', *Royal Dublin Fusiliers, A Forgotten Regiment*, at www.dublin-fusiliers.com].

***VC3.10 one at least of a-e