

Major Adrian Consett Stephen
Croix de Guerre Avec Palme, MC, MID
The Hon. Justice Anthony Meagher*

1 Adrian Consett Stephen was born in Sydney in 1892. On graduating from university in 1915, he sailed to England to join the British Royal Field Artillery on the Western Front. In March 1918 he was killed by a shell at Zillebeke (near Ypres) in Belgium. He was 25. During his two and a half years of service in the Field Artillery, Consett Stephen was awarded the *Croix de Guerre avec palme*¹ and the Military Cross.

2 In his letter to his family announcing that he had received the first of those awards, he wrote:

On June 1st [1917] the colonel asked me if my name was *Adrian Courcett Stephen*. I said “Yes, more or less.” “Well, you’ve got the *Croix de Guerre*”

I said, “Thank you, sir, that’s very nice.”

And that’s that! ... I am now open to be embraced by all the hairy poilus [slang for French infantrymen] that I meet – kissed on both cheeks in fact by the entire French Republic.

3 In his private correspondence and articles written for publication in the Sydney Morning Herald, Consett Stephen recorded his war experiences. His father Alfred wrote, when publishing a collection of those letters after his death, “we should know and compare the thoughts of the young men who have gone forth to do battle for us in this world tragedy and listen to their stories in the fighting”.²

4 Adrian Consett Stephen was the great-grandson of the Chief Justice of New South Wales, Sir Alfred Stephen (1802-1894). Adrian’s grandfather, Montagu, was the founder of the firm which would become Stephen,

* I thank my tipstaff, Andrew Bell, for his assistance in the preparation of this speech.

¹ Notified: London Gazette, 13 July 1917, 7095

² Adrian Consett Stephen, *An Australian in the R.F.A.: being letters and diary of Adrian Consett Stephen* (WC Penfold & Co, 1918, Sydney), xiii. Hereafter, “An Australian in the RFA”

Jacques & Stephen.³ Adrian's mother was Kate Suttor, the daughter of Sir Francis Suttor, for many years the President of the New South Wales Legislative Council.

5 Consett Stephen attended Sydney Grammar School and then St. Paul's College at the University of Sydney. He graduated with Bachelors of Arts and Laws in 1915, having worked for one year at Minter, Simpson and Co.

6 At University, he made his mark as a proficient literary and legal thinker. He loved drama and dramatic criticism, having written a compilation – *Four Plays* – which was published in 1918.⁴ One critic noted that the plays “show a skill in dialogue and ... the creation of character”, “despite occasional immaturities”.⁵ He “gave great promise as a writer of social comedy”.⁶ Indeed, his distinguished professor, Sir Mungo William MacCallum, said:⁷

None of the students I ever had in forty years' experience had such an instinct for high social comedy as he, and his humour and satire were always playful and kindly.

7 In his writings – published as *An Australian in the R.F.A.: being letters and diary of Adrian Consett Stephen* by WC Penfold in 1918 – Consett Stephen captures the scale and chaos of the warfare and the havoc wreaked on those engaged in it. His father writing after his death noted the difficulty of his producing these writings whilst in service.⁸

They were written at odd times, in strange places and in weird situations, sometimes in barns, sometimes in ancient deserted chateaux, in trenches and dug-outs: sometimes beside his gun or at his observation post ... His thoughts came rapidly and clearly, and he had the instinct for visualizing on paper the ever changing drama of this War and the myriad life around him.

8 So we begin, drawing heavily on that material.

³ 'Stephen, Adrian Consett (1894–1918)', Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University

⁴ Adrian Consett Stephen, *Four Plays* (WC Penfold, 1918, Sydney)

⁵ The Bookman (August 1919), p. 153

⁶ 'Stephen, Alfred Consett (1847–1939)', Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University

⁷ ER Holme, “Foreword” in Adrian Consett Stephen, *Four Plays* (August 1918), x

⁸ *An Australian in the RFA*, xiv

- 9 In one of his first letters, Consett Stephen described the commencement of his “private” sailing voyage to England:⁹

The weather was perfect, and altogether one had no impression of “going to war”. One felt in all probability Manly was the destination.

- 10 Having enlisted as a sub-lieutenant in the field artillery, Consett Stephen joined the Allied troops in Northern France. He described the end of his six weeks or so of trench mortar training with dry humour:¹⁰

They filled my pockets with cigars and wished me au revoir. The Colonel who happened to be there wished me a pleasant death, which cheered me up of course.

- 11 During his time on the Western Front in France and Belgium, Consett Stephen served in a remarkable series of campaigns, including at the battle of the Somme, Pozières, Theipval, Bienvillers, Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele (Ypres).

The Somme

- 12 More than three million troops fought in the Somme offensive which took place between July and November 1916. Over one million were wounded or killed. The first fighting took place north of Albert, which is within the square.¹¹ The larger broken line to the left is the Front Line as at 1 July 1916. The Allied troops were commanded by General Douglas Haig, of whom Consett Stephen wrote in January 1917:

[H]ow strange though to catch a glimpse of a mind which views the whole battle like a game of chess, thinking not of men but of flanks. [Quoting Haig] ‘I then ordered Sir Henry Rawlinson to advance his right flank.’ It was advanced. A thousand homes wept, but a line on the map has been straightened.

⁹ An Australian in the RFA, 1

¹⁰ An Australian in the RFA, 21

¹¹ From Foucault (south of the River Somme) to Serre (north of the River Somme)

- 13 Consett Stephen described the lead-up to the first day of this battle in which allied troops attacked the entrenched Germans near Albert:¹²

The wood was seething with traffic: ammunition, wagons, guns, transports, and marching men. A deep low growl filled the air. Night roared with the lumbering of endless wheels. It was the "Big Push" at last. It was upon us, undeniable, gripping us with a strange excitement of feeling oneself an atom being swept along in a crowd with a vast sense of power behind, and the unknown destiny in front. It was the "Big Push" and it made us nervy. For the next ten days we worked hard ...

- 14 On that first day there were nearly 60,000 Allied casualties, mostly British and Canadian. Consett Stephen wrote:

The day of the assault arrived at last ... the world burst into a gigantic roar that was flung from horizon to horizon as thunder is tossed about mountains. The bark of the 18 pounders, the cough of the howitzers, the boom of the heavy guns, and the lightning rush of naval guns, swelled and merged into a jerky rumble ... A line of trenches flickered with short flames, which sent up dense columns of white and orange smoke that twisted and curled and mingled, and then swept forward, a solid rampart towards the German lines.

- 15 He survived the German counter-bombardment on the afternoon of that day.¹³ The night was no less horrific:¹⁴

We were fighting at night and heard an explosion near one of the guns. Hardly a minute afterwards, three or four men (signallers who had been sleeping in the rest dug-out) staggered out. I could hear blood pouring on to the ground like water out of a tap.

Pozières

- 16 A key part of the battle of the Somme was the battle for Pozières, a town 10 kilometres or so north of the river. The Australian phase of that battle commenced in the evening of 22 July 1916.¹⁵

- 17 Historian Charles Bean described Pozières as "more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth".

¹² The Bookman (August 1919), p. 152; Karen Fox, 'Australian Legal Dynasties: The Stephens and the Streets', *Obituaries Australia*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://oa.anu.edu.au/essay/10/text30750>, published 17 February 2015

¹³ Tony Cunneen, *The Law at War 1916*, Chapter 6 "Lawyers in the Battle of the Somme".

¹⁴ An Australian in the RFA, 114.

¹⁵ Cunneen, *The Law at War 1916*, Chapter 7 "Lawyers in the Battle for Pozières".

- 18 Consett Stephen remained on duty that evening at an observation post. He later described the leaving and returning of the troops:¹⁶

The men marching to Pozieres, and the loads of wounded streaming back from it, not ten yards between them, made a contrast. The battle seemed to consist of a passing circle of men through that inferno, some of them staying there forever, some coming out broken, but few – I never saw any – coming back as they had gone ... Their bandages and their torn and bloody clothes made them look like old time buccaneers ... But Pozieres itself was now a furnace: dense smoke, yellow and white and black poured out of it; the Boche bombardment sounded like the crackling of tin; it seemed impossible that men without trenches could exist in such a cauldron.

The Vimy Ridge Campaign

- 19 The Battle of Vimy Ridge took place in the middle of April 1917 in a region north of Picardy. Consett Stephen was present during the initial successes of that offensive, reporting the “astonishingly successful” first attack and that altogether “the offensive had resulted in the capture *in one day* of more ground and men and guns than we had achieved after months on the Somme”.¹⁷
- 20 By this time his descriptions of the war were, as he recognised, far removed from the grandeur of cavalry charges and splendid parades:¹⁸

[It was] pouring and bitterly cold – miserable beyond words. The great advance seemed a poor thing. Roads there were none; only tracks of mud along which the transport seethed like a serpent in slime ... At one point we passed a pile of 27 dead horses. Where was the ring of hoofs and the flash of sabres of this great advance? A muddy dull-eyed mob! It was a cynical jest.

- 21 Two weeks later, Consett Stephen was wounded in a shelling which he barely survived:

We were sitting round the breakfast table in a German dug-out listening critically to shells above and around ... Crash! A blinding, scorching flame – we saw the flame – and the world tumbled about us.

I thought it was the end ... a sting in the head and hands told me of wounds – slight, yes – but I might have been elsewhere, tho’ I couldn’t feel anything. Where are the others? “Hullo! Anybody hurt?” No answer. Perhaps we’re

¹⁶ Cunneen, *The Law at War 1916*, Chapter 7 “Lawyers in the Battle for Pozieres”.

¹⁷ An Australian in the RFA, 171 – 172.

¹⁸ An Australian in the RFA, 175

buried. Will the sergeant dig us out? Is the stench of powder and dust only explosive or is it gas?

The Battle of Passchendaele

- 22 Adrian Consett Stephen was awarded the Military Cross for his action in the battle of Passchendaele for the control of the ridges south and east of the Belgian city of Ypres.¹⁹ The citation reads:²⁰

Whilst in command temporarily of his battery, under very heavy enemy shell fire, during an S.O.S. action²¹, [Consett Stephen], by his great coolness, set a magnificent example, to his men. To maintain the necessary fire he himself manned one of his guns, and during the same action attended to and carried into safety a badly wounded [Non-Commissioned Officer] His example and courage went a great way to enable the battery to be kept in action, as the battery was being very heavily shelled. Two days later this officer, by his coolness and resource, was the means of saving life during a very intense enemy bombardment.

- 23 At some stage between November 1917 and March 1918 Consett Stephen returned to England to receive that award. He described his attendance at Buckingham Palace:²²

We then filed into the room where the King was, our names were read out, we marched in, bowed to the King, and tried to look pleasant. The king placed the Cross which he picked up from the tray, held by an aged general, and hooked it on to a little pin which had been previously stuck in our tunics. The King looked needless to say – exactly like his photographs; his voice was very low ... ‘You have the Croix de Guerre?’ He said to me. ‘Did you get it at the same time?’

‘No sir. I got it before.’

‘When was that?’

‘On the Somme sir.’

‘Ah yes. I am very pleased to give you the Military Cross.’

He shook hands. I stepped back, bowed and was taken into custody by numerous Major-Generals (or Major Doms) [major person of the household], I don’t know which. Somebody seized the medal. Somebody else put it in a case. Somebody else shut the case. Somebody else gave me a push, and I

¹⁹ Supplement to the London Gazette, 19 November 1917, 11953.

²⁰ Quotation: M. F. Falkiner, Lieutenant Colonel.

²¹ An “SOS Action” or “SOS Barrage” was an artillery strike carried out against a German counter-attack. It could be called upon by firing a flare of a specified colour. See P Griffith. *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: British Army's Art of Attack, 1916–18* (1996).

²² An Australian in the RFA, 159.

found myself in the cloakroom again. I spent an agonized five minutes trying to decide whether I should tip the magnificent man in charge of the hat and stick department. But he was so big, and had so many ancient medals he seemed so aloof that I am sure money had no value to him ... I was thrust against a large policeman, who cannoned me on to another, and so on till I found myself darting for the street. A taxi shoved me [over] ... I woke up. I felt myself all over. Physically I was safe and sound. I still had my watch, and neither of my spurs had fallen off. I had done well. But should I have tipped the rear-admiral in charge of the hats and sticks? ... The medal? Great Scott! I had left it behind. But no! Here it was in a pocket where some kind general ... had placed it.

- 24 Announcing his death in March 1918, the Sydney Morning Herald described Adrian Consett Stephen as “A Sydney Hero”. A close family friend would remark that his mother, Kate May Stephen, “never smiled again” as he “was such an exceptionally clever and gifted young man, with a charming and outgoing way; many grieved his loss.”²³
- 25 He was buried just over 100 years ago at La Clytte Military Cemetery in Belgium in the presence of more than 500, mostly men, including generals, staff and other officers.
- 26 His obituary included:²⁴

He belongs to the band of men claimed by this inexorable war who, in the words of one of the heroes of Verdun have thought it "their duty to do more than their duty, who knew that no life could produce anything more fruitful than this example of patriotism, since a death like this brings about the quickening and expansion of many lives after it.

[His] humour and sympathy with which he observed every aspect of life at the front” were also noted, and that he “had many rare gifts, and they would all have been to the fullest extent at its service. He seemed certain of success in whatever career he had chosen, whether literature or the Bar.

²³ H Rutledge, *My Grandfather's House – Recollections of an Australian Family* (Doubleday, Sydney, 1986), 145; as reproduced in Tony Cunneen, *Battles Overseas and At Home: The New South Wales Legal Profession in 1917* (The Symposium 24 March 2012), 91.

²⁴ 'Stephen, Adrian Consett (1894–1918)', Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University

27 And finally, a glimpse of what likely motivated him:

This War has made me feel how grand it is to be an Australian. I only hope that the little part I play in this big affair may make me not unworthy to be classed (in all but name) as an ANZAC.

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