

Dunn, Brian Mansfield (1940–1965)

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Brian Dunn was the first Seventh-day Adventist in mission service in the South Pacific Islands to lose his life by violent means in the course of duty.

Brian Dunn was born on June 29, 1940,¹ in Hitchin, Baldock, England.² He graduated in 1964 from the

nursing course at Sydney Adventist Hospital (SAH) in Australia.³ Dunn married Valmae Ruth Benham, also a nursing graduate Sydney Adventist Hospital (1959),⁴ on December 29, 1964, in the Charters Towers, Queensland, Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁵ The young couple left Sydney for Atoifi Adventist Hospital, then a 90-bed facility, on the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands on November 23, 1965, to begin their term of mission service.⁶

Just a few days later, on Thursday evening, December 16, 1965, Dunn was returning from providing medicine for a patient when, standing at his own front door, he was speared out of the darkness. He called out to his wife for help.⁷ The spear, several feet long, was made from a piece of sharpened steel reinforcing rod, and had to be cut with a hacksaw. The vibration from this lengthy process was very painful and Valmae Dunn firmly held the spear to reduce the movement as much as possible. With the point of the spear protruding both from his chest and his back, there was no way Dunn could get comfortable or lie down but morphine supplied by a Roman Catholic priest who came to assist must have helped somewhat.⁸



Brian Mansfield Dunn

Photo courtesy of Adventist HealthCare Limited.

Assisted down the long hill to the boat after midnight, Dunn climbed aboard the small 18-foot Catholic mission boat himself, that being less uncomfortable than being helped by others. Unable to lie down, the back was cut off a dispensary chair and all through the night he was supported by two young men. They sailed through, at times, rough seas until they reached Kwailabesi on the other side of the island where he was transferred aboard the larger and faster mission vessel, *Dani*, which sailed for the Anglican mission hospital at Fuambu on the northern point of the island.⁹ Contacted by radio, the Anglican mission boat, *Bradley*, set out to meet the *Dani* and the crew supplied penicillin and morphine, before arrival at Fuambu on Friday at around 3:30 pm!¹⁰ Because the road to the airstrip was some 15 miles distant and rough, the *Dani* took Dunn further along the coast and as near as possible to the airstrip where the waiting pilot, to save time, taxied the aircraft off the strip and down to the beach. Once on board, he was quickly flown to Honiara and taken, by ambulance, on the rough potholed road, to the hospital where at around 6:30 pm five doctors began to do what they could to save the young missionary's life.

While in surgery at around 8:30 p.m. his heart failed. However, with massage, function was restored and on Sabbath morning his prospects looked better, and Dunn told his wife that he would fine "by the end of the week."¹¹ However, on Saturday night he became delirious. Briefly regaining consciousness, Dunn several times took the opportunity then to tell those with him he was "ready to die." As he healed, his blood pressure began returning to normal levels more quickly than his spear-damaged heart could bare. The outer heart muscle ruptured and Dunn bled out in his sleep on Sunday afternoon, December 19, 1965.¹²

Brian Dunn was buried at Honiara in the Solomon Islands the next day at 3:00 p.m. with the leading dignitaries of the town among the 300 people in attendance.¹³ Later, Valmae Dunn noted that just after her husband was attacked, "I got him into the house on Thursday night, he prayed and kept praying for forgiveness for the unknown man who speared him."¹⁴

This young missionary couple had been married less than a year when Dunn was murdered, the first expatriate Seventh-day Adventist to die violently in the South Pacific, just days after commencing their term of medical missionary service.¹⁵ He was 25 years of age when he died.¹⁶ Valmae Dunn returned to Australia to spend some time with her parents, noting then, "that I may have to go back soon." Indeed she did return to mission service just a few months later, serving as a missionary nurse in a Hansenide (Leper) colony in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.¹⁷

SOURCES

Brian Dunn Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives.

Frame, R. R. "Tragic Death of Medical Missionary Brian Dunn." *Australasian Record*, January 24, 1966.

Mitchell, A. R. "Brian Mansfield Dunn obituary." *Australasian Record*, January 31, 1966.

Parker, Ross. "Dunn Benham marriage." *Australasian Record*, February 1, 1965.

"People and Events." *Australasian Record*, May 16, 1966.

"Sydney Sanitarium Graduates, 1959." *Australasian Record*, January 18, 1960.

NOTES

1. Brian Dunn Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Dunn, Brian," document: "Personal Service Record."
2. A. R. Mitchell, "Brian Mansfield Dunn obituary," *Australasian Record*, January 31, 1966, 15.
3. Sydney Adventist Hospital Graduates Association database, Noreen P. Devine compiler, June 2003, held in the personal collection of the author.
4. "Sydney Sanitarium Graduates, 1959," *Australasian Record*, January 18, 1960, 1; Sydney Adventist Hospital Graduates Association database, Noreen P. Devine compiler, June 2003, held in the personal collection of the author.
5. Ross Parker, "Dunn Benham marriage," *Australasian Record*, February 1, 1965, 14.
6. R. R. Frame, "Tragic Death of Medical Missionary Brian Dunn," *Australasian Record*, January 24, 1966, 1.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

16. Brian Dunn Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Dunn, Brian," document: "Personal Service Record."

17. "People and Events," *Australasian Record*, May 16, 1966, 8.

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