Biography

Frederick William ‘Pop’ Downie (1879–1937)

Victoria Police Sub Inspector, Boer War veteran and inventor of mobile police radio communication



Frederick William Downie, affectionately known as ‘Pop’, was an influential Victorian police officer whose pioneering work helped transform the way police communicated while on patrol. Born in Melbourne on 3 December 1879, he was the son of William Low Downie and Elizabeth Whiteman. His family origins could be traced to Scotland, with his grandparents, John Butter Downie and Margaret Low, arriving in Victoria from Dundee in 1853.

Before joining the police, Downie worked as a labourer and served in the Boer War in South Africa. On 26 April 1902, he enlisted in the 6th Battalion, Australian Commonwealth Horse, as Private No. 212. Unfortunately, the war ended before his unit could see active service. He returned to Melbourne in August 1902 and was discharged shortly afterwards.

Like many returning servicemen, Downie subsequently applied to join the Victoria Police. His application was successful, and he was appointed Constable No. 5091 on 13 May 1903. Initially assigned to foot patrol duties in Melbourne, he was transferred to Carlton North. In September 1904, he married Rebecca Amy Pemberton at St Clement’s Church of England in Elsternwick. They later had two children, Constance Rose Pemberton Downie (1907–1919) and Rodney John Pemberton Downie (1914–1936).

Downie’s greatest achievement emerged from his work with motor patrols. On 5 May 1920, he transferred to Russell Street in Melbourne as a motor driver, beginning a new chapter in his policing career. Recognising the limitations of the existing system, in which officers often had to use public telephone boxes to report their movements and

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receive information, he helped pioneer the introduction of mobile wireless communications for police vehicles.

Downie is credited with establishing the world's first mobile radio police patrol in Melbourne in November 1922. The early equipment was enormous by modern standards, occupying much of the back seat of a patrol car. Nevertheless, it represented a significant advance in police communications, allowing officers in the field to receive information more efficiently. The Victoria Police Museum preserves photographs documenting Downie and his colleagues in the pioneering of the wireless patrol.

His contribution was formally recognised through promotion to Senior Constable in 1923 and appointment as the officer in charge of the Motor Patrol on 1 July 1924. His work earned him lasting recognition as a founding figure in the development of modern police radio communications.

Despite his professional achievements, Downie experienced considerable personal tragedy. His daughter, Constance, died in 1919 at just 12 years of age, while his son, Rodney, died in 1936 aged 22. Downie himself died in 1937, aged 57. His wife, Rebecca Amy Downie, survived him until 1948.

Today, a memorial plaque honours Frederick William 'Pop' Downie, his wife and their two children. It records his service as a returned Boer War soldier, his rank as Sub-Inspector of Police, and his pioneering role in mobile two-way police radio communication.