

## Desmond William Fenton

(4.2.1917 – 26.3.1981)

*Margery Jean Fenton (née Grylls, 1921)*



Des Fenton (Sgt) VX110638,  
2/1 Australian Topographical Survey Company  
Sydney 1943

Desmond William Fenton was born 4 February 1917 at Nurse Stephenson's "Primrose House" opposite Kerang Central Primary School. His father was John William (Bill) (26.10.1893 – 14.7.1962 Kerang), and his mother Evelyn Kathleen Morrow Fenton (nee Blossett, 5.12.1894 Emu Ck – 22.10.1984 Kerang), and he grew up on the family farm at Normanville.



Pupils of SS4189 Normanville, 1928; teacher Daisy Youl (later Shipp), with Des Fenton and Jean Robinson

After 1912 there was no school at Normanville until a Hall was built in 1924 (Bill Fenton was Secretary and

general looker-after until 19??). This was leased to the Education Department and Des started school there in 1924. He was always popular with the teachers because he was conscientious and dependable. Older boys in a rural school were always a great help to the teachers. Eva took the responsibility of boarding the teachers for 20 years and Des benefited from this contact and also from the influence of Joe Ayres who was employed by Fentons. Joe was a true gentleman, a most conscientious worker and a most desirable working mate. Other good working men included Frank Taverner, Denny Bettinelli, and Bill Eskrick.

Des had to leave school after completing Merit Certificate (Grade 8) although he would have liked further study and would have done well. He was soon attending to the horses and driving one of the teams. At harvest he lugged bags of wheat and was known as an excellent bag-sewer, taking great pride in his well-filled bags and 22 neat stitches. Days off were practically unknown, but on these occasions Eva helped him to get to cricket with Dingwall, where he acted as Secretary-Treasurer for years.

Ex-teacher Daisy Shipp (née Youl) was always a good friend. When he was 17 and 18 Mim Fimmell (née Quinn) and Ron McPherson were the teachers and their companionship opened his mind to more books and music which had a lasting impression for the rest of his life.

The teamster had always to consider the welfare of his horses. So, a very early rise, about 5am was necessary to feed them in the stable before breakfast. Afterwards, groom and harness, and walk them to the paddock. A rest at lunchtime and then home to feed and water them again. And, before going to bed, to check them again. Des was glad when he got a tractor – no more suffering for the horses.

Between team work, grow and cut hay, put into stooks, later carting it into stacks. The stack builder was a specialist and took pride in a well-built stack (see a photograph under “The Bill Fenton Farm” in "[Fenton](#)"). Then it had to be cut into chaff – Mr Fenton had a big double-bagger chaff cutter. Des thought this one of the worst jobs on the farm – “a filthy dirty rotten stinking job”. Mrs Fenton hated this time of the year – getting hotter, days longer, men tired and irritable.

As well, there was the harness to be cleaned and oiled, horses to have the hair clipped from their bellies. Then gathering stones, Mallee roots, cutting thistles, mending wheat bags and then on a rainy day when looking for a rest, to have to dig in the orchard. No wonder he took no interest in my garden.

His only real pocket money was earned by helping his grandfather Jack at Gonn. A good rapport developed between them and as Jack was an interesting man, Des benefited by this.

As the teamster at home, he didn't get the opportunity to attend auctions and the hare shoots which were popular at that time. Bill would take Laurie so no wonder Laurie was considered a fair shot by his father, and had two guns. Dick and Jean Fitzpatrick (the Mailman) were conscious that he was getting a raw deal on the farm and took him to Lorne for his first real holiday. Later he went with his cousin Jack Higgie to Queenscliff, where he used his new camera. He developed his own films and experimented with colouring the prints.

War declared August 1939.

After harvest 1939 (early 1940) Des wanted to enlist but his father opposed him. Later Des offered some of his pay to help pay a workman to overcome the problem of being in a protected industry, that is, a farmer, by presenting himself as a labourer. He bought himself a Matchless motorbike – the first thing he had been able to buy himself. He wanted to join the Air Force but they were not accepting recruits at that time – neither was the AIF (Australian Imperial Forces), but on 28.10.1940 he was enlisted in the Citizen Military Forces with number V9051 and the promise of being transferred to the AIF as soon as possible. It always hurt Des that it took 20 months and the bombing of Australia, particularly Darwin and surrounding areas, before that occurred and then he was given – to him – the gross humiliation of Registration Number VX110638 as if he had just enlisted.

Des (and Ian Brimacombe, Alex Fulton, and Ian Laughlin) were put into 3rd Field Survey Company, and they did their initial training at Woodend (sleeping in the Showgrounds) and at Wilson's Promontory. In May/June 1941 they assembled at Royal Park en route for Darwin – the trucks, surveying equipment etc were loaded onto flat top rail trucks at Terowrie, then off-loaded at Alice Springs to travel overland to the rail again at Birdum. Des nearly didn't make the trip as he was very ill with influenza and there was talk of sending him back.

At Birdum they loaded the equipment again onto rail trucks for the final leg to Darwin, camping at Larrakeyah (not the permanent army barracks). Colonel Lockwood was their CO and they were responsible

for mapping a lot of that area and airfields. The Unit was top-heavy with surveyors, engineers, and draughtsmen who all had officer status, so there was no officer position to be in charge of transport so Des became Transport Officer without the usual officer status – and also Mosquito Control Officer.

During Jan/Feb 1942 Des had Dengue Fever – no treatment but some time in hospital, where he was discharged two days before it was bombed by the Japanese on 19.2.1942. The “Wet” season was very enervating and people had become a bit casual, so that when the bombs fell the CO couldn't find his tin hat and put a sand bag over his head, while all the slit trenches had water and frogs or worse in them. By a terrible blunder no warning of the approaching Japanese bombers was given and all the ships were in the harbour and aeroplanes on the airfields. The devastation was terrible. All supplies came in by sea, so they were very short of medical supplies and food – in fact they were very hungry. Cocoa without milk or sugar was the only drink.

They had no leave at all until Easter 1943 and hadn't seen a white woman because all the white women had been evacuated. “Am I really beautiful or are you just back from Darwin?” was a current joke.

The Unit was relieved in April 1943, their first full leave in 23 months. I was returning to Normanville after the May holidays and met Des and immediately appreciated his qualities. There was some heavy courting. I was surprised that Eva seemed so agreeable. Of course Des immediately took his place in the farm work.

The Unit had been absorbed into the 2/1 Australian Army Topographical Survey Company, but they were still all together. There were only 33 in their Unit for those 2+ years and all ranks were closely bonded. Geoff May, Ivor Kibbey, Keith Gain, Berto Reaby, as well as Colonel Lockwood, Johnny Greene, Joe Molina, and others.

They went to Brisbane, where Des was again ill with a bad cold (possibly exacerbated by his allergy to wheat dust). We corresponded and Des got his next leave in May 44. We decided that we were suited enough to be married.

Continued as Des+Margery.pdf