

Ralph Edward Donnelly, the sixth child of John and Mary Ellen (Corcoran) Donnelly, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1891. John was an immigrant from Liverpool, England and worked in the several mills in Worcester. Ellen was a distant cousin of his, who grew up in Clinton, Massachusetts where her relatives were prominent public officials: cousin John Corcoran, a superior court judge; cousin David I. Walsh, a U.S. Senator. The family lived in a series of three-decker tenements on Saint Anne's Hill, an Irish section of the City. Ralph's four older brothers were fine athletes, and two, James C. Donnelly and Charley Donnelly, went on to coach football at the collegiate level.

Ralph attended Belmont Street School, then Classical High School, where he excelled in football as a star end and gained the nickname "Ras." Ralph attended Worcester Academy for a brief time in 1909, then went on to Georgetown University, where he became a star in football and a two-time All American. It was said that Ralph was the only football player that Jim Thorpe feared on the gridiron. After college, Ralph came back home and coached the Worcester Boys Trade High School football team. In 1916, Ralph enlisted in Emmet Guard, a Worcester Army unit composed of Irish Catholics and named for Irish nationalist Robert Emmet. He first served in the Guard in Mexico in the Pancho Villa uprising, then returned to coaching the Trade High football team. When the war against Germany was declared the next year, Ralph rejoined the Emmet Guard as a sergeant.

In Europe, Ralph fought with the same gusto as he had displayed on the football field and used the same tactics. He was a natural leader of men, and soon he was promoted to second lieutenant, and then first lieutenant, and was about to be promoted to full captain when tragedy struck. Reports filtered back to Worcester that his battlefield tactics bordered on being reckless as, reportedly, he never wore his helmet in battle. On September 13, 1918, the Emmets, led by Colonel Thomas Foley, were on a drive to Saint-Mihiel, France. The drive had gone well until the Emmets encountered German machine guns stationed inside concrete shelters. Ralph was the first one over the top of a machine gun nest, and took it single-handedly. He then went on to another machine gun nest, and again he was alone in going on top. This time, Ralph was shot just above the heart. As his men carried him away from the battlefield, Ralph urged them to keep going. Later accounts of his actions that day give a somewhat different story. The machine gun nests were said to have been in unknown locations, and someone had to move to draw the fire, so that their locations could be seen. Ralph wouldn't ask his men to do what he wouldn't do himself, so he stood up above the parapet to draw the fire. Seven bullets hit him in a line across his chest.

Colonel Foley's first reports back home indicated that Ralph had been wounded, but in the weeks that followed, word came back to Worcester that Ralph had been killed. On October 8, 1918, his brother James received the official news that Ralph had died; he was 27 years old. His exploits on the playing field and on the battlefield were front-page stories in all three of Worcester's papers.

Three years after Ralph's death, the Donnellys had his body returned to Worcester and a hero's funeral was held. He was buried in the family plot in Saint John's Cemetery in Worcester. The gravestone lists him as Captain Donnelly, Company H, 101st Infantry, killed in action September 13, 1918.

Ralph's name appears on three other memorials in Worcester. In the section next to the Donnelly plot is a memorial stone of fallen heroes of the Emmett Guard with the names listed in the chronological order of their passing. At Saint Paul's Cathedral in Worcester, a plaque in the lobby lists the parish members lost in the war. On the landing between the first and second floors of Worcester City Hall, a plaque honors the members of the Emmet Guard, with Ralph listed as a sergeant. In addition, a pond is named for him at the Cape Cod National Guard facility. Ralph D. Crowley, the current Chairman of Polar Beverages in Worcester, is named for him.