

GOWER REMEMBERS

Major Robert Holland Tait
(1891-1964)



“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He successfully organized the forming up of the battalion on its assembly position under the most difficult conditions. After reaching the final objective, he made a reconnaissance of the whole line under very heavy sniping and shell fire, bringing back very valuable information.”

*(Extract from a Supplement to *The London Gazette*, April 5, 1918, announcing Tait’s receipt of the Military Cross.)*

Robert Holland Tait was born in St. John's on October 7, 1891, the son of Dr. James Sinclair Tait and Sarah Elizabeth Calkin. He was educated at Bishop Feild College, St. John's, graduating with honours. In 1908 he travelled to England to attend London University, but moved to Trinity College, Oxford, in 1910 when he was named as that year's Rhodes Scholar for Newfoundland. He graduated from Trinity College in 1913 with a Bachelor of Arts in law.

Tait had excelled in athletics at Bishop Feild. While at Trinity College, he became captain of the college football team and was a member of the Oxford-Canadian hockey team. That team, which consisted of only seven players, toured Europe during the winter of 1910-1911, winning all 17 matches it played, outscoring the opposition 204 goals to 17. It was comprised of a Nova Scotian, three Manitobans, Gustave Lanctot from Quebec, who later became Dominion Archivist of Canada, and two players from Newfoundland, Tait at left wing and John G. Higgins as centre.

Following his graduation, Tait returned to Newfoundland. After spending the summer of 1913 articling with Sir Alfred B. Morine, he went on to University of King's College, Windsor, Nova Scotia, where he completed a Bachelor of Civil Law degree in one year.

Then came World War I. Tait was one of the first Newfoundlanders to join the Newfoundland Regiment, receiving a commission as Lieutenant on September 24, 1914. He was the officer in charge of the colour party and accepted a silk Union Jack on behalf of the Regiment from the Sons of England just three days before the First Five Hundred members of the Regiment left St. John's for Europe on board the S.S. *Florizel* on October 4. It was Tait who led the colour party bearing the Regimental colours on board the *Florizel*.

The Newfoundland Regiment was part of the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force that was shipped out to the eastern Mediterranean in August 1915. Tait was part of that force and service at Gallipoli and Egypt, where he sustained several injuries, resulting in periods of recuperation in hospital in Cairo. On January 10, 1916 he was promoted to captain, and in May was transferred with the Regiment to France. He did not participate in the Battle of the Somme (Beaumont Hamel) as he spent the summer and fall of 1916 in hospital. He was released on October 19.

The Regiment spent the winter of 1916-1917 away from front-line duties. In March 1917 the troops went back into action, first at Sailly-Saillisel and Monchy-Le-Preux in the spring, and at Poelcappelle in the fall. It was as a result of his leadership at Poelcappelle in October that Tait, who had been appointed Regimental Adjutant on May 23, 1917, was awarded the Military Cross. He took part in the Battle of Lys, the last major German offensive, where he was wounded at Neuve Eglise on April 12, 1918 and invalided to England.

After a month in hospital in England, Tait was sent back to Newfoundland where he was assigned command duties at Regimental Headquarters in St. John's. Shortly after the war ended he was given command of the Discharge Depot, overseeing the return of Newfoundland soldiers to civilian life. One of his duties during this time was to interview each of the returning members of the Regiment who had spent time in German prisoner of war camps. His written records of their experiences provide a great deal of information on how these men were treated and the conditions under which they were forced to live. While engaged in this command, on June 1, 1919 Tait was raised to the rank of Major. He retired to the reserve list on October 6.

With the war over, Tait was finally able to continue his law career. He was enrolled as a solicitor of the Supreme Court and called to the Newfoundland Bar on February 1, 1921. He had been appointed clerk of the Legislative Council in 1919, a post he held for four years.

Poor health, a result of his war wounds, caused Tait to leave Newfoundland in 1923. He emigrated to Boston where he became the Newfoundland representative in charge of the Newfoundland Publicity/Information Bureau. As part of his work to promote Newfoundland, especially as a travel and tourist destination, he gave many public lectures on Newfoundland throughout Massachusetts, and as far afield as Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland. In 1928 he was featured in a pamphlet entitled *Unknown Newfoundland* published by the Bureau of Commercial Economics in Washington, D.C., which was used to advertise and promote his lecture tours.

He also founded the *Newfoundland Weekly*, a four-page newspaper whose purpose was to keep expatriate Newfoundlanders living in the Boston area aware of happenings in Newfoundland. The newspaper lasted from 1924 until 1932, but was somewhat irregular in its publication schedule in the latter years. It contained economic, political and social news from Newfoundland, including births, marriages and deaths of people who were living in Newfoundland and in the New England area. While some of the stories were copied from Newfoundland papers, there was a fair amount of original content in each issue, most of it written by Tait or by his brother-in-law and partner, Archibald Gibb.

In 1933 Tait published a narrative poem entitled *The Trail of the Caribou*, an account of the Newfoundland Regiment in World War I with explanatory notes. In 1935 he moved to New York City, where he took charge of the Newfoundland Information Bureau. While there he became president of the Newfoundland War Veterans' Association of New York, and in 1939 he published *Newfoundland: a summary of the history and development of Britain's oldest colony*. In 1940 he reactivated the *Newfoundland Weekly*, but it lasted for only a year. During the early 1940s he completed a manuscript on the history of aviation in Newfoundland from 1919 to 1939.

Tait married Margaret Gertrude Gibb in St. John's on August 23, 1919. They were the parents of two children, Gertrude Sinclair, who was born in St. John's, and Phyllis Louise Calkin, who was born after the family moved to Boston. A regular visitor while Tait lived in the United States was his sister Elsie, who was organist at Gower Street United Church on three separate occasions (1918-1919; 1921-1941 and 1944-1946). She is one of the two former organists for whom the Tait-Osmond Room is named.

Tait eventually retired to Marshfield, Massachusetts, south of Boston overlooking Massachusetts Bay. He continued to write poetry and the occasional local article and spend time with his family. Although he was humble about his many accomplishments, to the end, he carried a thirst for knowledge, his passion for Newfoundland and tongue-twisting sense of humour (he was never one to shy away from a good pun!). He died at Boston on March 28, 1964.

Through his lectures, writing, publishing ventures and other activities, R. H. Tait was instrumental in introducing many thousands of Americans to Newfoundland. He also kept many thousands of expatriate Newfoundlanders informed of events and happenings in their former homeland. Despite living most of his adult life in the United States, he remained a proud Newfoundland until his dying day.