

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private John Fielding Chaplin
(1897-1915)



“When the call came, his response was eager. The sacrifice of his bright, young life, has been consummated on the altar of his country, not facing the foe it is true, but none the less whilst on active service. He has fallen as a soldier, and to the young soldier’s memory it is Newfoundland’s honour to pay the tribute of praise and pride.” (Daily News, January 05, 1915)

The first casualty suffered by the Newfoundland Regiment in World War I was a member of the congregation of Gower Street Methodist Church. John Fielding Chaplin was born in St. John's on April 6, 1897, the son of Amelia Jane Bowden and Mark Chaplin. He was the youngest of five sons, and as there were also at least six daughters in the Chaplin family, their mother would have been quite busy at home as well as carrying out the duties expected of her as the wife of a prominent local businessman.

Mark Chaplin was a tailor by trade. He opened his own tailor shop on Water Street in 1875, when he was still only 19 years old and built it into a very successful business. The clothes that he produced were of such high quality that he soon became known at the "King of the Tailors". He also served three terms in the House of Assembly as Conservative member for Bonavista from 1897 to 1908 and was president of the Football League from 1895 until 1920.

Jack Chaplin, as he was commonly known, was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church on June 11, 1897, just two months and five days old, but given the high infant mortality rate at the time – two of his sisters and one of his brothers died in infancy – early baptism was often the rule. Growing up he attended the Methodist College where he was involved in various sports teams, later joining the Methodist Guards. Given his father's commitment to football (soccer), it is safe to assume that Jack would have played that sport and probably others.

He was still a student when war broke out in August 1914. At least that is what he wrote as his occupation on his Attestation Paper, the form he filled out at enlistment. It also indicates that he was still living at home as his place of residence is at his father's house on Circular Road. His Attestation Paper provides other information about him. It tells us he had a fair complexion with red hair, brown eyes and freckles. We can also deduce that he had not been that good in mathematics in school for when asked to supply his age he wrote down 19, when he had turned 17 just six months previous. Maybe he just rounded his age up to 19 in order to appear older than he actually was.

Jack Chaplin enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on September 22, 1914, although his Attestation Paper was not completed until October 3. He was assigned regimental number 584, which places him in the ranks of the First Five Hundred. This is possible because there were numbers that had been assigned to enlistees who were later found to be medically unfit and therefore not able to serve in the Regiment. Their numbers were not given to other enlistees. Consequently the highest number assigned to a member of the First Five Hundred was 615. Additionally, there were at least 537 members of the Regiment who were part of the First Five Hundred. This group of men was also known as the Blue Puttees because of the navy-coloured puttees or cloth bands that they wore wrapped around their legs from the tops of their boots to just below their knees to keep mud and vermin from getting up their pants legs.

Jack Chaplin underwent his early military training in a makeshift camp created at Pleasantville on the north shore of Quidi Vidi Lake. There he received training in aiming and firing a rifle and learned to march in formation. It was from this camp that the First Five Hundred marched on the evening of October 3, 1914 to the St. John's waterfront, where they boarded the SS *Florizel* for the trip overseas. The *Florizel* remained in St. John's harbour for most of the next day, a Sunday, leaving port at 10:00 p.m. that night. It steamed down the eastern side of the Avalon Peninsula, where it rendezvoused with a convoy of Canadian war and transport ships for the arduous journey across the North Atlantic.

The voyage over took ten days, with the *Florizel* arriving in Plymouth Sound on the southwest coast of England on October 14th. However, it would be October 20 before they were able to disembark. They were immediately ordered to march from Plymouth to Salisbury Plain, in the shadow of Stonehenge, where they discovered that their accommodations were just as primitive as that of the ancient structure.

It is possible that it was here that the undoing of Jack Chaplin began. He and his comrades remained on Salisbury Plain for approximately six weeks where they were housed in tents, which had no heating and no floors apart from the surface of the plain. If it had been a dry warm fall perhaps that would not have mattered but it was a time of constant rain. Nearly 24 inches of rain fell between the middle of October and the middle of February, breaking a 32-year-old

record for rainfall in that time period, and which presented a host of challenges for these men adjusting to army life. The rain turned Salisbury Plain into a thick carpet of mud, so deep in places it seeped into the tops of their boots and found its way on to not just the pants but also the tunics of their uniforms. Coupled with sudden drops in temperature, which resulted in frost on their blankets and the walls of their tents, and frozen water that had to be melted in order for them to wash and shave, it was a very stark introduction to what the next four years would hold for them.

In early December came a change of location: they were transferred to Fort George in Scotland arriving there on December 8. It is where they would remain for the next ten weeks. Their accommodations were much more amenable than they had been at Salisbury Plain but it was still not the comforts of home. They were treated to a first-rate Christmas dinner provided by the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company, which operated the paper mill in Grand Falls. Private Frank “Mayo” Lind, a comrade of Jack’s, described the feast in a letter home dated December 26, 1914. *“First we had goose, roast of beef, cabbage, potatoes, turnips, etc., then plum pudding and tea, followed by oranges, apples, nuts, raisins, and for a “chaser” they gave us cigarettes (all presented). The puddings were given by Mr. and Mrs. W. Martin formerly of St. John’s.”*

It is possible but highly unlikely that this extravagant repast caused Jack Chaplin to be admitted to hospital two days later on December 27th. In a cable from Captain Weston March to Jack’s brother Lloyd, dated January 3rd, March

wrote: *“Jack was out on Christmas Day. He was admitted to hospital on Dec. 27th. On the 28th his condition was normal. On the 29th, condition changed for the worse. On the 30th it was more serious. On the 31st, very serious. He was then semi-unconscious, gradually passing to unconsciousness. He died at 10:40 on New Year’s Day. Suffered no pain. Everything possible was done for him.”*

There is no clear indication of the actual cause of Chaplin’s death. A medical report in his regimental file states it was “Abdominal Newgrowth. (liver).” but gives no explanation as to what that diagnosis means. Elsewhere in his file the cause of death is listed as “abdominal disease”. In reports of his death in local print media it states he died of pneumonia. Whatever the cause, the news, when it was delivered to his parents by the Rev. Dr. Henry Cowperthwaite of Gower on January 2nd, must have come as quite a shock, not the way they were hoping the New Year would begin. And the mood at Gower two days later at Sunday services would have been equally somber.

Inquiries were made asking whether his body could be returned to St. John’s for burial but this was not possible. Instead he was interred in Ardersier Parish Churchyard overlooking the east side of the Moray Firth. Three other World War I soldiers are interred in that cemetery: Private R. Birrell and Private J. McLean, both of the Highland Light Infantry, and Sergeant Andrew Patterson of the Royal Scots, all in close proximity to each other. Jack’s name is also inscribed on the family grave marker at the General Protestant Cemetery on Topsail Road.

In addition to lengthy tributes in the St. John's newspapers the *Daily News* and the *Evening Telegram*, the *Daily News* also printed a poem by local balladeer James Murphy composed on January 4 and titled simply "In Memoriam". It ends with these lines, which may have brought some comfort to his grieving family:

*Mother, dry your tears of sorrow;
Father, let God's will be done;
For in Heaven some fair morrow,
You will meet your soldier son.*