

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Captain Charles Robert Ayre**

(1885-1955)



*“The Captain is one of the most popular officers in the Regiment, in which he sustains the high reputation of the Ayre family.”* (The Evening Telegram, December 18, 1916)

Charles Robert Ayre was born in St. John's on September 21, 1885, the second of seven children of Mary Julia Pitts (1855-1903) and Frederick William Ayre (1854-1932). He was the oldest of the seven grandchildren of Mary Hannah Bray (1821-1911) and Charles Robert Ayre (1819-1889) who participated in World War I. The others were his sister Ruby (1889-1957), brother Gerald (1891-1916) and his first cousins Eric (1888-1916), Bernard (1892-1916), Wilfred (1895-1916) and Ronald (1898-1967).

The younger Charles attended the Methodist College in St. John's, graduating in 1901, having finished in the top ten students in his class in Algebra, Science, Mineralogy and Scripture. He also completed courses in English and Book-keeping. That latter course would have stood him in good stead as he was soon to enter the family business, Ayre and Sons Limited, which had been established by his grandfather in 1859. While there is no clear indication of when he began working there, it does appear that he started on the shop floor, as the McAlpine City Directory for St. John's for 1908-1909 lists him as working in the electrical department. By 1913, according to the city directory for that year, he had risen to the position of traveler: *The Western Star* newspaper mentions in its April 23<sup>rd</sup> edition for that year that he had recently arrived in Curling where he was representing the business interests of Ayre and Sons Limited.

Ayre's first period of service to the family business was to come to an end in the late summer of 1914. With the declaration of war in Europe and the decision by the local legislature to form a Newfoundland Regiment, Ayre was one of the first officers commissioned. He was awarded the rank of Lieutenant on September 24, 1914 and accompanied the Regiment to England aboard the SS *Florizel* in early October. He was with the Regiment during its time on Salisbury Plain during the Fall of 1914 and in Scotland during the Winter and Spring of 1914-1915. He was promoted to Captain on July 28, 1915 and had every intention of sailing with the Regiment to the eastern Mediterranean (Egypt and Gallipoli) in August, but fate intervened.

Fate came in the form of rheumatic arthritis concentrated in his ankles. The Officer Commanding the Regiment at Aldershot, from which port the men were to embark for the Mediterranean, ordered Ayre to remain behind “at the last minute ... at his own wish not mine or the MO’s [Medical Officer’s]. According to Major Walter F. Rendell, who was Adjutant at the time, in a letter to Ayre dated February 15, 1918, in response to one received from Ayre, “As far as I can recollect at this date, the C. O. was aware that you were subject to rheumatism, and as your ankles were affected by this, he considered that you would not be able to stand the strain of marching, and service conditions generally. He, therefore, detailed you to remain behind to look after the barracks, and take charge to details left behind.”

This was the beginning of the end for Ayre as a functioning member of the Regiment. He spent the several months following the departure of the Regiment for the Mediterranean first at Cragleith Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland and later at the Mount Royal Nursing Home in Bath, England undergoing treatment for his ailment. He was eventually granted a sick furlough and returned to Newfoundland in April 1916, where, in June, he was attached to the Regimental Headquarters in St. John’s.

Later that year, on November 23, he appeared before a medical board consisting of Dr. Cluny Macpherson, Dr. Lamont Paterson, Dr. J. Sinclair Tait and Dr. Nutting S. Fraser, at which time it was determined that while he suffered from rheumatic arthritis in the ankles and knees, and that this had been caused by his military service, he might improve enough within six months to return to active duty. However, a second medical board held on May 23, 1917, which included Macpherson, Tait and Fraser, with Dr. Frederick Burden sitting in for Paterson, concluded that the pain had spread to his hips and that his disability was now deemed permanent. The Governor of Newfoundland, Sir Walter Davidson, who was also commander-in-chief of the Regiment, subsequently accepted his request to retire from general service and to be placed on the Reserve List of Officers, effective June 7, 1917.

On December 16, 1916, Ayre married Shelley Elizabeth Hazelwood Lewis in a quiet ceremony, attended only by family members and a few close friends, at St. Thomas's Anglican Church in St. John's. Originally from Hamilton, Ontario, Lewis and Ayre appear to have met in Montreal some months earlier while he was in that city seeking treatment for his arthritis. He would spend a great deal of time there over the next 20 years seeking such treatment, during which time he rejoined and worked in various capacities for Ayre and Sons Limited, including as floor-walker and supervisor. He retired from the business in the late 1930s, because of failing eyesight, and he and his wife – they had no children – relocated to Montreal.

While there is no indication that he participated in extra-curricular activities or sports while at the Methodist College, he is credited with being one of the founders of the St. John's Commercial Bowling League and served as its President for a number of years. His father presented a cup to be awarded to the league champion each year.

One can deduce from the letter that Ayre sent to Major Rendell, the one that elicited the response cited above, that the unfortunate turn of events precipitated by his rheumatic arthritis was to haunt him for a long time, especially in light of the fact that his brother Gerald and three of his first cousins were killed on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916. It could not have been an easy cross for him to bear, as he had not been part of any of the fighting that had brought so much pain and suffering to his father and his aunts, uncles, and other family members. There is no doubt, however, that he was proud of his service to the Regiment, as in that same letter to Rendell he states "Please send me also Service Chevron, if you have any, that I am entitled to put on my uniform."

Ayre died in Montreal on May 7, 1955 and was interred in the Urgel Bourgie Memorial Gardens in that city. His wife outlived him by four and one half decades, dying in 2000, reputedly at the age of 108.