

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Private Arthur Cummings**  
(1896-1917)



*“I now take the liberty of writing you to know if you can find out anything of my son, #815, Private Arthur Cummings, of the First Newfoundland Regiment. (C Company). ... Last Thursday, the 15<sup>th</sup>, we received a message saying he had died in enemy hands, but no particulars of when he died and what caused his death were given.”* (Charles Cummings to Major H. A. Timewell, Newfoundland Regiment Pay and Records Office, London, November 21, 1917)

Arthur Cummings was born in Lower Island on July 26, 1896, the youngest of four sons and second youngest of eight children of Elizabeth Garland and Charles LeShano Cummings. His father was a fisherman and ship owner in Lower Island Cove, who moved his family to St. John's sometime around 1910: according to the city directory for 1913, they were in residence at 85 Long's Hill by that time. Since this was the first city directory since the one issued for 1908-09, in which no members of the Cummings family are listed, it would indicate a post-1909 migration for the family. Once settled in St. John's the family began to attend Gower Street Methodist Church.

The Cummings children had probably attended the Methodist school in Lower Island Cove, as those that appear in the 1913 city directory have jobs that would require some degree of formal education and training: Arthur is working was a tailor at John Maunder's tailor shop located at 281-283 Duckworth Street, while his sister Bessie was a stenographer in the law office of Michael P. Gibb. She would later hold a similar position with Sir William Coaker, prominent politician and founder of the Fishermen's Protective Union. Following Bessie's marriage to William L. Maunder, who appears to have been a son of John Maunder, she relinquished her position with Coaker to travel to Grand Bank, where her husband was to take up his duties as a teacher at the Methodist Academy there. Her younger sister, Sarah Jane, succeeded Bessie in Coaker's office.

When war was declared in August 1914, Arthur was not part of the First Five Hundred to enlist in the newly formed Newfoundland Regiment but he was not far behind. He signed

up on December 26, 1914, receiving regimental number 815. From the attestation papers that he filled out upon his enlistment, we learn that he was 5 feet, 3½ inches tall and weighed 119 pounds. He had a dark complexion, with dark brown hair and grey eyes, and he had a mole on his right cheek. He was unmarried and had no dependents. His tailor's position earned him \$12.50 per week or \$650.00 per year.

Cummings underwent a short period of training in St. John's before leaving for Europe on February 5, 1915 on board the SS *Dominion*, with his 243 comrades who comprised C Company of the Regiment. Their boarding of the *Dominion* was affected by the cold weather and ice conditions then common in St. John's harbor in February. The ice was such that the *Dominion* could not enter the Narrows and the men had to be ferried through the Narrows on board the sealing vessel *Neptune*, which brought them to where the *Dominion* was waiting for them off Bay Bulls. The men then had to cross over the frigid water of the North Atlantic from the *Neptune* to the *Dominion* before their journey to Europe could begin.

C Company arrived in Liverpool on February 16, and was entrained immediately for Edinburgh Castle in Scotland's capital, where, two days later, they were joined with A and B companies of the Regiment, the first colonial force to be assigned duty at the famous castle. They remained there until May 11<sup>th</sup> when they were relocated to Stobs Camp, where they would remain in training for the rest of the spring and early summer of 1915.

By that time, more than nine months had passed since some of the members of the Regiment had first joined up and they,

together with the new arrivals, were getting restless; they wanted in on the action, their turn at the Huns. When they were told that the four senior companies (A, B, C & D) would be leaving Stobs Camp for the English city of Aldershot on August 2, they were sure that they would soon be deployed to the continent. Eighteen days later Cummings, together with just over 1,000 of his comrades, boarded the HMT *Megantic* at nearby Devonport for the eastern Mediterranean and the war.

The Newfoundland Regiment arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, and after a period of acclimatization, sailed north aboard the *Ausonia* for Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos, from where they travelled on the night of September 19-20<sup>th</sup>, to Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula; they were greeted by heavy shellfire from the Turks. The Newfoundlanders spent approximately four months at Suvla Bay, under the most inhospitable conditions. Thirty-one died in action or from wounds received, while another 15 succumbed to disease or severe frostbite. The later deaths were a result of exposure to the harsh winter storms that inundated the area during November. Eighty soldiers were wounded by shell fire or snipers bullets and hundreds of others had to be evacuated because of various diseases or frostbite. When the time came for the Regiment to withdraw from Suvla Bay in early January 1916 their numbers had been reduced to some 400 active soldiers.

Cummings was one of the men who came through the Gallipoli campaign unscathed. After a period of rest and recuperation in Egypt, he and his fellow soldiers left there on March 14 aboard the HMT *Alaunia* for Marsailles on the south coast of France, arriving there on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. They then travelled

north by train to the French village of Pont Remy on the Western Front. There they spent the next three plus months getting ready for what was dubbed the Big Push, an all-out, full-scale attack on the German front line stretching for several miles along the banks of the Somme River.

That attack finally occurred on the morning of July 1<sup>st</sup>, when 801 members of the Newfoundland Regiment went over the top at Beaumont Hamel, suffering terrible loss of life. Cummings was part of that attack and was wounded, receiving gunshot wounds to the head and arm. He was eventually invalided to England where he was admitted to Wandsworth Hospital on July 4<sup>th</sup>. His wounds turned out not to be too serious and he was released from hospital and granted a short furlough on August 1<sup>st</sup> and then assigned to duties at the Regimental Depot. He rejoined the Regiment in the field on February 2, 1917, just in time for another major offensive.

In April 1917 the British Expeditionary Force, of which the Newfoundland Regiment formed a part, engaged the German army near the French community of Monchy-le-Preux. Heavily outnumbered, the Newfoundlanders suffered 166 casualties, with another 141 wounded and 153 captured by the enemy. One of those prisoners-of-war was Arthur Cummings. He and his comrades were transported to German-held French territory, near the eastern border of the two countries. Technically, they were being held in Kriegsgefangenen, a notorious encampment near the German city of Limburg. They were actually being kept under extremely harsh living conditions in French territory where they were forced to work, either on farms or in mines, to support the German war effort. While on a work detail near the

French town of Tournai, Cummings contracted typhus, most likely from the unsanitary conditions to which he was being exposed on a daily basis. He died in a field hospital near Tournai on September 4, 1917, of what was officially described as typhus pulmonary tuberculosis just two days after sending a postcard to his family telling them that he was “quite well and working”. He was buried in the cemetery there. Five weeks prior to his death he had celebrated his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Back in St. John’s the news of his death was received by his family with extreme sadness and his father sought an explanation for and details surrounding his death from Regimental Headquarters. He received a reply but it was incredibly vague, as officials there were able to provide only scant details.

Like many families of that time the Cummings family had a large ornate family Bible. On the front endpaper inscribed in pencil is B. Cummings, 85 Long’s Hill, St. John’s. Over the page on a flyleaf is written, also in pencil, Arthur Cummings, Lower Island Cove, Conception Bay. In the section provided between the Old and New Testaments the Cummings family history is written, including the birth and dates of Charles and Elizabeth Cummings, their marriage date, the names and dates of their parents, and of their children. There we learn that Sarah Jane, the youngest of the Cummings children married George F. Saunders on February 24, 1926. The birth dates of their two children, Philip Arthur and George Cummings Saunders, are recorded there. The Bible is housed in the Gower Street United Church Archives, a gift to this congregation by Philip Saunders

a few years ago. It is on display at the front of the sanctuary this morning.

*On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately the next four years. On roughly every third Sunday from now through to 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, like this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.*

*We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present as we celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation. If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at [briggs@mun.ca](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) 726-6169/864-8303*