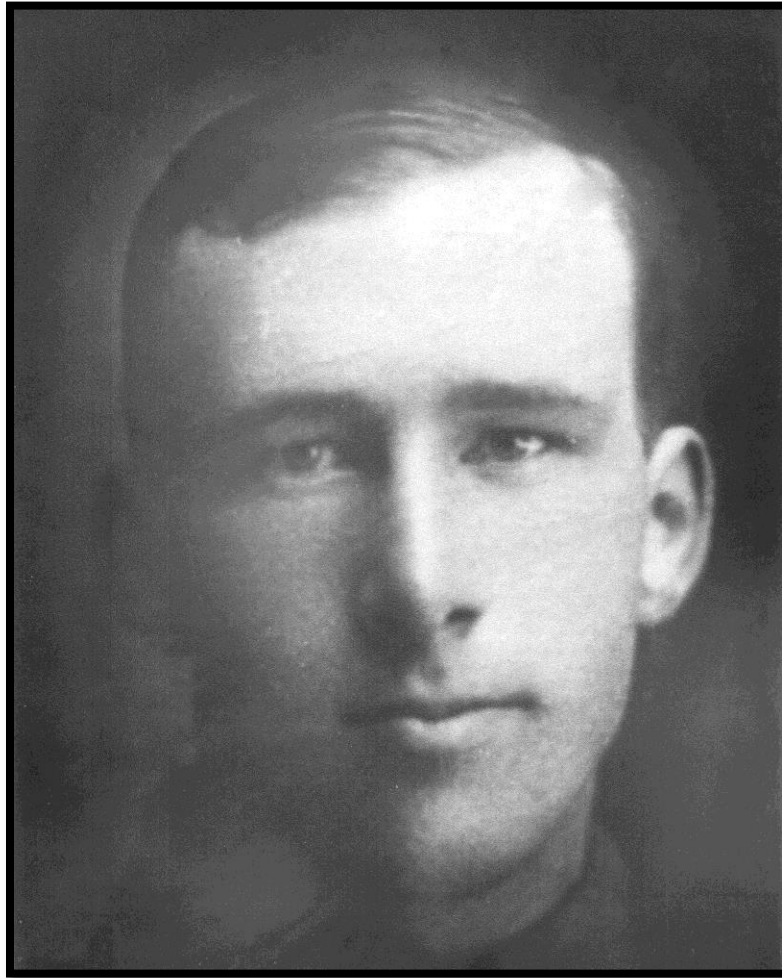


GOWER REMEMBERS

Sergeant Wilfred James Woolfrey

(1893-1970)



“I am very pleased to inform you that His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Military Medal to you son, No. 3880, L/Cpl. W. J. Woolfrey, for bravery in the field.” (Newfoundland Minister of Militia Sir John R. Bennett to William Woolfrey, Lewisporte, November 7, 1918)

Wilfred James Woolfrey was born in Lewisporte on October 24, 1893, the son of Selina Linfield and William George Woolfrey.

He received his early education in the Methodist school there before travelling to St. John's to attend the Methodist College. Graduation from the college qualified him for a teaching position and he taught school for a couple of years before being accepted as a candidate for the Methodist ministry in 1914.

Then as now, most candidates for the Methodist ministry underwent a probationary period, serving in a pastoral charge under the superintendence of a senior minister in that presbytery but one who was in a separate pastoral charge. Woolfrey served a year as a probationer in each of the St. Anthony, Britannia and King's Point pastoral charges.

Woolfrey spent the year from July to June 1916-1917 in King's Point. At the end of his appointment, on June 25, 1917, he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment. While most people are familiar with the practice of clergyman in the armed forces, their usual role is that of chaplain to the men and women in the ranks. It is difficult for some to grasp the concept of a man of God enlisting in a fighting force in which they would participate in fighting and perhaps have to kill other people, even if they were branded the enemy. However, it does seem to have been a relatively common practice in the First World War for clergymen to join up to fight. A glance at the station sheet for the Methodist Church in Newfoundland for the 1916-1917 year indicates that no fewer than nine students or probationers, including Fred Sellars from the Gower Street congregation, were listed as having permission to be "with His Majesty's Forces" during that year. In 1917, Woolfrey brought the total to ten.

At the time of his enlistment, Woolfrey was four months shy of his 24th birthday. He was 5 feet 10 inches tall with dark hair, grey eyes and a fair complexion. His regimental number was 3880. He left St. John's aboard the SS *Florizel* on August 4, 1917. Four days previous, on July 31st, he had married Ethel May Davis of Freshwater, Carbonear. It was quite the commitment, as one of the constant thoughts that undoubtedly

ran through each of their minds during the year and a half that followed was that he might not return from the war.

Woolfrey's journey to the war took a rather circuitous route, as the *Florizel* travelled not to Europe but to Halifax where it became part of a convoy of Canadian ships that was about to sail for the British Isles. After arriving in Scotland some weeks later, Woolfrey spent the fall and winter of 1917-1918 undergoing training at the Regimental Headquarters at Ayr, Scotland, before being sent to Belgium on February 4, 1918. More than a month would go by before he actually joined the Battalion in the field on March 15th.

In March 1918 the German armies made their last great offensive push of the war. The Newfoundland Regiment was part of the 29th Division of the British Army: as such, it was part of the allied fighting forces that met the German advance at Bailleul and Armentières, Belgium during April. They took part in heavy fighting and suffered almost 400 casualties, which brought the Regiment so far below strength that it was withdrawn from the Division on April 29, allowing those who remained time to recuperate and for re-enforcements to arrive from Scotland. Woolfrey was not one of the casualties during this April offensive.

The Newfoundland Regiment spent the period from May through August 1918, guarding the British Headquarters at Montreuil and proving a personal bodyguard for Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, the Supreme Allied Commander, an honour reserved for those regiments considered the best in the British Army. In September they returned to the front in Belgium, this time as a part of the 28th Brigade of the 9th (Scottish) Division. During September they took part in the fighting at Keiberg Ridge, where their attack on enemy positions was so successful they outran their support. In October they took part in their last major offensive, attacking German positions near Ledeghem and later at Lys and Vichte. It was there at Ledeghem on October 3, that Woolfrey's actions resulted in him being awarded the Military Medal, the second highest honour that could be given to a non-commissioned (not of officer

rank) soldier in the British armies in that war, the highest being the Victoria Cross.

The citation for his Military Medal appeared in *The London Gazette* for May 14, 1919: “*On the 3rd October 1918, during the enemy’s counterattack at Ledeghem, the Battalion was holding the line on the West edge of Ledeghem. This N.C. O. as soon as the attack started and under heavy hostile machine gun fire moved 100 yards in front of our line. He at once got both his Lewis Guns into action, and with great coolness and absolute disregard of danger directed their fire against pointed out targets. He remained well out until all danger of counterattack was over.*”

Woolfrey’s leadership abilities were recognized soon after his enlistment. He was made a Lance Corporal on November 4, 1917, not long after his arrival in Scotland. He was later made an acting Sergeant in the field on October 23, 1918; this rank was confirmed and the acting status removed on December 12, 1918. He spent several weeks in England early in 1919 before being authorized to travel to St. John’s for demobilization from the Regiment on January 30th. He made that trip aboard the *SS Corsican*, arriving in St. John’s on February 7th. He was formally discharged from the Regiment on April 12th, his length of service consisted of one year, 292 days.

Once more in civilian clothes, Woolfrey left Newfoundland for Belmont, Massachusetts, where his wife was then residing, in the spring of 1919. They spent part of the year there before moving to Montreal, where Woolfrey enrolled in McGill University in September of 1919 to study Arts and Theology: he graduated in 1925, with a Bachelor of Divinity degree. While studying there he also served the nearby pastoral charge of Point Fortune, Ontario.

Woolfrey returned to Newfoundland following his graduation and was ordained by the Methodist Conference that year, the last meeting of the conference before it became part of the United Church of Canada. In the years that followed, he served the church in Change Islands, Greenspond, Botwood, Grand Bank and Bell Island, before relocating to

Ontario in 1942. There he served the church in four separate charges in the London and Hamilton conferences, after which he returned to Newfoundland once again in 1957 to become Associate Minister at Gower Street United Church, where he worked with the Rev. Francis Vipond, who had been the minister there since 1948. When Vipond resigned his position in December 1958, Woolfrey filled in as senior minister at the church for eight months (December 1958 to July 1959) until a successor to Vipond was found. With the installation of the Rev. R. W. Braine as senior minister in July 1959, Woolfrey resumed his duties as associate for another year before relinquishing the position in 1960. The following year he returned to Ontario, where he did supply work and eventually settled in Burlington.

While stationed in Newfoundland Woolfrey served as chair of presbytery on several occasions, was Secretary of the Newfoundland Conference of the United Church of Canada during 1937-1938 and its President the following year, 1938-1939. In 1938 he represented Newfoundland at General Council.

Wilfred and Ethel Woolfrey had four children: Marion (better known to many members of Gower Street Church as Marion Pitt, a driving force in the Gower Street and the Newfoundland Conference United Church Woman for many years), Margaret, Jack and Elizabeth. He died in Hamilton, Ontario, on April 7, 1970, and was buried in the plot next to his wife, who had predeceased him 1967, in Burlington, Ontario.

A well-respected and much-loved man of great faith, Woolfrey obviously followed his conscience and chose what he considered to be the correct path for him in volunteering to participate in 'the war to end all wars'. It could not have been an easy decision for him to make but he made it, and made his own peace with God for having done so.

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 200th anniversary of this congregation. If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca 726-6169/864-8303