

# GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Alfred Penny Taylor

(1895-1916)



*I regret to have to inform you that a report has this day been received from the Record Office of the First Newfoundland Regiment, London, to the effect that No. 897, Private Alfred P. Taylor, has been posted as missing. (letter to Hedley Taylor from Newfoundland's Colonial Secretary John R. Bennett, July 31, 1916)*

Alfred Penny Taylor appears to have been born in St. John's in 1895, although no birth or baptism records have yet been located to confirm or deny this assumption. His parents were Leah Guy and George Hedley Taylor, who were resident at 2 Cabot Street in January 1915. The elder Taylor worked as a draper, latterly at Ayre & Sons.

In all likelihood, Alfred was named for his uncle, Judge Alfred Penny (1851-1922) of Carbonear, from whence Hedley and Leah Taylor also hailed. He had at least three siblings, a brother, James Arthur, and sisters Elsa and Kathleen. Both brothers attended the Methodist College, where Alfred is recorded as having received a prize for Mathematics while he was part of Miss Holloway's primary class at the Annual Entertainment and Prize Distribution event held in late June 1905. Following his graduation, he gained employment with the St. John's mercantile firm Steer Brothers as a clerk and it was there that he was working when he decided to enlist in the Newfoundland Regiment.

He was not part of the First Five Hundred, also known as the Blue Puttees because of the colour of their wool leggings, but he was not far behind them. He enlisted on January 4, 1915, and was assigned regimental number 897, less than two weeks after his brother, James, had enlisted. He was assigned to No. 3 Platoon, under the command of Lieutenant James J. Donnelley, while James was part of No. 4 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Cyril B. Carter, which, together with platoons one and two, made up Company C of the Regiment.

According to his Attestation Paper, filled in at the time of his enlistment, Alfred Taylor was 5 feet 7 inches tall, weighed 147 pounds, had a dark complexion, black hair and brown eyes. It was noted by the Medical Examiner, Dr. Cluny Macpherson, that he had “artificial upper teeth” but that this “slight defect” did not warrant his exclusion from the Regiment.

The brothers travelled overseas together on board the SS *Dominion*, leaving St. John’s on February 5 and arriving in Liverpool, England, on the 16<sup>th</sup>. This was the same ship that had carried Private Arthur Cummings to Europe, and had been prevented from entering St. John’s harbor at that time because of the thick ice blocking the Narrows. Consequently, 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. They were transferred to the *Dominion* and their journey to England began.

Company C did not remain long in Liverpool, but was soon on its way to Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland, where they eventually were joined by the members of A and B companies at the legendary Edinburgh Castle. In doing so, they became the first colonial force to be assigned duty at the famous castle. There they remained 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 mid-summer 1915, some members of the Regiment had been in uniform for almost a year without encountering the enemy, but that

was about to change. On August 20, 1915, after having spent the previous two and one-half weeks at the English city of Aldershot, a little over 1,000 members of the Newfoundland Regiment boarded HMT *Megantic* at nearby Devonport. Eleven days later, on August 31, they arrived in Alexandria, Egypt; the following day they were entrained for Cairo, where they would undergo two weeks of further training and acclimatization before they were sent north aboard the vessel *Ausonia* for Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos, arriving there on September 18. The following night (September 19-20) they were transported to Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula, where a welcoming party of Turkish soldiers acknowledged their arrival with a bombardment of shells.

Despite being under constant attack from the Turks and the horrific weather conditions that predominated on the Gallipoli Peninsula during the late fall and early winter of 1915-1916, which resulted in the evacuation of a large number of his comrades, Taylor came through the Gallipoli campaign relatively unscathed. He was evacuated from Suvla Bay with the bulk of the Regiment on January 8, 1916, from where they were taken first to Cape Helles, at the southern tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula, and then back to Alexandria, arriving there on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

The Newfoundland Regiment spent another two months in Egypt before they were taken back across the Mediterranean aboard the HMT *Alaunia*, a 13,000-ton Cunard liner, leaving Port Twefik, where the Suez Canal enters the Red Sea, on March 14, 1916, and arriving at Marsailles, France, some eight days later. From there they

travelled north by train to the French village of Pont Remy on the Western Front. 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 came on the morning of July 1. In what had been billed as a cake walk, the Newfoundland Regiment watched as two separate waves of British troops were cut down by German machine guns and shell fire. Despite the obvious impossibility of accomplishing their goal – the Newfoundlanders had been meant to serve as a clean-up force after the other troops had captured the German frontline trenches – the Newfoundland Regiment was ordered to advance at 9:15 a.m. that morning. Alfred and James Taylor were two of the 800+ members of the Regiment who went over the top near the French enclave of Beaumont Hamel. James was injured and eventually made his way back to the British side; Alfred was declared missing in action and while there was a possibility that he had been captured and was now a prisoner-of-war, the greater likelihood was that he had been killed, one of almost 300 young Newfoundlanders who lost their lives that day.

As is evident from the letter to Taylor's father from Colonial Secretary Bennett quoted above, the Regiment did not want to inform his family that their son had been killed while there remained any hope, no matter how small, that he might have survived. Curiously, that hope may have been falsely kindled by a message that Hedley and Leah Taylor had received from their son James a few days after

the attack, one that subsequently appeared in the St. John's *Daily Star* on July 10, 1916 and read: "*TWO SONS WOUNDED – Last night Mr. Hedley Taylor received a message from his son, Lance Corporal James A. Taylor, saying that he was doing well in hospital, and that his brother, Alfred Penny Taylor, was also wounded.*" Obviously James had not been informed that Alfred was missing in action!

It would be almost five months before the Taylor family was informed that Alfred had been killed in action at Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916. The letter printed below, again from Colonial Secretary Bennett, makes that all too clear.

*November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916*

*Dear Sir,*

*For some time past the Imperial Government have been making enquiries in relation to those men of the First Newfoundland Regiment who have been reported missing since the action of the 1<sup>st</sup> July. I very much regret to state, however, that from the correspondence which has taken place, a copy of which I enclose, it is evident that none of them are Prisoners of War in Germany, and the authorities are, therefore, reluctantly forced to the conclusion that all these gallant men, whose names are given in the enclosed list, and one of whom was very dear to you, were killed in that fateful action on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July.*

*I desire to express to you on behalf of the Government, as well as myself, the sincerest sympathy in this time of sorrow. We feel the loss of our loved ones, but it will, no doubt, be some consolation to*

*you to think that he, for whom you now mourn, willingly answered the call of King and Country, did his part nobly, and fell, facing the foe, in defence of the principles of Righteousness, Truth and Liberty. Though he has laid down the earthly weapons of warfare, he now wears the Soldier's Crown of Victory, and his name will be inscribed upon the Glorious Roll of Honor, and be held in fragrant memory by all his fellow-countrymen. When the victory is won, and Peace again reigns upon the earth, it will be a comforting thought to you that in this glorious achievement he bore no small part.*

*I trust that you may have the Grace and consolation of the Great Father of us all at this time.*

*With sincere sympathy,*

*Believe me to be,*

*Your obedient servant,*

*Colonial Secretary*

Alfred Taylor's body was never found and he has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial, along with the names of more than 800 Newfoundlanders who died in the war but have no known grave. A replica of that memorial by local sculptor Morgan MacDonald is situated in Bowring Park.

Alfred Penny Taylor was one of eight men from this congregation who lost their lives on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, the first eight members of the congregation to die in the war. One can only imagine the grief and sense of loss that were present at services in the Gower Street sanctuary on the Sundays immediately following the shocking news. At this time, 99 years after that fateful July 1<sup>st</sup> morning, we remember from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment:

**Captain Eric Ayre**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Gerald Ayre**

**Private Harry Butler**

**Lance Corporal William Edward LeShano**

**Private Robert Meadus**

**Private William G. Perrin,**

**Private Alfred Penny Taylor,** all of whom died at Beaumont Hamel, and

**Lieutenant Bernard Ayre** from the Norfolk Regiment, brother of Captain Eric Ayre and a first cousin of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Gerald Ayre, who also died on that day in a different part of the battlefield.

*“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”*

Isaiah 2:4