

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Captain Eric Stanley Ayre**  
(1888-1916)



*“It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has this day been received from the War Office notifying the fatality that has overtaken Captain E. S. Ayre, ... and I am to express the deep sympathy and regret of the Newfoundland Government at your irreparable loss”*

(Letter dated July 06, 1916 to Mrs. Janet Ayre from Major H. A. Timewell)

Eric Stanley Ayre was born in St. John's on October 20, 1880, the older of two sons of Lydia Gertrude Pitts (1857-1927) and Robert Chesley Ayre (1857-1903). His father was one of the six sons of Mary Hannah Bray (1821-1911) and Charles Robert Ayre (1819-1889), the founder of the St. John's mercantile firm Ayre & Sons Limited. Eric was educated at the Methodist College in St. John's, where he won prizes for his academic achievements and for his prowess on the sports field. Following his graduation from the College, he attended Leys School in Cambridge, England.

Ayre returned from his schooling in England sometime around 1910 and entered the family business as a director. He was working there when war was declared in August 1914. He was one of the first to volunteer his services and was commissioned as a Lieutenant with initial responsibilities on the home front involving training and recruiting. Hence, he did not accompany the First Five Hundred (Blue Puttees) to England in October 1914. Instead, he and Captain Alexander Montgomerie were designated by the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, the organization responsible for the war effort, as members of a Reserve Force Committee. This committee was charged with raising another 500 men to provide additional drafts for service overseas. British regiments were regularly comprised of 1080 men and the Newfoundland Regiment would need that many and more in reserve if it were to retain regiment status.

Ayre spent the fall of 1914 and winter of 1915 involved in this task, and was rewarded for his success with promotion to Captain on January 26, 1915. By the spring of that year enough men had enlisted to enable C Company, with 244 men, and D Company, with 250, to leave for service overseas, on February 4 and March 20, respectively. A month later, on April 22, another 241 men comprising E Company left St. John's on board the *Stephano*, with Ayre as officer in charge. They sailed first for Halifax, where, according to G. W. L. Nicholson in *The Fighting Newfoundlander*, his history of the Newfoundland Regiment in World War I, "*Captain Ayre proudly paraded the Contingent through the streets of the old city*". After an 18-hour stopover, E Company boarded the *Missanabie* and sailed for England.

Ayre's time during the next year was spent in training the new recruits in Scotland. He did not accompany the Regiment to Gallipoli, and did not see front-line action until assigned to command D Company on the Western Front in the spring of 1916. He arrived in France on May 4, and was with his

company as it went through the various preparations for the Big Push, scheduled for some time that summer. The day finally came on July 1, when the Newfoundland Regiment, as part of the third wave, went over the top at Beaumont Hamel. As was befitting of an officer, he led his company forward, pistol raised, waving them on. According to Private Edwin Shea, No. 874, who was himself wounded that morning, he saw Ayre brought down by machine gun fire. Of the 26 officers who saw action that morning, Ayre was one of 14 who were killed while the other 12 were wounded. His remains were later interred at Ancre British Cemetery in France.

Among the officers of the Newfoundland Regiment who were killed that day were two of Eric Ayre's first cousins, Lieutenant Gerald W. Ayre (1891-1916) and Lieutenant Wilfred D. Ayre (1895-1916). Eric's brother, Captain Bernard P. Ayre (1892-1916), of the Norfolk Regiment, also died on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, near Maricourt. Two other cousins, Captain Charles R. Ayre (1885-1955) of the Newfoundland Regiment, a brother of Gerald, and Captain Ronald Ayre (1898-1967) of the Royal Flying Corps, younger brother of Wilfred, who were not present at the Somme on that fateful day. They both survived the war, as did Charles and Gerald's sister Ruby (1889-1957) and Wilfred and Ronald's sister Dorothy (1891-1969), who were serving in nursing units.

While stationed in Scotland, Eric Ayre married Janet Miller of St. John's at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh on June 19, 1915. Their time together was quite short, as their marriage came to an abrupt end with his death at Beaumont Hamel.

Eric and his family were life-long members of Gower Street Methodist Church, where he was a much-admired Sunday School teacher for some years. He was a generous and kind person who remembered two of the church-based influences on his early life in his last will and testament. He left eleven shares in the Newfoundland Clothing Co. Ltd. to the Governors of the Methodist College "*the annual interest derived from said shares to be devoted to the Athletic Departments of the school, i.e. the purchase of Gymnasium equipment, cricket bats, and such like.*" He also left ten shares in that enterprise to the Methodists Guards, the interest to be used in a similar manner. His estate at probate was valued at \$121,557.74 (equivalent to \$2.7 million in 2015 dollars).

In memory of Eric Ayre, his brother Bernard, and their cousins Gerald and Wilfred, Ayre & Sons Limited established the Ayre Athletic Grounds on

a large tract of land in the then northwest suburbs of St. John's, an area bounded by Pennywell Road, Adams Avenue, Freshwater Road and Linscott Street. It is still in existence and plans are underway for a commemorative plaque to be installed there to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their deaths. Another commemorative endeavour was the creation of The Ayre Memorial Library, *"The bequest of Capt. Eric Ayre and Capt. Bernard Ayre to the employees of Ayre & Sons Ltd."* A lending library, it had more than 1500 books and operated until the mid-1940s when its holdings were turned over to the library at Memorial University College.

Eric Ayre was also a Freemason, a member of Lodge Whiteway in St. John's. Upon learning of Ayre's death his fellow masons passed a resolution of sympathy to his wife Janet and his mother. It read, in part, *"That the lodge tender its deep sympathy with the young wife of Capt. Ayre ... and also to his mother whose heart is yearning for the two brave boys, only and well beloved sons, who answered the Immortal Roll Call on the same day in the fields of France. May the Great Architect of the Universe the mystery and intricacies of whose designs only eternity will unravel, bring to her consolation, resignation and strength. May the heroism of her boys, the beauty of their lives and the nobility of their sacrifice be to her an inspiration and a pride..."*

Eric Ayre died at the age of 27, a successful businessman, noted college athlete, and willing supporter of his church and community. Like so many of his friends and comrades who died in that "war to end all wars", who knows what might have been.

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***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***