

GOWER REMEMBERS

Corporal Harold Lidstone

(1893-1917)



“A public meeting will be held at the Casino Theatre on the evening of Wednesday April 3rd, at 8:15 p.m. and I should be glad to know if it will be convenient for you to attend to receive from the hands of His Excellency the Governor, the Military Medal won by L/Cpl. Lidstone.”

(Major Walter F. Rendell to Nathaniel Lidstone, March 20, 1918)

Harold Lidstone was born in St. John's on December 11, 1893, the youngest son of Elizabeth Sheppard and Nathaniel Lidstone, and was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church on November 12, 1894 by the Rev. A. D. Morton. Nathaniel Lidstone was an engineer at Job Brothers, while Elizabeth Lidstone had a full-time occupation looking after her household, which, in addition to her husband and son Harold, included three other sons (Thomas, Frank and Woodley) and two daughters (Stella and Gertrude).

Like a number of his fellow soldiers from the Gower Street Methodist congregation, it is obvious from Lidstone's work history and his signature on his attestation form that he received some degree of schooling but it does not appear that he attended the Methodist College, as his name is not on the memorial plaque that commemorates the 86 young men and one woman from that school who were killed or died as a result of injuries or illness sustained in World War 1. Another indication that he did not attend the Methodist College was that he was a member of the Newfoundland Highlanders boys' brigade, rather than the Methodist Guards.

Lidstone was incredibly lucky to have made it through his teenage years. His first close call with death occurred on November 24, 1907, when he was 12 years old. As reported in the local newspaper *The Daily News* the following day: "*Yesterday morning, a young lad, Harold Lidstone, son of engineer Lidstone, had a very narrow escape from drowning. It is customary for him to go around every Sunday morning in the Gower Street Church mission boat, distributing religious literature. He and his two companions in the boat landed at Geo. Neal's wharf. The other two went to the west wharf and left him standing on the breastwork between the piers. Suddenly they heard a splash, and on returning back, young Lidstone was seen struggling in the water, having lost his balance and fallen in the dock. One of the young men jumped into the boat and quickly pulled him on board. Though chilled from his immersion*

in the cold water, he was none the worse for his sudden bath.” His second mishap occurred four years later on December 2, 1911, when he was 16. He was walking down Long’s Hill when “he slipped and fell on the ice and wrenched his knee cap out of place. He suffered intense pain, had to be assisted home and was attended to by a doctor.” (The Evening Telegram, December 04, 1911)

According to McAlpine’s St. John’s directory for 1908-1909, Lidstone had joined the workforce at a young age, as he is listed there, at age 14 or 15, as a clerk at James MacGregor’s men’s store at 185 Water Street. He was still employed at MacGregor’s when he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on September 3, 1914. At that time he listed his occupation as a dry goods clerk at a salary of \$30.00 per month (approximately \$713.00 in today’s currency).

From his attestation paper we also learn that Lidstone had a dark complexion with dark brown hair and blue eyes, although there is no indication of his height or weight. His Regimental number was 163, making him one of the First Five Hundred (or Blue Puttees as they were also known), and he went overseas with them on board the SS *Florizel*, which left St. John’s harbour on October 4, 1914. It arrived in Plymouth, England, on October 14, but Lidstone and his fellow soldiers did not leave the ship until the 20th, when they were marched overland to England’s Salisbury Plain, which would be their encampment for the next six plus weeks.

Then it was off to Scotland, where the Regiment spent time in training at Fort George, performed guard duties at Edinburgh Castle, and then underwent further training at Stobs Camp, near Hawick. On August 20, 1915 he joined with slightly more than 1,000 of his comrades as they boarded HMT *Megantic* at Devonport for a ten-day voyage south to the Strait of Gibraltar and then east across the Mediterranean Sea to Egypt. They arrived in Alexandria on August 30 and entrained for Cairo the following day, where they spent two

weeks acclimatizing to their new environment. On September 13, they went back to Alexandria, where they boarded the SS *Ausonia*, for transport north to the Greek island of Lemnos. From there on the night of September 19-20 they crossed the eastern Aegean Sea to Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula.

Lidstone was one of the fortunate Newfoundlanders at Gallipoli, in that he was not killed or wounded by enemy bullets or the many shells and grenades that were constantly being lobbed their way. Nor did he contract any of the various diseases that were rampant there that fall; nor did he fall prey to trench foot or frostbite as so many of his comrades did, a result of the horrendous weather – rain, ice, sleet and snow – that plagued them throughout the late fall of 1915. He left Gallipoli with the Regiment in early January 1916, arriving back in Alexandria on the 15th. They spent the next two months in Egypt resting and recuperating before they received orders to board HMT *Alaunia* on March 14 for the trip back across the Mediterranean to the French port of Marseilles, where they landed on March 22. From there they went north by train to Pont Remy, a small village in the Picardy region of northwestern France.

Over the next three months the Newfoundland Regiment, together with other British and French regiments, was readied for a major assault on the German forces a few miles away along the Somme River. That assault finally came on the morning of July 1, 1916, when 801 members of the Newfoundland Regiment went over the top near the French enclave of Beaumont Hamel, in what has come to be considered by many as an unnecessary loss of lives in a doomed, albeit heroic, effort to capture the enemy lines.

Of the 801 men of the Newfoundland Regiment who took part on this first morning of the Battle of the Somme, 14 officers and 219 other ranks were killed or died of wounds received, 12 officers and 374 other ranks were wounded and 91 other ranks were missing.

When roll call was taken July 4, three officers and 76 men answered. One of them was Harold Lidstone. He did not escape unscathed, however. On August 12, 1916 he was invalided to England, where he was admitted to Wandsworth Hospital with pyrexia (fever) of unknown origin, although it may have resulted from an encounter with poison gas. He remained there for about six weeks, before he was released and assigned to H Company at the Regimental Depot in Ayr, Scotland, on September 23.

Lidstone spent the fall and winter of 1916-1917, at Ayr during which time he was promoted to Lance Corporal on January 17. He left Southampton, England, on April 25 for the Western Front, where he rejoined the Battalion-in-the-Field on June 7, and where he was promoted to full Corporal on September 17.

During the latter half of 1917, the Newfoundland Regiment saw action at Steenbeek (in the Battle of Langemarck, part of the Third Battle of Ypres) and at Broembek (in the Battle of Poelcappelle, part of the Battle of Passchendaele) in Belgium. It was at Steenbeek on the night of July 17-18 that Lidstone was part of a raiding party, which was sent over to the German trenches with orders to capture one of the enemy soldiers, who would then be interrogated in hopes of extracting information from him. For his part in this raid, Lidstone was awarded the Military Medal, the third highest decoration that could be awarded to an enlisted man in the British Armies, the higher two being the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Victoria Cross. He was singled out "*for the heroic way he led a party of men across 'No Man's Land', cutting the barbed wire entanglements and killing or capturing the occupants of the trench,*" (*The Daily Star*, December 12, 1917).

In November the Newfoundland Regiment was moved into France, where it took part in the Battle of Cambrai, the first theatre of the war to use massed tanks. Lidstone survived the two rounds of

fighting in Belgium, but he was not to be so lucky in France. It was there, on November 20, 1917, near the French town of Masnières, that he was killed by enemy fire, the same day that Corporal John Shiwak of Rigolet and 39 other members of the Regiment met their deaths.

Harold Lidstone's Military Medal was presented to his father by Governor Sir Charles Harris at the Casino Theatre on April 3, 1918. Military Medals were also presented that evening to Josiah Best (for his son Private Frank Best, who was killed on October 9, 1917) and to Catherine Lacey (for her son Private George Lacey, who was killed on the same day as Lidstone). In all likelihood, Lidstone's mother attended the ceremony at the Casino Theatre, but it is probably safe to say that her son's death took its toll on her health. Perhaps her stress was compounded by the fact that another of her sons, Thomas, had recently joined the Royal Flying Corps, a branch of the service noted for the high death rate for its pilots. Elizabeth Lidstone died just two months after the event at the Casino Theatre, on June 2, 1918, at age 62, like her son, another victim of the war to end all wars.

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 second Sunday from now through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals 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 women please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca 726-6169/864-8303