

GOWER REMEMBERS

Sergeant Charles Parsons
(1892-1967)



*“For bravery in the field. At Monchy-le-Preux on April 14th, 1917, when an attack had failed and the enemy were advancing on the village, he displayed the greatest gallantry as one of a small party hastily collected to oppose the hostile advance. The party maintained itself in the face of overwhelming odds, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy and completely checked him on this part of the line”. (Citation accompanying the award of the Military Medal to Corporal Charles Parsons, from *The Royal Gazette*, June 18, 1917.)*

Charles (Charlie) Parsons was born in St. John's on December 13, 1892, the second son of Belle Carnell and Eugene Parsons. The elder Parsons, a draper by trade, was a native of Harbour Grace who relocated to St. John's sometime in the 1880s, where he found employment at Ayre and Sons as a clerk. He and Belle Carnell were married on June 8, 1887. In addition to Charles, they had an older son, John Carnell, a younger son Cyril (who died in 1896 at two years of age) and two daughters: Mabel and Edith. The family lived at 40 Victoria Street.

Parsons was educated at the Methodist College in St. John's. Following completion of his studies he went to work with the Reid Newfoundland Company as an office clerk. Five days after his 22nd birthday, on December 18, 1914, he enlisted in Newfoundland Regiment's C Company and was assigned Regimental number 783. His Attestation paper informs us that he was 5 feet, 3 inches tall, and weighed 124 pounds. He had a dark complexion with brown hair and blue eyes.

After a short period of training, Parsons travelled to England aboard the SS *Dominion*, leaving St. John's on February 5 and arriving in Liverpool, England, on February 16. The ship 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.

C Company spent a short period of time in Liverpool, before it received orders to entrain for Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland, where they were later 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 when they were relocated to Stobs Camp, where they would be 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, a little over 1,000 members of the Regiment left Devonport on the south coast of England on board the SS *Megantic*, en route to Gallipoli, Turkey, via Egypt. They arrived in Alexandria on August 31, and after two weeks of acclimatization to the Middle Eastern climate, they travelled north, arriving at the Greek island of Mudros on September 18. From there they were ferried to Suvla Bay on the Gallipoli Peninsula on the night of September 19-20. As the sun rose on the morning of the 20th, the Regiment came under Turkish artillery fire inflicting the first Regimental casualties of the War.

In addition to the heat and near-constant bombardment with bullets and shells from the Turks, the unseasonably cold and wet weather in November also caused the Newfoundland troops much hardship. In less than four months, approximately 70% of the Regiment's Gallipoli force was transferred to hospitals suffering from such ailments as frostbite, jaundice, and a variety of pulmonary infections. Parsons was one of these. After three months on the Peninsula, Parsons was evacuated from Gallipoli on December 12, 1915 aboard the hospital ship *Somali* and taken to the island of Malta, where he was admitted on December 17 to the Royal Naval Hospital suffering from pyrexia.

Parsons spent Christmas of 1915 in that hospital. He was transferred to Ricosali Military Hospital (also in Malta) on January 9, 1916. Parsons was finally cleared to return to active service on March 4 and was transferred to the Base Depot in Alexandria, Egypt. He left Egypt on March 18 arriving in Marseilles, France on March 22 and then joined the Battalion in the field on April 15.

The Regiment spent the next few 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, 1916. 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.

Parsons went over the top at Beaumont Hamel and survived. In a 1966 CBC documentary on the Battle of the Somme, he is quoted: “Seventeen of us went over under Lt. Mellor and at nightfall there were but two of us left.” In his memoirs, Howard Morry from Ferryland, a fellow member of C Company, speaks about recovering the dead and wounded during and after the battle and says he completed the task alongside Charlie Parsons. Morry states: “He was the bravest and luckiest man I knew.” Parsons was promoted to the rank of Corporal on December 4, 1916.

One of Parsons’ duties with the Regiment was with the Signal Corps. As such, he was part of a band of soldiers who were responsible for communications between Brigade Headquarters and the Regiment’s officers in the field. This could take a variety of forms, including runners who travelled back and forth on foot, carrier pigeons, flags, lights, rockets and field telephones. As such, the signalers had a very important function to perform and a good signaler was a distinct asset to his regiment.

It was in this capacity as a signaler that Parsons was part of the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux, France, on April 14, 1917. The Newfoundland Regiment, together with the Essex Regiment, were ordered to attack an area known as Infantry Hill. However, a strong counterattack by the German forces resulted in severe casualties (166 killed or died of wounds; 141 wounded) and the capture of more than 150 members of the Newfoundland Regiment.

Lieutenant-Colonel James Forbes-Robertson, Commanding Officer of the Newfoundland Regiment, gathered together as many men, weapons and ammunition as he could find, determined to keep the Germans at bay as long as possible. What happened reads more like fiction, but it did

happen. On the outskirts of the village, he and nine of his men (eight from the Newfoundland and one from the Essex) opened fire on the advancing German soldiers from a shallow ditch and with remarkable speed and accuracy inflicted heavy casualties. The Germans thought they were facing a much larger force; otherwise they could easily have stormed the area where this small band of men had positioned themselves and killed or captured all of them. Instead, these “ten who saved Monchy” as they became known, held the enemy at bay for 11 hours, until relief finally came after dark.

Their heroic actions resulted in the two officers, Forbes-Robertson and Lieutenant Kevin Keegan, being awarded the Military Cross and the eight others receiving the Military Medal. One of those eight was Corporal Charlie Parsons, who two days after this decisive engagement, was raised to the rank of Sergeant. One of the four Caribou monuments in France commemorating the actions of the Newfoundland Regiment is located at Monchy-le-Preux.

After this harrowing experience at Monchy, Parsons and his comrades continued the fight throughout the summer and fall of 1917. In late November the Regiment was involved in heavy fighting near the French city of Cambrai, where Parsons won a Bar to his Military Medal. (Soldiers did not receive more than one Military Medal, but received bars to be worn on the ribbon of the medal for deserving exploits.)

The citation for this Bar from *The Royal Gazette* reads: “*H. Qrs. Signaller, on the morning of the 30th [November 1917] took a party of Signallers and Regtl. Police and joined in the counter attack and remained in the front line and helped to consolidate. He got his party together and dug posts. Later on when an officer [Lieutenant Arthur Herder] got wounded, he took command of the platoon and held the position until the Battalion was relieved.*”

On the night of the 30th, he collected wires and wired the whole of his platoon front. By his disregard of danger and cheerful manner he helped others to push forward and best the counter attacks. During the enemy attack on the 3rd [December], he showed splendid bravery and his party opened fire on an attacking wave and accounted for a number while the rest turned and ran back.”

In 1918, while in the field in France, Parsons received word that his brother, Officer Cadet John Carnell Parsons, was killed aboard the SS *Florizel* on 25 February while *en route* to England, via Halifax, to commence training as part of the Royal Flying Corps. Ironically John Parsons had not joined the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as his mother worried that his brother's life was already in peril and she was hopeful that he would be safe in the Flying Corps.

Parsons was on active duty in France and Belgium for the remainder of the War and went to England in the spring of 1919. He returned to Newfoundland in September and on October 18, 1919, he was demobilized from the Regiment after serving nearly five years. He was awarded the 1914-1915 Star for his service in Gallipoli, as well as the British War Medal 1914-1918 and the Allied Victory Medal.

While on leave in England in the summer of 1919, he met Lilian Ransom, a nursing sister, whom he would later marry. In 1921, Lilian sailed to St. John's as a War Bride and they were married in Topsail United Church on June 9 of that year. This union would see four children: John Carnell, Bertram Ransom, Alison Eugenie and June Rosemary; as well as 12 grandchildren, 24 great-grandchildren and eight great-great-grandchildren.

Parsons resumed his job at the Reid Railway and joined the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA) and later the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL). He completed training in Railroad Accounting and progressed with the Reid Newfoundland Company and the Canadian National

Railway as an accountant and District Freight Claim Agent for Newfoundland.

From 1924 to 1965 Parsons served on the Executive of the GWVA / RCL at both the provincial and national levels. He was an active member of the Newfoundland GWVA, filling the position of Assistant Secretary-Treasurer for many years, as well as serving as a member of the Editorial Board of *The Veteran Magazine*. In that capacity, in 1929 he assumed responsibility for the “Children’s Section” of the magazine, where, as Uncle Charlie, he made sure that there were stories, poetry, puzzles, and games suitable for the younger set. Parsons also wrote articles for the magazine, including one on the various forms of communication that were used in the field. He was made an Honorary Life Member of the GWVA and Honorary Secretary of the Central Relief Committee.

In July 1924, as a member of the GWVA Executive, Parsons escorted Field Marshal Earl Haig during his visit with Regimental soldiers at Bannerman Park. This was part of the events marking the unveiling of the National War Memorial on Water Street in St. John’s. In May 1937 he travelled to London, England, to represent the GWVA at Coronation of King George VI and received the Coronation medal. Between 1942 and 1945, Parsons was active in the Commission of Government’s Civil Defence organization charged with protecting and assisting Newfoundlanders on the Homefront during World War II. In June 1953, he was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation medal for his service with the Royal Canadian Legion. He also received the Royal Canadian Legion Meritorious Service medal.

In 1957, at the age of 65, Parsons retired from the Railway and continued to dedicate the rest of his life to serving veterans. For health reasons, he was unable to attend the dedication of the Beaumont Hamel Pavilion in France in 1961, but he returned to Turkey in 1965 as a member of the official provincial contingent to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gallipoli. He maintained close friendships with his

comrades from C Company and they held annual reunion dinners and gatherings.

Sergeant Charles Parsons passed away at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital in St. John's on July 19, 1967 at age 75 and was laid to rest at the General Protestant Cemetery.

On April 23, 1917 a small note entitled "A Charmed Life" appeared in *The Evening Telegram*. It read, in part, "*Relatives of Sergt. Charles Parsons of the signalling corps, Newfoundland Regiment, received a message from him yesterday saying that he had come through the last engagement with "Ours" without a scratch.*" The irony inherent in this statement reflects the spirit of Charles Parsons: despite having just survived against great odds, he was not going to allow what had happened at Monchy to govern the rest of his life, a life that he lived to the fullest until the end.

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.