

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Harold Burt
(1891-1984)



“In order to establish the extent of your disability and have your case considered by this Board for final disposal, it will be necessary for you to appear before the Medical Board in St. John’s, for examination, at the earliest opportunity.”
(J. M. Howley, Secretary, Pensions and Disabilities Board, St. John’s, to Harold Burt, January 29, 1917)

Harold Burt was born in St. John's on October 20, 1891, the oldest of four sons of Jemima Green and John Burt, and was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church by the Rev. Humphrey P. Cowperthwaite on November 27 of that year. The family resided first at 33 Cook Street and later at the Upper Battery. At various times during his working life the elder Burt was employed as a labourer and as a fisherman, ending his time in the work force as a labourer at Crosbie and Company.

Young Harold was able to read and write so it is safe to assume that he had some level of schooling, probably at the Methodist College on Long's Hill. He was a member of the Methodist Guards Brigade, which would support the supposition that he attended the college, and he took part in Guards sporting activities. An account that appeared in *The Evening Telegram* for April 28, 1909 regarding the annual sports competition for the Guards, indicated that he participated in a basketball game, in which "*Sergeant E. Quick of the Band Team ... collided with Harold Burt of A. Team, and when Quick fell his collar bone was fractured.*"

In all likelihood he would have begun working while still in his teens, but he did not appear in the St. John's city directories for the pre-war period until 1913, where he was listed as a labourer; his place of employment was not recorded. In the summer of that year he was involved in a serious incident on the St. John's waterfront, one which almost cost him his life and may have been work-related. He was "*engaged in firing from a gun on a stage head near the waterfront when a spark from the firearm dropped into a keg of powder which was standing beside him. An explosion followed and Burt was knocked back several yards.*" (*The Evening Telegram*, July 31, 1913)

Burt was knocked unconscious by the blast, with serious burns to his arms and chest, resulting in a stay in hospital. *The Telegram* commented that it was felt he was incredibly lucky not to have been “*blown to pieces*”, his life being spared by the fact that the force of the explosion had been lessened because the powder had been damp. In any event, it prevented him from rowing in that year’s St. John’s Regatta, where he had been scheduled to man an oar in the *Blue Peter* in three separate races.

Burt was quick to answer the call for volunteers when war broke out between Great Britain and Germany in the late summer of 1914. He enlisted in the newly reconstituted Newfoundland Regiment on September 14, receiving Regimental number 323. This made him one of the First Five Hundred, also known as Blue Puttees. From his Attestation Paper, we learn that he was 5 feet, 10 inches tall and weighed 182 pounds, with fair hair and blue eyes. It was noted that he had burns on both arms, a constant reminder of the accident he had had the previous year. It further states that he was a labourer who earned two dollars per day but his place of employment is not given.

The First Five Hundred (actually 537) members of the Newfoundland Regiment left St. John’s on October 4, 1914 on board the SS *Florizel*, bound for Europe. The following day they joined a convoy of Canadian ships for the ocean voyage to England, which would take eleven days. The convoy arrived in Plymouth Sound on the southwest coast of England on October 14. However, it would be October 20 before the members of the Newfoundland Regiment were able to disembark the *Florizel*. Once they did they were immediately ordered to march from Plymouth to Salisbury Plain, in the shadow of Stonehenge, where they discovered that their accommodations were just as primitive as that of the ancient structure. They were besieged by rain and mud for the next seven weeks before they were transferred to Fort George in Scotland in

early December. His story for the nine months that followed is the same as for most of his fellow soldiers: training in Scotland, first at Fort George and later at Stobs Camp, with a brief respite as the guard force at Edinburgh Castle, the first colonial troops awarded that honour.

On August 2, 1915, the main body of the Newfoundland Regiment, some 1,000 plus men, were relocated to Aldershot in the south of England. When the original group of men enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment in the Fall of 1914, they did so for the duration of the war but not to exceed one year. It was firmly believed in both Europe and Newfoundland that the war would not last any more than one year; many thought it would be over by Christmas 1914. As a result, in the summer of 1915 those members of the Regiment whose term of enlistment was about to expire were asked if they would sign on for the duration of the war. All except for a handful of them did just that. There is a note on Burt's Attestation Paper dated August 14, 1915, at Aldershot, that he had "Re-engaged for the duration of the war".

However, he did not accompany his comrades when they left England from nearby Devonport on August 20, for transport to the eastern Mediterranean and the war. Two months later on October 15, 1915, Burt was discharged from the Regiment and sent back to Newfoundland on board the SS *Corsican*. The reasons given are "Time Expired and medically unfit." This seems strange given the note on his Attestation Paper that he had re-signed for the remainder of the war. Furthermore, there is no explanation of the cause for the diagnosis of "medically unfit" anywhere in his file, even in the letter quoted from above from the Pensions and Disabilities Board. It is possible that it was a result of the burn scars on his upper arms preventing him from effectively operating a rifle or propelling a hand grenade, but the scars had been there when he enlisted. The Proceedings on Discharge form documenting his leaving the

Regiment does indicate that he was of “Exemplary” military character and that he was “An excellent soldier and an honest worker.”

In the years that followed his discharge from the Regiment, Burt worked for a number of local enterprises including Harvey’s butterine factory and Harvey & Brehm Ltd. He retired from the workforce in the mid-1950s.

One of his interests in the immediate post-war period was politics. He was not a candidate for any political party but his name does appear in the newspaper on at least two occasions with regard to political events in the city. The first of these involves a large rally at the Casino Theatre on October 10, 1919 in support of Cyril Fox, William J. Higgins and Nicholas Vinnicombe, the Liberal Progressive Party candidates in the three-member district of St. John’s East. They were the incumbents and were easily re-elected in the general election held on November 3, albeit as members of the group that formed the Opposition. Burt was singled out as one of “a large and representative number of returned soldiers and sailors” attending the event. (*The Evening Telegram*, October 11, 1919) Some years later, in April 1923, he was a witness to the nomination of one of these candidates, Cyril Fox, again in St. John’s East, in that year’s general election.

He also renewed his involvement with the Methodist Guards Brigade after the war, as is evident in a report from *The Evening Telegram* on October 22, 1921, that “At the historic old Maggoty Cove Bridge, Corporal Harold Burt and his famous Battery Squad of riflemen will join the parade.” This parade was in celebration of the achievement of a local lad, John Bell, who had finished second in the Halifax 10-Mile Marathon earlier that month.

Harold Burt married Cora Froude of Old Perlican probably in 1919. They were the parents of six children: Eric, Bronson, John, Marjorie, Maxwell and David. Following to some extent in his father's footsteps, Bronson enlisted in the Royal Navy and saw action in World War II.

Whatever caused Harold Burt's medical discharge from the Newfoundland Regiment did not affect either his involvement in the activities of the Newfoundland Great War Veterans Association, or its successor, the Royal Canadian Legion. His name frequently appears in reports of attendees at reunions of the First Five Hundred (Blue Puttees) well into the 1960s and 1970s. Nor did it affect his longevity, as he died on July 26, 1984, in his 93rd year. In addition to his six children and their spouses, he left to mourn 12 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren. His funeral took place from Cochrane Street United Church on July 30, with interment in the General Protestant Cemetery. His wife had predeceased him in 1976.

Harold's younger brother Eric was also a member of the Newfoundland Regiment in World War I, but that is another story.

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, similar to 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 begin our 201st year as a faith community.

If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca or at 726-6169.