

# GOWER REMEMBERS

Corporal Roy Archibald Smith

(1892-1987)



*I am writing you a few lines to ask you of my brother, who is L/Cpl. R. A. Smith. I understand that he left 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital Wandsworth SW on 12<sup>th</sup> of March, and then he had to report to you. If you can possibly find out where he is I should be very much obliged. I am enclosing a letter for him. ... I should very much like to see him, as I have not seen him since August 14<sup>th</sup> 1914. (Private Harry Smith to the Newfoundland Regiment Pay and Records Office, London, July 25, 1918.)*

Roy Archibald Smith was born in Toronto, Ontario, in the first half of the year 1892. His exact date of birth has not yet been discovered. His parents, Jessie Robertson and William B. Smith, who were married at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in St. John's on December 22, 1885, had moved to Toronto sometime previous to their son's birth. It is possible that William underwent training as a woodworker while there, since he was employed in that capacity after he and his family returned to St. John's mid-decade. Their second son, Harry, was born in St. John's in 1896, as were their other children, Samuel Russell, Allan Jackson, Rowland and Rita.

William B. Smith appears in McAlpine's St. John's city directory for 1894-1897 as being resident at 35 Water Street in St. John's, and employed with the Campbell Lumber Company as a stair builder. McAlpine's directory for 1898 indicated that the family had moved to 176 LeMarchant; they later relocated to 114 Pleasant Street, which would be the family home for almost 50 years. By 1904, William had moved to the Horwood Lumber Company, where he was employed as a foreman, a position he would hold until his death in 1920.

Even though they were married at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, it would appear that William and Jessie began to attend Gower Street Methodist Church after their return from Toronto. Their children attended the Methodist College on Long's Hill, where Roy had completed his studies by 1913, as he was employed at the Empire Wood Working Company as a carpenter in that year. It was from there that he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment the following year.

Roy Smith was one of the First Five Hundred (or Blue Puttees) who signed up in August and September of 1914 and was a member of the first contingent to sail for England on October 4, 1914, on board the SS *Florizel*. He enlisted on September 8, 1914, at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury on Harvey Road, and was given Regimental number 379. According to his Attestation Paper he was 20 years of age, 5 feet

4½ inches tall, and weighed 118 pounds. He had a fair complexion, fair hair and brown eyes. He still lived at home at 114 Pleasant Street and indicated that he earned \$500.00 per year as a carpenter.

It took the *Florizel* ten days to cross the Atlantic Ocean. It was part of a convoy of Canadian ships, which arrived at Plymouth on the south coast of England on October 14. Another six days would pass before they were able to go ashore. Once back on dry land, Smith and his comrades marched to Salisbury Plain where they spent the fall of 1914 in makeshift tents. There they experienced constant rain and deplorable living conditions.

The Newfoundland Regiment was transferred to Fort George, Scotland, in early December. They would remain in Scotland, first at Fort George, then at Edinburgh Castle, and finally at Stobs Camp, near Hawick. In August 1915 when they went south to England, first to Aldershot for a few weeks of rest before travelling to Devonport where, on August 20, they boarded SS *Megantic*, which would take them to the Eastern Mediterranean and the war.

When Smith and his Blue Puttee comrades had initially enlisted they had signed up for the duration of the war but not to exceed one year. This condition reflected the thinking of British and other politicians and military leaders, who were convinced that they would crush Germany in short order and that many of the recruits would return home without ever confronting the enemy on the battlefield. By the summer of 1915 it was evident that this was not the case. The officers in charge of the Newfoundland Regiment were faced with getting several hundred of their recruits to re-enlist without time constraints.

Only a few did not. Smith was one who did, “re-engaging for the duration of war” at Aldershot on August 13, 1915. With that formality out of the way, he was one of the more than 1,000 members of the

Regiment aboard the *Megantic* when it began its voyage to the Mediterranean.

The Newfoundland Regiment arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, after a ten day trek, on August 30. Smith and his comrades entrained to Cairo the following day, where the Regiment spent the next two weeks getting used to the Mediterranean climate. On September 13, they returned to Alexandria, where they boarded the SS *Ausonia*. It took them 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.

It was in Turkey, at Suvla Bay, that the Newfoundland Regiment fired its first shots, encountered its first enemy fire and suffered its first casualties. Smith was one of those casualties, a victim of the weather and the horrible conditions in the trenches. Just over two weeks after his arrival at Suvla Bay, Smith was invalided out on board the hospital ship *Dunluce Castle* on October 6, suffering from enteric, a gastrointestinal disease, usually brought on by contaminated food, water or other intestinal pathogens. Three days later he was admitted to the Military Hospital at Imtarfa in Malta, where he was to remain until November 30, when he was sent to England on board the hospital ship *Letitia*.

Smith arrived in England on December 8, and was admitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital at Wandsworth. His affliction was serious enough to result in his staying at Wandsworth for almost four months. Upon his release on April 3, 1916, he was assigned to E Company and sent to the Depot at Ayr, Scotland. He was there for a little over a year, not joining the Battalion-in-the-Field until April 19, 1917. As such he missed the fighting at Beaumont Hamel and at Monchy-le Preux, but he was just in time for the Battle of Cambrai, the opening salvos of which were fired on November 20 of that year. Smith was in the midst of the fighting and soon became one of the wounded. He received a

gunshot wound in his buttocks on December 2, which landed him in the 8<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Rouen, in Northern France. His wound proved to be serious enough to warrant a second visit to Wandsworth, where he arrived on December 6.

This second stay at Wandsworth lasted for almost six months. Following his release on May 31, 1918, he was attached to the Depot of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Shawford Regiment at Winchester, in the south of England, home to the famous Winchester Cathedral. He remained there until July 21, when he was granted Special Leave. This Blue Puttee Leave, as it was also known, had been instituted that summer to allow long-serving soldiers an opportunity to return to Newfoundland for a period of time and Smith took advantage of it to return home for the first time since leaving in October 1914. Upon being granted this leave, it was determined that he was medically unfit for further duty in Europe and that he should be discharged from the Regiment.

Smith was promoted to the rank of acting Lance Corporal on August 20, 1917, a position that was made permanent on September 17. The following year, on July 16, 1918, shortly before commencing his Blue Puttee Leave, he was made acting Corporal. Once back in Newfoundland, he was attached to the Depot Headquarters. He was demobilized from the Regiment on March 19, 1919.

As part of its civil re-establishment program, to assist soldiers in re-entering the workforce, the Newfoundland Regiment attempted to provide its members with training opportunities if they wished to enter a new field. Smith indicated that “His personal wish is to obtain a position as Bookkeeper.” His request was referred to the Vocational Office, and it appears that he may have received the requisite training: he is listed in the 1924 St. John’s city directory as an accountant but there is no indication of where he was working. By 1928 he was employed with Bowring Brothers Limited in St. John’s as a clerk, but

it is not clear if this was as an office clerk or a salesclerk. He was also listed as a clerk with that establishment in the 1932 directory, but in the next city directory, published in 1936, he was a salesmen in Bowring's hardware department.

Smith's father died in 1920. In his will, probated on May 12 of that year, the major beneficiaries were Roy and his mother. Roy was left the house at 114 Pleasant Street, together with the attached land, all household furniture and other effects, as well as any monies left over after the other bequests had been made. The exception was that his wife Jessie would receive "all my furniture in her bedroom in my said house on Pleasant Street, together with one [1] plush covered chair, one [1] rocker, the sewing machine now in my said house, and the sum of two hundred [\$200.00] for her sole use and benefit." Bequests of \$100.00 each were left to his sons Samuel Russell, Allan Jackson, and Rowland and to his daughter Rita. The estate was valued at \$5,805.02, which would amount to more than \$100,000.00 in today's dollars.

Little is known of the remainder of Smith's life. He died at the Department of Veterans Affairs Pavillion in St. John's on June 4, 1967, at the age of 95. He had lived with his cousin, Lorna Robertson, for the previous 15 years, and, besides her, left to mourn a number of nieces. He never married. His funeral took place at Barrett's Chapel, with interment at the General Protestant Cemetery.

It is his death announcement, coupled with a second report of his death that also appeared in *The Evening Telegram* for June 6, 1967, that is the main source for his year of birth. The death announcement states that he was in his 96<sup>th</sup> year at the time of his death, while the second report states that he was 95 years of age; this implies that he had turned 95 sometime within the past year. Confusion arises from the fact that he stated on his Attestation Paper when he enlisted in September 1914 that his age was 20 years, no months. That would have him being born in September 1894. Meanwhile, the 1921

Newfoundland Census has him being born in April 1895, while the 1945 Census lists him as being 40 years of age. That would mean that he was born in 1905, clearly an error. The correct year is most likely 1892, probably in April, as he would have had to produce a birth certificate of some kind in order to receive DVA benefits.

The report in *The Evening Telegram* also pointed out that with Smith's death, there were only three Blue Puttees known to be still alive: Private Frederick LeGrow (Regimental number 9), who died a few months after Smith, on August 28, 1987, at age 91; Private Thomas Horan (Regimental number 212), who died on May 4, 1990, at age 95; and Private Abraham Mullett (Regimental number 437), the last of the Blue Puttees, who died on July 21, 1993, at the age of 101.

*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 201<sup>st</sup> year as a faith community.*

*If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at [briggs@mun.ca](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*