

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private William Edward LeShana
(1892-1916)



I regret to inform you that the Record Office of the First Newfoundland Regiment, London, to-day advises that No. 799, Private William Edward LeShano [sic], who was previously reported Missing, is now reported Killed in Action on July 1. (John R. Bennett, Newfoundland's Colonial Secretary, to Mrs. Janet LeShano [sic], wife of Private William Edward LeShana, October 9, 1916)

William Edward LeShana (jr) was born in Montreal, Quebec, the son of Elizabeth Pichette and William Edward LeShana (sr). There is a great deal of confusion about his birth date. In the 1891 Canadian Census for Montreal, there is a listing for a William LeShana (age 28), born in Newfoundland, his wife Elizabeth (age 25), born in Quebec, and their son William (age 4 months), born in Montreal. As this census return was dated May 27, 1891, it would put the younger William's birthdate in late January of that year. However, there is a baptismal record for a Florence Julia LeShana, daughter of William LeShana and May Pichette, who was baptized at All Saints Anglican Church, Montreal, on June 21, 1891. In it she is recorded as having been born in Montreal on January 20, 1891.

Florence Julia is William LeShana and Elizabeth Pichette's daughter. She appears in the 1921 Newfoundland Census living with her father and step-mother in St. John's, with her birth place given as Canada and her age as 30 years. Could the William listed in the 1891 Census actually be his sister Florence, with baby William's name being a clerical error? Possibly, but is her mother's name in the baptismal record also a clerical error?

Other evidence indicates that William (jr) was born in late 1892, possibly December. First there is his marriage record. William (jr) married Janet Maud Garf of St. John's at the parsonage of Gower Street Methodist Church on August 7, 1914. At that time he gave his age as 21 years. It is highly unlikely that he would have lied about his age to the minister who was performing the marriage ceremony. If he was born in the latter part of 1892, he would have celebrated his 22nd birthday sometime after his marriage.

This is confirmed by the information contained in his Attestation Paper when he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on December 23, 1914. At that time he stated that his age was 22 years, no months, which would point to a birth date in late 1892. However, on the official

record of his death registered with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in London, he is listed as 24 at the time of his death on July 1, 1916. That record confuses the matter even more by stating that his parents were William and Mabel LeShana.

Whatever his birth date, however, he was living in St. John's for much of the period between 1898 and 1914. Sometime between 1892 and 1898, his mother appears to have died and his father brought William (jr), Florence and another sister, Eva, to St. John's where, according to the St. John's city directory for 1898, they were living at 18 Boncloddy Street. This is verified by the record of William's (sr) marriage to Mabel Georgina Pickett of St. John's at the Gower Street Methodist parsonage by Rev. Dr. Levi Curtis on March 24, 1899. She was originally from Stowey, Somerset, England but her family had relocated to St. John's sometime previous.

While living in Montreal, William (sr) worked as a shipper and as a storeman, which may have been some kind of clerk in a warehouse. Back in St. John's he is recorded in the 1898 directory as a shoemaker and in his marriage record as a "leathercutter". Ten years later, in 1908, he is listed in the city directory as a labourer. There is no indication where he was working at that time but he was living at 39 Flower's Hill.

The 1913 city directory gives much more information about William (sr) and his family. At that time they were living at 68 Carter's Hill with his father, also named William, who was a widower. William (sr) is listed as a carpenter working at Ayre & Sons Ltd.; William (jr) as a clerk at George Knowling Ltd.; daughters Eva and Mabel were both classified as "tailoress", working at the Newfoundland Clothing Factory. Florence is not listed.

William (jr) appears to have received some schooling in St. John's, as he was later employed as a clerk, which would have required some formal education. In all likelihood he attended the Methodist College

but strangely he did not join the Methodist Guards Boys Brigade; instead he was a member of the Newfoundland (Presbyterian) Highlanders. His name is emblazoned on the plaque located in St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (also known as the Kirk), in memory of the 25 members of that organization who died in World War I.

It may seem somewhat surprising that William (jr) was a relative newlywed when he joined the Newfoundland Regiment late in 1914. It might have been planned that way or it might have been peer pressure that prompted his decision. His wife's brother, Fred Garf, was one of the First Five Hundred and this may have influenced William to enlist. Many of his friends had probably enlisted, as well, which may have inspired him to make a similar move.

From his Attestation Paper we learn that William was 5 feet, 9 inches tall, weighed 120 pounds, with a dark complexion, brown hair and blue eyes. It was noted that he had a tattoo on his left forearm. At the time of his enlistment he was living with his wife at 27 Power Street. He earned \$6.50 per week in his clerk's position at Knowling's, approximately \$338.00 per year. His Regimental number was 799.

LeShana received a small amount of training in St. John's before sailing for England on board the SS *Dominion* on February 5, 1915, with 243 of his comrades who made up C Company of the Regiment. They were hindered from getting aboard the *Dominion* by the cold temperatures and ice blocking St. John's harbor at that time. The ice prevented the *Dominion* from entering the Narrows, so the men had to be taken out through the Narrows aboard the sealing vessel *Neptune*, whose hull had been re-enforced to withstand heavy ice. Once outside in the open water they were transferred to the *Dominion*, which was waiting for them off Bay Bulls.

C Company arrived in Liverpool, England, on February 16 and as soon as they landed they boarded a train which took them north to

Edinburgh Castle, where, along with A and B companies, which were already in Scotland, they were given the honour of being the first colonial force assigned duty at the famous castle. They were there until May 11, when they were relocated to Stobs Camp, where they remained until early August.

On August 2, 1915, just over 1,000 members of the Newfoundland Regiment left Stobs Camp for Aldershot in the south of England. Here they spent 18 days enjoying the last rest and relaxation they would see for that year. On August 20, they were taken to nearby Devonport where they boarded the HMT *Megantic* for deployment in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Newfoundland Regiment arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, on August 31, and after a period of acclimatization in and around Cairo, sailed north aboard the *Ausonia* for Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. From there they travelled aboard the coastal steamer the *Prince Abbas* on the night of September 19-20, to Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula. The Turkish army extended them a loud and boisterous welcome, greeting the newcomers with a constant barrage of heavy shellfire.

The Newfoundlanders spent approximately four months at Suvla Bay, under the most inhospitable conditions. Thirty-one died in action or from wounds received, while another 15 succumbed to disease. Eighty soldiers were wounded by shell fire or snipers bullets and hundreds of others had to be evacuated because of various diseases or frostbite. When the time came for the Regiment to withdraw from Suvla Bay in early January 1916, their numbers had been reduced to some 400 active soldiers. LeShana was one of the lucky ones. He did not contract an illness nor suffer from frostbite that required hospital care as so many of his fellow soldiers did, nor did he get in the way of any bullets or shells.

After a period of rest and recuperation in Egypt, LeShana and his fellow soldiers left Port Tawfik at the southern entrance to the Suez Canal on March 14 aboard the HMT *Alaunia*, bound for Marsailles on the south coast of France. They arrived there on March 22, and then travelled north by train to the French village of Pont Remy on the Western Front. There they spent the next 15 weeks 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 occurred on the morning of July 1, when 801 members of the Newfoundland Regiment went over the top at Beaumont Hamel, suffering terrible loss of life. It took several days for the number of casualties to be determined and when they were the news was grim: 14 officers and 219 other ranks had been killed or died later of wounds; 12 officers and 374 other ranks had been wounded; and 91 other ranks were missing. LeShana was one of that latter group. That was the news that was relayed to his wife and family in a form letter from the Colonial Secretary, John R. Bennett, dated July 31, 1916.

Two months would pass before there was confirmation of LeShana's fate. On September 30, 1916, a report confirming his death on July 1 was received by the Newfoundland Regiment's Pay and Records Office in London. His wife was duly notified, receiving the letter quoted above a few days after October 9. She later received an envelope containing an identity disc and seven photographs, which constituted all that was on his person when his body was found.

Not long after her husband's death, Janet LeShana left St. John's for Winnipeg, and eventually settled in Vancouver. It was from Vancouver in September 1919 that she wrote to Newfoundland's Department of Militia in an attempt to obtain a separation allowance, in addition to the monthly pension that she had been receiving since her husband's death. Originally \$32.00 dollars per month, it had been increased to \$40.00 per

month in 1919. There is no indication if she ever received that allowance.

LeShana was not the only member of his extended family killed at Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916. His wife's brother, Fred, was also one of the dead. After the war LeShana's sister Mabel married Rupert Morris, also a member of the Newfoundland Regiment and a member of the Gower Street congregation. Rupert's brother, Edward, a member of the Regiment, lost his life in France on December 3, 1917. They demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Gower Street congregation and the role its members played in the First World War.

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.