

GOWER REMEMBERS

Lieutenant-Surgeon Harold Garrett Chaplin
(1888-1916)



This young surgeon has always believed that physical development should accompany mental activities. Before leaving Newfoundland he was a noted figure in athletics, particularly on the football field. His abilities give every indication that he will have a distinguished career in the Navy. (The Newfoundland Quarterly, Vol. 4(4), April 1915, p. 17)

Harold Garrett Chaplin was born in St. John's on March 10, 1888, the son of Amelia Jane Bowden and Mark Chaplin. He was their fourth child and third of five sons. There were also six daughters in the Chaplin family, so their mother would have been quite busy at home raising her family. As the wife of a prominent local businessman she would also have been expected to carry out various duties of a philanthropic nature outside the home.

Mark Chaplin was a tailor by trade. In 1875, when he was still only nineteen, he opened his own tailor shop on Water Street, and built it into a very successful business. The clothes that he produced was of such high quality that he soon became know at the "King of the Tailors". He also served three terms in the House of Assembly as Conservative member for Bonavista from 1897 to 1908 and was president of the Football League from 1895 until 1920.

Hal Chaplin, as he was commonly known, was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church by the Rev. George Boyd on June 18, 1888. He received his elementary schooling at the Methodist College where he excelled from an early age. At year-end ceremonies held for the Primary grades at the college on June 17, 1896, eight-year-old Hal was awarded first place in spelling and arithmetic tables. Two years later he received similar commedation for recitation and composition. He successfully completed the Primary program in 1899 and was promoted to Preliminary. There his academic prowess continued: he was awarded a \$20.00 scholarship in January 1903 for overall performance. He was also a skilled debater, a talent he took with him when he became a member of the Methodist College Literary Institute (MCLI) after graduation.

As a student Chaplin was also involved in various sports teams, later joining the Methodist Guards Athletic Association. Given his father's commitment to football (soccer), it is little surprise that he excelled at that sport. He also played hockey; *The Evening Telegram* for January 27, 1905 reported that he had received a three-inch gash in his forehead during a practice game; it was serious enough that it required treatment by his older brother, Dr. Herbert, a recent graduate of McGill University's Medical School.

There is an old adage in some parts of Newfoundland that states: "The first, the second, beware the third!" It is one of the proverbs of warning and signifies that if you succeed in surviving the same type of bad experience on two separate occasions, you will not be so lucky on the third occasion. Such may have been the fate of Hal Chaplin as it relates to the sea.

His first unfortunate experience occurred when he was just ten years old. At 9:00 a.m. on July 26, 1898, Hal, his thirteen-year-old brother Lloyd, Willie Rodger, age ten, and George Parsons, age fourteen, left St. John's harbour in a small vessel that belonged to Parsons. Ostensibly they were planning to go fishing off the harbour entrance but their actual plan was to sail north around Cape St. Francis and across Conception Bay to Harbour Grace, where Parsons had relatives. Luckily, considering the distance and potential for disaster that could have befallen four young lads attempting to cross the open bay in a small boat, they reached their destination safe and sound.

His second life-threatening encounter with the sea occurred during November and December 1903 and January 1904. The fifteen-year-old Chaplin had been in Scotland that fall and had secured passage home on board the *Silver Sea*, a vessel

captained by John Snow. Chaplin had sailed with Captain Snow on previous occasions and would have had no reason to believe that he would not reach St. John's within two weeks of their departure from Glasgow on November 5. A successful voyage was not in the cards for the *Silver Sea* this time, however. Once the vessel reached open water it encountered gale-force winds, which caused "the ship to leak about the stern post. The heavy coal cargo being such a dead weight caused her to strain heavily, and from this time forward all the crew had to turn to the pumps as she made three inches of water per hour." (*The Evening Telegram*, February 11, 1904)

Snow and his crew spent the next several weeks buffeted by high winds and treacherous seas, constantly running the risk of further leaks and the capsizing or sinking of the ship. On December 31, a passing steamer offered to take the crew on board, but Snow, with his crew's support, refused to abandon ship. Finally, conditions on board the *Silver Sea* reached the point of no return: on January 8, 1904, Snow accepted an offer of rescue from the steamer *Lerston* en route from Chile to Liverpool. The *Silver Sea* was left to its fate and eventually sank to the bottom of the Atlantic.

Chaplin was on board the *Silver Sea* during the whole of that ordeal. Even though he was a paying passenger, Captain Snow singled him out to *The Evening Telegram* reporter that he spoke to after his return to St. John's. "He [Snow] also speaks highly of the passenger, Mr. Harold Chaplin, who never flinched when things looked their worst, and who manfully took his turn working at the pumps." (February 11, 1904)

Over the next three years Chaplin completed his education in Newfoundland, passed the qualifying examinations for

London Matriculation and received an Associate of Arts designation from the Methodist College. He was one of the finalists for both the Jubilee Scholarship and the Rhodes Scholarship for 1907.

In the fall of 1908 Chaplin entered the study of medicine at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. He spent the next six years there in training, graduating with a degree in medicine in 1914. He led his class in final examinations and was awarded the Gold Medal in Medicine for that year. Upon graduation he was appointed as one of the St. Thomas' house surgeons.

Chaplin had hardly settled in to his new office when war was declared in Europe in the late summer of 1914. He immediately applied for a commission in the Royal Army Medical Corps, which was soon granted. *The Evening Telegram* for October 26, 1914 reported that: "Dr. Harold Chaplin, . . . , has obtained a commission in the Army Medical Corps and has left [London] for the front in charge of a squad of twenty men."

He did not remain with the RAMC for long; within a few months he had received a commission in the Royal Navy with the rank of Lieutenant-Surgeon. He was first assigned to a Navy shore base in Portsmouth named HMS *Victory*, and then to the hospital ship, HMHS *Agidir*, which ferried casualties from Calais, France, to hospitals in England. In a letter to his sister Mabel Chetwynd, who lived in Portland, Maine, he told of an encounter his ship had with a German Zeppelin, which flew over them indiscriminately dropping bombs; one bomb landed within 100 yards of the *Agidir*.

By the spring of 1916, Chaplin had been assigned to HMS *Hampshire*, a Devonshire-class armed cruiser. He was on board

that ship during its participation in the Battle of Jutland at the end of May. Following the fighting, it was given orders to transport Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, from Scapa Flow, a body of water off the Orkney Islands in northwest Scotland, to Archangel, Russia, on a diplomatic mission. On June 5, the small convoy was sailing northwest into gale-force winds; the two escort ships, destroyers *Unity* and *Victor*, soon fell behind the *Hampshire* and were eventually ordered by the captain of the *Hampshire* to return to Scapa Flow.

This would prove to be a tactical error. The *Hampshire* sailing alone, struck a German mine, which caused an immediate list to starboard; the ship began to take on water as a result. The winds and heavy seas caused lifeboats to be smashed against the side of the ship as they were lowered into the water. Within fifteen minutes of striking the mine, the *Hampshire* went under, bow first. Of the 655 crewmen and seven passengers on board, only twelve crewmen managed to survive and reach land. Among the dead were Lord Kitchener, and Dr. Harold Chaplin, who was later reported to have been tending to the wounded as the *Hampshire* went down. If the *Unity* and *Victor* had still been travelling with the *Hampshire* they may have been able to rescue some of these men.

Chaplin's was one of more than 100 bodies that were recovered from the *Hampshire*. He was interred in Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery on Hoy, one of the Orkney Islands.

For Mark and Amelia Chaplin, the news of the loss of their son Hal was an incredibly harrowing experience. He was the fourth of their five sons to have died well before his time, as did two of their daughters. Their oldest daughter, Nellie Gertrude,

died on July 9, 1887, at age five years; their fourth son, Claude, died on May 9, 1893, at age three years; a younger daughter, Doris, died on July 21, 1894, age seventeen months; their oldest son, Dr. Herbert, died on liver cancer on January 18, 1912, at age 31; their youngest son, Jack, was the first member of the Newfoundland Regiment to die, in Fort George, Scotland, of a ruptured appendix, on January 1, 1915, at age 18¹. And now, their third son, Dr. Hal, had met a similar fate, at age 28. Given that Hal's death was by drowning, perhaps there is some truth to that old adage "The first, the second, beware the third!" after all.

A family headstone commemorating the lives of each of these children, as well as their parents, is in the General Protestant Cemetery on Topsail Road, in St. John's.

Harold Chaplin was engaged to Jane Kendall, also a member of the Gower Street Methodist Church congregation. A trained nurse, her life will be commemorated in the next Gower Remembers.

¹ Jack Fielding Chaplin (1897-1915) was the third person to be commemorated through the Gower Remembers program.

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.