

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Albert Pearcey
(1891-1915)



“Albert Piercey [sic] was one of the first Newfoundlanders to enlist abroad and did valuable work on the patrol service. He was formerly a member of the Methodist Guards.” (Daily Star, March 09, 1921)

Albert Pearcey (sometimes spelled Piercey) was born in St. John's on April 24, 1891, the son of Caroline Mugford and Isaac Pearcey, and was baptized at George Street Methodist Church on August 6 of that year. Caroline and Isaac were married at that church on July 25, 1884. They had two other children, a daughter named Emily Jane, and a son, named George Samuel, both older than Albert.

Isaac Pearcey was a mariner. It would appear that he died at a relatively young age: Caroline is listed in McAlpine's Directory of St. John's for the period 1894-1897 as a widow, living at 32 Wickford Street. There is no indication in any of the city directories in which she appears that Caroline was employed, but she would have needed some form of income in order to feed, clothe, and care for herself and her children.

At least one copy of Albert's signature survives, one in which he signs his name as *A. Pearcey*. It is very clear and legible, indicating that he had some degree of formal education, possibly at the Methodist College, but it is unlikely that he completed all of the grades available to him there. He was working, it would appear, shortly after he entered his teens; a brief write-up about him in *The Newfoundland Quarterly* for December 1915 states that a "*few years ago he was in the employ of the City Club*", a gentlemen's club located on Water Street. This employment was prior to 1907, by which time he had already left Newfoundland.

Perhaps he was influenced by the fact that he lived so close to the sea; or maybe he just wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, but whatever the reason, by the middle of the first decade he had abandoned his position at the City Club for a life

on the sea. By the spring of 1907, when he was just 16 years old, Pearcey had signed on board the British vessel HMS *Brilliant*, an Apollo class cruiser, built by the British Navy in the early 1890s. Given that this was a British naval vessel, it is quite possible that he sailed to England as a crew member on another vessel some months before he began working on board HMS *Brilliant*.

As many young men before and after him have done, Pearcey was not quite truthful about his age: he provided the correct month and day but gave his birth year as 1889, which made him 18 instead of 16. He was probably afraid that if he had given his actual birth year he would have been considered too young.

Pearcey was employed as a steward for at least two voyages on HMS *Brilliant*: one lasted from May 20 to August 28, 1907 and the other from November 07, 1907 to April 29, 1908. He was one of a regular crew complement of 275 to 300 men. During peace time it was engaged in various undertakings around the British Isles and in other parts of the Empire. Once war was declared, it was placed on active duty.

The day after completing his last voyage on the *Brilliant*, Pearcey transferred to HMS *Sappho*, also an Apollo class cruiser, used mainly in the colonial service. It was built at the same time as the *Brilliant* and was a very similar ship, having the same tonnage (3600) and complement of men. Pearcey was a steward on board the *Sappho* for at least two voyages (and maybe more): from April 30 to May 07, 1908 and from May 08, 1908; the end date of that second voyage remains elusive.

Pearcey's whereabouts for the next four years are a mystery, as well. It is possible he continued to work on board HMS *Sappho* for several years, or on some other ship. What is known is that the spring of 1912 he was a steward on board HMS *Orcoma*, a commercial liner with a crew of more than 300. The *Orcoma* was taken over by the Royal Navy in 1915 and converted to an armed merchant cruiser.

Pearcey made several voyages on the *Orcoma*, before gaining employment as a steward on HMS *Oceanic*, a ship of the White Star Line. Part of the White Star Line's trans-Atlantic fleet, from its launch in 1899 until 1901 it was the largest ship in the world, with a gross tonnage of more than 17,000. It had a crew of 349 and could carry more than 1700 passengers (400 first class, 310 second class, 1000 third class).

Pearcey was on board the *Oceanic* on what proved to be its last trans-Atlantic voyage, which ended at Southampton on August 5, 1914, one day after Great Britain declared war on Germany. A few weeks later it was taken over by the Admiralty, but its war service was short-lived. In September, while on a routine surveillance mission, it went aground off the north of Scotland: the damage was too extensive to allow repairs.

One would think that if Pearcey was contemplating enlisting in the war effort, that he would have joined the Royal Navy. However, he did not. He enlisted in Southampton on August 12 in the 15th (King's) Hussars, a cavalry regiment that dated back to the mid-1700s. After joining up, he spent ten days undergoing formation drill training at Bristol Barracks, before being sent to the Hussars base camp at Longmoor, in Hampshire. *The Newfoundland Quarterly* (December 1915)

reported that *“His letters to his mother describe his military duties and the keen delight he took in his horse.”*

Pearcey spent the fall and winter of 1914-1915 in training at Longmoor. He embarked for France as part of the 9th Cavalry Brigade of his regiment on April 23, 1915. One of the duties assigned to him there was scouting enemy positions. On one of these scouting missions, on May 30, just a little over five weeks after he first arrived on the Western Front, he was severely wounded by enemy fire. He was immediately transported to the 13th General Hospital at Boulonge, where he died two days later on June 1.

In a letter to his mother in St. John's, one of the nursing sisters who took care of him wrote, *“Trooper Piercey's [sic] condition was almost hopeless from the first as many internal organs had been injured. He did not suffer a great deal of pain and passed away very quietly. I was with him at the end. He was very good and most brave. He is buried in Boulonge Cemetery, in a part set aside for our English soldiers.”* (*The Newfoundland Quarterly*, December 1915)

For his mother, Albert's death was a terrible blow. According to a number of reports, he was listed as her only son, which implies that her older son, George, had pre-deceased his brother. She eventually received his memorial plaque (usually called a death penny) and his 1914-1915 Star, signifying that he had been part of the British Armies and had seen action in those years. Ironically, the 1914-1915 Star had to be sent back to the War Office for re-engraving, as his surname had been spelled PEARREY.

Caroline Pearcey's love for her son was in evidence many years after his untimely death. On the ninth anniversary of that tragic event she had the following poem inserted in *The Evening Telegram* for June 2, 1924:

*Although his life could not be saved
He sleeps now in a soldier's grave;
No mother there to see him die,
No loved ones there to say good-bye.*

*The loss was great, the blow severe,
To part with him we loved so dear;
It was God's will it should be so
At his command we all must go.*

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 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.