

GOWER REMEMBERS

2nd Lieutenant Gerald Walter Ayre
(1891-1916)



Lieut. G. W. Ayre was presented with a handsome dressing case by the volunteers last evening as a mark of appreciation of his valuable services to them. Sergt. Baird made the presentation and the recipient made a fitting reply. Hearty cheers were then given for Lieut. Ayre.

(The Evening Telegram, March 23, 1916)

Gerald Walter Ayre was born in St. John's on October 19, 1891, the fifth son and sixth of eight children of Mary Julia Pitts (1855-1903) and Frederick William Ayre (1854-1932). His father was one of the six sons of Mary Hannah Bray (1821-1911) and Charles Robert Ayre (1819-1889). C. R. Ayre was the founder of the mercantile establishment that became Ayre & Sons.

Gerald was one of the eight grandchildren of Hannah and C. R. Ayre who participated in World War I. The others were his older brother Charles R. (1885-1955), his sister Ruby (1889-1957) and his first cousins Eric (1888-1916), Dorothy (1891-1969), Bernard (1892-1916), Wilfred (1895-1916), and Ronald (1898-1967).

The Ayres were prominent Methodists: Gerald, like his siblings and cousins, attended the Methodist College in St. John's. He appears to have been a very good student. An account of the closing concert and distribution of prizes for the 1901-1902 school year was reported in *The Evening Telegram* for June 5, 1902. Ten-year-old Gerald received prizes for writing, spelling and grammar. It is unlikely this was a one-off performance.

Ayre also excelled as an athlete, and his prowess in football and cricket went with him when he left school. He was instrumental in the success of the Collegians football team and hailed as one of the top fullbacks ever to wear a Methodist Guards uniform. On the cricket pitch he played for both Job's team and the City team, where he was singled out in newspaper reports of matches for both his offensive and his defensive abilities.

On September 4, 1908, Gerald, together with his cousin Bernard, left St. John's on board the SS *Carthaginian*, for Glasgow, Scotland. This voyage may have marked the beginning of his attendance at Rossall College, an all-boys school in Lancashire, often referred to as the "Eton of the North". He probably spent the 1908-1910 school years there and while doing so he was a member of the school's Officers

Training Corps. This training would hold him in good stead for his future involvement in the Newfoundland Regiment.

It is unclear if Ayre was living in St. John's permanently from 1910 to 1912 or was just there in the summertime during the football and cricket seasons, but he was in residence during 1913. He was listed in the city directory for that year as a salesman at Ayre & Sons; he lived with parents at "Northview" on Circular Road. He was also best man at his brother Harold's marriage to Agnes Miller at the Kirk in June of that year.

He was certainly living in St. John's the following year when war was declared in Europe. His older brother, Charles, was one of the Regiment's first officers, receiving his commission as a Lieutenant on September 24, 1914. Gerald did not enlist until after the first Contingent had left for Europe: he signed up January 1, 1915, at which time his Attestation Paper records that he was 5' 8" tall, with a fair complexion, brown hair and brown eyes.

Ayre's leadership abilities were immediately recognized, as he was made a corporal on February 24. The following night he took part in an entertainment for Sergeant-Major John Moore, a veteran of the Second Boer War (1899-1902), and one of the oldest members of the Regiment, held at Wood's West End Restaurant and arranged by the non-commissioned officers of D Company. Ayre made the toast to "Our Guests", with the response by Corporal Kevin Keegan.

As a member of D Company, Ayre left St. John's with the 249 other members of that company on board the SS *Stephano* on March 20, bound for Halifax. Arriving a few days later, they transferred to a larger ship, the SS *Orduna*, for the trek to Great Britain. While there, on June 15, Ayre was promoted to Sergeant.

Sergeant Ayre did not remain long in England, however: on July 15, Newfoundland's Governor, Sir Walter Davidson, who was the head of the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, which managed the Regiment, asked that three non-commissioned officers or men to be sent back to Newfoundland "to take charge of the training of G Company and ultimately to receive Commissions as second Lieutenants in this Company if proved suitable." (*The Evening Telegram*, July 30, 1916)

The three men chosen for this assignment were Ayre, Corporal Kevin Keegan and Private H. J. Rowsell. Their commissions went into effect on July 29; they left Liverpool on August 08, arriving in St. John's two weeks later, at which time they were attached to Headquarters.

The training of G Company was well underway when, on October 28, Ayre was appointed as Acting Adjutant, in effect the chief administrative assistant to the commanding officer at HQ St. John's. He held this appointment until February 28 of the following year, when the Adjutant, Captain Alexander Montgomerie, returned to the position.

Ayre left for Europe again on March 23, 1916, aboard the SS *Stephano*. Once there he was attached to the Depot at Ayr, Scotland, where he remained until mid June when he joined the Battalion in the Field. He was just in time for the big push. Given charge of one of the units of the Newfoundland Regiment, he led them over the top at Beaumont Hamel on the morning of July 1, 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. Like his cousins Captian Eric Ayre and 2nd Lieutenant Wilfred Ayre, also of the Newfoundland Regiment, and Eric's brother, Captain Bernard Ayre of the Norfolk Regiment, he met his death on that July morning along with almost 200 of his comrades.

While the bodies of many of the officers and enlisted men who died that day were recovered and given a formal burial and a grave marker bearing their name and that of their regiment, Ayre was not so fortunate.

His body was not identified during the retrieval of bodies in the aftermath of the fighting because another soldier had stolen his revolver, holster and identification disc. A report in his Regimental personnel file sheds light on this course of events. It includes correspondence or statements from several individuals, most of whom are not clearly identified. The first is an excerpt from a letter addressed to Major Timewell, at the Pay and Records Office in London, and appears to be from Gerald's father, F. W. Ayre, in St. John's. It is dated April 28, 1917. He writes:

Last week I received a revolver belonging to Gerald, which has been forwarded to me, [his] identity disc was not received.

Yesterday morning, when interviewing one of our boys, who has just returned, having lost his left arm, he told me that when his stretcher was brought to the train at Boulonge, a stretcher near him contained another Nfld soldier. Having heard someone state this, he tried to see the man's face, but could not do so. Immediately afterwards, the Orderly came along and he heard him tell another man that he had taken Captain Ayre's revolver from under this man's pillow. I have been wondering if there were any possibility of tracing the identity disc. It seems quite evident to me that this man removed the case of the revolver from Gerald's body, no doubt having picked up the revolver near him, and also removed the identity disc from his wrist, as I have no positive information of Gerald's body having been recovered. Of course you will understand that the removal of the disc prevented any possibility of recognition. I hate to put you to any trouble, but would like to see if any trace of the volunteer who brought it in can be obtained.

There are a number of other documents in that section of the file, each of which makes reference to the revolver and the identity disc, including the final memo, dated August 11, 1917, which states:

I have made inquiries and have been informed that the revolver was found on the person of a soldier, who was being evacuated to the Base. As this was contrary to Regulations the revolver was removed and he was

asked to whom it belonged. He stated that he took it off the body of Lieut. G. W. Ayre. The patient was then lifted into the train and the revolver and disc brought back to the camp. I have interviewed the Orderly who packed these articles and he is positive that a disc was packed with the revolver.

I am unable to give the name of the soldier from whom the revolver was taken as all my records have been sent to the D.A.G., 3rd Echelon.¹

2nd Lieutenant Gerald Walter Ayre has no known grave. His name is emblazoned on the Beaumont Hamel Memorial along with those of 813 other Newfoundlanders who suffered a similar fate. His identity disc was never found.

¹ Deputy Adjutant General, 3rd Echelon refers to the Adjutant-General's Office at the Base. There was only one for the whole of the British Expeditionary Force: it was at Rouen, France, and handled all personnel records and general manpower matters. The Deputy Adjutant General throughout the war was Major-General E. R. C. Graham.



Gerald Ayre (left) and his cousin, Bernard Ayre.

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.