

GOWER REMEMBERS

Lieutenant Fred Moore Sellars
(1894-1946)



“There is one fact that gives us courage that if we do go and fail, we believe that over our bodies our comrades will go on to victory and triumph. I don’t think our boys are very nervous. I believe that when that hour comes if it does come, when it will be up to them to win fame and honour for their country, that if it is possible, it shall be won.”

(Letter from Sellars to Rev. H. Leggo, dated March 2, 1915 and published in *The Evening Telegram*. April 5, 1915.)

Fred Moore Sellars was born in Western Bay on October 7, 1894, the third son and fourth of eight children of Harriet Crowley and Stephen Sellars. His father was a fisherman, who after more than 20 years of practicing his trade in the Western Bay area, moved his family to St. John's sometime around 1905, where he continued to fish out of St. John's harbour. In St. John's, the family resided at 62 Barter's Hill.

Fred probably attended the Methodist school in Western Bay before the move to St. John's. Once settled in the capital city he was enrolled in the Methodist College, where he proved to be both a good student and a fine athlete. He also became a member of the Methodist Guards, a local boys' brigade. *The Evening Telegram* for April 14, 1910, reports that the then 15-year-old Sellars was the winner of the Walking Race in the brigade's indoor sports event held at its armoury on Springdale Street.

Upon completion of his course of study at the College, in the spring of 1914, Sellars was accepted by the Methodist Church in Newfoundland as a probationary candidate for the ministry. He was assigned his first pastoral charge at Deer Islands, Bonavista North, under the supervision of the Rev. Elijah C. French, who was stationed at near-by Greenspond. His stay there did not last long, however, because of the declaration of war in Europe.

Sellars was able to resist the government's campaign to encourage young men to enlist and his own desire to serve King and Country, at least until almost the end of 1914, when, for whatever reason, on December 26, of that year he joined the Newfoundland Regiment in St. John's. He was assigned Regimental number 814, and as part of the second contingent, C Company, he went overseas on the SS Dominion in early February 1915.

A few weeks after his arrival in Scotland, Sellars wrote to the Rev. H. Leggo, a Church of England clergyman serving the Bonavista North area during the time Sellars was at Deer Island. That letter was dated March 2,

1915 and published in *The Evening Telegram* some two months later on April 5, which gives some indication of the length of time it took to get mail back and forth across the Atlantic during war time. In that letter he describes their journey to England. *“On Friday, the 5th of February, we boarded the S.S. Neptune, and were taken to the S.S. Dominion, which was caught in the ice a few miles from the Narrows. All Saturday we were in the ice making very poor progress. ...*

The captain was very careful all the way. His orders were that as soon as night fell all lights were to be put out. On Monday morning [February 15] when we came in sight of the Irish Coast all the boats were put in readiness so that if a German submarine fell in love with us somebody perhaps might save their lives. It was reported in Liverpool that we were torpedoed and all hands lost, but I think it was a false report as we are all here in good health.”

Sellars' letter also recounts C Company's arrival at Edinburgh Castle: *“On Tuesday, the 16th about noon we arrived at Liverpool. We were put immediately on the train and taken to Edinburgh. We all thought we were going to Fort George ... Then we learned to our delight that we were to be stationed at Edinburgh Castle, also that all the boys from the Fort were coming to join us. Now we are all here together.”*

The Newfoundland Regiment spent several months at Edinburgh Castle before being transferred to Stobbs Camp, near the Scottish town of Hawick, on May 11. Approximately three months of further training took place there before the main force of the Regiment, some 1,000 plus men, entrained for Aldershot, in southern England.

It was from nearby Devonport on August 20 that the Regiment boarded the SS *Megantic* for a sea voyage to the eastern Mediterranean and the war. Arriving in Egypt on September 1, they spent almost two weeks getting used to the hot, dry climate, before sailing north on board the SS *Ausonia*, leaving Egypt on September 13 and arriving at the Greek island of Lemnos on the 18th. It was from the port town on Mudros on that island that the Regiment crossed over a narrow arm of the Aegean Sea and

landed at Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula on the night of September 19-20. They were welcomed to their new 'home' by a barrage of Turkish shells and mortar fire. Sellars was too close to one of those shells when it hit the ground, receiving shrapnel wounds to his right shoulder blade. He was admitted to the 26th Casualty Clearing Station at Suvla that night, before being transferred to a hospital on the island of Malta on the 26th.

The wound proved to be serious, causing Sellars to be evacuated to England on October 23, and admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth on November 3. He was subsequently released from hospital and reported the Depot at Ayr, Scotland, on November 15; he spent the next ten months working there.

Sellars rose rapidly through the non-commissioned ranks, being named as Lance Corporal on January 26 before leaving Newfoundland; he was made Corporal on July 2, and acting Sergeant on December 5. While at the Depot at Ayr on July 12, 1916, he joined the ranks of the commissioned officers, with a promotion to 2nd Lieutenant.

The Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was the air wing of the British Army. It had come into existence on April 13, 1912, and existed throughout most of the war until it merged with the Royal Air Force, which had been part of the Royal Navy, on April 1, 1918, forming a separate air service on par with rather than subservient to the army and naval forces.

While individuals could join the RFC directly, for much of its existence, soldiers from British Army regiments could transfer to the army's air service, retaining their affiliation with their regiment. Sellars was one of those men. He was attached to the RFC on September 25, 1916, where he spent almost two years as a flight instructor in England before flying combat mission over enemy territory on the continent. He was on one of those missions on August 27, 1918, when he was shot down by enemy near the French city of Cambrai.

Luckily, Sellars survived the crash of his small plane, although he did sustain injuries severe enough to warrant a short stay in a German

hospital. Upon release from hospital he was incarcerated as a prisoner of war. He was attempting an escape from the prisoner of war camp in November 1918 when the armistice was signed. Sellars was subsequently repatriated to England, via Switzerland, arriving at Dover on December 4, 1918. During his time in the RFC he was promoted first to Flying Officer on May 19, 1917, and to Lieutenant on December 1 of that year.

Sellars transferred back to the Newfoundland Regiment of February 26, 1919. He sailed for St. John's on March 12, arriving there on the 24th. He was demobilized from the Regiment on April 10. He probably spent the next few months arranging to begin studies for the ministry, but he did return to Scotland in November, where he married a widow, Jean Baird Clark McGill, whom he would have met during one of his periods of service in that country. She had a son, Ian Hamilton (b. 1909), from her previous marriage, and they became the parents of three: Alastair (b. 1922), Jean Enid (b. 1924), and Eric Elliott (b. 1926).

In his quest for a career in the Methodist ministry, Sellars was accepted into the Wesleyan Theological College, in affiliation with McGill University, in Montreal. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in Theology in 1926 and was ordained into the United Church of Canada, as it had become in 1925, in Ottawa later that year.

During his studies, Sellars, with a growing family to support, ministered at the Methodist Church in Moretown, Vermont (1921-1924) and at the Federated Church at Waitsfield, Vermont (1924-1926), both within driving distance of Montreal. Following his ordination, he relocated to the United States, serving the Methodist Church in Spencer, New York (1926-1933), in Shavertown, Pennsylvania (1933-1937) and at Immanuel Union Church, Westerleigh, Staten Island, New York (1937-1946). He also served at various times as Chaplain to the American Red Cross at Staten Island, Honorary Chaplain of Aviation Garrison No. 27, Army and Navy Union and President of the Staten Island Federation of Churches.

Fred Sellars died at his home in Staten Island on June 10, 1946, four months shy of his 52nd birthday. In writing about him in the program

booklet for the *Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Church* (1947), A. Norman Janes remarked: *“His personality was magnetic and warm, winning him a host of friends. His mind was vigorous and alive, and well stored with literary treasures, especially from the fields of biography and great religious poetry. His preaching spoke directly home to the hearts of all sorts and conditions of men. The young felt he was surely for them, for he gave a voice to their dreams and a glow to their hearts; all who heard him were impressed with the reverence he imparted to worship, and went with the awareness that for one brief hour they had been in the Holy Presence of God. Following the first World War his sermons and lectures became a flaming evangel for peace and goodwill among men and nations. With all the force of his intense nature he pleaded for the understanding heart.”*

Jean Sellars survived her husband by more than 30 years. She died in Fairfield, Connecticut, on December 25, 1977 at the age of 91. His brother, Eldon Sellars (Regimental number 8001) was the first enlistee in the Newfoundland Forestry Corps.

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.