

GOWER REMEMBERS

Staff Sergeant William Frederick Cyril Hutchings
(1894-1944)



“Bill” Hutchings entered the University with the class of '14 and later joined '16. Those who know him will realize that the army has gained a man who embodies all those attributes of courage, fidelity and good cheer which go to make English soldiers what they are. Wherever the battle is thickest, there you will find Bill, and wherever Bill is, are our best wishes, and our sympathy for the German who happens to be in front of him. (The Argosy, Mount Allison University, Vol. XLI(2), 1914)

William Frederick Cyril Hutchings was born in St. John's on June 21, 1894, the eldest child and only son of Annie Maude White and Charles Henry Hutchings. The Hutchings family also included six girls: Irene, Helen, Marjorie, Gertrude, Maude, Jean. Charles Hutchings was a noted barrister who served as a member of the Newfoundland House of Assembly (1904-1908), as Deputy Minister of Justice (1900-1904; 1908-1917) and as Inspector General of the Newfoundland Constabulary (1917-1934). Annie was kept busy raising seven children in addition to various duties that fell to her as the wife of a very influential and high-placed public official.

Billy Hutchings, as he was known in his early years, began his schooling at the Methodist College, joining the Kindergarten class there in the Fall of 1900. He was an excellent student who won prizes in many subjects: in his final year (1910-1911) he was awarded the Council of Higher Education prize for excellence in Chemistry. While at the College, he was also a noted athlete, participating in hockey, football (soccer) and rugby, among other sports. Hutchings was home for the summer of 1912 from his first year at university and played for the Collegians football team. In a game against the C.E.I. club team the previous evening, *The Evening Telegram* for June 28, 1912 reported that "All the Collegian team played well, especially Hutchings. He is a 'corker.'" The Collegians won the match 2-1.

After completing his studies at the Methodist College, Hutchings enrolled in Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. *The Evening Telegram* for September 16, 1911 noted that Charles Hutchings was leaving the following day "for a holiday tour of Canada". William, who was entering Mount Allison University, accompanied his father on this trip.

Hutchings spent at least two years (1911-1913) at Mount Allison and was expected to graduate from there in 1914. However, various matters, the most of influential of which was the outbreak of war in Europe, caused him to delay his studies, with a new plan to graduate in 1916.

When war was declared in August 1914, Hutchings was living in St. John's, where he was studying law with James P. Blackwood, KC. Once he had obtained the necessary approval from Mount Allison and the Newfoundland Law Society to delay his studies, on September 16, 1914, he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment, receiving Regimental number 538. As such, he was one of the First Five Hundred, also known as the Blue Puttees because of the colour of the cloths that they wrapped around their legs from ankle to knee to keep mud, vermin and other undesirables out.

From his Attestation paper we learn that Hutchings was 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 155 pounds. He had a fair complexion, with brown hair and blue eyes. And, he was missing the first joint of the thumb and second finger of his left hand, although there is no explanation for what had caused these joints to be absent. It is safe to assume that he was right-handed; otherwise he would have been disqualified on medical grounds. In order for a soldier to become proficient in firing a rifle he would need to have a full trigger finger.

Before leaving St. John's, less than a week after his enlistment, Hutchings was made a lance corporal. As a Blue Puttee, he was on board the SS *Florizel* when it left St. John's on October 04, 1914 for the trek across the Atlantic. The *Florizel* was part of a larger convoy of Canadian ships, arriving in Plymouth Sound on the southwest coast of England on October 14. They were required to remain aboard ship until October 20, however, and then ordered to march to Salisbury Plain that same day. There, in the shadow of Stonehenge, they discovered that they were to

spend the Fall of 1914 in tents, with little protection from the rain and mud that became their constant companions.

Finally, on December 8 they were sent by train to Fort George in Scotland, where they continued their training. They would remain in Scotland, first at Fort George, then at Edinburgh Castle and lastly at Stobs Camp, near Hawick, throughout the months that followed. They were transported back to England in early August, this time to Aldershot on the south coast. It was from nearby Devonport on August 20, 1915 that 1000 plus members of the Newfoundland Regiment, Hutchings among them, boarded the HMT *Megantic* for the eastern Mediterranean and the war.

While still at Stobs Camp, on July 2, 1915, Hutchings was promoted to Corporal, a rank he held for just 15 days. Perhaps he went too far in celebrating his new stripe, but whatever the reason, he missed tattoo from July 02 to July 05, his third such infraction, resulting in a severe reprimand and the loss of four days' pay. Then, on July 17, he did it again for another three days. This time, in addition to losing four days pay, he reverted to the rank of private at his own request.

It took eleven days for the Newfoundland Regiment to reach its destination: Alexandria, Egypt. They were sent immediately by train to Cairo, where they underwent a period of acclimatization. On September 13, they sailed north aboard the *Ausonia* for Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos, from where, on the night of September 19-20, they were ferried across the Aegean Sea to Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula. There they were met by heavy Turkish shellfire.

The Newfoundlanders spent approximately four months at Suvla Bay, under horrible conditions. Thirty-one died in action or from wounds received. Another 15 succumbed to disease or severe frostbite. The latter deaths were a result of exposure to the harsh winter storms that inundated the area during November. Eighty soldiers were wounded by shell fire or snipers bullets. 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.

One of those who was evacuated for medical reasons was Hutchings. On November 26, 1915, he was sent to No. 54 Casualty Clearing Station, suffering from dysentery. A week later, he was in Malta, halfway across the Mediterranean, where he spent the rest of December and most of January at St. John's Military Hospital. On January 24, he was invalided to England on the SS *Letitia*, where, on February 02, he was admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth. A month later, he was released from hospital and attached to the Regimental Depot at Ayr, Scotland.

It quickly became apparent that Hutchings could not return to fighting any time soon. On June 16, 1916, he was transferred to the Regiment's Pay and Records Office in London, where he remained for some time. On December 23, 1916, he was made acting Corporal. During this time, he was having headaches and problems with his eyesight, which affected his proficiency at the clerical work he was assigned at the Pay and Records Office. On August 1, 1917, he underwent a comprehensive eye examination, which recommended that he be prescribed glasses for constant wear. Such a diagnosis would usually preclude him from rejoining the Regiment in the field.

He continued to work at the Pay and Records Office, and while there, on November 24, 1917, he was raised to the rank of acting Staff Sergeant. Some consideration seems to have been given to a medical discharge during this time, as on February 14, 1918, he completed an interview with the Civil Re-establishment Committee's Vocational Officer with a view to his employment prospects once he was discharged. This process was limited to soldiers who had some form of disability. At that time Hutchings stated his desire to return to studying law.

Before his discharge became a reality, however, he attempted to transfer to the Royal Air Force, but was rejected, in all likelihood because of his eyesight. He also inquired of the Regiment whether he could be re-assigned to the Newfoundland Forestry Corps. The response from the NFC was that they already had enough non-commissioned officers.

He spent part of 1918 in Newfoundland on Blue Puttee Leave, available to members of the First Five Hundred who had not had received any furlough time up to that point. He left England for that leave on July 21, arriving in St. John's on August 4. He returned to England late in the Fall, spending another six weeks there before being repatriated to Newfoundland on January 1, 1919. He was attached to headquarters on his arrival in St. John's on January 20, and demobilized from the Regiment on February 27.

Soon after his repatriation, Hutchings resumed his law studies with J. P. Blackwood, but was forced to abandon them for medical reasons. In all likelihood he was suffering from what was then called 'soldier's heart' now referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He found employment with the St. Lawrence Timber, Pulp and Steamship Company at its mill in Lomond, in Bonne Bay. It closed in the mid-1920s and was purchased in 1925 by the Armstrong Whitworth, which had built the pulp and paper mill in Corner Brook and Hutchings went to work there in charge of woods operations.

In the mid to late 1930s he made another attempt at completing his law studies but to no avail. Sometime around 1939, he became involved in mining speculation, developing a concession in Sops Arm, White Bay. Early in the Spring of 1944 he travelled to Montreal for various meetings with mining experts. While there, on April 17, 1944, he died suddenly, probably of a heart attack. He was two months shy of his 50th birthday.

William Hutchings remains were brought back to St. John's for interment in the General Protestant Cemetery on Topsail Road. He was involved in very little actual fighting in the war but his life was severely affected by what he saw and took part in there. He may have returned to civilian life in 1919 but like most of his comrades who survived the war, it never left him and, quite possibly, was a catalyst in his premature death.

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 women please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca or at 726-6169.