

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Lieutenant Robert Palfrey Holloway**  
(1887-1917)



Lt. Robert P. Holloway *“Has constantly displayed great gallantry and initiative as Battalion sniping and Intelligence Officer. On 27<sup>th</sup> January he was sent to locate the exact position gained by troops who had made an attack. At great personal risk he visited all the positions captured and brought back most valuable information.”* (London Gazette, June 6, 1917)

Robert (Bert) Palfrey Holloway was born in St. John's on November 15, 1887, the second son and fourth of four children of Henrietta Palfrey and Robert Edwards Holloway. Holloway's father came to St. John's from England in 1874 as principal of the Wesleyan Academy. There he met, and in 1878 married, Henrietta Palfrey, daughter of Elizabeth Bray and Captain Richard Palfrey. Elizabeth Palfrey's sister Mary Hannah was married to Charles Robert Ayre, founder of the Ayre mercantile premises in St. John's.

Holloway's siblings were William (b. 1879), Elizabeth, more commonly known as Elsie, (b. 1882), and Kate (b. 1885). He was very lucky to have survived his early childhood years as a severe diphtheria epidemic caused the deaths of hundreds of children in St. John's during the period between 1888 and 1891. His sister Kate, not quite three years of age, succumbed to the disease on March 8, 1888, and then older brother Will met a similar fate two weeks later, at age eight. In 1889 alone, 40 children under the age of 14 from the Gower Street congregation, died from diphtheria.

With his father as principal of the Methodist College – the name had been changed in 1886 – it is no surprise that that was the school that Holloway attended. He was an eager student who excelled in his academic studies, particularly in the sciences. The recipient of prizes throughout his time at the college, in his final year, in 1904, he was awarded the prize for highest marks in Chemistry and a scholarship for the highest overall marks in science, which was awarded for the first time in that school year.

He also enjoyed travelling, accompanying his father on several of his excursions around coastal Newfoundland, where the elder Holloway, an avid and accomplished photographer, went

each summer to document the Newfoundland outport scenery. He also was with his father in December 1902, when he travelled to Jamaica for his health. Upon completing his schooling, in 1905 Bert Holloway took another journey by water, this time the short crossing of the tickle to Bell Island, where he was employed as a chemist with the Dominion Iron and Steel Company.

It is unclear how long Holloway spent working on Bell Island. He was certainly back in St. John's by 1908, when he and his sister Elsie established a photography business at the corner of Bates Hill and Henry Street in St. John's. His father had died in 1904 and in 1905 the family (Robert, Elsie and their mother) published a large number of the elder Holloway's photographs in a book entitled *Through Newfoundland with a Camera*. They also converted the attic space of the family home at 168 Gower Street to a photographic studio and darkroom. The demand for their services led to the procurement of the larger space they moved to in 1908.

Shortly after the new studio opened, a reporter from *The Evening Telegram* visited to write about this venture for a series on local industries. In a fairly lengthy article, which appeared in the newspaper on December 11, 1908, he remarked on the size of the building, which at first glance would appear to be "*too large for a mere photographic studio, but when Mr. Holloway explains the use to which the different apartments will be devoted to, he very soon changes that opinion and realizes that Mr. Holloway has only looked ahead a few years and with a photographic eye has made allowances for the evolution that must go on in photographic work in this city and country in common with the rest of the civilized world.*"

The writer comments further: "*Mr. Holloway has already established a name as an artist and proved that he inherits the*

*great talent of his father in this line. He will venture out into fields of art that are almost untrodden as yet in this country and for which there is ample scope for a young man to achieve brilliant success. ... Such enterprise as Mr. Holloway is showing in this undertaking is well deserving of patronage. ... For these reasons, if no others, he is deserving of support and encouragement."*

Sometime during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Holloway met Agnes Isobel Robertson, the daughter of Jeanne Ross and the Rev. Andrew Robertson, from New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. She and Holloway were married, possibly by her father, in York, Ontario, on July 11, 1911. The newlyweds set up residence in St. John's, at 29 King's Bridge Road, where a son, Robert Andrew, was born on April 13, 1912, and a daughter, Agnes Macil, on December 23, 1914.

Holloway and his wife were enjoying life in St. John's during the summer of 1914, awaiting the birth of their second child. The photographic business was doing well. A second, expanded edition of *Through Newfoundland with a Camera* had been released in 1910. All seemed well with the world. Then, on August 4, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire.

Holloway did not enlist in the newly reformed Newfoundland Regiment right away as so many of his friends and contemporaries did. After all, he had a wife and family to support and a business to run. He did not try to avoid his duty to King and Country, however. He received a commission as a lieutenant in the Newfoundland Naval Reserve Force where he was involved in coastal surveillance under the command of Anthony MacDermott, who was in charge of the Reserve Force. In this capacity he spent part of the late summer of 1915 in the area off Harbour Deep on board the SS *Fogota*. He also worked with the Regiment's medical

officers “*assisting them in the examination of all candidates and making up the records thereof*” (*Newfoundland Quarterly*, July 1916, p. 8). He had also been photographing soldiers as individuals, in groups and in training at Pleasantville.

The time came, however, when he could no longer resist the call to join friends, schoolmates and countrymen in the Newfoundland Regiment. On December 24, 1915, he made an application to Newfoundland’s Governor, Sir Walter Davidson, who chaired the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, and in effect the war effort, for a commission in the Regiment. This request was granted and on January 11, 1916, he was commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. He went overseas in July and joined the Battalion in the Field on November 04, in time for the final days of the Battle of the Somme.

The Regiment left the Gueudecourt region late in 1916, towards the end of January 1917 they were moved to an area known as Le Transloy. Shortly before that move, on January 11, 1917, Holloway was promoted to Lieutenant. His abilities as a sniper, credited to his expertise with focusing cameras, were soon in evidence, and he came to be considered, along with Corporal John Shiwak from Rigolet, one of the best snipers in the Regiment. He was with the Regiment throughout the Winter and early Spring of 1917, where his sniping and reconnaissance work proved instrumental to the cause, so much so that he was mentioned in dispatches, just a step below receiving a medal.

Perhaps he did not receive a medal for exploits such as these because he was not always following direct orders when engaged in such work. An unidentified former member of the Regiment, possibly Captain Leo C. Murphy, writing in *The Evening Telegram* (January 28, 1922), records “*the adventures of Bert Holloway and Sam Smith* [# 932, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, killed at Monchy-

le-Preux, April 14, 1917] *who penetrated about a mile and a half behind the Hun line, and reported their findings to Brigade Headquarters. This placed the Commanding Officer in a quandary: if he recommended any person or reported the work they done by the Regiment they may be decorated, but they may also be court-martialed.*”

It was at Monchy-le-Preux, near Arras, during the Battle of Cambrai, that the Newfoundland Regiment suffered the second of its major losses of personnel in World War I. During fighting there on April 14, 1917, 460 members of the Regiment were put out of action: 166 were killed outright or died later of wounds; 141 were wounded but later recovered; 153 were taken prisoners and spent the remainder of the war in German prison (work) camps. One of the dead was Holloway: although his body was never recovered there were a number of comrades who saw his dead body and gave statements to that effect. His name is emblazoned on the War Memorial at Beaumont Hamel Park to those Newfoundlanders who have no known grave.

Holloway’s wife, Agnes, and their two children had travelled to Great Britain sometime in 1916 and it was while she was in London on April 19, 1917 that she was informed of Holloway’s death. Later that year she requested and received funds from the Regiment to relocate herself and her children to Canada. According to the United States Federal Census, she and her children were living in Davidson, Tennessee, in 1920. On April 24, 1925 she married Jonathan Marshall of Harbour Grace, in Montreal. He was ten years her junior. She died in Vancouver, British Columbia, on June 09, 1971.

Robert Andrew Holloway followed in his father’s footsteps as far as the military is concerned. He joined the RAF in World War II and rose to the rank of Squadron Leader. During that war

he was stationed for a period of time in Newfoundland. He died in Victoria, British Columbia, on April 04, 1991. His sister, Macil, did not marry; she lived in California for many years and died there on February 03, 2008.

Elsie Holloway carried on the family photography business that she and Robert had opened in 1908 until her retirement in 1946. She used glass plate negatives in her photography right up until the end. That body of work, along with what has survived of her father's and her brother's photography, is housed at The Rooms Provincial Archives.

One of Bert Holloway's closest friends growing up in St. John's was Kevin Keegan. He was the son of Mary (Minnie) Walsh and Dr. Lawrence Keegan, who was a medical doctor and one-time administrator of the Lunatic Asylum. Despite Keegan being a Roman Catholic and attending the rival St. Bonaventure's College, he was a frequent and welcome visitor at the Holloway home as Bert was at the Keegans. Dr. Keegan nicknamed them Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, after the characters from British nursery rhymes, and especially in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland stories. Keegan was also a member of the Newfoundland Regiment; he survived the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux, and in a letter home to his parents after the battle laments the loss of his best friend with the phrase "There is no Dee anymore!"

Newfoundland was one of the few countries that fought in World War I to not have an official war artist. In order to remedy this situation, plans were underway to appoint Holloway as the Newfoundland Regiment's official photographer. However, he was killed before that appointment could take place. What incredible photographs might otherwise exist of the Newfoundland Regiment in action and at rest. *Quod nimis!*

*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 201<sup>st</sup> year as a faith community.*

*If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at [briggs@mun.ca](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*

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