

GOWER REMEMBERS

Major James St. Pierre Knight (1885-1944)



“Major Captain Knight has done much good work during the last year as Medical officer of this Battalion, and, latterly, as D.A.D.M.S. of the Contingent. In addition to the medical care of the Battalion, he has superintended the provision of a “surgical appliance” room where he has worked untiringly and with excellent results, at the final[?] treatment of severely wounded men after their discharge from hospital. As a result such men have become fit to pursue their previous callings on discharge.”
(Recommendation for Knight to receive Order of British Empire, January 09, 1919)

James St. Pierre Knight was born at St. Pierre, the French-governed island off Newfoundland's Burin Peninsula, on June 04, 1885, the only son of Mary Clinton and James Roberts Knight. He had one sister, Florence. His father operated a very successful import-export and shipping enterprise, based in St. John's with connections in St. Pierre. It was there that he met his future wife, Mary Clinton, daughter of a local medical doctor who had practised at St. Pierre and in the Harbour Breton area.

Soon after Knight's birth, his parents brought him to St. John's where he attended the Methodist College. He proved to be an excellent student, both in academics, and athletics, where he was singled out for prowess on the football (soccer) and cricket fields. Following his graduation from the college, he enrolled in Edinburgh University in Scotland, graduating in 1910 with the University's Gold Medal in Medicine.

He was soon back in St. John's, where he interned and later practised at the St. John's General Hospital. In 1912 he was appointed as acting Resident Physician at that hospital, relieving the incumbent, Dr. Lawrence Keegan, who had taken ill. The next year he was listed as one of two district surgeons for St. John's East. The other was Dr. Timothy M. Mitchell. During that time, he also operated an extensive private practice.

Despite the time and effort involved in establishing a new medical practice, and the demands of his other commitments, Knight found time to relax and enjoy life. He was an avid curler: his name appeared on various trophies offered by the St. John's Curling Association, including the President's Trophy, the Bonavista Trophy, and the Buchanan Cup. And, he appears to have developed a proficiency at card games, winning at least one major card tournament sponsored by the Curling Club in 1914. He was also one of a number of its members who were now in uniform and recognized by the Curling Association when it presented a cheque for \$1,025.00 to the Women's Patriotic Association, money it had raised on Soldiers and Sailors Day on January 24, 1916.

Knight was also a member of the Methodist College Literary Institute (MCLI), a debating society, and the Freemasons. In the latter, he was initiated into the first degree at Whiteway Lodge in St. John's on May 28, 1915. He was passed in the second degree on June 25 and raised to the third degree on October 25.

Watching so many of his friends and acquaintances enlist in the Newfoundland Regiment and leave for Europe must have been an incredibly challenging time for Knight. As a medical doctor, if he wanted to be part of the war effort, he would have to join the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), and that could result in assignment to any Regiment within the British Empire's armies that needed a medical officer. Eventually, however, he did sign up with the RAMC. While he sought assignment to the Newfoundland Regiment, alas, it was not to be. He sailed for England with G Company of the Regiment in October 1915. Once there he was assigned, with the commissioned rank of Captain, to the Connaught Rangers, an Irish-based infantry regiment of the British Army. The Rangers had as its marching song the well-known "It's a Long Way to Tipperary".

Knight was with the Connaught Rangers through several tours of duty on the Western Front. An article that appeared in *The St. John's Daily News* on November 13, 1916 reported on his presence at the Battle of the Somme. A letter that accompanied that article from an anonymous observer indicated that "*Knight was up there (in the thick of the fighting) with another battalion, and did great work. If he had his rights he should have had his ribbon¹. Jimmy is no shirker and is doing famously.*"

In the late Fall of 1916 Knight returned to St. John's on furlough. Not long after his return to duty, he applied for a transfer to the Newfoundland Regiment but in a letter from the Assistant Director General of Army Medical Services, Sir E. S. Worthington, dated April 23, 1917, his requested was denied. He did not lose heart however, and his long-sought-

¹ Received a medal.

after transfer finally came through on October 27, 1918. A few weeks later, on December 2, he was promoted to the rank of Major and named Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services for the Regiment (DADMS).

Even though the war ended at roughly the same time as Knight joined the Newfoundland Regiment, he was quite aware that his medical duties with Newfoundland soldiers would not end with the signing of the Armistice. With this in mind, he underwent special training at Sheppard's Bush Orthopaedic Hospital, in London, to be better able to treat his patients.

On June 16, 1913, *The Evening Telegram* announced that Miss Alice Hewitt, a native of Irthlingborough, in Northamptonshire, England, had arrived in St. John's on board the SS *Sardinian*, to become the new Head Nurse at the "Lunatic Asylum". She remained in St. John's in that position until November 1916, when she returned to England to become part of the war effort. It is quite likely that she and Knight had met during those three years, St. John's not being that big a place. In any event, a relationship developed between them that eventually resulted in their marriage, which took place in London, on October 27, 1917.

Knight and his wife were back in St. John's by mid-summer 1919. On June 11 he was ordered to report for duty to Major W. H. Parsons, the Medical Officer with the Hospitals Commission and the Commissioner for Pensions, "*for such medical services with the Hospital Commission, or Board of Pensions Commissioners, or any such other work in connection with the forces which he may from time to time assign you.*" Five days later he was made a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his war service.

In addition to his work with veterans, Knight was also engaged in the process of establishing his own medical practice. He was placed on the Regiment's Reserve List for Officers on September 21, 1921. The

following year, in June, he was named as Medical Superintendent of the Sudbury Hospital in the west end of St. John's. Prior to that appointment, he had served for a short period as physician and surgeon at the Empire Barracks Hospital on Water Street. Later he was made Superintendent of the Fever Hospital, Superintendent of the Home for the Aged and Infirm and Chief Medical Officer for the Port of St. John's. In 1934, under Commission of Government, he was appointed Chief Medical Officer with the Department of Public Health and Welfare. During his tenure with the Hospital for the Aged and Infirm he conducted a major re-organization of its internal operations, which led to many improvements in the administration of the hospital.

Their return from England heralded the beginning of changes in the Knight family. First their son Geoffrey was born in November 1919, followed a few years later by sisters Sonia and Lois. Knight's mother, Mary Clinton Knight, died on May 31, 1921. His father followed four and one-half years later on December 06, 1925. James was the sole heir to his father's estate, "*to deal with as he pleases.*" That estate was valued at \$24,970.00 (approximately \$340,000.00 in 2016 dollars).

In addition to his medical duties, Knight found time to contribute to the greater community. He served on the Executive of the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA) during the early 1920s, and in that capacity attended the unveiling of the Bell Island War Memorial on June 15, 1921. He was also a member of the committee struck at Cochrane Street Methodist Church to recommend an appropriate war memorial for the sanctuary of that church. In 1932 he was elected Master of Whiteway Masonic Lodge and later filled the office of District Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of Newfoundland; he also served as Master of Empire Lodge of the Sons of England. For many years he was Deputy Chairman of the Board of Pensions Commissioners.

In July 1942, Knight became ill, so ill that he was required to give up his medical duties; a period of treatment followed and he subsequently

returned to work. His illness continued, however, and in February 1944 he travelled to Montreal for further treatment. After surgery there, he appeared to be on the mend, but in early April his condition worsened and he died on April 10. His body was returned to St. John's for interment.

News of his death at 59 years of age caused great shock and sorrow in his native land. Expressions of sympathy came from all quarters and included a resolution that was passed by the Board of Pensions Commissioners and published in local papers. In it, the Board lauded "*His unfailing devotion to duty in all matters pertaining to the welfare of war pensioners, and the cheerful and impartial manner in which he discharged these duties will always be a source of inspiration to those of us who must still carry on the work in which he was so much interested.*" (*The Daily News*, April 20, 1944)

His funeral took place from his residence on King's Bridge Road, with many friends and colleagues in attendance. Rev. Dr. Dean K. Burns of Gower Street United Church conducted the service and at his graveside at the General Protestant Cemetery on Topsail Road, the GWVA and the Masonic rituals were both performed. Alice Knight survived her husband by 19 years. She died in St. John's on September 8, 1963.

A further indication of the esteem in which Knight was held by his friends can be seen in this tribute to him, written by Captain Leo C. Murphy, one of his fellow officers in the Newfoundland Regiment, and appearing in *The Daily News* on April 20, 1944: "*A handful of letters and faded newspaper clipping fall from the folder on the desk with a rustle like wind-blown leaves. 'More legacies from the last war,' said my friend, himself a veteran of Belgium and the Somme.*

Yes, they were! These ragged envelopes, those well-worn sheets from a Field Service Book, these notes on Y.M.C.A. paper from Hazeley Camp seemed like messages from the dead, but they brought your voice to the living, too!

That postal card on the top of the heap from Galles Camp – where Dr. Knight first arrived with “G” Company in 1915 – a very happy bunch of officers and men – Kevin Keegan, Syd Gane, George Emerson and others.

The menu from the Elyseé, where Dr. Knight and I had dinner when we went up to London for the Lord Mayor’s Show.

The re-organization memo of the Officers Mess, established by Lt. Eric Ellis and given a touch of colour and extra comfort when Howe Greene, Dr. Knight and George Emerson, and the writer, were the new committee, added the piano, Chinese screens, palms, chintz curtains and the Victrola with its ever popular ‘Chamenade’.

The famous Armistice dinner, and the Mock Court-Martial, to which Lt. Col. Barton, D.S.O., Capt. Kean and Dr. Knight contributed so much good humour,

Some of the press notices are scarcely legible, they mention those who attended the unveiling of the Memorial at Bell Island; G.W.V.A. Executives of the past; the Comrades who yearly followed the simple pilgrimage of July 1st – Major J. St. P. Knight, O.B.E., was always included in that little band.

Yesterday his native soil received all that was mortal of that War Veteran, member of the medical profession, Masonic and various fraternal organizations. With his passing, a fragile link with the Great Adventure is snapped – for another of those who kept by candle light the vigil of the advanced dressing station – one more Newfoundlander who knew the meaning of the starshells over ‘No Man’s Land’, who helped relieve the suffering humanity emerging from the shattered trenches, and who now, a soldier, unafraid, has joined the silent Battalions.”

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 202nd 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.