

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Captain Harold Sinclair Tait**  
(1889-1964)



*Carlie White, formerly purser of the S. S. Portia and now of the Newfoundland Regiment and the biggest and heaviest man who left with the First Contingent [# 171], is now in London recovering from his serious illness. Writing to friends in the city by last English mail he intimates that while at Malta he was attended by Dr. Harold Tait and he pays great tribute to the skill and ability of that physician whose work among the wounded and sick is spoken highly of. (The Evening Telegram, March 14, 1916)*



Harold Sinclair Tait was born in St. John's on August 16, 1889, the second son of Sarah Elizabeth Calkin and James Sinclair Tait. He had an older brother, Archibald Campbell (1884-1966), a twin sister, Alice Boyd (1889-1890), a younger brother, Robert Holland (1891-1964) and a younger sister, Mary Elsinore<sup>1</sup> (1894-1989). His father, a native of Wallace, Nova Scotia, had come to Newfoundland as a teacher at Brigus in 1877. There he made the acquaintance of Dr. William Anderson, under whom, in his spare time, he received rudimentary medical training. This led to a change in vocation, a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and eventually, a medical practice in St. John's.

Hal, as he was usually known, attended Bishop Feild College (BFC) in St. John's from 1898 to 1908. Given that the family was Methodist and attended Gower Street church on a regular basis, this is surprising but not unique, as other sons of prominent Methodists, including Hal's brother Robert, attended that school. At BFC, Hal proved himself to be proficient in both academic and athletic pursuits, winning prizes in both areas, including the 1906 "Award for Current History". He was also a member and later officer in the Church Lads' Brigade, the Church of England paramilitary boys' brigade, established in St. John's in 1892.

After completing his studies at BFC, Tait, who had received some medical training from his father, was successful in the passing the entrance examination to Oxford University in England, and underwent medical training there for a number of years. He later attended Dalhousie University in Halifax, graduating with an MD in 1914. He was soon offered and accepted a position as house physician at Flushing General Hospital in New York.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the same woman who was Gower Organist and Choir Director from 1918-1919, 1921-1941 and 1944-1946, and is one of the two people for whom the Tait-Osmond Room is named.

Within weeks of Tait having begun to practice medicine, war was declared in Europe. It would only be a matter of time before Tait would feel and respond to the call to serve King and Country, as his brother Robert had already done and his brother Archibald would do before the end of 1915. He returned home in the early summer of 1915 hoping to be part of the Newfoundland Regiment, but it did not have an overseas medical unit, as the British and Canadians did. As a result, he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), with the rank of lieutenant. He was soon in England, where he spent several months treating wounded and convalescent soldiers at Aldershot, near London.

Upon completing his stay at Aldershot, in the Fall of 1915, Tait was sent to Malta, where he was assigned to St. George's, one of the large military hospitals on that island. After some months, he was placed in charge of the Officers' Convalescent Hospital at Dragumara. He left Malta in the Summer of 1916. After a short furlough in London, in September, he was assigned as Medical Officer on board the *SS Aquitania*, a Cunard liner that had been converted to an armed merchant cruiser at the beginning of the war, for a voyage from England to Macedonia, in the eastern Mediterranean. He served there for almost a year, during which time his duties included treating the troops on the Vardar front, many of whom were suffering from malaria. While there he was raised to the rank of Captain.

By the Fall of 1917, Tait was back in Newfoundland on furlough. His involvement in the war effort for the next nine months is unclear. At some point he travelled to New York. There, in the first half of 1918, he married Bertha Taggart, a native of Brooklyn. On June 18, 1918, he was in Montreal, where he completed an Officers' Declaration Paper for the Canadian Over-seas Expeditionary Force. In it, he listed his wife, who was resident at 739 Bigelow Avenue, Woodhaven, Long Island, New York, as his

next of kin, but gave 141 Dorchester Street, West Montreal, as his current place of residence. He confirmed his two years of active service with the RAMC, and was subsequently assigned to the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC).

Later that year, the *St. John's Daily Star* for November 05, six days before the end of the war, reports: "*Captain Harold Tait who is now a medical officer with the Canadians, tells of a fearful trip he recently had crossing the Atlantic. ¶ Writing his parents he says he found a number of Newfoundlanders in the draft. ¶ Shortly after leaving this side, Spanish influenza made its appearance and soon nearly everyone on board was afflicted. ¶ Terrific weather was experienced and distress signals had to be sent out. ¶ The doctor says: "The steamer was a plague ship. Eight died one day. Twenty-nine Canadians passed out during the voyage, and three Newfoundlanders. We transferred three Newfoundlanders, seriously ill, to hospital when we arrived."* ¶ *Dr. Tait also was a victim but his attack was slight and after a day in bed he felt fine, and was able to continue his work. ¶ On reaching the other side many of the patients were placed in hospital. Dr. Tait expects to remain in the Old Country for the present.*"

With the declaration of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, Tait is soon released from active service. In a document dated May 21, 1919, that he completed for the United States Border Service, he states that he had been living in the United States from November 1917 until June 16, 1918, when he travelled to Montreal. In the 1920 United States Census he together with his wife, and their infant son, David, is living in Springfield Ward 7, Hampden, Massachusetts, and is self-employed as a physician. He still maintained ties with Newfoundland, however; on December 28, 1920, the *Evening Telegram* reported that on the previous night he had been elected to the office of Organist with the Newfoundland Elks, Lodge No. 1 in St. John's.

Family ties also remained in Newfoundland, as his parents and all three of his siblings were residing in St. John's at that time. As the decade passed, however, he began to sever or lose his ties with the place: in May of 1922 he sold off at auction a large array of furniture located at his father's house at 267 Duckworth Street; his brother Robert relocated to the United States in 1923; his mother died in 1925; his father died in 1928. On January 15, 1926, he became a naturalized US citizen. Interestingly, in becoming a citizen, he had to swear that "I am not an anarchist; I am not a polygamist nor a believer in the practice of polygamy." A daughter, Dorothy, joined the family in 1923.

By mid-decade, Tait had joined the staff of the Taunton State Hospital, in Taunton, Massachusetts, as assistant psychiatrist and head of the Department of Roentgenology (X-ray). By 1935, he had been appointed Superintendent of the State Hospital for Mental Disease in Taunton, and remained there in that position for more than a decade. In the early 1950s, he became Superintendent of the Weston State Hospital in Weston, West Virginia. He died in retirement at Wheeling, West Virginia, on January 1, 1964. His wife survived him by 35 years; she died at the age of 94 on August 24, 1989.

While he lived away from Newfoundland for most of his life, and does not appear to have visited often, Tait did remember the land of his birth with a certain degree of fondness. In 1955, he established and provided the funds for two prizes at his *alma mater*, Bishop Feild College: the Tait Gold Medal for Science and the Tait Essay Award. With the death of his brother Archibald in 1966 and his sister Elsie in 1989, the last of the Tait family disappeared from Newfoundland. Their exploits live on, however, particularly at Gower Street United Church, where members of the family made immeasurable contributions during almost a century of service.



*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 202<sup>nd</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.*