

GOWER REMEMBERS

2nd Lieutenant John Spooner
(1893-1972)



The concert under the auspices of Wesley Church Epworth League, was quite a success as to the choice programme supplied, ... Lieut. J. Spooner sang a fine patriotic song, and in response to continued applause gave another in the "Harry Lauder style" scotch and jolly. (The Evening Telegram, February 14, 1918]

John Spooner was born in St. John's on January 11, 1893, the sixth of eight children of Clara Watts and Thomas Vey Spooner. His mother and father were both natives of Brigus where Thomas plied his trade as a fisherman for many years. The family relocated to St. John's sometime in the latter half of 1891 or during 1892. This move took place after the birth of their fifth child Frank in Brigus on April 05, 1891, but before John's birth in St. John's early in 1893.

Once the family had settled in St. John's, Thomas was employed as a labourer for a number of years before going to work as a salesman at E. J. Horwood's general import, groceries and provisions business at 133 Water Street. Two more children were born after the move to St. John's, the first five having been born in Brigus: Arthur (b. 1884), Minnie (b. 1886), Lilian (b. 1888), Thomas Henry (b. 1889), Francis (Frank) (b. 1891), Clara (b. 1895) and Harold Watts (b. 1899). John, Clara and Harold were all baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church.

There is no indication that Spooner attended the Methodist College, although his future military and work history indicates that he did receive some formal education. He may have attended Bishop Feild College, since he and his brother Frank were both members of the Church Lads Brigade. John won first place in the junior hurdle race in the annual CLB Sports day held in April 1907, at which time he was 14 years of age. There is also a record of him being a member of the Newfoundland (Presbyterian) Highlanders.

Spooner had joined the workforce sometime during the year that followed, working as an assistant in the tea storage department at Harvey & Company's warehouse on the waterfront. He was lucky to

survive that employment. On February 20, 1908, he was on the third floor of the warehouse. He went to take a look out the open door when he slipped and went head-long out through the door. He had the presence of mind (or foolhardiness) to turn a summersault in the air on his way down, landing on his back. When medical attention arrived he was unconsciousness, and was considered fortunate to even be alive. He was diagnosed with a fractured left arm and “serious injury to his spine”. He spent time in hospital and made a full recovery.

Four years later Spooner had another unfortunate encounter in the workplace. He was employed in the machine shop at the Reid Newfoundland Company, when his left hand was caught in a revolving device, resulting in a “badly cut and crushed” hand. Medical treatment was provided and he made a full recovery. He was still employed with the Reid Newfoundland Company as an apprentice in 1913.

Spoooner was noted for have a very fine tenor voice. In a February 07, 1914 newspaper article publicizing an upcoming concert hosted by the George Street Adult Bible Class, it was highlighted that Jack Spooner would be the soloist. Several months later, on June 02, 1914, it was reported that he sang solo at the Girls’ Friendly Society concert held at the Synod Hall.

His singing in public in St. John’s was coming to a close, however. On September 14, 1914, he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment for service in the war overseas. From his Attestation Paper and other documents, we learn that he was 5 feet, 8½ inches tall, weighed 164 pounds, with brown hair and blue eyes. He stated his occupation as engineer. Before leaving for Europe, he did perform one final solo: on September 28, he sang Frederic E. Weatherly’s “Ailsa

Mine” at a concert sponsored by the George Street Epworth League, of which he was a member.

Spooner, who had received Regimental number 498 upon enlistment, left for overseas and the war on board the SS *Florizel*, which took him from St. John’s on October 04 to Plymouth Sound, England, on October 14. Over the next 10 months, he spent time in training: first on Salisbury Plain in southern England; then at Fort George, Edinburgh Castle and Stobs Camp in Scotland. This was followed by a few weeks of rest and relaxation at Aldershot, in England, before sailing to the Eastern Mediterranean and the war. Before leaving, on June 14, 1915, he was made a Lance Corporal.

Many of the men who sailed with Spooner on the *Florizel* knew of his singing abilities. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that when Company Sergeant-Major Owen Steele was putting together a ship’s concert, to be held on October 12, he tapped Spooner as one of his star attractions. Spooner did not let him down, performing a solo version of “Thora” and singing a duet of “Life’s Dream is O’er” with a Private Greene, either Walter (# 266) or William (# 320).

Spooner was part of a similar entertainment, a farewell smoker, or men only, concert, at the Sergeants’ Mess, at Acreknowe Camp, at Hawick, Scotland, “for their fellow sergeants of the other regiments in the vicinity” before leaving Scotland for the Eastern Mediterranean. All too soon, Spooner found himself in the midst of the fighting on Turkey’s Gallipoli Peninsula. Arriving there with his comrades on the night of September 19-20, he was one of the many who was evacuated because of illness.

The area where the Newfoundlanders were fighting was subject to erratic and unpredictable weather that Fall, which resulted in many

members of the Newfoundland Regiment contracting such ailments as dysentery, myalgia, jaundice, bronchitis, pneumonia and tuberculosis. In Spooner's case it was a diagnosis of myalgia, which often results from viral infections. He went first to the 26th Casualty Clearing Station on November 17, and then transported to St. Paul's Hospital on Malta, arriving there on November 26. A two-month stay there ended when he was invalided to England on January 25, 1916.

Arriving in England on February 09, he was admitted to Wandsworth Hospital with myalgia and jaundice, but his affliction was not considered serious. He was released after almost two months in hospital and attached to the Regiment's Depot at Ayr, Scotland. On July 16, 1916, in the aftermath of the great loss of life at Beaumont Hamel, he was raised to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. He spent the remainder of the Summer and most of the Fall working at the Depot, before rejoining the Regiment on October 27.

Spooner was part of the action at Masnieres and Marcoing in northern France and at Poperinghe in Flanders during the late Fall of 1917 and Winter of 1918. He was medically evacuated on March 25, again because of illness, not injury. Invalided to England on April 17, he was found to be suffering from dysentery. He was eventually allowed a two month furlough and left for Newfoundland sometime around the end of June.

All was not rest and relaxation during his time in Newfoundland. His stay was extended for medical reasons and in October 1917 he led a recruiting expedition including five other members of the fighting forces to the Conception Bay communities of Harbour Grace, Carbonear, Board Cove and Adams Cove, among others, to encourage enlistment. He continued to be plagued with

dysentery and was finally retired from the Regiment and transferred to the Reserve Officers list on December 11.

It would appear that Spooner was not pleased with this turn of events. In January 1918 he attempted to join the United States Army as a Lewis (machine) Gun instructor, but was turned down because they had “no opening”. In February he tried to return to full strength in the Newfoundland Regiment but was rejected because of his medical history.

One of the things that his medical ailments did not affect was his voice. He performed in the Christmas morning service at George Street Methodist Church in 1917, singing “Nazareth” as a solo and joining the “Misses Christian and Mr. Trapnell” as part of a quartette version of “Silent Night, Holiest Night”, a variant on the familiar carol. Both of these performances were part of an encore presentation held at George Street on December 30. He also performed in the Wesley Church Epworth concert on February 14, 1918.

A few weeks later Spooner left Newfoundland, eventually travelling to British Columbia, where his brother, Frank, was living. In November 1918 he was working for the Consolidated Whaling Corporation based in Victoria. On November 28, he wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Walter F. Rendell of the Newfoundland Regiment using that company’s letterhead, seeking permission to have the medical examination required by the Board of Pension Commissioners of Newfoundland to continue his disability pension carried out by a Canadian Medical Board doctor in Victoria, to save him from having to return to Newfoundland.

His Regimental personnel file contains several pieces of correspondence related to his pension and its periodic renewal during

the 1920s. This correspondence provides information regarding his health – his dysentery continued to be chronic, with debilitating attacks occurring several times each year. It does appear that his pension was renewed permanently, as there is no further correspondence referring to it after September 30, 1929.

The 1920s was an exciting decade for Spooner. He had found work in 1919 as an engineer on board a ship, the *SS Princess Charlotte*. In November 1923, he left Vancouver, British Columbia, which had been his permanent residence for some years, for Seattle, Washington. On August 24, 1924, he married Cecelia Hawthornthwaite in Nanaimo, British Columbia. She returned to the United States with him. On November 15, 1926, he became a naturalized United States citizen. Perhaps in an attempt to differentiate himself from other American citizens with the name John Spooner, in his naturalization document he gave his name as John Grenfell Spooner. This name appears in other documentation concerning him in future years.

Cecelia gave birth to the couple's only child on October 15, 1928. A boy, he was named John Vey Spooner. The three of them appear together as a family in the 1930 United States Federal Census, in which Spooner is listed as an engineer in a ship yard.

In 1932 the Spooner family returned to British Columbia, where John and Cecelia appear to have resided in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island for the remainder of their lives. John (junior) returned to the United States in 1947 as a student at the University of Oregon Dental College. While details are sparse, he seems to have remained in that area: he died at Florence, Oregon, on March 06, 2003, at age 75.

Cecelia Spooner died at Port Alberni on July 29, 1969; she was 70 years of age. John survived her by three and one half years: he died at Parksville, not far from Port Alberni, on January 11, 1973. Coincidentally, that was his 80th birthday.

Spooner's brother Frank also took part in World War 1, as a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Their cousin, Albert Spooner, was a member of the Newfoundland Regiment (# 2227). All three Spooners survived the war but each was afflicted in ways that affected the remainder of their lives. This has been John's story. Frank and Albert's stories will be featured in later issues of *Gower Remembers*.

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.