

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private William Squires Mitchell
(1899-1961)



*My Dear Mother:-I came down to this Hospital by Ambulance Train today, because on Saturday, July 1st., I was foolish enough to stop a bullet, just below my collar bone, which though painful enough, is not I hope at all serious, and I hope it will not be long before I shall be shipped off back to St. John's. This hospital is a healthy place by the sea, on the top of a high cliff, so it gives us chaps the best chance of making a good recovery. I hope to write a letter myself in a few days time. Meanwhile I am your loving son, William Mitchell. (Letter to his mother from 16 General Hospital, Le Treport, France, dated July 3, 1916, *The St. John's Daily Star*, July 21, 1916)*

William Squires Mitchell was born in St. John's on April 21, 1899, the oldest of eight children of Susanna Bragg and George Charles Mitchell. He was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church by Rev. Levi Curtis on May 29, 1899. His mother was originally from Greenspond and his father was from Brigus, so in all likelihood they met in St. John's after they both relocated to the capital city. George worked as a labourer for a number of years before gaining employment with George Knowling Ltd., one of the larger of the St. John's mercantile establishments. In addition to William, the family included Maxwell (b. 1900); May (b. 1902); Violet (b. 1904); Bertha (b. 1911); George (b. September 1913); Robert (b. 1917); and Ruth (b. 1919).

Nothing has been discovered about William's schooling, but he probably attended one of the Methodist schools in St. John's for some years, perhaps even the Methodist College. The two pieces of his writing that survive (a letter to his mother and an interview with a Scottish newspaper) indicate that he had an excellent command of English grammar and a very fine sense of irony and wit. Whatever his career plans might have been, however, once war broke out in the late summer of 1914, young Mitchell was determined to be part of it. Unfortunately for him, he was only a few months past his 15th birthday at that time and by his own admission had difficulty enlisting because of his age. Enlistees were supposed to have reached the age of 18 in order to sign up.

Mitchell was not one to be easily deterred and was finally accepted into the ranks of the Newfoundland Regiment on April 23, 1915, two days after he had celebrated his 16th birthday. While he obviously convinced one or more officials that he was 18, the picture of him in uniform, a copy of which is on the cover of this biographical sketch, leaves his true age open to speculation.

At the time of his enlistment, Mitchell was 5 feet, 9 inches tall, with a mild complexion, brown hair and brown eyes. He was assigned Regimental number 1500. Less than two months after his enlistment, on

June 20, 1915, he boarded the SS *Calgarian*, as part of F Company of the Regiment, for transport overseas. The *Calgarian* took a rather circuitous route to get to Liverpool, England, which was its final destination. It went via Gibraltar, where it took on board German prisoners of war and men from “the Clypso”, a nickname for HMS *Calypso*, a Royal Naval Reserve vessel stationed in St. John’s harbor that trained men for the Royal Navy both prior to and during the war. It did not arrive in Liverpool until July 09.

Once in the United Kingdom, Mitchell and his comrades were sent to Stobs Camp, near Hawich, Scotland, where they spent several months in training before joining the main body of the Regiment, which had been assigned duties on the Gallipoli, Turkey, earlier that year. Mitchell was extremely fortunate in that he avoided the two main obstacles that faced the Regiment at Gallipoli: Turkish bullets and shells; and the life-threatening winter storms that wreaked havoc on the troops. He was one of the Newfoundlanders evacuated from Gallipoli in early January 1916, and was with the Regiment during their time in Egypt. He was aboard the MT *Alauria*, which left Port Twefik, Egypt on March 14, transporting the Newfoundland Regiment back across the Mediterranean to the French city of Marseilles, where they arrived on March 22. He was with them for the next three and one-half months in northwest France, where they were part of the British Army’s planned attack on German strongholds along the Somme River. He was one of the Newfoundlanders who went over the top on July 1, 1916, at Beaumont Hamel, as part of that opening day of the Battle of the Somme. Luckily, he was one of the 386 who were wounded; not one of the 324 who were killed that morning.

Mitchell had received gunshot wounds in his chest and his left thigh that July 01 morning. He made it back to his own front trench line, where he received emergency treatment before being taken to the 16th General Hospital at Le Treport. Some weeks later he was invalided to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth. As his wounds were quite severe and took a long time to heal, he was moved a second time, to

Stobhill Military Hospital, in the area of Springburn, north of Glasgow, Scotland. It was while he was there that he was interviewed by a reporter for a local paper, *The Saturday Post*. The following article appeared in its February 24, 1917 edition. Note that most of the article is in quotation marks, signifying that these are Mitchell's own words.

TWO YEARS' SERVICE BEFORE HIS EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY.

“With a war on in which the Old Country was taking part, it was difficult for any young fellow to remain behind when the troops started to leave Newfoundland for overseas. My difficulty, however, was not in remaining behind, but in getting away, this being on account of my age.”

Private William Mitchell, Newfoundland Contingent, a smart-looking, bright-eyed young soldier, smiled almost apologetically as he explained in these words how he had answered the Empire's rallying-call to the colours, although only a few days over sixteen years of age. He is now an inmate of Stobhill Military Hospital, Glasgow, as the result of wounds sustained in the Somme offensive. I met him at the entrance of his ward, and, in a short chat in the vestibule there, he gave me some of the salient points in his experience during a period of almost two years' military service.

Joined at Sixteen

“As I was regarded as rather young for the hardships of military service, I had great difficulty in pressing my claims to enlistment before the Newfoundland recruiting authorities, but at last, on 23d April, 1915, when I was a few days over sixteen years of age, I was accepted. This was due to the fact that I would even pass for eighteen years of age, and was in first-class health. After that things moved rapidly.

“I may say that though I was born in Newfoundland, my folks – that's the Scotch term, isn't it? – are descended a north of the Tweed family. My father is what we call a hardware merchant – what is known over here as an 'ironmonger' I believe – in St. John's, Newfoundland. Our district has

done well in recruiting, having raised several battalions for general service.

“Soon after enlisting I was dispatched with a section of the contingent to Britain for training, leaving Newfoundland in June, 1915. We were stationed in Edinburgh for a brief period, and afterwards were sent out to Egypt. Then we went over to the Gallipoli Peninsula, where the campaign there was entering upon its closing stages.

In France

“April, 1916, found me in France, having now attained my seventeenth birthday. The opening day of the Somme offensive was an eventful one for me. On the 1st of July, 1916, our battalion was detailed to take part in the attack on the German positions.

“I can only tell you what happened in my case. We had not gone any distance over the rough ground before the German machine guns started to spit out streams of bullets among us. Men fell here and there, but the rest pushed on, with nothing but a fevered desire to get over the danger zone and silence those fiendish harvesters of death. I was nearing the German positions when I felt a sudden burning pain in my chest, and was knocked over by the shock. Then I became aware of pain in my right knee – another missile had got me there, too.

“It took me only a few moments to realize that I had been hit, and it was no use going on. Accordingly, I started to make my way back to our trenches, as cautiously as I could, for bullets were flicking about all around. It is now a confused dream, that struggle into safety, but I know that I did get there, and, on receiving medical treatment in our first trenches, was told that I had a bullet in the lung, and [was] sent down to the dressing-station.

“What struck me most in my period of service? Well, I can't exactly say at the moment, unless I repeat what the Irish soldier said when asked the question ‘It was the bullets that missed me, sorr.’ Altogether it is an experience that I would not have missed for anything.”

This is one of the few first-hand accounts by one of the men of the Newfoundland Regiment who was injured at Beaumont Hamel, or in any other battle that the Regiment was involved in. It is very well written, providing ample evidence of his strength of character, his commitment to the cause, his determination to survive, and his sense of humour. It is a complement to the much shorter piece he had written to his mother a few days after he had been wounded the previous July.

Mitchell's war wounds led to his eventual discharge from the Regiment. He was one of 24 soldiers who were sent home on furlough in the Spring of 1917, arriving in St. John's on April 22. He never returned overseas.

Information regarding Mitchell's post-war life is scarce. He was probably living in St. John's in 1919, as his name was recorded on the Special Lists of Volunteers List of Voters for the District of St. John's East, living at his father's house at 47 Spencer Street. His name does not appear in either the 1924 city directory or the 1926 St. John's telephone directory. He is in the 1928 city directory, however, where he is identified as a clerk at George Knowling Ltd., the same place his father had worked for many years. He is not listed in the 1932 city directory or the 1935 or 1937 telephone directories.

A possible explanation for Mitchell not appearing in these directories could be that he was spending periods of time in the United States. On September 28, 1929, he and Isabelle Campbell of St. John's were married. During the 1920s and 1930s, she made a number of visits to Massachusetts, where she had relatives, including an aunt and a married sister, and a number of friends. It may be that Mitchell was working there and she was visiting him, or that he was visiting her during her sojourns there. They did travel together on board the *SS Nova Scotia* early in 1938, leaving St. John's on January 16, and arriving in Boston on January 22. They stayed with Isabelle's sister Florence, and her husband Henry McKelvie, in Arlington, and they indicated on the ship's manifest that

they planned to remain in the country for three months. William's occupation was recorded on that manifest as taxi driver, which he could have done in either Arlington or St. John's.

William and Isabelle returned to St. John's later in 1938 and were living at 256 Hamilton Avenue. By the mid-1940s, they were at 64 Leslie Street, where they remained until at least 1951; during the later 1950s they lived at 72 Cornwall Crescent. William appears to have continued to drive a taxi for his livelihood.

Mitchell died at his Cornwall Crescent residence on May 06, 1961, at age 62. He was survived by his wife (they had no children); his sisters Violet and Ruth, both of whom were married and living in Halifax; and his three brothers, Maxwell¹, George and Robert. He was buried in the Field of Honour at Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Isabelle outlived him by more than 20 years: she died at St. John's on August 11, 1982, at age 82, and is buried next to William at Mount Pleasant.



William Mitchell's headstone in Mount Pleasant Cemetery

¹ Maxwell Mitchell was # 8360 in the Newfoundland Forestry Corps. His story will be told in a future issue 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.

No. 47