

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Eric Burt

(1896-1917)



“Private Eric Burt, No. 1152, Newfoundland Regiment, has been sick for some time and has been back from France and examined and found unfit for service, and is now on furlough at the War Hospital, Dundee. His parents are anxious, if it would be possible at all, to have him come home to spend his furlough.” (letter to Hon. J. R. Bennett, Minister of Militia, from Hon. J. C. Crosbie, Minister without Portfolio, August 03, 1917)

Eric Burt was born in St. John's on February 21, 1896, the third of four sons of Jemima Green and John Burt. He was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church by the Rev. Levi Curtis on April 12. His three brothers, Harold (b. 1891), Otto George (b. 1894) and Frederic Baxwin (b. 1903), were also baptized at Gower. The family lived on Upper Battery Road. The father, John Burt, originally from Bay de Verde, fished out of the Battery for many years. He later worked as a labourer for Crosbie and Company.

Eric probably attended one of the Methodist schools in the city although there is no indication that he attended the Methodist College. His name does not appear on the Memorial Plaque erected recognizing former students from the College who had participated in World War I. He was certainly able to read and write, but there is no indication from St. John's newspapers that he was involved in any extracurricular activities, as there often was for students who took part in athletics, music, theatre or other such events.

He did make it into the newspaper while still in school, however, but not for a celebratory reason. *The Evening Telegram* for September 6, 1907, reported that two days previous "*Ten-year-old Eric Burt, of Battery Road, was brutally assaulted by a young man named N. Moyst at Battery Road on Wednesday evening last about 8 o'clock. Both reside in the locality. Moyst was arrested under warrant by Detective Byrne last evening and taken to the police station where he was kept until three p.m. today when he was taken before Judge Conroy. The case is such a brutal one that the details cannot be published.*" A follow-up story the next day reported that Moyst's lawyer, George W. B. Ayre, attempted to have the case dismissed, claiming that his client was intoxicated at the time and that half of Burt's account of the assault to the court came from his imagination, despite there being three witnesses who testified on Burt's behalf. Judge Conroy disagreed with Ayre and sentenced Moyst to six months hard labour.

The next time Burt's name appeared in the newspapers was in late February 1915, when he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment. He signed up on February 23, two days after his 17th birthday. He had obviously misremembered that event, since, on

his Attestation Paper, he stated that he was 19 years of age. He may have looked much older than he actually was, although it was common for eager young lads who were underage to add a year or two on to their actual age in order to enlist; the recruiting officials seldom asked for proof. His oldest brother, Harold, had been number 323 of the First Five Hundred, but his brother Otto, who was four years older than Eric, was either turned down on medical grounds or made no attempt to enlist.

According to his Attestation Paper, Burt had a fair complexion, with light brown hair and blue eyes. He was 5 feet, 6 inches tall and weighed 141 pounds. At the time of his enlistment he was working as a labourer earning \$50.00 per month. After less than a month in training in St. John's, he left for Halifax on March 20, on the SS *Stephano*, a part of No. 8 Platoon of D Company. There he and his comrades transferred to the SS *Orduna* for their voyage to Great Britain. Once in the UK, D Company was assigned to duty at Edinburgh Castle in Scotland. The Newfoundland Regiment was the first colonial regiment given that responsibility.

The Regiment finished its tour of duty at Edinburgh Castle on May 11 and was transferred to Stobs Camp, near the Scottish town of Hawick. In early August, the Regiment moved to Aldershot, in the south of England. They spent two and one-half weeks there, before travelling to nearby Devonport on August 20. At Devonport slightly more than 1,000 members of the Regiment boarded the SS *Megantic* for a sea voyage to the eastern Mediterranean, arriving at Alexandria, Egypt, on August 31. Burt's initial enlistment, as with all of the early recruits, had been limited to the end of the war, but not to exceed one year of service. While at Aldershot, on August 15, he re-enlisted for the duration of the war.

His first few weeks in Egypt were quite hectic. Time was spent in acclimatization and further training exercises in Cairo before he and his comrades were taken back to Alexandria by train on September 13 and immediately put aboard the SS *Ausonia* for transport north to the Greek island of Lemnos. They arrived at Lemnos on September 18 and the following night (September 19-

20) they were ferried the short distance across the Aegean Sea to Suvla Bay, on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula.

Burt did not spend long at Suvla Bay. On October 17, four weeks after landing, he was evacuated to the Hospital Ship (HS) *Galeka* suffering from dysentery. He was not alone in contracting that disease, as many of his comrades also fell victim to it or one of a host of other infectious diseases that were rampant in that area that Fall. He was eventually taken to a hospital in Abbassia, a suburb of Cairo, arriving there on November 19. It would appear he remained there for more than two months, as there is no further notation in his file of his whereabouts until he rejoins his unit at Suez on January 26, 1916. He remained with the main body of the Regiment in Egypt until March 14, when they left from Port Tewfiq, at the southern end of the Suez Canal, aboard the MT *Alaunia*, which carried them to Marseilles, in the south of France.

Burt and his comrades arrived in Marseilles on March 22, and were immediately entrained for Pont-Rémy, a town in northern France. From there they marched to Buigny Abbé, where they were billeted. They were in this section of the Western Front to be part of a major assault that the Allied forces were planning against German positions along several miles of the Somme River.

Before that assault began, however, Burt was admitted to the Casualty Clearing Station at Gezaincourt on April 27, suffering from tonsillitis. On the 29th, he was taken to the St. John Ambulance Brigade Hospital at Étaples. Two weeks later, he was moved to the Étaples Convalescent Camp, where he spent several more weeks before rejoining the Battalion on June 09.

The opening foray of the Allied assault at the Somme was scheduled to take place on July 01. The Newfoundlanders were part of the third wave that went over the top that morning. It was a disaster for them, as 14 officers and 219 men were killed, 12 officers and 314 men were wounded, and another 91 were unaccounted for. Burt was one of the wounded. After making his way back from No Man's Land to his own trenches, he received emergency medical attention for gunshot wounds in his left arm. On July 03, he was taken to the 1st Canadian Stationary Hospital at

Étaples. Five days later, he was moved to the 6th Convalescent Depot, also at Étaples. He was assigned to the Base Depot at Rouen on the 11th and rejoined the Battalion at Beauval on the 24th.

The Regiment left the area of the Somme on July 27, travelling north to the Ypres Salient in Belgium. While there, on August 15, Burt was admitted to the 29th Division Rest Station with inflamed tonsils. Eleven days later, on August 26, he was transferred to the coastal town of Wimereax suffering from laryngitis, in all likelihood a result of his inflamed tonsils. He was released back to the Base Depot in Rouen on September 15 and rejoined his Battalion at the Somme in early October.

The Newfoundland Regiment had returned to the Somme as part of the fighting at Gueudecourt in relief of the Royal Fusiliers. It was ordered to capture a major German position known as Hilt Trench. That attack was successful, but at a cost. Five officers and 114 men were killed, and another five officers and 115 men were injured during the 53 hours that the Newfoundland Regiment was engaged with the enemy between October 10 and 12. One of the wounded was Burt, again with gunshot wounds, this time to his right arm and his left wrist. He went from a casualty clearing on the 13th to the General Hospital at Rouen on the 14th, to England, via the HS *Gloucester Castle*, on the 23rd. Two days later he was admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth. There, X-rays showed that he had a partial fracture to the lower end of the radius, near the wrist, in his left arm.

Burt spent 49 days at Wandsworth before being released on December 12, at which time he was granted ten days furlough. That was customary in cases of prolonged hospital stays. On January 05, 1917, he reported to the Regimental Depot at Ayr and twelve days later he received a Lance Corporal's stripe.

Being at Ayr, or perhaps more accurately being anywhere in Scotland, appears to have brought out the mischief-maker in Burt. When he had been at Edinburgh Castle the previous May 05, he was discovered to be absent from Parade and was confined to barracks for three days as punishment. Two weeks later, on the 19th, at Stobs Camp he was confined to camp for two days for

answering back to a non-commissioned officer (NCO). Now that he was back in Scotland, old habits reared their heads again. On February 02, while at Castle Hill School in Edinburgh¹ he was unaccounted for from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. That infraction cost him his Lance Corporal's stripe and he was required to forfeit eleven days pay. Then while he was stationed at the Racecourse in Ayr, came a succession of breaches of the rules: on February 10, he left the Parade Ground without permission; on March 08, he was absent from tattoo for an extended period; on April 05, he was cited for "inattention at Parade"; and on April 22, he was found gambling in the barracks. He was again punished by being confined to barracks, three for the first offense and two days each for the other three, nine days in total. His most serious offense occurred between April 29 and the beginning of May, when he was absent without leave. For this he received seven days detention and forfeited ten days pay.

That he did not get into any further trouble during the rest of that summer may be due to the fact that between May 10 and August 03 he spent 46 days in hospital, first at Stobhill in Glasgow, then at Ayr and finally at Dundee, with a variety of ailments. It was on August 03, that Hon. John R. Bennett, Newfoundland's Minister of Militia, received the letter from Hon John C. Crosbie, Minister without Portfolio, attempting to have Burt repatriated to Newfoundland, for his furlough, if not permanently. Crosbie was the Member of the House of Assembly for the district of Bay de Verde, which is where Burt's father and mother were from, and at some point John Burt went to work for Crosbie and Company.

Some three weeks after he had received it, Bennett forwarded Crosbie's latter to Major Henry Timewell, the Regiment's Paymaster and Officer in charge of Records in London, for consideration. Timewell responded on September 14, informing Bennett that Burt had been found fit for general service and had gone back to France, leaving Southampton on September 07 and arriving in Rouen two days later. He rejoined the Battalion

¹ The reason he was there is not given in his personnel file.

in the Field on September 18. At that time, the Newfoundland Regiment was at the front lines at Wijdendrift, northwest of Langemarck, Belgium. On September 30, it was sent to Camp Preston for a period of rest, and later to Cardoem Camp, from which place it went back to the front lines on October 07 at the Yser Canal Bank. Two days later, on October 09, in fighting at Broembeek, Eric Burt was killed in action. For him it was third time unlucky!

At home his death was recorded with great sadness. *The St. John's Daily Star* for October 23, wrote "*The news of the death of Private Eric Burt, in a recent drive on the British front in France, has caused universal sympathy to be extended to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Burt of the Battery. / Eric left here with the second draft and was wounded twice before the fatal action of the 9th inst. He had not perfectly recovered from the second wound when volunteers were asked for to again go forward and he went gladly and eagerly, only to fall by the bullets of the foe. / Another brother, Harold, went with the first contingent but came back wounded. To Mr. and Mrs. Burt The Star extends its condolence.*"

The Evening Telegram for November 02, 1917 contained the following announcement:

"DIED. Killed in action, Somewhere in France, October 9th, Eric Burt, aged 20 years, son of Mrs. And Mr. John Burt, St. John's.

*He is gone but not forgotten,
His dear face we shall see no more.
But we will meet him in the morning
Over on the golden shore."*

Eric Burt's body was never found. He is commemorated on a large plaque at the base of the Beaumont Hamel Caribou Memorial in France, along with more than 800 other soldiers, seamen and sailors who have no known grave. There is a replica of that plaque near the Caribou Memorial in Bowring Park, St. John's.



The house on the left is the one on Upper Battery Road that Eric Burt, his parents, brothers and other family members have lived in over the years. It still stands and is well over 100 years old.

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.