

# GOWER REMEMBERS

## Major John Shenstone Roper

(1888-1946)



*Major Roper was awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and organization in the front line at the Battle of Cambrai, Sept. 28, 1918. He had been sent by his commanding officer, Lt. Col. J. L. Ralston (afterwards Canadian Minister of Defence) to make the line for the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division in front of Bourbon Wood. The citation said 'he did excellently' in carrying out this hazardous duty. (Halifax newspaper clipping, January 1946)*

John Shenstone Roper was born in St. John's on July 05, 1888, the oldest of ten children of Sarah Browning Leamon and Henry Roper, four of whom died while still infants or small children. His siblings were Emma Louise (1890-1972); Florence Maude (1892-1895); Sarah Browning (1894-1978); Mabel (1897), who lived three days, and her twin brother who was stillborn and unnamed; Edith Morton (1898-1971); Graham Dicks (1900); Harry Leamon (1902-1966); and Charles Parsons (1904-1982).

John's father, Henry, began his working life as an undertaker and carpenter in St. John's, but, after experiencing financial challenges, he relocated his wife and oldest son to Halifax sometime in late 1889 or early 1890. There he gained employment with the construction firm owned and operated by Samuel Manners Brookfield (1847-1924). Very late in 1892 or early in 1893, Roper brought his family, which by then included daughters Emma and Florence, back to St. John's, where he oversaw the construction of various buildings that Brookfield's company had contracts to rebuild following the devastation of a great deal of the residential and business districts of the city in a major fire that occurred on July 08, 1892.

Henry Roper and his family remained in St. John's until the late Winter of 1898, during which time daughter Sarah and the twins were born. The family attended the newly-constructed Gower Street Methodist after it opened for services on October 04, 1896. Once back in Halifax, John, who had begun his schooling at the Methodist College in St. John's, attended Halifax County Academy, graduating in 1906. He was an average student, graduating high school with a B average in his courses: English, French, German, History & Geography, Arithmetic & Algebra, and Geometry. However, his grades were good enough to afford him entry into Dalhousie University in Halifax in the Fall of 1906. There, over the four years that followed, he took a similar suite of courses to his high school studies, with the addition of Latin, Chemistry, Physics, Philosophy, Elocution, Economics and Geology. He was awarded a Bachelor of Arts

degree in April 1910, and a Master of Arts, with a specialization in “Shakespeare” in April 1911.

Upon completion of his MA, Roper entered Dalhousie Law School. He met the requirements for a Bachelor of Laws degree, graduating in 1913. During his two years at Law School, he was involved in various associations and societies connected to the University, and in his last year served as Editor-in-Chief of *The Dalhousie Gazette*, the oldest campus newspaper in North America, founded in 1868. In his role as Editor-in-Chief, he was noted for writing “able and fearless editorials” and was predicted to do well in his chosen profession.

After completing articles with Harris, Henry, Rogers and Harris, and with McInnes, Mellish, Fulton and Kenny in Halifax, he was called to the Bar of Nova Scotia in 1913. He practised law in Halifax for several years before receiving a commission as a lieutenant in the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He spent short periods of time with other battalions before being assigned to the Nova Scotia Highlanders and going overseas in World War I. His first command duties were as Adjutant for the 219<sup>th</sup> Battalion (October 19, 1916 – January 31, 1917) and then as Adjutant of the 17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion. He was made an acting Captain on November 11, 1917, and placed on special assignment. On April 23, 1918, he was transferred to the Nova Scotia Highlanders Regiment and went overseas with the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion later that summer. He saw action at the Battle of Cambrai in France in September 1918, winning the Military Cross, which he received on February 24, 1919.

From his medical history contained in his military personnel file, we learn that Roper was 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighed 135 pounds at the time he signed up on February 22, 1916. He had a 34-inch chest, with the capacity for expansion to 37 inches, and was considered to be in good physical shape. He did encounter several medical problems during the war, the most serious of which appears to be problems with his feet, a chronic condition, exacerbated by standing for long periods of time in

trenches. For that ailment, he spent 18 days (from February 06 to 24, 1919) in the Canadian Red Cross Officers Hospital in Audley, in Staffordshire, England.

One interesting event that happened to Roper towards the end of the war occurred when he “*was leading his company of the 85<sup>th</sup> Nova Scotia Highlanders out of the line after the brilliant part of that unit in the epic Battle of Amiens, [and] he was overtaken by the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies, Field Marshal Earl Haig. The Commander-in-Chief rode along with the company for some distance, conversing with Major Roper.*” (*The Legionary*, September / October 1931)

Roper remained in England after the end of the war, as part of the staff of Canadian Ministry responsible for the Overseas Military Forces of Canada in London, England. He remained there until he sailed for Canada on the SS *Melita* on October 17, 1919. Once back in Canada he was struck off the strength and demobilized effective December 12, 1919. His actions and dedication to duty were brought to the attention of Secretary of State and he was cited in the New Year’s honours list for 1920, recognition of which appeared in *The St. John’s Daily Star* under the headline “St. John’s Boy Honored” in that newspaper’s edition for March 22, 1920.

Following his discharge and demobilization, Roper returned to Halifax, where he attempted to settle back into his former life. This included his law practice and continued involvement in military matters. In 1920, he became Brigade Major with the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the Canadian Defence Forces stationed in Halifax, a rank he held until 1923. During his last two years at Dalhousie University, he had been a lieutenant with Dalhousie branch of the Canadian Officers’ Training Corps, and after the war he re-engaged with that corps, becoming its commanding officer from 1929 to 1931. It was under his command that COTC parades were re-instituted after having been discontinued during wartime.

Another area to which Roper devoted a great deal of time and energy in the post-war decades was the founding of the Canadian Legion and the advocacy of increased and sustained benefits for veterans. He served as President of the Nova Scotia Command of the Canadian Legion for five years, beginning in 1925. The following year he attended the founding convention of the Canadian Legion in Winnipeg, where he was elected to office on the new executive. At the Regina Convention in 1929 he became First Vice-President and two years later, at Niagara Falls, he assumed the Presidency, an office he occupied until 1934.

Roper became President of the Canadian Legion at a very difficult time for veterans. Canada was in the midst of the Great Depression and the national government, under the direction of Prime Minister Richard B. Bennett, was looking for ways to reduce expenditures. Reducing or eliminating certain benefits for veterans was high on the government's agenda and Roper led the fight against this unfair and dishonorable treatment of men and women who had fought for their country in World War 1. Many had been permanently disabled through lost limbs, blindness, deafness, poison gas, and other bodily damage. Roper argued that to make them the scapegoats for the economic downturn was a gross injustice after all they had sacrificed in the service of their country.

*“In his presidential address to the Legion’s fifth convention, held in Ottawa on 12-15 March 1934, Roper praised the many veterans who, having exhausted their own resources, had been forced unto relief. The ex-servicemen had experienced ‘severe trial and hardship’ but had shown ‘marvellous self-restraint and patience’ and through example had ‘steadied all classes of the Canadian people during a time of economic chaos.’”<sup>1</sup>*

His law practice flourished during this period, despite the large amount of time he dedicated to the Canadian Legion, the Nova Scotia

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Neary, “‘Without the Stigma of Pauperism’: Canadian Veterans in the 1930s” in *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 22(1), 2009, pp. 38-39.

Command and veterans in general. From 1925 to 1928, he served as solicitor for the Nova Scotia Highways Board, and in 1928 he accepted appointment to the Nova Scotia Public Utilities Board, where he served for ten years. His commitment to his *alma mater* was equally strong: for many years he sat on the Board of Governors of Dalhousie University, served as Secretary-Treasurer of the journal *The Dalhousie Review*, and was a long-time member of the Dalhousie Alumni Society. He was also granted the honorific title King's Counsel for his service as a member of the legal profession.

He was also quite active in the local community and sporting bodies, with memberships in the Commercial Club, the Halifax Golf and Country Club, Saraguay Country Club, the Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron, the Halifax Curling Club, and the Northwest Arm Rowing Club.

He was also a driving force in the Studley Quoits Club, a sporting group that had been founded in Halifax in 1858. A quoit is a circular ring made of iron or some other metal, which is tossed at a fixed object, quite similar to the game of horseshoes. It was located on the Studley property, which eventually became part of Dalhousie University. Roper was active in the club for many years and became its President in 1935. During the years that he occupied that office, he was instrumental in stabilizing club membership and interest in its activities.

On June 09, 1915, John Roper married a young woman he had met while attending Dalhousie University: Gladys Una Smith. That marriage ended in divorce. There were no children. He died at Camp Hill Military Hospital, Halifax, on January 28, 1946, six months shy of his 58<sup>th</sup> birthday. His death was a result of myocardial failure due to anterior sclerosis; it was reported that he had been an invalid for the greater part of the last two years of his life.

Public reaction to his death was reflective of sadness and loss. One Halifax newspaper editorial remarked "*The death of Major John*

*Shenstone Roper, K. C., M. C., can hardly be termed unexpected in view of his long illness. Yet it will bring hundreds of people throughout Nova Scotia the shock that inevitably comes with the passing of a good friend. For Jack Roper had many friends. He was that kind of a man. Possessed of a warming personality and a tireless zeal, he was essentially a man's man who made and held friendships easily."* R. V. Harris, under whom Roper had articulated, wrote in tribute to him in the program for a luncheon of the Commercial Club of Halifax, held on February 07, 1946, just a few days after Roper's death: *"I knew John Roper from his days as a student in the law offices of Harris, Henry & Cahan. He articulated to me for several years and we have been firm friends ever since. He had a generous hearted way about him which made one regard him as a friend and genial comrade. I greatly regret his passing."*



Roper in his uniform as part of the Nova Scotia Highlanders.

*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](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*