

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private William George Perran

(1894?-1916)



“Dear Madam, I have the honour to inform you that I am now in receipt from the Pay and Record Office, London, of particulars of gravesites. No. 1690, Private W. Perren [sic], was buried on the 1st July, by Rev. C. Mayne, at Auchonvillers, 2¼ miles S. of Hebuterene, 7¼ miles N. of Albert. Yours faithfully, Colonial Secretary.” (Letter to Mrs. Thomas Perran, 44 Mullock Street, St. John’s, dated November 13, 1916)

William George Perran's name appears on the Gower Street United Church Memorial Plaque to its war dead. However, it is inscribed there as Wm. G. Perrin. It is located in the right-hand column, tenth from the top, in the section designated for members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. His name also appears on the War Memorial plaque at St. Thomas' Church of England Church in St. John's. There it is inscribed as W. G. Perran. There was only one member of the Newfoundland Regiment who had the surname Perran and none with the surname Perrin. This conundrum – why his name would appear on both plaques, in churches of different denominations, with a slight variation in spelling – is just one of many that surrounds the relatively short life of this young man.

It is likely that he was born in St. John's, sometime around 1894-1895, the son of Elizabeth and Thomas Perran. His year of birth is in doubt because three separate authentic documents give three different ages for him. His Attestation Paper when he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on July 05, 1915, states that he was 20 years, 6 months old, at that time. That would place his birthdate sometime in January 1895. However, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which is responsible for the administration and upkeep of the graves of World War I soldiers in Europe, has his age at the time of his death on July 01, 1916, as 19 years, which would put his birthdate sometime 1897. The Vital Records Register of Deaths for St. John's (Book 7, 1916-1917) has his age as 22 years at the time of his death, which puts his birth in 1894-1895.

William's parents are somewhat elusive, as well. They appear to be the Elizabeth and Thomas Perrin (note the different spelling in the surname; Perran and Perrin appear to be interchangeable) whose son was baptized at the Church of England Church in Bay Roberts on August 18, 1876. He had been born on July 17 of that year and was baptized William George. Given that that birthdate is too early for the William George Perran who joined the Newfoundland Regiment, it is safe to assume that the older William died some time before the younger one was born, and

the younger was given the same name as his dead brother, a common occurrence in Newfoundland families at that time.

If these are William's parents, the exact date they relocated to St. John's is also uncertain. There is no Thomas Perran listed in any of the St. John's city directories before 1908, when Thomas Perrin, a farmer, is listed as living on McNeil Street. However, there was an application to the Supreme Court of Newfoundland in November 1897 from Thomas Perran of St. John's seeking insolvency (*The Evening Telegram*, November 9 & 10, 1897). Furthermore, there is a death notice in the June 11, 1912 edition of *The Evening Telegram* informing readers that "*This morning, after a long illness Thomas Perrin [sic], a native of Plymouth, England, aged 65 years, leaving a widow, 2 sons and 2 daughters, to mourn their sad loss: funeral on Thursday at 2:30 p.m., from his son-in-law's residence, Merrymeeting Road.*" This would indicate that he was living in St. John's by the mid-1890s.

Having died in 1912 at age 65 would mean that Thomas Perran was born in or around 1846-1847. His widow, Elizabeth, was listed in the 1915 city directory as resident at 44 Mullock Street; her son Thomas, a baker, was living with her. She also appeared in the 1921 Census for Newfoundland as resident at that address; her month and year of birth was given as July 1848, which puts her birth fairly close to her husband's. Her son Thomas, his wife Selina, and their son Thomas, who had been born in July 1920, also lived with her. According to that Census return, her son Thomas was born in 1884 in Bay Roberts.

With that preamble, we now turn to William George Perran. Very little is known of his life before he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on July 05, 1915. There is no indication in the various school magazines that attended either the Methodist College or Bishop Feild College (the Church of England boys' school in St. John's). However, he signed his

name with a strong bold signature on his Attestation Paper, indicating that he had received some degree of formal education.

His Attestation Paper tells us most of what we know about him. For instance, it records that: he lived at 44 Mullock Street; was a British subject; had worked as a coachman before enlisting; had never been married; had never served in any branch of the British forces; and had never been vaccinated. His “apparent age” was given, as stated above, as 20 years, 6 months; his height was 5 feet, 8½ inches; he weighed 140 pounds, and had a chest measurement of 37 inches when fully expanded. He listed his mother, Elizabeth (Mrs. Thomas) Perran of 44 Mullock Street, as his next-of-kin. His Regimental number was 1690 and he was assigned to G Company.

Perran spent the first four months after his enlistment in St. John’s, undergoing initial training at Pleasantville. He left for England, via a circuitous route, on October 27, 1915. First, he and his fellow members of G Company travelled by train to Port aux Basques; they took a ferry across Cabot Strait to North Sydney, where they entrained for Quebec City. There they boarded the SS *Corsican*, for the journey across the North Atlantic. They arrived at Devonport on the south coast of England on November 09, and were immediately placed on board a train for transport to Scotland. There they spent a short time in make-shift huts at a military camp at Gales, near the town of Ayr, where the Regimental headquarters was being established. The members of the Newfoundland Regiment who were in Scotland at that time occupied this new accommodation later in November 1915, and it continued to serve as Regimental headquarters until January 1918.

The facility at Ayr would be Perran’s home base from late November 1915 until April 08, 1916. During that time he was a model soldier with no misdemeanors or other blemishes on his record. The one notation present is that he re-signed for the duration of the war on April 05, 1916, as his

original enlistment had been for one year. On April 08, he and a group of his comrades left England for the Western Front, arriving at Rouen, France, later that same day. After several weeks in Rouen, they joined their Battalion in the Field on April 26, linking up with the men of the Regiment who had returned from the eastern Mediterranean earlier that month.

During the rest of April, May and June, 1916, Perran and his comrades were occupied with preparations for what came to be known as the Big Push, an all-out attempt to capture the German front line positions stretching for several miles along the banks of the Somme River. That attempt began on the morning of July 1, when 801 members of the Newfoundland Regiment went over the top at Beaumont Hamel, suffering terrible loss of life. In the days that followed, after the fighting had ceased and the injured and dead had been brought back for treatment or burial, the extent of the loss became clear: 14 officers and 219 other ranks had been killed or died later of wounds; 12 officers and 374 other ranks had been wounded; and 91 other ranks were missing. Perran was one of the dead. His body was recovered and, on the same day that he had been killed, he was interred at Auchonvillers Military Cemetery, not far from where he had lost his life. The burial service was conducted by the Rev. C. Mayne of the 88th Brigade.

Elizabeth Perran received official notification of her son's death on August 07, 1916, through a letter she received from Newfoundland's Colonial Secretary, J. R. Bennett, which read: *"It was with the deepest regret that the Government received a cable from the Record Office, London, reporting that your dear son, Private William G. Perran, had been Killed in Action on the 1st July last.*

On behalf of the Government, as well as myself, I desire to express to you the sincerest sympathy in your time of sorrow. But though we feel the parting and though the heart is heavy with its loss, yet it is a glorious thing to think that your gallant boy early responded to the call of duty and made his stand for the establishment of Righteousness, Truth and Liberty

upon the earth. We are all proud of our brave and noble boys but no less do we esteem the unselfish fathers and mothers who so willingly gave their boys when the call of duty came. Though your boy laid down his earthly weapons he wears the Soldier's Crown of Victory and his name is inscribed on the glorious Roll of Honour and will be held in fragrant memory by all his fellow countrymen. When the end of this war comes and an honourable and abiding Peace will have been established, it will be your proud thought that your dear boy did to the utmost of his ability to bring about such results. I trust that the Great Father may give you of his love and comfort at this time."

William Perran served in the Newfoundland Regiment for 362 days, just a few days short of a year. He spent only 65 days on the front lines. He left £19, 11 shillings on account, which was subsequently paid to his mother, Elizabeth, by cheque, in the amount of \$62.32, but not until August 22, 1918. On April 05, 1919, she was notified that she would receive a pension of \$24.00 per month, to take effect, retroactively, on July 02, 1916, the day after her son's death. She was paid a lump sum of \$502.00 in arrears and the monthly pension continued until her death in 1925. Some years earlier, on September 19, 1921, she had received the Memorial Plaque (or Death Penny), issued by the British Government, "in respect of the services of the late No. 1690, Pte. William G. Perran, Royal Newfoundland Regiment."

According to his Attestation Paper, William Perran was a member of the Church of England, more than likely of St. Thomas parish. That would account for his name being inscribed on the Memorial Plaque at that church. The only reference to him being a Methodist appears in the Vital Records Register of Deaths Book for the City of St. John's, 1916-1917 (Book 7). There, it clearly states that his religious belief was Methodist. All the other information about him (name, date of death, place of death, cause of death, and place of permanent residency) is correct, with his age at death being unconfirmed. However, even if his name was placed there in error, he appears on the Memorial Plaque in the sanctuary of Gower

Street Church, and we remember him and commemorate his life and his scarifice as we do all of the others whose names are inscribed there.

On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately four to five 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 203rd 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.