

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private George Bishop Darby

(1898-1980)



“We also heartily welcome another “old boy” who has been doing his “bit” on the fields of France, and is now taking up his studies again at the College. George Darby, who left school nearly two years ago at the call of the colours, has returned, unfit for military service and is among us.” (The Collegian magazine, Volume 23 (3), September-October 1918)

George Bishop Darby was born in Greenspond on October 12, 1898, the only son and third of five children of Jessie Harris Bishop (1867-1945) and Rev. Thomas Brewster Darby (1862-1940). His two older sisters were Helen (born 1895) and Laura (born 1896); the two younger, Dorothea (born 1901) and Jessie Grace (born 1904). Helen died at age nine months in 1896; Dorothea died at age 11 years in 1912.

Thomas Darby was a native of Burin, who was ordained into the Methodist ministry in 1886. He served the Newfoundland Methodist Church in a number of pastoral charges, including Greenspond, Musgrave Harbour, Epworth, Fortune, Carbonear, Harbour Grace, Old Perlican and Cupids. In 1916, he became the Guardian and Chaplin of the Methodist College Home on Long's Hill, in St. John's, a position he held until 1932. The Methodist College Home was adjacent to the Methodist College and provided accommodation for students from outside St. John's who wished to further their education in order to meet entrance requirements for institutions of higher learning in Canada and the United Kingdom. During their time in St. John's the Darby family attended Gower Street Church.

George attended Methodist schools in several of the communities where his father was stationed. He completed his grade school education at the Methodist College in St. John's. In all likelihood, he was already a student there when his father became the Guardian and Chaplin.

On August 01, 1916, Darby joined the Newfoundland Regiment. He had not completed his studies at the Methodist College, so one can assume that he enlisted with his parents' blessings. He listed the College Home as his place of residence on his Attestation Paper and his father as his next of kin. He was not quite 18 years of age at the time, although he conveniently forgot that when he signed up. He had a fair complexion, with dark hair and blue eyes, was 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 118 pounds. He stated his occupation as student. He was given Regimental number 3004.

After several months of training in St. John's, Darby, along with several hundred other recruits, boarded the SS *Florizel* on January 31, 1917, bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. While they were still on board the ship, it was discovered that most of the men had contracted measles, mumps or both. They landed in Halifax on February 03, but, to keep the infections from spreading to other troops destined for overseas, they were taken to Windsor, Nova Scotia, where they received medical treatment and remained under quarantine for two and one-half months.

The Windsor draft, as they became known, sailed from Halifax for the United Kingdom on three different ships: 92 men on the SS *Ausonia*, including Darby, 100 on the SS *Grampian*, and 100 on the SS *Northland*. All three vessels left Halifax on April 18. By the end of the month they were at the Regiment's training depot at Ayr, Scotland. Darby spent almost two months at this facility before being taken to Southampton on the south coast of England. There he boarded a ship for Rouen, France, on June 11, arriving the following day. He joined the main body of the Regiment in the field on July 02. Five days later, he was seconded to the 173rd Company of the Royal Engineers, where he served until July 28.

Darby's first four months on the Western Front were spent in Flanders, during which time, on August 03, he was admitted to the 88th Field Ambulance with tonsillitis; he returned to duty on August 09. In mid-October, the Regiment was transferred to northern France, where it saw action at Marcoing and Masnieres in Cambrai. It was in fighting there on November 21 that Darby received a gunshot wound to his left side. He was admitted to the 55th Casualty Clearing Station later that day and on the 24th taken to the 12th General Hospital at Rouen. Four days later he was invalided to England, where he spent a week at the Military Hospital in Richmond before being transferred to the Convalescent Hospital in Eastbourne.

He spent roughly one month in these two hospitals before being discharged on January 02, 1918, at which time he was granted nine days

of furlough. On January 14, he was attached to H Company and assigned to the depot at Hazeley Down Camp, near Winchester, in the south of England. He spent the next six months there on light duty. Then on July 31, 1918, he boarded a ship for Newfoundland, where he would be formally discharged from the Regiment as medically unfit. This discharge occurred on October 09; his war service totaled three years and 39 days. On December 31, 1918, he received a war service gratuity in the amount of \$350.00.

Once he was back in St. John's, and with his return to civilian status imminent, Darby resumed his studies at the Methodist College, graduating in 1919. He then enrolled in Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he spent one year before transferring to McGill University in Montreal to study medicine. He received financial support from the Newfoundland Government's Civil Re-establishment Committee during 1920 and 1921 in the amount of \$580.00 to assist in paying for his education.

Darby spent three years at McGill but was forced to end his medical studies for health reasons. In the Fall of 1924, he enrolled in the Ontario College of Optometry, and later in the American Optical College, graduating in 1925 with the degree Doctor of Optics. Following graduation, he returned to St. John's, where he established a practice as an optometrist and an optician on July 1, 1925. In addition to his main clinic in St. John's, Darby held travelling clinics all over the island, testing the vision of and prescribing eyeglasses for thousands of people. These clinics lasted well into the 1960s.

In addition to operating his own practice, Darby was a member of the Optometry Board of Newfoundland for many years. In January 1955, he was one of three members of the board, the others being Lorne Hiscock and John Nichols, who spoke at a special tribute in honour of H. B. Thomson, who had served as President of the board for the past 28 years.

Darby married Isabel Marjorie MacLeod of St. John's on October 23, 1932. They were the parents of two children, Keith and Faith, as well as a third child, a son who died at age two months before baptism had taken place. The family attended Gower Street United Church, where Darby was quite involved in the administrative side of the Church, serving as a member of Session and on various committees. He died at his home at 96 Freshwater Road in St. John's on January 04, 1980, at age 81. His funeral was conducted by Rev. A. F. MacLean at Barrett's Funeral Home, with interment in the General Protestant Cemetery.

On May 17, 1917, while stationed at Ayr, Darby wrote this letter home to his parents:

Dear Mother & Father :-

Roy & I are here in the Union Jack Club writing our letters.

I have first written Mrs. Wood to thank her for the box she sent me.

On Sunday night Walter & I went to the Free Church of Scotland. A woman, who was going in the same time as we were asked us in her seat & afterwards took us to her home where we stayed to supper. They are very nice people & we are invited there to tea on Saturday next. Sunday morning we drilled as usual until 12.

I received father's letter, written about the middle of April, yesterday. It has been a month coming. We had a field day yesterday (Wedn). We left this about six o'clock on Tuesday evening with full equipment & marched seven miles where we encamped for the night in a large wood. It was my first experience of lying down on the ground to sleep. Walter, Maunder & I got some boughs & made a bed so that we had it just as comfortable as it is in our tent where we have to sleep on the boards. We were up at five & off on the road again at seven. We marched another five miles & then took up our position around two farms which we were told to defend at all costs against C, E & H companies. Each man carried thirty rounds of blank ammunition. H company captured one of the farms about 12:30 so we

gave it up & marched back about a mile & a half to dinner. We left again at 2 p.m. & got back at 4:30. There was quite a lot of fellows from the different companies who had to fall behind & come in later. I managed to stick it out but was pretty stiff. It doesn't take many miles to tire you when you are carrying full equipment. There were blisters on some men's feet as big as your thumb but my feet were O.K. I should have mentioned that C, E & H who were the attacking party did not go with us on Tuesday evening but left by a different route altogether. We all came to-gether. The food was carried on two carts which followed in the rear while the Colonel & adjutant motored in.

The military authorities here gave orders that our 10:45 leave was to be stopped but our C. O. has fooled them. Each man has been issued with a permanent pass until 10:45 which he keeps until recalled. All he has to do is to show this pass to anyone who inquires about it & they can say nothing. Our musketry instructors have been ordered to have our shooting finished by Saturday week which will be eight days. We are going to have our gas test & you have to stay there too long with your helmets on. Father, I spoke about a code which we might use when we went to France. You could have certain words to mean something or jumble up the letters of the alphabet. I don't know whether this letter will be censored or not. If it is I'm afraid there will be quite a lot of it cut out.

A lot of our N.C.O.'s are going to Edinburgh to take a six week's course so will not go with us. Hunt, Roy Kendall & others are among the number. Hunt's brother Don is among the missing in this last drive. The news only came in yesterday & Hunt is feeling pretty bad today.

There are some going home to-morrow on furlough but I don't know of any of them. One of our instructors in bayonet fighting is a Spencer from Fortune. He is a sergeant. I had tea at a restaurant on both Saturday & Sunday. The last crowd that came over are only raw recruits & I don't think that they will go to the front with us. They must have been hard up

for N. C. O.'s in N.F. by the look of some of the L. Cpls that came with them.

We have a new sergeant for our platoon now. His name is Samson & he is a D.C.M. I don't know whether he is going to France with us or is just temporary.

Lieut L. T. Stick who is No. 1 of the N. F. Regiment is now here. He enlisted as a private & has worked his way up. You certainly have to be steady on parade here. One fellow was put in the cells for smiling on parade & another got 3 days C.B. for the same thing.

You also have to have everything about you spotless or you get put on crime.

I guess I'll have to close for the present.

Love to all.

Your loving son

George

*Racecourse Barracks
Ayr, Scotland.*

P.S. I forgot to tell you that we find it awful hard to understand the people they talk so funny.

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.