

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Private Sidney John Stewart Woods**

**(1896-1977)**



*“Dear Sir, I received your card of Oct. 27<sup>th</sup> a few days ago. So far I have received four grocery parcels, five parcels containing biscuits, two containing bread, one tobacco and one cigarettes, but as yet no clothes of which I am greatly in need – tunic and trousers, size 4, boots size 6 or 7, great coat and under clothes. Oblige yours truly, (Sgd.) J.S. Woods”*  
(Letter to Newfoundland Pay and Records Office, London, November 17, 1917)

Sidney John Stewart Woods was born in St. John's on June 09, 1896, the youngest of two sons and third of four children of Emma Burns and Sidney Woods. The elder Woods was a prominent businessman who operated a very successful hardware business for many years. He also spent approximately one year as MHA for Bay de Verde during 1894-1895. Emma Woods was a busy mother and housewife, as well as being involved in various social, religious and philanthropic endeavours. His siblings were his older brother William Lloyd (1890-1923), his older sister Clara Louisa (1892-19??) and his younger sister Evelyn Maud Mary Alice (1898-19??).

Woods attended the Methodist College, where he was singled out at the end of the school year in 1907, winning a prize for excellence in spelling. He graduated from the College at the end of the school year in 1915, but instead of pursuing higher education at that time, at age 19, he joined the war effort. He left St. John's with Company G of the Newfoundland Regiment, on October 27, 1915, on board the SS *Corsican*, arriving in Liverpool, England, on November 07. He was not a member of the Regiment at that time: he was one of five local lads who were headed for England to become hospital orderlies. The others were E. H. Churchill, Edward Moyle Stick, Fred Jeans and Will Cornick.

Five days after arriving in Liverpool, Woods was in London, where he enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), No. 104332. On his enlistment form he stated that he was a science student and he agreed to sign up for six months service on the English home front. He served with the RAMC as a hospital orderly for a little more than nine months, receiving his discharge on August 19, 1916. One week later he was in Ayr, Scotland, where, on August 26, he joined the Newfoundland Regiment. No reason was given for this change in his status but perhaps it may have been prompted both by the number of friends and fellow Newfoundlanders that he encountered in hospital in his work as an orderly and by the large number of casualties experienced by the Newfoundland Regiment at

Beaumont Hamel on July 01, 1916, including the deaths of at least 233 officers and men.

Woods' Newfoundland Regiment Attestation Paper informs us that he was 5 feet 8 inches tall, weighed 130 pounds, and had a dark complexion, with black hair and brown eyes. He listed his father, resident at 68 LeMarchant Road, St. John's, as his next of kin. It notes that he had a scar on his right shin and another at the "root of his nose". He was judged to be suitable for Foreign Service. His Regimental Number was 2146.

Following six weeks of training in Ayr, Woods was off to Southampton, on the south coast of England, where he and other members of the Regiment embarked by ship for duty in France on October 11. They arrived there the next day and soon joined up with their comrades at Gueudecourt, where he first engaged with the enemy. During his time there, in early November, he lost his helmet, a definite no-no, as he was fined 3 shillings 7 pence, roughly the equivalent of two weeks army pay. While Woods escaped injury at Gueudecourt, he was admitted to the 14<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station on November 24, 1916, suffering from bronchitis. He returned to duty five days later on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

From November 22, 1916 until January 19, 1917, the Newfoundland Regiment was mainly behind the front lines, either involved in road construction or enjoying periods of rest and relaxation. On January 19 they arrived at Le Transloy on the front lines. They were in and out of the fighting there for the rest of January and much of February. Towards the end of the latter month they saw action at Saily-Saillisel, where they remained until the middle of March. This was followed by another period of rest and relaxation at Camps-en-Amienois. Then, on April 12, the Regiment began a major assault at Monchy-le-Preux, near Arras. It proved to be second only to Beaumont Hamel in the toll it took on the Regiment.

The major fighting at Monchy-le-Preux took place between April 12 and the 15<sup>th</sup>. During those four days, 159 enlisted men and seven officers were killed or later died of wounds received; 134 enlisted men and seven officers were wounded; and 150 enlisted men and three officers were captured; 28 of those later succumbed to wounds or died from other causes while incarcerated in German prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. At first Woods was listed as missing in action as of April 14, but on June 23 his status was changed to prisoner-of-war.

Woods spent the remainder of the war in a number of POW camps. During those 19 months he was part of forced work details in support of the German war effort, such as farming, mining, road and bridge repairs. He was allowed to write to family and friends and to the Regiment's Pay and Records Office in London. These letters were sent and return correspondence received and directed by the Red Cross. He also received parcels containing food, clothing and other necessities. In one letter, dated November 17, 1917, he wrote *"So far I have received four grocery parcels, five parcels containing biscuits, two containing bread, one tobacco and one cigarettes, but as yet no clothes of which I am greatly in need – tunic and trousers, size 4, boots, size 6 or 7, great coat and underclothes."* Beginning in January 1918, he began to receive parcels containing clothing and other items: shirts, trousers, sweaters, underwear, socks, gloves, a jacket and a great coat, boots and shoes, handkerchiefs, and towels.

To say life was not easy for POWs is an understatement. On May 20, 1918, Woods father writes to Major Henry Timewell, at the Pay and Records Office in London, which appears to be in response to information he had received from E. M. Stick, who had escaped from a German POW camp and was back in St. John's. In it, Woods senior writes *"We had the pleasure of an interesting interview with escaped prisoner Stick who was a companion of my son, when they were taken prisoners and he said that at first they were sick from starvation and had to be put in Hospital – After recovery they were separated – He says that if Jack (no. 2146) could get*

*two stripes [be made a corporal] it might save his life. If you can see the way clear to send them on without delay, I will be more than obliged. If we wait to write to Germany to ask Jack to write for them, it will take a long time and the letters may never reach X. I may say that Jack had finished his College Course and graduated with honours and he was studying Mechanical Engineering and this break means more years or more out of his studies.*” Enquiry was made but the request could not be granted because as a POW, Woods was not considered to be on strength (active service) and such promotions could only be made to those who were.

On July 24, 1918, the Pay and Records Office received a telegram from the Red Cross office in Geneva, Switzerland, informing that Woods had been admitted to hospital at Langensalza suffering from heart trouble, news of which eventually reached his parents. It did not seem to have been to debilitating, as he was back in the Cassel POW camp at Hessen Nassau by mid August. In a letter, dated August 15, 1918, to the Newfoundland War Contingent Office in London, he thanked all *“those responsible for the ‘Gem’ cigarettes and ‘Mayo’ tobacco which I received in one of my parcels and which I thoroughly enjoyed.”*

Meanwhile, back a home, his father continued his quest to have Woods repatriated or transferred to a neutral country. Woods release finally came with the Armistice. He was repatriated to England, arriving in Hull on December 31, 1918; two days later he was on his way to Hazeley Down Camp, near Winchester. The following day, on January 03, 1919, he was granted a two-month furlough, during which time, on January 30, he sailed for Newfoundland. He arrived there on February 07. In an interview with the Civil Re-establishment Committee, he stated that he wanted to return to school.

One practice that the Newfoundland Regiment instituted in the early post-war period was a detailed interview with former POWs about the circumstances of their capture and the treatment they received. Woods underwent this procedure on March 10, 1918, with Major Robert H. Tait

[Gower Remembers No. 2] conducting the interview. In his statement, Woods noted that after capture, *“We were sent to Douai for four or five days and then on to Fort MacDonalld. My story about this place coincides with what others have already said. I was then sent to Guisnain, a reprisal camp, near Douai, where I was set to work making railway cuttings. We were here for seven months and had a very bad time of it. The food was very scarce and what we were given was hardly fit to eat. A steel helmet full of watery soup once a day had to do for seven of us. We were continually under the eye of the German sentries, who did not hesitate to use their rifle butts or sticks on us at the least sign of slacking in our work. Several of our men were knocked down and ill-used from time to time at their hands. Then I was shifted to Marchiennes for about two months to work in an oak-forest. The treatment was much better, but the food was still poor and very scarce. I was sent to Hospital from here as a result of the hard work and starvation, and went to Tournai for a month. From here I was sent into Germany and went to a small town name[d] Langensalza in Thuringen for almost a year. I was not put to work for six months, as I had not fully recovered my strength, but afterwards was sent to work at Housebuilding and sanitary duties. I was transferred to Cassel Camp for a while and when the Armistice was declared we refused to work, and they did not do anything about it. We were then given much more liberty, and on Dec. 27<sup>th</sup> we left Germany for repatriation, and arrived in England via Holland on Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919. An interesting aspect of his time in the POW camp was that Woods, who was a teetotaler, gave his daily alcohol allowance to his fellow prisoners. He also spoke regularly of the kindness of his fellow prisoners and of German prison guards.*

One week after making this statement, on March 17, 1919, Woods was discharged from the Regiment. He received a war service gratuity of \$350.00. He also received \$208.68 in back pay upgrade for his time in the RAMC. Over the two years that followed he received further payments amounting to \$480.00 towards his education. That included two years at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree, with honours in Physics, in June

1920. While there, his roommate was George Bishop Darby (*Gower Remembers* No. 55). Upon the completion of his degree, Woods returned to St. John's where he joined the employ of the Commercial Cable Company, where he spent his entire working career, although he did attempt to obtain employment elsewhere on at least one occasion.

On February 23, 1923, the St. John's Municipal Council Report of its meeting the previous evening appeared in *The Evening Telegram*. It included the following statement: "*Applications were read from John Woods and Michael Walsh for a position in the Engineering Department. At present staff is considered sufficient for the working of this Department. It was decided no further appointment was necessary.*" In that same report, the Municipal Council expressed its condolences to the Woods family on the recent death of W. Lloyd Woods [*Gower Remembers* No. 05], 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Engineer with the city. This is the same Lloyd Woods who was Jack's older brother.

Jack Woods married Winifred Margaret Louise Braine (1903-1978) of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, on September 01, 1926. They were the parents of six children: Bernard, Sidney Alice, David, Christopher, Clare and Jean (who married Keith Darby, son of Isabel Marjorie MacLeod and George Bishop Darby). In the mid-1970s, after his retirement from the Commercial Cable Company, Jack and Winifred relocated to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where several of their children were living. He died at Dartmouth General Hospital on November 28, 1977, and was buried at the Dartmouth Memorial Gardens on November 30. Winifred died the following year.

In addition to his brother, Lloyd Woods (1890-1923), Regimental Number 660, Jack's first cousin, Captain Wilfrid J. W. Pippy (1881-1920), was also a member of the Newfoundland Regiment in World War 1.

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