

GOWER REMEMBERS

Colonel Charles Ayre Peters

(1872-1968)



“We are at rest again and it is a great treat. We came out last night. We had the hardest time we ever had this last trip and our casualties were very heavy. It was the greatest fight this Division has ever had and I think we did all and more than was expected of us. Really the bravery of the men was wonderful. They simply cannot be beaten.” (from a letter by Charles A. Peters, November 9, 1918)

Charles Ayre Peters was born in St. John's on September 10, 1872, the fifth of seven sons and eight children of Rose Emma Cole (1839-1913) and John Edgar Pickavant Peters (1839-1919). The elder Peters was a prominent St. John's businessman for many years and a member of the House of Assembly for Burin from 1882 to 1889. Rose Peters was a niece of Charles R. Ayre, another prominent businessman, which explains the names given to their son. J.E.P. Peters worked for Ayre at one time.

The Peters family were pioneer Methodists in Newfoundland and have been involved with Gower Street Methodist and later United Church for generations. J. E. P. Peters served on the building committee for the present church building.

In addition to Charles, the Peters children included John Edgar (1863-1945), Alfred Mayne¹ (1865-1938), Joseph (1868-1938), Arthur Cole (1871-1932), Katherine Norris (1874-1960), William Henry (1875-1957) and George (1877-1967).

Charles was educated at the Methodist College in St. John's, where he proved to be an exceptional student. However, he did have some health problems and, following his graduation, at his father's suggestion, he spent several months in Brazil and in Barbados. After his return to St. John's, he worked in his father's business for some years. Then, in 1894, he enrolled in McGill University in Montreal to study medicine.

Peters spent four years at McGill, working throughout that time to meet the cost of his studies. All the hard work paid off, as he graduated with an MD and first-class honours in 1898. While at McGill, he met and fell in love with Norah White, whose father, Richard White, was owner the Gazette Printing Company, publisher of the Montreal newspaper, *The*

¹ Two of Alfred Mayne Peters' sons, Private Edward Cole Peters (1890-1916) and Private Herbert Smith Peters (1896-1918), lost their lives in World War I. They have been commemorated by *Gower Remembers* as No. 39 and No. 41, respectively.

Gazette. They were married at St. George's Anglican Church in Montreal on February 23, 1903.

Before they were married, however, Peters travelled first to London, England, in September 1899, to write the British Medical Board examinations, which would enable him to practice medicine anywhere in the British Empire. Early in 1900, he passed these examinations, which enabled him to become a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. This new status coincided with the fighting in South Africa between the Boers (Dutch settlers) and the British, which had broken out in October 1899. Peters volunteered for service and spent a year and a half as part of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in South Africa. He had a particular interest in the prevention of typhoid fever, and inoculated himself, and all those on the ship on which they was travelling to South Africa, who accepted his offer to vaccinate them.

After completing his war service, Peters returned to North America early in 1902. He spent some time visiting with family in St. John's before travelling on to Montreal, where he established his own medical practice. It was quite the busy time for him, as he also was appointed to the attending staff of Montreal General Hospital and joined the newly formed Canadian Army Medical Corps. In this latter capacity, he took part in drilling exercises each spring at Champ de Mars and attended a two-week camp each summer. He later became an Outpatient Physician at Montreal General and a Clinical Professor and then an Assistant Professor of Medicine at McGill.

Peters did not confine his medical expertise to Canada. Beginning in 1903, he became a visiting Professor of Dermatology at the medical school at the University of Vermont (UV) in Burlington. Another Montreal-based physician, who had a similar role at UV, was Peters' close friend, Dr. John McCrae (1872-1918), who later penned the poem "In Flanders Fields" during World War I. And, in 1904, at its opening, he was

named physician in charge of the measles department at the Montreal's Alexandra Hospital for Infectious Diseases.

During this period he and Norah started their family, with four children being born in eight years: Charles Hamilton in 1907; Norah Eileen in 1908; Jean White in 1910; and John Richard in 1915.

A little over two months after the birth of his fourth child, on December 24, 1915, Peters volunteered for service. It must have been a difficult decision to leave his wife on her own with four small children, but, in all likelihood, she would have encouraged him in his decision. Upon enlistment, he was appointed Officer Commanding the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. According to his Attestation Paper, he was 5 feet 10 inches tall, weighed 147 pounds and had grey eyes.

Three months of preparatory work in Canada followed before he sailed from Saint John, New Brunswick, on April 03, 1916, arriving in Plymouth, England some ten or so days later. Within a matter of weeks he was in France where one of his first assignments was to clear casualties suffered by the 3rd Canadian Division at the Ypres Salient. By June he and the 9th Field Ambulance were at Sanctuary Wood and then at the Somme.

Peters was obviously a person with easily recognizable leadership abilities. Just seven months after leaving Canada, on November 03, 1916, he was posted to the Canadian Army Medical Corps and ten days later transferred to the Director of Medical Services in London, and was named as Assistant Director in charge of personnel. On January 02, 1917, he was mentioned for the first time in despatches: his name appeared in an official report written by his superior officer and sent to those in command describing a particular action by the individual of a courageous or laudable action in the face of the enemy. He would receive three more of these, on December 28 and 31, 1918, and on July 11, 1919.

He left London in May 1917 to become Assistant Director of Medical Services with the 4th Canadian Division, with the rank of Colonel. While in that position, he was in charge of all medical operations of that division during the strenuous fighting it was engaged in at Lens, and later at Passchendaele. In recognition of his service above and beyond the call of duty at these and other fighting arenas during 1917, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order on the New Year's Honours List on January 01, 1918. He remained with the 4th Canadian Division for the remainder of his war service, and except for several periods of leave (usually two weeks in duration), he was on the Western Front, in the midst of the fighting. Near the end of his service, on November 09, 1918, he wrote: *"We are having a wonderful experience these days. We took two towns with 25,000 inhabitants. They were in Boche [German] hands for four years. They all line up in the streets crying 'Vive les Anglais' and 'Vive La France'. They shake hands and cry and laugh. It is terrible to see the desolation of their houses. It takes us a long time to do anything on these broken roads, but the engineers are wonderful. One become prouder every day of being a Canadian"*

Peters left England for Canada aboard the SS *Baltic* on February 03, 1919. He was struck off the strength on February 24 and within no time had re-established his practice in Montreal, as well as his connection to Montreal General Hospital and began clinical teaching. He was also appointed as a medical consultant with the newly established government department responsible for the well-being and support of soldiers, sailors and others who had been part of the war effort, now Veterans Affairs Canada. He continued in that role until 1945.

In addition to a large medical practice, pro bono medical work, staff duties at Montreal General and teaching duties at McGill, Peters spent 40 years during the mid-twentieth century as Chief Medical Advisor for the Royal Insurance Company of Liverpool and more than 25 years fulfilling a similar role with the Prudential Assurance Company of England.

As well, he was actively involved in a number of professional endeavours including life-long membership in the Canadian Medical Association, and as Chair of the Medical Board and Secretary of the Committee of Management of Montreal General for many years. He served four years on the governing council of the Royal College of Physicians and was also President of the Montreal Medical Chirurgical Society. He was also medical referee to the Mount Royal cemetery Company for more than 60 years.

None of this curbed his ability or willingness to take on non-medical responsibilities. An avid athlete since his school days at the Methodist College, where he excelled at cricket and tennis, during adulthood he served as President of the Montreal Thistle Curling Club and Vice-president of the Royal Montreal Golf Club. He also had a fondness for cars: in 1934 he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Royal Automobile Club of Canada, becoming its President for a two-year term in 1951, and remaining as a member of the Executive Committee until 1960.

Family was also quite important to him. In addition to taking an active role in the raising of his children, he and his wife and children visited Newfoundland on a number of occasions. He also became involved in the White family business, accepting an appointment as a Director of the Gazette Printing Company in November 1942, serving until 1962.

In recognition of his contributions to the medical profession and to society in general, Peters was awarded two honorary degrees in 1957, the first a Doctor of Civil Law from Bishop's University in Sherbrooke Quebec; the second a Doctor of Laws degree from McGill University. In presenting the latter degree, he was singled out as "*one of the outstanding leaders in the practice of medicine in Canada for more than half a century.*"

Charles Peters died at Montreal General Hospital on April 01, 1968, in his 96th year. He was survived by all four of his children. His wife had predeceased him in 1966. His funeral was held at Erskine & American

United Church, Westmount, and he was laid to rest at the Mount Royal Cemetery. On December 29, 1987, almost 20 years after his death, a plaque was unveiled in his memory on the 19th floor of Montreal General Hospital. It reads:

IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF
CHARLES AYRE PETERS
DSO·MD·CM·FRCPC·DCL·LLD
1972-1968
WHO SERVED THIS HOSPITAL AND
ITS PATIENTS WITH DISTINCTION
AND COMPASSION FOR MORE
THAN HALF A CENTURY
“Beloved as Physician, Teacher and Friend”

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.

No. 58