

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Thomas Bowring Evans
(1895-1945)



“Private Thomas B. Evans, of the Newfoundland Regiment, writing to his parents from Newton on Ayr, under date Nov. 4th. says that he was leaving for the Dardenelles the following day. The letter further states that the draft consisted of over one hundred men, and that they were all thoroughly equipped and ready to enter the trenches on arrival.” (The Evening Telegram, December 07, 1915)

Thomas Bowring Evans was born in St. John's on August 11, 1895, the son of Elizabeth and Jabez Evans, and was baptized two days later on August 15 by the Rev. Arthur D. Morton of Gower Street Methodist Church. He was one of the youngest of a large number of brothers and sisters. His father was a fisherman, originally from Western Bay, who fished out of Bay Roberts for many years before relocating to St. John's around 1894-1895.

Evans does not appear to have received formal schooling, as he signed his name on his Attestation Paper when he joined the Newfoundland Regiment in 1914 with an X. There is no substantial information about him until he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on December 14, 1914, Regimental number 642. His older brother, Leonard, also enlisted on that day and was assigned Regimental number 658.

According to his Attestation Paper, Evans enlisted on December 14, 1914. It recorded that he was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. He had a dark complexion, with brown hair and grey eyes. He listed his nearest relative as his father, who resided at 2 Parade Street. His occupation was a labourer, for which he received \$200 per year.

After roughly a month of training during December of 1914 and January of 1915, Thomas left Newfoundland on February 05, 1915, a member of C Company, one of 244 recruits, including his brother, on board the SS *Dominion*. It was anchored just off Bay Bulls because the ice was too thick for the ship to enter St. John's Harbour: the men had to be ferried out through the Narrows on board the sealing vessel *Neptune* to

rendezvous with and transfer over the water to the *Dominion*. Eleven days later, the *Dominion* arrived in Liverpool, England. Almost immediately, they boarded a train to Edinburgh, Scotland, where they were assigned to duty at Edinburgh Castle, the first colonial regiment assigned duty at the castle. They were soon joined by A and B companies, which had been in training at Fort George, Scotland, since December 1914.

While at Edinburgh Castle, Evans proved to have a wild streak: he ran afoul of the military police on eight separate occasions between March 15 and April 30. The first five of these were at the Castle itself; the other three were in Edinburgh itself. The offenses included absence from parade and being drunk and disorderly; his combined punishment amounted to 23 days confined to barracks, fines totalling 25 shillings and the forfeiture of four days' pay.

The Newfoundland Regiment's tour of duty at Edinburgh Castle came to an end on May 11 and the men, including Evans, were relocated to Stobs Camp, near Hawick, Scotland, for further training. There, he continued his resistance to authority, with five more citations: one for absent from parade, one for absent from tattoo, one for being drunk in Hawick, one for on parade with dirty boots, and one for neglect of duty. This time his combined punishment amounted to seven days confined to camp, two days confined to barracks, a fine of five shillings and the forfeiture of two days' pay.

It is unclear whether Evans transferred to Aldershot with the majority of the Regiment in early August. He was not one of the 1,000 plus members of the Regiment who left Devonport on

August 20 to sail to the eastern Mediterranean and eventually engage the enemy at Gallipoli, Turkey. In September he was in Scotland, as one of his infractions occurred on September 11 at Newton.

It is quite possible that Evans found the constant training and parading somewhat boring, not at all what he had signed up for, and that his defiance of military authority was a result of that boredom. He finally got his chance to engage with the enemy when he was one of the reinforcements sent out to Gallipoli in the late Fall of 1915.

Before leaving Scotland, however, on November 04, 1915, Evans had someone write a letter to his parents, one whose contents were reported in The Evening Telegram of December 07. The first part of that report is reproduced under Evans's picture on the cover of this biographical sketch. The second paragraph of that report reads *"His letter throughout is quite cheery. He tells his parents that he is determined to do his duty as a soldier. Referring to the equipment, Private Evans says that they have all been supplied with good warm underclothing, and each man was given two pairs of boots. The young soldier concludes by telling his parents not to worry about him but instead to feel proud that he was going forward to fight for King and Country."*

Evans left England on November 14, arriving at Suvla Bay, near Gallipoli, on December 01. There he probably saw limited action, since the British campaign against the Turks was slowly winding down. Less than three weeks after his arrival, the Newfoundland Regiment began evacuating from Suvla Bay.

They relocated to Cape Helles, which was still in the line of fire. They remained there until January 09, 1916, when their full-scale evacuation from the Gallipoli Peninsula arriving at Alexandria, Egypt, on the 15th.

The Newfoundland Regiment spent the next two months in Egypt, before boarding the transport ship *Alaunia* at Port Twefik on March 14 for the voyage back across the Mediterranean. They landed at Marseilles, France, on March 22 and were taken by train north to Pont Remy, near Abbeville, on the Western Front in northern France. Once again, Evans was not with the main body of the Regiment. On March 19, he was at Mustapha, Egypt, where he was cited for being absent from parade and confined to barracks for two days as a result. He did not proceed to France until early April and rejoined his comrades in the field on the 8th of that month.

Two months later, on July 06, he was transferred to England. This poses the question of where he was on July 01, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme and the deaths and wounding of many of his comrades at Beaumont Hamel. He is listed as being "On Strength" with the Regiment on that date. That means he could have been part of the ten percent reserve force, held back from the opening attack to help rebuild the Regiment in case of massive casualties, as did happen. That reserve force was brought up to the front lines on that afternoon of July 01. He might have been one of the stretcher bearers, part of the transport unit or a cook, which is unlikely, since there is no mention of it in his personnel file. He also may have been assigned to other duties but this too is unlikely. The first option seems the most plausible.

Whatever the reason for his absence from the fighting at Beaumont Hamel, Evans was not destined to remain in uniform for much longer. During the first year of the war, most of the recruits were asked to sign up for a maximum of one year. In the summer of late summer of 1915 that period was expiring for many and they were asked to resign for the duration of the war. Most of them did. As later recruits reached their one-year expiry date, they, too, were given the option to re-engage. Evans, who had already surpassed the one-year mark, decided in July 1916 that he had had enough. On July 08, two days after arriving back in England, he was assigned to the Regiment's Depot at Ayr, Scotland. On July 19, he received a formal discharge; on the 25th, he was repatriated to St. John's. He had served one year, 187 days; upon discharge he received a war service gratuity of \$280.00.

Once back in St. John's, Evans found work as a butcher. He appears to have brought some of his old habits with him. On September 18, 1916, *The St. John's Daily Star* reported that Thomas Evans, a 22-year-old butcher of Parade Street had been charged in Magistrate's Court with being drunk and disorderly. He was released after his court appearance, having served three days imprisonment since his arrest on the previous Saturday morning.

Evans's whereabouts for the next year or so are uncertain, although he appears to have remained in St. John's. At some point he met and married Bertha Crowley Percy, the daughter of Eva and William Percy of Port de Grave. The marriage probably took place after August 17, 1918, which was Bertha's 18th birthday. Their first child, a son named Leonard Champion

Evans, (in all likelihood in honour of his uncle Leonard, who was killed in the fighting at Gueudecourt, France, on October 11, 1916), was born in St. John's on June 23, 1919.

That child would be the first of 13 children born to Bertha and Thomas. The others were Blanche (b. 1920), Maxwell (1924), twins Julia Moore & George Harold (1926), Lillian Ina (1927), William Thomas (1928), Robert Jethro (1930), Florence Lavina (1932), Daphne Mary (1932), Eva Elizabeth Ann (1935), Carroll Percy (1938), and Thomas Roy (1943).

According to various city directories for the 1920s and 1930s, Evans was employed as a fisherman for much of his life after he returned from the war. He died at St. John's in mid-January 1945, seven months before his 50th birthday. No cause of death was cited in his burial announcement, which appeared in *The Evening Telegram* on January 15, 1945. His funeral had taken place the previous afternoon, from his residence on Thorburn Road and he was interred at Mount Pleasant Cemetery. The Rev. Dean K. Burns of Gower Street United Church officiated at the funeral, with representatives of the Great War Veterans Association, including the President, Captain W. D. Edwards, and the Secretary, W. B. Martin, in attendance. The coffin was covered with the Union Jack.

Despite his decision not to re-enlist in the Newfoundland Regiment in July 1916, he was still entitled to and awarded three medals: the 1914-1915 Star for any soldier who was in uniform before the end of 1915, which he received on December 05, 1919; and the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, both of which he received on August 31, 1921.

[Image on page one courtesy of The Rooms Provincial Archives Division: C3-95]

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.

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