

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Jesse Heyfield Butler

(1887-1949)



The Military Medal showing both sides and ribbon.

“Pte. Jesse Butler enlisted in December 1915, in the Irish Guards, Liverpool, and has been nearly three years at the front. He was sailing out of Liverpool at the outbreak of hostilities, and enlisted from that port. He won the Military Medal in March last. Pte. Butler is the brother of Rev. W. B. Butler, of Bell Island, who served two years with the Canadian Medical Corps overseas, and is also the brother of Capt. Abner Butler, of Hickman and Co.’s employ.” (The Evening Telegram, September 09, 1918)

Jesse Heyfield Butler was born in Bonne Bay, Newfoundland, on July 18, 1887, the fourth son and seventh of nine children of Zipporah Snow and John Thomas Butler. His mother was originally from Bay Roberts, while his father, a member of the Newfoundland Constabulary, hailed from Clarke's Beach. John Thomas was stationed in a number of Newfoundland communities during his years with the police force. This accounts for Jesse having been born at Bonne Bay, probably Woody Point, and later living at Old Perlican and St. John's. The family appears to have moved to St. John's shortly before John Thomas's death in 1899 at age 54.

As was often the custom in Newfoundland for some sons at that time, Jesse Butler was named after the clergyman who christened him: the Rev. Jesse Heyfield. The Butlers had first met Heyfield when they were living in Channel and he was the Methodist minister there. Their paths crossed again when both were transferred to Bonne Bay.

Jesse was probably educated in the various communities in which his father was posted, completing his schooling in St. John's. In all likelihood, he left school soon after his father's death in order to contribute to the household income for his mother and his siblings who were still living at home. The family resided first at 7 British Square but by 1904 had moved to 3 Bulley Street. By that time, Abner was a seaman, John was a picture framer and William was a shoemaker, but there is no mention of Jesse in the St. John's City Directory for that year.

With his brother Abner moving up the ranks to become a ship's captain, it is not surprising that Jesse Butler would opt for a life at sea as well. He may have signed on one of his brother's ships when he first went to sea, but he eventually gained a berth on ocean going vessels. His life is somewhat of a mystery for the first dozen years or so of the 20th century. However, in the Fall of 1915, he was on a ship that docked in Liverpool. From there he journeyed to London, where he joined in the Irish Guards.

Perhaps it was mere happenstance, or maybe one or more of his shipmates had connections to that Regiment, but whatever the reason, Butler enlisted in the Guards on December 18, 1915, at Buckingham Gate, London. He was given Regimental number 10685 and his initial rank was Guardsman. He agreed to serve for the duration of the war. He was assigned to the 1st Battalion, and was later reassigned to the 3rd Battalion.

According to his Attestation Paper, Butler was 5 feet 7¼ inches tall at the time of his enlistment. His weight was not recorded but his chest measured 38 inches when fully expanded; 35½ when not. He gave his occupation as a mechanical helper and his next of kin was his mother, who was then living at 46 Lime Street, in St. John's. That was the address he also gave as his permanent residence. It was noted in his file that at the time he had a Standard IV educational attainment, was adjudged very good in musketry and field work and was identified as a Newfoundland able seaman in the Mercantile Marine.

Not a great deal is known of Butler's actual war service. He spent much of his first year in uniform (December 18, 1915 to September 27, 1916) in England, undergoing training. He was shipped to France on September 28, 1916, and remained there, or in Belgium, until he returned to England on March 10, 1919. While in France, on March 12, 1918, he transferred from the Irish Guards to the Machine Gun Guards (later the Guards Machine Gun Regiment), where he was assigned Regimental number 1974.

If one examines the activities of the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Irish Guards during September 1916, they were on the Western Front, where they saw action at the battles of Flers-Courcelette (September 15-22) and Morval (September 25-28), both part of the Battle of the Somme. It is quite possible Butler was sent to France, along with others of his Regiment, as re-inforcements for losses incurred in these two battles. In

1917, the Guards took part in the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, the Battle of Pilkem, the Battle of the Menin Road, the Battle of Poelkapelle, the First Battle of Passchendaele, and the Battle of Cambrai.

Butler was one of the first to become a member of the newly formed Machine Gun Guards¹, which came into being on March 01, 1918. He may have seen action with his new unit in one or all of the Battle of St. Quentin (March 21-23), the first Battle of Bapaume (March 24-25), or the first Battle of Arras (March 28). He certainly was involved in the fighting during March for he was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry in the field in that month. He probably took part in other battles involving his new Regiment during the Summer of 1918, including the Battle of Albert (August 21-23), where he was injured and admitted to the 2nd Canadian General Stationary Hospital, France, on August 25, with a gas shell wound.

After the war ended on November 11, 1918, Butler spent another three months on the continent before he was shipped back to England on March 11, 1919. He remained in that country until March 31, 1920, having transferred to the Army Reserve on April 09, 1919. He resided in Liverpool for part of that time and was living there at 76 Rose Place on May 22, 1919 when he finally took possession of his Military Medal.

¹ *"The four Machine Gun Companies in the Guards Division were formed into a unit named the 4th Battalion Machine Gun Guards on 1 March 1918. By a Royal Warrant of 10 May 1918 and as stated in Army Order 161 of 1918, the Guards Machine Gun Regiment was formed. It comprised four Machine Gun Battalions: the three Household Cavalry Regiments (the [1st and 2nd Life Guards](#) and [Royal Horse Guards](#)) formed the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions, and the 4th Battalion Machine Gun Guards joined and was renamed the 4th (Foot Guards) Battalion."* (*The Long, Long Trail: The British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918*, website)

Following his discharge on March 31, 1920, he was credited with four years, 104 days service, of which only three years and 112 days counted toward a pension.

During the latter half of 1920 or early in 1921, Butler returned to St. John's, where he appears in the 1921 Census as living with his mother and his nephew William Raymond at 54 Lime Street. William was the youngest of four children of Butler's oldest sister, Elizabeth Mary, who had married Constable William Henry Raymond sometime around 1902. Elizabeth Raymond died of tuberculosis on August 28, 1908; just 19 days later, on September 16, 1908, her husband died of cancer of the jaw. In addition to their son William (b. May 17, 1908), they also left three daughters: Elizabeth Mary (b. April 01, 1903); Zipporah Gertrude (b. 1904); and Emma Margaret (b. 1906).

After their parents' deaths, William went to live with his grandmother Butler; the three girls were placed in an orphanage in St. John's. The oldest of the Raymond girls, Elizabeth, moved to the United States in 1922, arriving in Boston on December 08. Her Uncle Jesse made a similar move the following year, as several of his siblings had done previously. He obviously had a good relationship with his niece and made contact with her upon his arrival in Boston. They were married on July 03, 1924. They settled for a time in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and later lived in Derry, New Hampshire. They had one child, a son named William, who died in infancy.

Little is known of Butler's life in the United States. According to the 1930 US Census, he was working as a janitor in a private school in Derry. In October 1935 he travelled to Ottawa in an attempt to meet with British officials regarding his war pension. At that time he was still employed as a janitor.

As the decade wore on, his health took a turn for the worse. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and in the 1940 US Census he was living at the State Sanatorium in Rutland Massachusetts. On February 15, 1942, when he completed the US Draft Registration Card, he was a guest of the State TB League at the Little Building in Boston. On that card he lists his next of kin as his sister, Selina Brown, Newtonville, Massachusetts. The card also records his height (5 feet 7½ inches), weight (140 pounds), complexion (dark), eye colour (grey) and hair colour (black).

That he listed his sister as his next of kin on that form may indicate that he and his wife Elizabeth were estranged. They were still married when she applied for US citizenship on March 08, 1944, but they subsequently divorced. She later married Percy M. Cutler, a marriage that lasted until his death in the early 1950s. She had received training as a nurse at some point and spent much of the period following Cutler's death working at that profession in Boston. She died in Belmont, Massachusetts, on January 04, 1987, at the age of 83.

Jesse Butler spent much of the remainder of his life in and out of various sanatoria or other medical facilities. The tuberculosis gradually took its toll on him and he died at the State Sanatorium at Rutland on June 22, 1950, at age of 62. He had been living at the Hotel Canterbury in Boston prior to his last stay at the sanatorium. Interestingly, his occupation in his death notice was seaman. His brother, the Rev. William Robert Butler, a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in World War I and later an ordained United Church Minister, was numbr 24 in this series of commemorations.

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.