

GOWER REMEMBERS

Corporal Henry George Hopkins

(1885-1918)



Insignia of the Royal Highlanders of Canada

“Dear Mrs. Hopkins – It is with the deepest feelings of sympathy I write you these few lines, as your son “Hoppy,” as he was known amongst us had been in my section during the past three years, and since I was promoted to the ranks to be Lieutenant he was my sniper Corporal, and I don’t expect to find a better or more conscientious soldier to take his place.” (Letter from Lieutenant J. W. Cave to Jane Hopkins, October 31, 1918, as printed in *The Evening Telegram*, December 04, 1918.)

Henry George Hopkins was born on February 19, 1885, in Old Perlican, the youngest of six children of Jane Mills and Henry Hopkins. According to a family headstone in the General Protestant Cemetery in St. John's, the senior Henry Hopkins died by drowning on April 25, 1886. It would appear that Jane Hopkins moved her family to St. John's some time after her husband's death: although the exact date is uncertain, she was living there on Young Street in the 1894-1895 McAlpine Directory.

Living in St. John's would have afforded George, as he was commonly known, the opportunity to attend school. Although his name does not appear in class lists for the Methodist College magazine, *The Collegian*, during the time Hopkins might have attended, he may have attended another Methodist school in the city. He certainly had the ability to read and write, as is evident from his clearly legible signature that appears on a number of documents.

Hopkins had entered the workplace by 1904, when he is recorded in the McAlpine Directory as a tailor and living at home with his mother at 17 Cabot Street. However, it would appear that wanderlust soon enveloped him, as he made plans to travel to the United States. He sailed for New York City on board the SS *Rosalind* in early April 1906, arriving there on the 15th. He soon found employment as a labourer and on January 30, 1909 applied for naturalization as a United States citizen. At that time he was living at the Ardmore Hotel in the Bowery section of New York. His application form states that he was 5 feet, 8 inches tall, weighed 150 pounds, had brown hair and eyes. Strangely, he gives his date of birth as February 22, 1887, and his place of birth as St. John's.¹

The day after his application for US citizenship, Hopkins enlisted in the United States Army at Fort Slocum, NY, for a three-year stint and was assigned to the 5th Infantry Division at Plattsburg, NY. He re-signed for a second three years on February 01, 1912, receiving an honorary discharge

¹ According to the Methodist baptismal records for Old Perlican he was born there on February 19, 1885 and baptized there on May 22, 1886. As well, if he was born on February 22, 1887, that would put his birth at ten months after his father had died.

on February 03, 1915. During his time in the US Army, he appears to have been assigned overseas service in the Canal Zone, as he arrived back in New York City from Cristobal, Panama, on board the USS *Advance* on February 15, 1915, to begin his new life as a civilian.

Civilian status did not last long for Hopkins, however. He soon travelled to Montreal, where on March 08, 1915, he enlisted in the 42nd Battalion² of the Royal Highlanders of Canada. Curiously, his Attestation Paper also gives his birthdate as February 22, 1887. Even more surprising, he states he had no previous military service.³ His physical features correspond, for the most part, to those from 1909, although his height is an inch and three-quarters shorter in Canada than in the US. He lists his next of kin as Jane Hopkins, 52 Monroe Street, St. John's.

Hopkins was assigned regimental number 418317 and the rank of Private. The next three months were spent in and around Montreal undergoing training. The battalion, 40 officers and 978 men, left Montreal on board HMT *Hesperian* on June 10, 1915, arriving at Plymouth, England, some nine days later. They were sent to Shorncliffe Military Camp on the coast of Kent. They remained there until October 09, 1915, when the 42nd Battalion embarked from Folkestone for France. They spent the five months that followed in the Ploegsteert area of Belgium, before being moved to the Ypres Salient in March 1916.

While at Ploegsteert, Hopkins learned first-hand the extent of military discipline. He had been absent without leave and under the influence of alcohol on December 31, 1915. The following day he was sentenced to 14 days of Field Punishment No. 1, which required that he be affixed to a stationary object, such as a gun wheel, with fetters and/or handcuffs, for

² This is the same Battalion that Stanley C. Norsworthy (Number 42 in this series) received a commission as a Captain on June 03, 1915.

³ This may have been a deliberate decision on his part to avoid having to inform the Canadian officials that he was an American citizen. It is the same individual, as the signature on the US naturalization form from 1909 matches that on his Attestation paper.

up to two hours a day. Needless to say, there are no further infractions on his record.

Moreover, this incident did not affect his standing in the Battalion. On January 22, he began a course at the Snipers School at the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade. It is unclear how long he spent at this school or what his activities were for the next five months. He did complete the course because he became one of the Battalion's snipers in the months that followed.

On June 02, 1916, the 42nd Battalion engaged the enemy at Ypres, near Mount Sorrel. Between then and its withdrawal on June 07, there were 275 casualties. For the next couple of months, their major encounters with the Germans were from their trenches and involved artillery fire and snipers. It was during this time, on August 21, 1916, that Hopkins suffered injuries to his left hand. After admission to a field ambulance, then the 12th Casualty Clearing Station at Hazelbrouck, he was transferred to the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital at Boulogne, France on August 23. Three days later he was transferred to No. 7 Convalescent Depot at Boulogne, and discharged to duty at the Canadian Base near Le Havre on the 28th.

Hopkins rejoined his unit on September 21, 1916, where he was soon involved in fighting at the Battle of the Somme. The Battalion spent the period from September 23 to October 01 at Albert, before being ordered back to the Somme Front; on October 05, it relieved the 43rd Battalion and engaged the enemy the following day. While part of the fighting there, Hopkins received two severe injuries, gunshot wounds to his right leg and his left arm and was taken to a Casualty Clearing Station, where he had surgery to remove shrapnel.

He was admitted to No. 1 Australian General Hospital at Rouen on October 09, and transferred to the Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre (CCAC) at Folkestone, England, aboard HMHS *Carrisbrook Castle*, on the 12th. The following day he was sent to the Northern General Hospital at Beckett's Park in Leeds, where he underwent extensive medical examination. Additional surgery on November 02 removed another piece

of shrapnel from his right thigh. Two weeks later he was transferred to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital at Woodcote Park, Epsom, where he remained until New Year's Day 1917. On January 03, he was sent to the Canadian Convalescent Depot at Hastings and was assigned light duties at St. Leonard's on the Sea, on the coast of Sussex. On February 13, he was transferred to the 20th Reserve Battalion (Quebec regiment) at Shoreham, where he continued with his recuperation until he was ready to return to his Battalion on March 21.

He returned to France on March 22, where he spent 24 days at the Canadian Base Depot at Le Havre. He performed some entrenching duties over the next month before moving back to the Front lines on April 20. On May 27, 1917, he was admitted to No. 51 General Hospital at Étaples with a sexually transmitted illness, which kept him in and out of hospital until he was discharged to Base Details, probably kitchen duties, on September 04. He did not rejoin his Battalion until November 21, 1917, which was stationed at Bourecq, France, until December 18, when they were moved to Fosse, near Lens. They remained there until March 25, 1918, when they were ordered to stand ready to return to the Front lines. This happened in early April, when they were sent to Avion.

It was while there that Hopkins received first and then a second non-commissioned officer stripe: he was made a Lance Corporal in the field on June 09, and a full Corporal, also in the field, on July 29. Throughout the Summer and Fall of 1918, the 42nd battalion saw action first near Amiens and later at Quarry Wood. They proceeded to Auberchicourt on October 20, and then on to Somain. It was at Somain, on October 23, that Hopkins received a gunshot wound to his left side, which resulted in his death.

His commanding officer, Lieutenant J. W. Cave, wrote to Hopkins' mother following her son's death. The first paragraph of the letter is on the front of this profile. The letter continued: "*He was killed by a German sniper while on duty at his post, and did not live very long after being taken to the dressing station but was conscious all through.*"

If all our men were as good soldiers and had the courage and grit he did we would indeed have a splendid lot. It may be some comfort to you to know that his pals were with him to the last and did everything possible to help him. The rest of his section wish me to say how much we sympathize with you in your great loss.

He was held in the highest esteem by the officers and all men in the Battalion. If there is anything that I or any of the section can do for you, it shall be done willingly in the way of giving you any further details.”

On the first anniversary of Hopkins' death this poem appeared in The Evening Telegram for October 23, 1919.

Oh may we mourn for those we love,
 A lad so brave and fair;
But he is gone to Heaven above
 To meet us over there.

Away from friends he loved so well,
 Our brave young soldier boy.
On fields of France where shot and shell
 Did lay him down to die.

His duty stirred his spirits still
 And left his task, his gains, his all:
And fired his hope and nerved his will,
 He rose responsive to the call.

Somewhere in France, far, far, away,
 He fills a hero's grave;
While he is sleeping, let us pray
 For He is strong to save.

A few short years of evil past,
Then we shall meet you there;
Where we shall smile on you at last
When God is ever near.

And, oh, when in the hour of death
I bow to Thy decree,
Jesu, receive my parting breath,
Good Lord, remember me.

- Inserted by his mother.

Jane Hopkins did not outlive her son by many years. She died at St. John's on August 16, 1922. A family headstone in the General Protestant Cemetery in St. John's marks her final resting place and also commemorates the life of her youngest son who lies buried at Auberchicourt British Cemetery in France.



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.