

GOWER REMEMBERS

Officer-Cadet John Carnell Parsons

(1889-1918)



"NOTE OF THANKS. - Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Parsons desire to express their sincere thanks to all kind friends who sent telegrams and notes of sympathy, also all who sent flowers or in any way helped to lighten the sorrow of their recent bereavement." (The Evening Telegram, March 26, 1918)

John Carnell Parsons was born in St. John's on October 24, 1889, the oldest of five children of Belle Carnell and Eugene Parsons. The elder Parsons, a draper by trade, was a native of Harbour Grace who relocated to St. John's sometime in the 1880s. There he found employment at Ayre and Sons as a clerk. He and Belle Carnell were married on June 08, 1887. In addition to Jack, as he was commonly known, they had two other sons: Charles (1892-1967) and Cyril Eugene (1895-1896); and two daughters: Mabel (1888-1978) and Edith (1899-1972).

Jack was educated at the Methodist College in St. John's, leaving school sometime around 1905-1906. He first appeared in a St. John's city directory in 1908-1909, when he was listed as a clerk at the Royal Stores Ltd., which was the same place his father was then working, also as a clerk. In the next city directory, for the year 1913, Jack was working as a clerk at Ayre & Sons Ltd; in the 1915 city directory he was employed at Bowring Brothers Ltd., also as a clerk. In each of these directories he is recorded as boarding with his parents at 40 Victoria Street.

Very little has been uncovered about Parsons' early life. One can assume that he was involved in some sporting activities while at the Methodist College, as most of the boys attending that school took part in at least one sport. Once he entered the workforce, he joined the St. John's Curlers' Association, and was considered to be a very fine curler by his fellow members.

Family lore indicates that Parsons had wanted to enlist in the war effort much sooner than the Winter of 1918, but his brother Charles had joined in the Newfoundland Regiment on December 18, 1914, and their mother was dead set against having both of her sons overseas. It is claimed that she finally relented to Jack's wishes and allowed him to enrol in Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Perhaps she believed that the war would end before it came time for him to be shipped off to Europe. In order to train as an RFC pilot, he had to travel to Ontario, which at the time usually

involved a sea voyage from St. John's to Halifax and then by train to Ontario.

The SS *Florizel* was the flagship of the Bowring Brothers Ltd. Fleet. Cassie Brown, in her account of the wreck of that vessel in her 1976 book *A Winter's Tale*, tells how Parsons ended up on the *Florizel* on what would be its final voyage. “*Fred Snow, a corporal in the Canadian Army, had transferred to the Imperial Flying Corps. His cousin, Edward Berteau – son of the Auditor-General, F. C. Berteau – and good friends Frank Chown, Jack Parsons, and Newman Sellars had indicated that they, too, were joining the Flying Corps to fight for King and Country, but they had continually postponed breaking ties with home. Fred decided to go anyway and was scheduled to leave St. John's by train with an uncle who was going to Canada on business. His friends decided that they had delayed long enough and, as a group, booked passage to Halifax on the Florizel. They urged young Snow to forego the railway journey and sail with them, and a few hours before departure, he decided to do so.*” (p. 10)

The lads were accompanied on the *Florizel* by Ralph Burnham, a member of the Newfoundland Regiment who was transferring to the Royal Flying Corps. Carrie Brown (p. 24) notes that Burnham was in a room on the starboard side, while Berteau, Snow, Parsons and Chown were in room 20 on the port side.

There were a number of delays before the *Florizel* finally steamed out of St. John's Harbour at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, February 23, 1918, with 78 passengers and 60 crew members on board. The vessel steamed south along the eastern side of the Avalon Peninsula, destined for New York, with a brief stopover in Halifax. Captain William Martin had ordered the vessel to proceed at full speed, despite the dangers posed by pack ice and heavy swells. Adding to the uncertainty was a southeast gale and snow, which the ship encountered part way down the Avalon Peninsula.

However, all seemed under control when, nine hours after leaving port, the captain gave the order to change course to head west around Cape Race. It turned out, however, that the vessel was nowhere near Cape Race, and very shortly ran aground on Horn Head, near Cappahayden, some 30 miles (50 km) short of Cape race. The ship became stuck on the rocks and soon began breaking apart in the heavy seas.

It took almost two days before a rescue effort was able to reach the survivors on the wreck. In the meantime, those who were still alive did their best to remain that way. Cassie Brown (p. 145) tells of the attempts of one such group, including Jack Parsons, who were holding on for dear life in the wheelhouse, one of the parts of the ship that remained above water. *"In the wheelhouse Major Sullivan was wedged between the ship's wheel. Captain Joe Kean, wearing Captain Martin's cap over his bandage, sat quietly on the locker, his face gray with pain. Captain Martin, Second Officer John King, William Molloy, Michael Power, Charlie Snow, William Dooley, George Crocker, and passengers Alex Ledingham, James Miller, Jack Parsons, John Connolly, William Parmiter, John Cleary, and Paddy Fitzpatrick were among those grouped there."*

However, a short time later, *"... a huge wave rose high above the broken ship and spilled forward, carrying with it what was left of the smoker and the wheelhouse, taking with it John Munn, Captain Joe Kean, and about fifteen men, including Jack Parsons, Captain Bartlett, Paddy Fitzpatrick, Peter Guilfoyle, George Crocker, and Second Officer John King."* (page 148)

Only 44 of those who boarded the *Florizel* in St. John's were rescued: 17 passengers and 27 crew members. The other 94 people on board, 61 passengers and 33 crew members, lost their lives. Among the dead were John Shannon Munn (age 37) and his daughter Betty (age 3½). Munn's step-father, Sir Edgar R. Bowring, was part of Bowring Brothers Ltd. Also numbered among the dead were five of the six young

Newfoundlanders who were off to join the Royal Flying Corps. Only Ralph Burnham, age 23, survived the wreck. The five who lost their lives were Fred Snow (age 22), Edward Berteau (age 18), Newman Sellars (age 20), Frank Chown (age 19) and Jack Parsons (age 29).

It was several weeks after the survivors had been taken off the *Florizel* before Parsons' body washed ashore. He was identified by the signet ring that he was wearing, which was subsequently removed and is now in the possession of his great-nephew, also named, John Carnell Parsons, who lives in Ontario. His parents took possession of his remains and a funeral was held on March 22, with the Rev. Dr. Levi Curtis and the Rev. D. B. Hemmeon of Gower Street Methodist Church officiating. His remains were laid to rest in the General Protestant Cemetery.

On the Sunday evening, February 25, 1918, just a day after the *Florizel* hit the rocks off Cappahayden, the St. John's Curlers' Association held a special meeting. *"President Joseph Peters occupied the chair and in opening the meeting explained the object was to give expression to the sorrow with which members had learned of the loss in the Florizel tragedy of seven prominent curlers, and to place on record a resolution of condolence to the relatives. In an appropriate address, the junior Vice-President, Mr. W. J. Higgins, then moved the following resolution:*

WHEREAS, in the loss of the S. S. Florizel this Association has had removed from its rolls seven of its most valued and respected members, namely Messes. John S. Munn, Fred C. Smythe, Michael O'Driscoll, Geo. A. Moulton, Edgar Froude, Robert Wright and John C. Parsons;

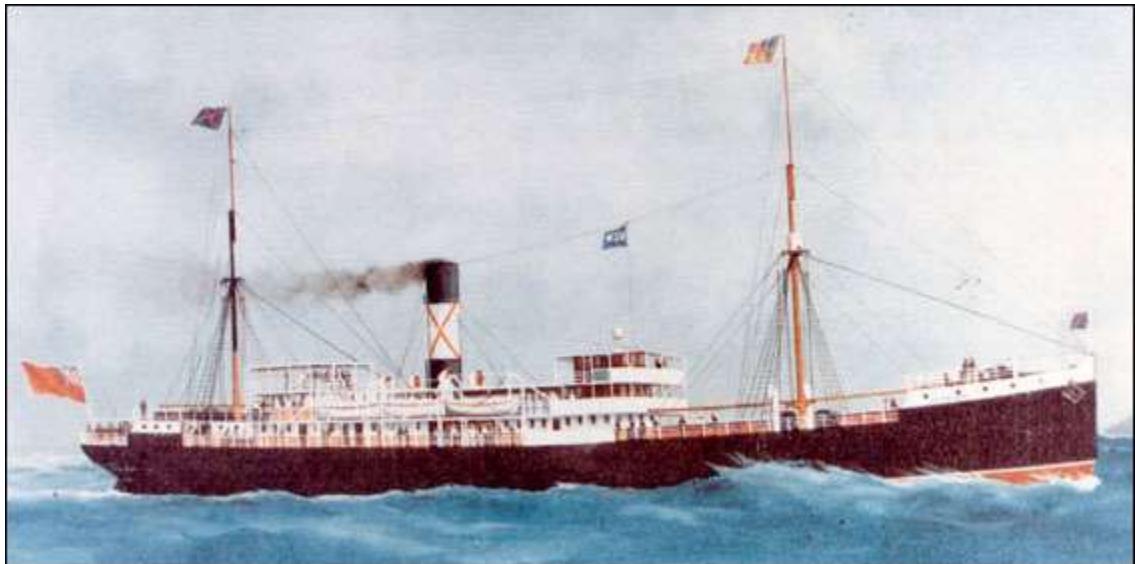
BE IT RESOLVED, that we place on record an expression of our deepest sympathy with the relatives of the deceased, whose tragic passing has not only created a void in the civic and industrial life of the community, which it will be difficult to fill, but has taken from us good curlers whose sterling qualities of good-fellowship and true manhood will

long be remembered in the hearts of those who have had the privilege of this friendship.

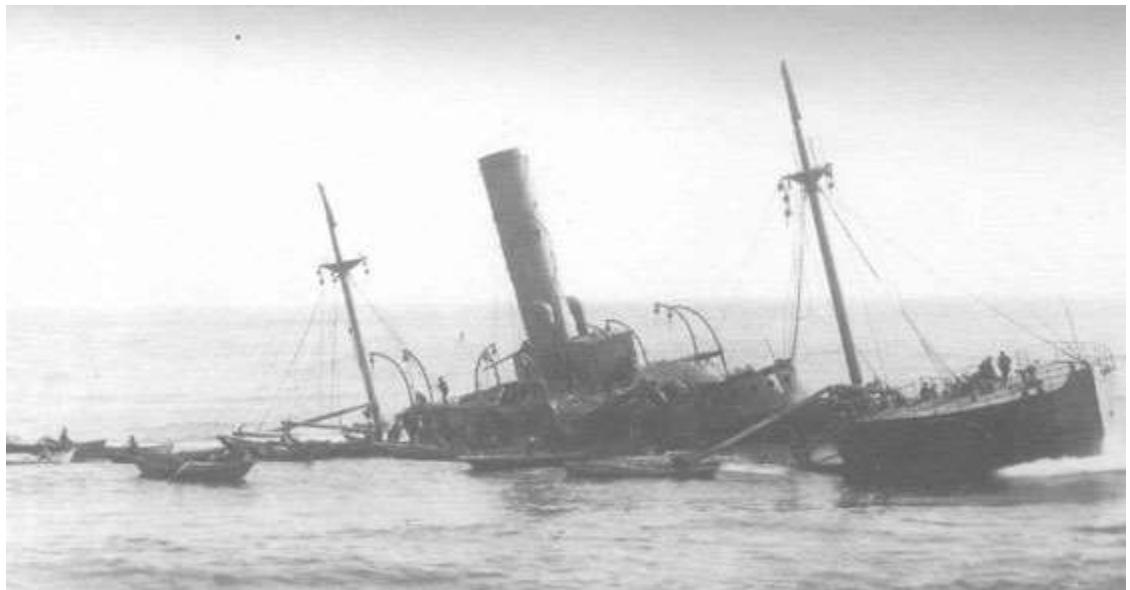
The motion was seconded by a very feeling speech by Major Montgomerie, and supported by addresses of a most touching character by Revs. Thomas and Dickie, and Messrs. F. W. Bradshaw and J. R. Bennett. It was adopted by a standing vote, the members remaining uncovered while Mr. F. V. Cheeseman played the Dead March.” (The Evening Telegram, February 26, 1918)



The Parsons family, circa 1900: (l-r) John Carnell Parsons, Mabel, Edith on her grandfather Nathaniel Parsons' knee, Bella, Charles and Eugene.



The SS *Florizel* as it looked when it took the First Five Hundred of the Newfoundland Regiment to England in October 1914.



The SS *Florizel* breaking up on the rocks off Cappahayden, late February 1918.

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.