

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Lester Densmore Barbour

(1894-1918)



“Regret to inform you Record Office, London reports to-day No. 3709, Private Lester D. Barbour died of wounds March 10th at 27th Field Ambulance Nature of wounds not reported.” “NOTE TO OPERATOR: THIS MESSAGE IS NOT TO BE DELIVERED UNTIL RECEIVING OFFICE NOTIFIES THAT MESSAGE TO METHODIST MINISTER OR SCHOOL TEACHER HAS BEEN DELIVERED AND ACTED ON.” (telegram sent to Mary Jane Barbour by John R. Bennet, Minister of Militia, March 21, 1918)

Lester Densmore Barbour was born in Newtown, Bonavista Bay, on September 10, 1894, the third of nine children of Mary Jane Kean and Edward Barbour. In addition to Lester, the family consisted of four girls and four boys: Clarissa Kean (1887-1920); Sybil Scott (1893-1968); Job Kean (1898-1986); Elsie Martha Buller (1900-1996); Clarence McKinley (August 1901 – July 1902); Wilhelmina (1903-1983); Clifton Dunraven (February – April 1906); Carlson Clifton McKinley (1908-1990). Edward Barbour, in partnership with his brother Samuel, operated a grocery and provisions business and they had their own schooners.

After completing what education he could receive at the Methodist school in Newtown, Lester was sent to St. John's to attend the Methodist College, where he spent several years. In all likelihood, he would have completed the few courses in business practices offered at the College, as it was his intention to return to Newtown to work in the family business. While at the College, he attended Gower Street Methodist Church, as did other outport students who lived at the College residence on Long's Hill. Gower had four rows of seats in aisles C and D (numbers 15 through 18) designated for College students.

Barbour probably spent parts of the years 1911, 1912 and 1913 at the College; there are passenger records for those years which list him as travelling from St. John's on the coastal boats *Fogota* and *Sagona* to points north (Newtown) in each of those years. Once he had finished his studies at the Methodist College, it appears he returned to Newtown, where he probably assumed that he would spend the rest of his life. His father had died on June 08, 1912, and his mother still had most of her children at home, the youngest only four years of age. As the oldest son, Barbour would have been expected to help in raising and supporting his younger brothers and sisters. War in Europe, however, intervened in his plans.

Lester Barbour enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on April 30, 1917. This was almost some two and one-half years after war had been declared, and came at a point when the Regiment badly needed new recruits in order to maintain regimental status. This, coupled with a desire

to fight for King and Country, may have prompted his decision to join up. According to his Attestation Paper, he was 5 feet 8½ inches tall, weighed 138 pounds and had a chest girth of 32 inches, which could be expanded to 36. He listed his occupation as a grocer and his next of kin as his mother. His place of residence was Newtown.

Less than three weeks after his enlistment, Barbour, along with three officers and 182 other ranks of the Regiment and 99 members of the newly established Newfoundland Forestry Unit, left St. John's on May 19, aboard the SS *Florizel* for Halifax. After almost three weeks in port, they boarded the RMS *Olympic*, which left Halifax for England on June 02, and arrived in Liverpool seven days later, on June 09. The men of the Regiment were immediately put aboard trains, which took them to Ayr, Scotland, where their main training facility was located.

Barbour spent four to five weeks at Ayr; some of that time appears to have been spent at Heathfield Hospital although the reason for the hospital stay is not known. Then, in mid-July, he was sent to Barry Camp, near Dundee. He spent the remainder of July, August and September 1917 there undergoing training. He made several trips into Dundee while at Barry Camp. On one of these, he tells his sister Sybil in a letter dated September 30, he had gotten "*two or three things tattooed on my arms. The Nfld Caribou being one of them. I won't be able to show it to you though until I come home; another one represents hands crossed over the sea in farewell. They are very good, but it was painful getting it stamped into the flesh. Of course it was all done with electricity, and needles.*"

By early October he was back in Ayr, where he was domiciled at Newton Park School, where many of the Newfoundland Regiment were accommodated. Towards the end of October he was granted five days leave, which he spent in London. Letters home during those days indicate that he was the typical tourist, visiting the Tower of London, St. Paul's Cathedral, Nelson's Monument in Trafalgar Square, Charring Cross; the Parliament Buildings, and Westminster Abbey, among other historic sites and attractions.

Many of his comrades had already been sent to join the main body of the Regiment in the Field during the Fall of 1917, but Barbour had been kept back because he was a witness in the court martial of another soldier. Who this was, what Regiment he belonged to and what the crime he had committed remain a mystery, but in a letter to his mother dated November 19, he tells her that the “trial came off a fortnight ago and he got two years hard work for his crime.” That incident was no sooner behind him, when he was forced to remain in England for another two-week period because one of the members of the group that he was to travel to France with came down with a sore throat. The doctor feared diphtheria and quarantined most of the men for a twelve-day period. Barbour was not one of them but plans were stayed until all were able to travel.

He was finally able to be part of the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front in early December 1917. He and his comrades left Southampton on December 02, arriving in Rouen, France, two days later. He joined the Battalion in the Field on December 09. The Newfoundland Regiment spent much of early December at Humbercourt, southwest of Arras; on the 18th they were marched to Fressin, 50 kilometers to the northwest, where they spent Christmas and New Year’s.

In January 1918, they were ordered back to the Ypres Salient, the third time the Regiment would be involved in fighting there. A massive counter-offensive was expected from the Germans in the Spring of 1918, and the Newfoundland Regiment was occupied during January and February building and strengthening Allied defences in the area, in anticipation of the German attack. On March 07, the Regiment was posted to Zonnebeke, northeast of Ypres. There they encountered enemy fire on several occasions, resulting in eleven killed and 54 wounded. One of those killed was Barbour.

Lester Barbour was injured on March 10, 1918, admitted to the 27th Field Ambulance for treatment and died that same day. He was buried at Oxford Road Cemetery No. 2, one-and-one-half miles northeast of Ypres.

It took several years, as it did for many other soldiers and their families, for matters relating to his war service to be settled.

Two weeks after he enlisted, Barbour made a last will and testament, through the offices of Samuel J. Foote, a St. John's solicitor and barrister. He named his uncle, Samuel Barbour, as his executor. He left his life insurance policies in the Manufacturers and the Sun Life Insurance companies to the firm of E & S Barbour; any money he had in the bank or invested was to be held in trust with an amount paid to his mother until her death or remarriage, and the proviso that it then be divided equally between his two brothers, Job and Carlson; all his personal effects were also to be divided equally between his two brothers. When his will was probated on June 17, 1918, his estate was valued at \$2,300.00.

Some months later, on September 07, 1918, his mother received a letter and package from Lieutenant William Valance Warren of the Newfoundland Regiment. The letter contained an itemized list of Barbour's personal belongings, which were being returned to his family in the accompanying package. That package included his identity disc, letters, photographs, his wallet, three religious books, a mirror in a case, a locket, a pair of scissors, a diary, a drawing book, a ring with three stones, a razor, a comb and a cigarette case. Mrs. Barbour acknowledged receipt of all of these items in a return letter dated September 16.

No sooner was that matter taken care of, when his mother received another letter, this one dated September 27, 1918, containing a cheque for \$48.76, the remainder of the service pay due to Barbour. Then, on January 16, 1920, there was correspondence regarding the headstone that would be erected at Barbour's grave in the Oxford Road Cemetery in Belgium, in which his mother expressed her desire "*that should a cemetery be constructed at St. John's for deceased soldiers, I would prefer that the headstone erected to the memory of my late son be placed there rather than in a cemetery elsewhere, as thereby I could have a chance to visit it whenever possible.*" On March 25, 1920, she acknowledged receipt of the Memorial Scroll issued in her son's name. That was not the end of

it, however. On September 28, 1921, she acknowledged receipt of the medals to which Barbour was entitled and the Memorial Plaque (or Death Penny) that had his name inscribed on it.

Lester Barbour was 23 years, six months, old at the time of death. His mother, his brothers and sisters and their children and grandchildren have all been committed to and worked to ensure that his memory and the accomplishments that he was able to effect in his short life are not forgotten. He wrote approximately 70 letters home to his mother and siblings during his time in Europe. These letters have been preserved and are on deposit at the Archives and Special Collections division of Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II Library. The letters have also been dramatized and performed at the Neptune II Theatre, part of the Barbour Living Heritage Village in Newtown.

The last letter Lester Barbour wrote to his mother was a fragment, dated March 04, 1918. It was in response to a letter that his mother had written to him in which she describes a dream that she had had about his eventual homecoming and the celebration the family would have at that time. In his letter, Barbour writes: *"I forgot to mention about the dream I had the night before I got your letter telling me about your dream. I may say that I dreamt that I too was home, and was in khaki, but it was all dirty, and I wanted to put on my civilian clothes. So you went and got my brown clothes for me to put on, and when I got it, it was all dusty, and you told me not to let Wilhelmina know it, because she had charge of the clothes. I thought that I was upstairs and as I looked down stairs, behold I saw people and they were all dressed up, and they were spreading tables with so much nice stuff, and flowers and everything that you could think of. And I said to myself, surely gracious this is not for me, there must be a wedding going on, but at the time you came along, and you said, this is all for you my son, and I was so glad that I awoke, and that very same day I had a letter from you telling me about your dream. Is it not strange that we should dream such dreams?"* Six days after writing this letter, Private Lester Densmore Barbour was dead.



Lester Barbour in Scotland in 1917.

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.