

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Alwyn Minter Keeping

(1895-1967)



1914-1915 Star,
awarded to members of the Newfoundland Regiment
who took part in the Gallipoli Campaign.

Altogether the Keeping family is well represented in the fighting forces, two uncles of the hero [Lt. Kimball Keeping] referred to having each a son with Canadian [sic] Regiments. Mr. B. Keeping of the Anglo-American Tel. Co., this city, has a son, Private Lance and his brother Capt. Hugh Keeping, a son, Private Alwyn, who is attached to a signalling corps [with the Newfoundland Regiment]. (St. John's Daily Star, November 01, 1917)

Alwyn Minter Keeping was born in St. John's on July 11, 1895, the middle of three children of Catherine Jane Chafe and Hugh Keeping. He had an older brother, Weston Kimball (b. February 05, 1894), and a younger sister, Olive Mary (b. February 19, 1899). He was baptized on July 27, 1895, by the Rev. Arthur D. Morton of Gower Street Methodist Church.

Hugh Keeping was a native of Murray Harbour, Prince Edward Island. He and Catherine Chafe of Petty Harbour were married at Brunswick Street Methodist Church on November 23, 1891, by the Rev. Dr. George J. Bond, who had twice served the Gower Street pastoral charge, from 1874-1876 and from 1883-1886. The Keepings relocated to St. John's sometime shortly after their marriage; he was listed in the St. John's city directory for 1894 as a master mariner living on Gower Street.

Throughout the twenty years that followed, Hugh Keeping was employed as a master mariner, as captain of the *Searchlight*, the *Nimrod* and the *Stella II*, among other transatlantic vessels, some of which were owned by J. Baird and Company. As well, he operated a groceries and provisions business, first (1898) at 221 Gower Street, and later (1908) at 112 Water Street West. Catherine Keeping was also involved in the retail trade: according to the 1908 city directory, she operated a drygoods and millenary business at 114 Water Street West. Their son Weston was employed at his father's business as a clerk at that time.

Alwyn Keeping attended the Methodist College in St. John's. Upon completion of his schooling, sometime around 1911, he began raising poultry. This is the occupation that he listed on his Attestation Paper when he joined the Newfoundland Regiment. His salary was \$9.00 per week, which would lead one to believe that he was working for a poultry farming enterprise rather than on his own.

Like many of his friends and former school mates, Keeping joined the Newfoundland Regiment not too long after war was declared. It was

not part of the First Five Hundred, who went overseas in early October 1914, but he was not far behind. He enlisted on January 23, 1915, which made him part of D Company. Keeping was 5 feet 6½ inches tall, and weighed 117 pounds. He listed his mother as his next of kin; at the time she was living with her sister, Louisa, and her brother-in-law Benjamin Keeping on Forest Road in St. John's. Benjamin Keeping was her husband's brother. Their son, Lance, who was four years older than Alwyn, had joined the Canadian Army at Valcartier, Quebec, on September 23, 1914.

Keeping and his fellow recruits in D Company underwent approximately two months training in St. John's before leaving there on board the SS *Stephano* for Halifax on March 20. There they transferred to TS *Orduna*, leaving port on March 22, and arriving in England on March 30. He and his comrades spent the four months that followed in training, stationed first at Edinburgh Castle and later at Stob's Camp, both in Scotland; then, in August 1915, they were sent south to Aldershot, England, along with 1,000 plus other members of the Regiment. From Aldershot, the Regiment, now part of the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, was transferred to nearby Devonport on August 19, and the following day, August 20, left England aboard the HTS *Megantic* for the eastern Mediterranean and the war.

The Newfoundland Regiment arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, on August 31. They were immediately entrained for Cairo, where they spent several weeks adjusting to the climate, before returning to Alexandria. There, on September 13, they sailed north aboard the *Ausonia* for Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos; from there, on the night of September 19-20, they crossed the short distance to Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula, where they were greeted by heavy shellfire from their Turkish adversaries.

The Newfoundlanders spent approximately four months at Suvla Bay, under the most inhospitable conditions. Thirty-one died in action or from wounds received, while another 15 succumbed to disease or severe

frostbite, a result of winter weather that encompassed the area during November of that year. Keeping was one of those who became ill. He was evacuated to the 26th Casualty Clearing Station on December 01 with lumbago, severe pain in the joints and lower back. He was soon on his way to Malta aboard the HS *Panama*, where he was admitted to Imtarfa Hospital on December 14, suffering from enteric, a disease of the intestines. After six weeks there, his condition had not improved greatly; as a result he was invalided to England in early February 1916 aboard HS *Formosa*.

Keeping was admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth on February 18. He would remain there for approximately two weeks before being transferred to the Addington Park Convalescent Home in Croydon. Before leaving Wandsworth, he met up with Private James George Washington Hagen, a member of E Company of the Regiment. They probably knew each other from their time in Scotland and in Gallipoli. In any event, Keeping gave Hagen a cheque for £4, which Hagen was to cash and bring the money to Keeping. Hagen did not return with the money, and on March 04, Keeping wrote to the Newfoundland War Contingent Association in London asking that they *“deduct the equivalent amount from his wages & either send to me or put it in my acc. please. I am afraid if it is left any longer I shall lose it altogether.”* Later that same day, Captain Timewell, the Regimental Paymaster, informed Keeping that Hagen was now back at Wandsworth and that he should contact him there.

There is no indication that Keeping ever got his £4 back. Hagen was not noted for following Regimental rules and protocols or the laws of the land. He twice deserted from the Regiment for extended periods and twice returned to duty before he died on October 21, 1918, of wounds received in fighting near the Belgian city of Courtrai.

Keeping was released from Addington Park on March 25. He was awarded six weeks furlough before being attached to the Regimental Depot at Ayr, Scotland, on May 05, 1916. He spent the remainder of 1916 there, missing the fighting at Beaumont Hamel in July and at Gueudecourt

in the Fall. He was assigned to the British Expeditionary Force on January 01, 1917, rejoining his Battalion in the Field in France on February 13. He was just in time for the Regiment's foray against the enemy at Sailly-Saillisel in early March and at Monchy-le-Preux in April. It was in the run-up to that latter attack, which was to begin on April 14, that Keeping received a gunshot wound to his head on April 08. He was admitted to the 6th Stationary Hospital at Frevent that same day, transferred to the 20th General Hospital at Camiers on April 11, and then invalided to England on the 18th and admitted to Wandsworth the following day.

After approximately three weeks of treatment and recovery at Wandsworth, Keeping was released on furlough for the period from May 12 to 21, and then attached to the Depot at Ayr on the 25th. He remained there until mid-July. There is no indication in his Regimental personnel file when he joined the Regiment's Signallers Corps, but he had done so by the time he was declared fit to return to the war zone in July. He sailed for France on July 21 and rejoined his Battalion in the Field on August 12. He remained with the Regiment through the Fall of 1917 and throughout much of 1918, seeing action at Steenbeek (mid-August), Broembeek (early October), Cambrai (November), and Bailleul (April 1918).

During August 1918, the Regiment was assigned to duty guarding German prisoners-of-war near Equihen, France, and traffic control at Ecuire. While involved in these activities, Keeping began to show symptoms of pyrexia, the medical term associated with trench fever. He was admitted to hospital on August 27, but released to duty on September 02. Nine days later, on September 11, he rejoined his unit. In late September he saw action at Keiberg Ridge, part of the third battle of Ypres. On October 10, he was granted two weeks leave in the United Kingdom.

Keeping saw little additional action as the war came to a close in the weeks that followed his leave. On January 19, 1919, he was transferred to the British Expeditionary Force Depot at Winchester. Eleven days later, on January 30, he was repatriated to Newfoundland, and on his arrival on February 07, he was attached to strength at Regimental Headquarters in St.

John's. He completed paper work for the Civil Re-establishment Committee on February 25, indicating that he would like to work as an operator, but it did not specify what he wished to operate. It may have been as a telephone operator, as his uncle, Benjamin Keeping, worked with the Anglo-American Telephone Company in St. John's.

Keeping whereabouts for the next few years are a bit of a mystery. He was in St. John's in December 1919, when he signed for receipt of the 1914-1915 Star, awarded to all members of the British Expeditionary Force who had seen action before the end of 1915. The next extant record is for July 1922, when he left Manoa, Hawaii and sailed to Montreal, and then on to Toronto, where he planned to visit his parents and other family members. It would appear that his parents had relocated to Toronto, where his brother Weston had been living for some time.

On Christmas day, 1922, Keeping went from Toronto to Buffalo, New York, where his sister Olive was living. His parents joined him there later that year and it is where they and Alwyn spent the rest of their lives. He worked as a salesman and as a carpenter in his early years there, but eventually gained employment as a clerk at Weed Company, a wholesale hardware operation on Main Street in Buffalo. He worked there for more than twenty years, and probably up until his death.

Alwyn Keeping never married. His father died in Buffalo in 1934 and he lived with his mother until her death in 1942. After his sister Olive's death in 1963, he appears to have lived alone until his own death, which occurred in March 1967, just months shy of his 72nd birthday.

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.