

GOWER REMEMBERS

Lieutenant Ralph Barrett

(1899-1953)



Ralph Barrett, one of the employees of Crosbie & Company's office, contributed \$1.00 to the N.P.A. Aeroplane Fund; his father, who worked in Crosbie & Company's store, contributed \$4.00. (*The Evening Telegram*, August 03, 1915)

Ralph Barrett was born in St. John's on December 09, 1899, the fifth of six children of Matilda Green and Henry George Barrett. The two oldest children, Julia Mary (b. 1889) and Harold George (b. 1892) were born in Old Perlican, before George Barrett, as he was commonly known, relocated to St. John's sometime around 1893-1894. It was there that Ralph and his three other siblings, Ethel May (b. 1896), Alan John (b. 1898) and Fred Dawson (b. 1904) entered the world. According to the 1894 St. John's city directory, the elder Barret was employed as a clerk, in all likelihood with Crosbie & Company. The family lived at 50 Freshwater Road.

There is not a great deal of information extant on Barrett's childhood. The family attended Gower Street Methodist Church where they occupied pew 29 in the North Gallery. His brother Harold attended the Methodist College, so it may be safe to assume that Ralph did as well. One incident involving him that did make one of the local papers concerns the 8th Annual Meeting of the Women's Missionary Society (WMS), which was held at Gower Street Church in June 1909. On the evening of June 16, there was a special service involving the various children's groups within the Methodist Church, many of which were sponsored by the WMS. At this service, it was noted in *The Evening Telegram* for June 18, that there was a "*Recitation by Ralph Barrett, showing that when boys become men, wrongs will be righted.*"

The next mention of Ralph Barrett in local papers refers to his contribution to the Newfoundland Patriot Association's Aeroplane Fund cited above. He was still only 15 at the time and probably fresh out of school, working in the office at Crosbie & Company, and for him to donate a dollar to the fund was significant, as he would not be making a large salary at that time: \$1.00 in 1914 funds is the equivalent of more than \$20.00 in Canadian dollars in 2018. One thing

it does confirm is that he had an interest in aeroplanes for some years before he decided to join the Royal Flying Corps.

Barrett's oldest brother, Harold, joined the Newfoundland Regiment on December 26, 1914, just fifteen days after Ralph had turned 15. Harold saw action in Gallipoli, at the Somme, at La Transloy, and at Steenbeek, where he was killed in action on August 08, 1917. It appears to be shortly after learning of his brother's death that Ralph Barret decided to sign up for flight training. According to an article in *The St. John's Daily Star* for October 30, 1918, "*in December of last year [1917]*" Barrett "*left here for Canada*" where he underwent training throughout the months that followed. That same article states that he "*became so proficient while training, that he received a commission [as Lieutenant] in May [1918] and received the offer of an appointment as instructor which he refused, preferring to go in for active service.*"

A similarly laudatory article in *The Evening Telegram* for September 07, 1918, informs readers that "*Yesterday, Mr. Geo. Barrett received a cable from his son Ralph, containing the pleasing intelligence that he had passed his examination with honours and has been given a commission as Lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps. He will be leaving for home on furlough shortly, before taking up active duty in France.*"

Barrett spent several days, possibly weeks, on furlough, visiting his parents in St. John's during September 1918. He boarded a train at St. John's on September 22, which took him to Port-aux-Basques, arriving there on the 24th. Then he travelled by ferry to Nova Scotia and then by train, probably to Halifax, where he was part of a larger contingent of newly qualified pilots who left for England and the war.

The article previously referred to from *The St. John's Daily Star* for October 30, 1918 contains some additional information on Barrett: that he had arrived safely in London and that he was attached to the Royal Flying Corps. The article closes with the statement that “*his many friends believe he will acquit himself in a manner that will bring credit to him and will redound to the honour and glory of old Terra Nova.*”

Eleven days after that article appeared, the war ended. Given the death rate among Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force pilot, he was very lucky indeed.

Barrett returned to Newfoundland some time in 1919, after his discharge from the Royal Flying Corps. On September 06, 1919, he arrived in New York City from St. John's on board the SS *Rosalind*. He appears in the 1920 United States Census as living in a boarding house on Riverside Drive in Manhattan, with five other people. He was working as an accountant in a brokerage business. He did not remain permanently in the United States, however. Sometime during the 1920s, he relocated to London, England, where in the Spring of 1932 he married Jessie Madelyn Sweetser.

He did travel back to the United States at least once in the 1930s. On August 08, 1934, he travelled from Southampton to Boston on board the SS *Majestic*, arriving back in Liverpool on August 30. That return voyage made stops in Halifax and St. John's, which probably gave him an opportunity to visit with his mother. His father had died two years previous.

The 1939 Register for England reports that he was a sales manager in a business that sold refrigerators. Jessie is listed as

performing “unpaid domestic duties”. They were living in Paddington, London.

Ralph Barrett died at the Radcliffe Infirmary, in Radclife, Oxfordshire, on December 31, 1953, three weeks and a day after his 54th birthday. In his will, which was probated on February 20, 1954, left his estate, valued at £1893 13s 5d to his wife. In 2018 Canadian dollars that amount has the buying power of more than \$88,000. Jessie survived him by 18 years. She died in Halifax, Yorkshire West Riding in 1971. They had no children.



The Barrett family of 50 Freshwater Road, *circa* 1908;
seated (l-r): Henry George, Ralph, Fred, John, Matilda;
standing (l-r): Julia, Harold and Ethel.

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.