

GOWER REMEMBERS

Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre

(1892-1916)



“Here we are back in the trenches again having come here three days ago. Our expected rest of a month or six weeks turned out to be only a fortnight. Out here the promise of a rest is treated as a standing joke. This is our second that has fallen through. We have come to an entirely new place not very far from where we went [when] we came out here first. So far it proves to be a jolly nice place. Very quiet indeed, quite extraordinary after our experiences of the last seven months.”
(Bernard Ayre, letter to his mother, Gertrude, March 17, 1916.)

Bernard Pitts Ayre was born in St. John's on November 28, 1892, the middle of three sons of Lydia Gertrude Pitts (1857-1927) and Robert Chesley Ayre (1857-1903). His father was one of the six sons of Mary Hannah Bray (1821-1911) and Charles Robert Ayre (1819-1889), the founder of the St. John's mercantile firm Ayre & Sons Limited.

Bernard was educated at the Methodist College in St. John's, where he won prizes for his academic achievements and for his prowess on the sports field. In particular, he received one of nine scholarships awarded to students at city schools based on the Council of Higher Education (CHE) results for the 1905-1906 school year. Six of those scholarships, valued at \$20.00 each, went to students at the Methodist College; the other three went to students at St. Bonaventure's College.

In the Fall of 1906, Ayre enrolled in the Leys School in Cambridge, England, as a boarder. He spent five years there, matriculating in 1911. He then attended Jesus College, at Cambridge University, where he was awarded a degree in Natural Science in 1914, preparation for admission to the University's medical school. He was quite active on the sports field at both Leys and Cambridge, playing cricket at the former and representing the University in lacrosse and as full-back on the rugby team.



“In Easter Term 1914 Ayre became a member of the Rhadegunds Society. This was founded in 1873 and made up of men of outstanding sporting prowess for University or College. In 1914 they adopted a new motto: “Post tot naufragia portum” (After so many shipwrecks, a harbour) which, given sport humor

of the time, may go some way to explaining the tag line “putting the port in sport.”” (Chanticleere, Easter Term, 1914)

He also acted in at least one play while at Cambridge as a member of the Footlights Comedy Club. It was a production of “The Vegetarians: A Dietetic Absurdity in Two Acts”.

Ayre spent his summers back in St. John’s where in addition to visiting with family and friends, he was quite actively involved in local cricket. While he was home during the Summer of 1911, on August 31, his mother had her birth name, “Pitts”, formally added to Bernard’s name, as he had been named just Bernard Ayre when he was baptized.

When war broke out in the Summer of 1914, Ayre was still at Cambridge, which was only 100 kilometers away from London, where the decision to declare war on Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) was made. It did not take him long to decide to become part of the war effort. On September 05, he joined the special reserve force that had been established at Cambridge and applied for a commission as an officer. Within a very short time he was posted to the 8th (Service) Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment, with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant.

By early November 1914, Ayre, who had been made a Lieutenant on a temporary basis, was at Colchester in East Hants. His Battalion remained there until May 01, 1915, when it was moved to Codford St. Mary on Salisbury Plain. On July 25, Ayre and his comrades crossed the English Channel from Folkestone to Boulogne, France, and the war. He was promoted to temporary Captain in December 1915; the rank of Captain was made permanent in March 1916. In commenting on his promotion, The St. John’s Daily Star for March 18, 1916, remarked: “*Capt. Ayre who is one of the best shots*

Newfoundland has ever produced has performed very valuable work in the firing line.”

Much of Ayre's time in France can be relayed in his own words. Forty-eight letters and a postcard that he wrote to his mother have survived. They cover the period from March 31, 1915 to May 31, 1916. Here are excerpts from some of them:

*8th Norfolks B. E. F. France
Aug.2.1915*

My dear Mother,

Many thanks for the torch. It arrived last night. There are one or two other things I want you to send. A pair of canvas shoes, size 8½, just a cheap pair of brown ones. Also a very thin vest and a pair of very thin short pants. Also a pack of envelopes the same as this letter is in.

We get at least one mail a day, & so far I have had a letter or something every mail. I have written quite a number myself. The worst job I have is censoring. Some letters are very amusing. One man signed himself, your affectionate niece when writing his aunt. The last page is invariably covered with kisses. We have all had our buttons enameled black. I forgot to ask you to get me a couple of silk scarves for my neck as collars are beastly uncomfortable. Water is very scarce here, we get about a pint each day for drinking. Beer is putrid. I had the luxury of a bath yesterday in the garden of my billet in the boiling sun. One bucket full of water, could not drink it if I wanted to. We are most particular here about shaving. Whenever we move from our billets we go fully armed. Last night about 10:30 the guns in the distance we[re] going awfully strong. When you get this we shall be within 5 miles of the front trenches. Yesterday we had

church in an apple orchard, fully armed. Rather curious. You might send me a couple of packets of plain postcards. We are to be inspected this afternoon by our Corps commander. You have no idea what flies are. They wake you up in the morning. Swarms of them on everything. It has been quite hot here but today it is more cool thank goodness. I am president of D Coy mess & have forage round for food. The French bread we get is awfully good indeed.

I shall finish now as I have to catch the post.

Your loving son Bernard.

*France
Aug. 7. 1915*

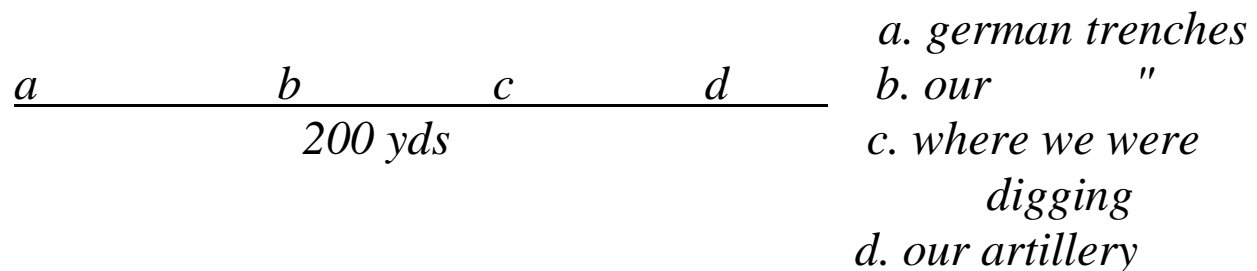
My dear Mother,

Just a line or two to let you know that I am in the best of health and am going strong. Many thanks for your letter from Folkestone. I hope you find it a pleasant place. When we were there last Sept. it was packed with refugees.

We have moved since I last wrote. We marched here on Tues. evening arriving about 11 pm. It was an awful march although it was only 13 miles. The men were simply dead tired and dropped down asleep as soon as they got into their cowsheds etc. There was a tremendous amount of traffic on the road & it caused innumerable needless checks which are the worst things possible for marching. When I got into my billet I took off my boots and puttees & lay down on the stone floor & slept solid until 6 next morning. I was too tired to get my flea-bag or any thing like that. Jolly thankful to lie down. Our billets are fair but the men's are bad. Where my men live there is a well in the yard. The old hag who keeps the place sits on guard

over it all day & night. If a man tries to get a drink of water she chases him with a knife. Now the men lock her up in the house when they want the water. We have to send miles away for any water. She has not used water for months. Some of the people treat us as invaders. We are near a town which the germans shelled unmercifully. When they started there were no troops in the town. The first four shots were aimed at the steeple of the big church. The four hit the statue on top and turned it over at right angles. They then played havoc with everything near it. We marched through the town yesterday & saw all the ruins. The place is dead & ruined forever. Our billet is only fair, 3 in a tiny little room, we wash and bath outside.

Yesterday was very interesting. My Coy. & B Coy. went up to dig the 2nd line of trenches. Several parts of the road we went by could be shelled by the germans if they wanted to & if we stayed on it long enough. We used to hurry along it in small bodies at a time, so as not to give them a target. The trenches we were digging were 200 yds. behind our front line, & about 1/2 mile from the german front line.



Their rifles bullets could not hit us nor could they see us except by aeroplane. Our guns were firing over us all the time we were up there, about four hours. The germans shelled our trenches several times & it was jolly interesting. A shot too far would hit us. One or two ricochets passed over us. The men were quite

interested. It is not known yet when & where we go into the trenches. As far as one can tell, our General told me this, it is impossible for either side to move forward here, the defences are so strong.

The flies here are worse than ever. They quite drive me mad. A mosquito net would suit me well to fit over my head. Also any chocolates, Nestlé's or the like go down well. We are well off for tobacco, it is issued as a ration on Sat[urday]s. I heard yesterday from Bullen, he is now commissioned in the regular army for good. We are having a terrific amount of rain here now, a miserable drizzle. There has not been a day on which I have not had something by the post in the shape of a letter or parcel.

Well no more at present.

*Your loving son
Bernard*

Mon. [September] 13. 1915

My dear Mother,

Very many thanks for your letter of the 9th, also for the parcel of cake and the mug etc. The socks are just the right size. Not a bit tired of the chocolate and the butterscotch came in well. I would like you to send me either a large packet of it or some Mackintosh's toffee. I am keeping the cake for tea today as it is the birthday of one of our officers.

I was wondering if it was our Miss Carberry. Sorry to hear it. If my photo went down in the Hesperian, you might get another one for Ruby. One does not wash one's clothing in the trenches. You are lucky to get a decent face wash once in two

days. My capable servant gets me some more often than other officers. A few men are a trifle early but you cannot help it.

Things are very quiet still here. An officer was wounded in the head last night, not very bad. He was on patrol outside & a fool of a man with him fired his rifle & drew attention. We expect to go out Sat. night. You might send a few more magazines to help pass the nights. I am feeling extraordinarily fit indeed but dirty. Well I do not think there is anything more to say. Hope you are much better by the time you get this.

Your loving son Bernard

In billets.

Oct. 14. 1915

My dear Mother,

Just a line or two before we go into the trenches tomorrow. This visit we understand is to be of much shorter duration, they tell us eight days. It is quite wonderful the number of things they tell you that do not come off. Quite the best rule is never to believe anything until it comes off. The latest thing is that we go to Salonika as a division. It may come off. I rather hope it does because it would be ever so much more exciting and interesting. In fact some of us will be quite disappointed if it does not.

We go back to the same trenches so we will know our way about. I think that things will remain very much as they are here as we are preparing our winter quarters here, trying to make decent rooms, some baths, etc. The men have all been issued with blankets. We shall have been out here 3 months on Sun. so leave ought to be starting soon. Already some in the division have gone and returned. I have no idea when my turn will come.

You will hear soon enough. Last night I went to a cinema at a village near here. Jolly good show indeed, quite like England!! It is run for the men of the division. Many thanks for the cake etc. I do not think I like it as much as the others. A girl friend has just sent me a large box of chocolates. They are jolly good.

Love to Eric & Jen.

Your loving son.

Bernard.

In billets.

15.11.15.

My dear Mother,

I woke this morning to find snow on the ground to the depth of several inches, also it froze hard too. However it has turned out a glorious day and so the ground underfoot is too awful for words.

Many thanks for the last two parcels. The mittens are awfully good indeed, quite the envy of the other officers. The pants too are just right. I shall put the on tomorrow when I go to the trenches.

I have also had two games of soccer for the company. It made me most frightfully stiff. The company was beaten in the divisional competition. You could hardly stand on the ground it was so wet and slippery. Managed to get a hot bath in my billet afterwards which made an awful mess on the floor.

Leave has been put back a few days so I do not expect now to arrive in London until the morning of the 8th. Please tell Ruby I expect to see her when I come home. I do not think there is anything more to say. With much love

Your loving son. Bernard

24 / 12 / 15.

My dear Mother,

I have been expecting to hear from you before now, but so far no letter has arrived. I have received the trousers and the pin inside.

We came back to this place, 15 miles, last Mon. Fortunately the day was fine so the marching was not as bad as it has been though underfoot it was very bad. The marching was quite good in spite of the fact that we had not done a proper march since the middle of last Sept.

Our billets here are very good but the men are only in barns. Taken on the whole they are the best we have had over here. I have a very nice clean room with a good bed with sheets and I think most of the other officers are equally comfortable. Our mess room is very comfortable and we ought to be very comfortable here tomorrow.

We have arranged a good Xmas dinner for the men thanks to Major North. They are off work for that day. All of our turkeys have not turned up yet but we have good pork instead. Xmas puddings & cigars galore.

We won't be here beyond the end of the month and then we go back to the town for a few days before going into the trenches. We go into a different part of the line this time which on the whole ought to be much softer as we are as far as 1000 yds away in one place whereas in another we are as close as before. I think though that the trenches are in a worse state and the dugouts very bad. I do not think though that we shall be there very long.

This ought to be in time to wish you very many happy returns of Jan. I with happier returns in future. We shall have a good time here as far as possible, one thing we won't be disturbed in the middle of it. Love to Eric & Jen.

With much love from

your loving son

Bernard.

4:1:16.

My dear Mother,

Many thanks for your letter of the 29th & the pockets. I have not had them put in yet. I will tell you a few things I want before I give you any news. A tin of dubbin, tooth paste, shaving soap, soap, some tins of café au lait, a couple of cookers, magazines galore, 100 De Reszke Tenor cigarettes. That I think is about all. I mention the cigarettes as the people who make my usual ones have gone into liquidation.

We marched back to this old town on the 29th. I did not march but came in an ambulance because I had a touch of flu. I had three days in bed with [it] though it was not bad. I went to bed more as a preventative than cure. I am quite fit again. We have come to different billets here but they are more comfortable than our last.



I went over our new trenches yesterday just to find my way about. They are in excellent condition and very dry. All the floors have boards, or quite good drainage, far better than our old ones. We go in on the sixth.

Things here are very dull and quiet. We still have our shells every night but they are very small & do no damage. I do not think that he has any big guns opposite here.

With best love to you all. Your loving son. Bernard.

31/5/16.

My dear Mother,

Many thanks for your letter and parcel which arrived yesterday. Never put bananas with a cake, the result is disastrous to both parties concerned. The cake, though, was all right and went down very well.

I have heard nothing yet about my leave. Probably when I do get it, it will be so sudden that I shall probably be in town before I can let you know. I should stay at Folkestone till you hear anyway. Why do you not stay at the Salisbury?

I dropped Eric a few lines yesterday just for luck. If he gets command of D Coy. it will be rather curious, both of us being in command of D Coy. of our respective regts. I do not know if you realize that I have commanded this coy. since early in Jan.

We are not yet in the trenches, but will be going in there any day now. At the present moment we are working all night and sleeping during the day. It is rather tiring.

We had a tremendous amount of rain a few days ago but it has cleared up and is topping weather again. My billet is on the

noisiest street in Christendom. You can hardly hear yourself speak for the traffic.

Give my love to Jen. Am keeping most awfully fit.

Much love from

Your loving son,

Bernard.

There are no letters to his mother that have survived from June 1916. Maybe they were lost or destroyed; maybe he got the leave he was so looking forward to and was able to visit with his mother and friends in England one last time. By late June he was on the front lines once again, where, on the morning of July 01, 1916, he and his comrades from the 8th (Service) Battalion Norfolk were charged with capturing the German trenches southwest of Carnoy, near Mountauban. It was one of the few regiments to achieve its objective that morning, although four officers and 104 other ranks were killed and more than 200 wounded. One of the dead was Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre.

The Norfolk Regiment was first into the breach at Mountauban, going over the top at 7:53 a.m. Ayre led D Company “*from the Castle towards Bund Support Trench and the Loop.*”¹ By 8:15 a. m. he was dead! He was the first of four members of the Ayre family to be killed that day.

Beaumont-Hamel, where the Newfoundland Regiment attacked that morning, was just 20 kilometers (20 minutes) north of where the Norfolk Regiment was deployed. Among the members of the Newfoundland Regiment killed that day were

¹ Paul Kendall in his 2015 book *Success and Failure on the First Day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916*, gives a full account of the Norfolk Regiment, the Newfoundland Regiment and other British regiments on day one of the Battle of the Somme.

Bernard's brother, Eric, as well as his two first cousins, Lieutenant Gerald W. Ayre (1891-1916) and Lieutenant Wilfrid D. Ayre (1895-1916). Two other cousins, Captain Charles R. Ayre (1885-1955) of the Newfoundland Regiment, a brother of Gerald, and Captain Ronald Ayre (1898-1967) of the Royal Flying Corps, younger brother of Wilfrid, who were not present at the Somme on that fateful day. They both survived the war, as did Charles and Gerald's sister Ruby (1889-1957) and Wilfrid and Ronald's sisters Isabel (1889-1944) and Dorothy (1891-1969), who were serving in nursing units.

In memory of Bernard and Eric Ayre, and their cousins Gerald and Wilfrid, Ayre & Sons Limited established the Ayre Athletic Grounds on a large tract of land in the then northwest suburbs of St. John's, an area bounded by Pennywell Road, Adams Avenue, Freshwater Road and Linscott Street. Another commemorative endeavour was the creation of The Ayre Memorial Library, "*The bequest of Capt Eric Ayre and Capt. Bernard Ayre to the employees of Ayre & Sons Ltd.*" A lending library, it had more than 1500 books and operated until the mid-1940s when its holdings were turned over to the library at Memorial University College.

On July 4, 1916, John F. Evans, who was a friend of Bernard's and also a member of the Norfolk Regiment, wrote to Bernard's mother:

My dear Mrs. Ayre,

I am writing to tell you the old Burn has been killed. His Coy led the attack on the 1st & did magnificently. This was due entirely to Burn's fine leadership. It would be impossible to express in words the skill, coolness & courage that he showed. He started off in his most characteristic manner smoking his

pipe & directing & leading on his men with his stick. He was killed just before reaching the objective & died instantly. He suffered nothing. He has just simply died a real hero's death & we are all very proud of him.

I knew him better than anyone else & you know how deeply I sympathise with you. I feel sure that the pride you must have in him, which everyone here & especially his Company share, will be some comfort to you in your great loss.

I recovered his body yesterday & had it brought down to the cemetery. The Chaplain held a service over the grave with guns roaring all round; more than 100 of us attended the service although everyone was exhausted. This again shows how he was loved & respected.

I am sending some letters which have just arrived for him & his kit will be sent home. It may take some time to arrive.

Please let me know if there is anything I can do. We lost many of the very best, but we won our objective.

I wish you could hear what everyone individually thinks of Burn. They will never forget him & he has set a wonderful example.

*Yrs affectionately
John F. Evans*

Bernard Ayre's remains were interred in Carnoy Military Cemetery in France. His mother remained in England with her newly widowed daughter-in-law, Janet, until the end of the war, when they both returned to St. John's. Gertrude Ayre died on February 04, 1927, the last members of that branch of the Ayre family.

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.