

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private John Kitchener Hallett

(1900-1985)



“I regret to have to inform you that a report has this day been received from the Record Office of the First Newfoundland Regiment, London to the effect that No. 2515, Private John Hallett, has been posted as missing April 14th.” (letter to Hallett’s father from Colonial Secretary, John R. Bennett, May 12, 1917)

John Kitchener Hallett was born in St. John's on February 25, 1900, the youngest of seven children of Jessie Wilkinson and John Hallett. The other children were George, Harriett (Hettie), Ethel May, Florrie, William Thomas, and Mabel Wilkinson. Both Ethel May and Florrie died in infancy.

John Hallett senior was a native of Dorchester, England, a mason by trade, who came to St. John's to work on the construction of George Street Methodist Church. He later worked on the construction of the Railway Terminus Building on Water Street, the fencing around Victoria Park and the General Protestant Cemetery and the laying of the railway ties from St. John's to Clarendville. The family resided at 26 Balsam Street.

Jack Hallett, as he was commonly known, attended the Methodist College in St. John's. It would appear that he enlisted not long after leaving school, where, one can assume he was not very good in arithmetic: he claimed to be 18 years and one month old on his Attestation Paper, when, in fact, he was only 16 years and two months. That enlistment took place on April 15, 1916.

According to his Attestation Paper, Hallett was a clerk at Ayre & Sons Ltd. at the time of enlistment. He was 5 feet 5½ inches tall and weighed 128½ pounds, with a 33 inch chest, which could expand another 2½ inches. He had a dark complexion with black hair and brown eyes. It was noted that he had a scar on his left arm from a vaccination he had had ten years previous. He listed his father as his next-of-kin. He was assigned Regimental number 2515.

Hallett, along with other recruits, left St. John's for the United Kingdom aboard the SS *Sicilian* on August 28, 1916. He spent the Fall and early Winter of 1916-1917 in training at Ayr, Scotland. Shortly after his arrival a letter, dated September 28, 1916, arrived at Pay & Records Office in London from his brother William, who was a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Will was a patient at the Canadian Convalescent Home at Bromley and was inquiring as to the whereabouts of his brother.

By the end of January 1917, Hallett was deemed ready for action. On February 01, he was part of a contingent that left Southampton for Rouen, France. He joined the Battalion in the field on February 17; the following day he and his comrades were marched toward Sailly-Sallisel, where, on February 23, they relieved the Lancashire Regiment in the trenches. They withdrew two days later but were soon back in the trenches, where they relieved several regiments and held the trenches for 52 hours. They were, in turn, relieved by the Lancashires on March 03. They spent most of March in reserve, at Camps-en-Amienois and other locales, before moving closer to the action on the 28th. They had a rehearsal for an upcoming attack on April 11; the following day they marched to Les Fosses Farm, near Arras. On April 14, they encountered the Germans at Monchy-le-Preux.

The Newfoundland Regiment suffered extensive loss of personnel in the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux, second only to the losses at Beaumont-Hamel. Seven officers and 159 men were killed or died later of wounds received; seven officers and 134 men were injured; three officers and 150 men were captured by the Germans, 28 of whom later died in captivity. Hallett was one of those who were captured. He spent the remainder of his time in service as a prisoner-of-war.

Hallett's father was notified on May 11, 1917, that John was missing in action as of April 14; it was not until May 19 that the Pay & Records Office in London had confirmation that he was a prisoner-of-war. However, it was not until June 30 that this information was communicated to his father, and that Hallett was a prisoner at Dulmen, in the German state of Westphalia.

As a result of his incarceration, Hallett, as was common practice, was "struck off strength" with the Newfoundland Regiment, indicating that he was no longer available for active service. This occurred for Hallett on August 15. There seems to have been no further information about him until December 17, 1917, when an Official German List made its way to the Regiment's Pay and Records Office via the Geneva, Switzerland, Red Cross. It indicated that Hallett was now at the Gefangenenlager

(concentration camp) Parchim in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Another month would go by before he began receiving parcels from the Newfoundland War Contingent Association based in London.

The first parcels he received arrived on January 27, 1918: there were two, one with a sent date of December 12, 1917 and the other dated November 30, 1917. The first contained a jacket, a pair of shoes and a pair of trousers; the second a pair of braces, a cardigan, a pair of drawers, two handkerchiefs, two shirts, a pair of socks and a towel. A third parcel, which had been sent on November 11, 1917, arrived on January 29, and contained a pair of boots, a pair of drawers, a handkerchief, a kit bag, two pairs of socks, a towel and a vest (undershirt).

On February 04, 1918, it was noted in his file that Hallett had been transferred to Gefangenenlager Schneidemuhl in Poland. It is not until June 05, 1918, that there is an record of him receiving further parcels. These included another one that had been sent on November 11, 1917, which had a cap, a handkerchief, a jacket, a pair of shoes, a pair of socks and a pair of trousers. Another, received that same day was dated April 17, 1918, contained a pair of drawers, a greatcoat, a handkerchief, a shirt, a pair of socks, a towel and a vest. His final parcel, also dated April 17, 1918, arrived on June 09, and contained a pair of boots, a cardigan, a pair of gloves, a handkerchief, a shirt, a pair of socks, a towel and a vest.

Before his eventual release, which occurred late in 1918 or early in 1919, via Copenhagen, Hallett was transferred back to Gefangenenlager Parchim. On January 11, 1919, he arrived at 57 St. Piran's Avenue, Copnor, Portsmouth, where Maude Isley, his brother William's girlfriend, lived. He left there two days later for Ripon, North Yorkshire, and ordered to proceed to the 2nd Battalion of the Regiment at Winchester, where he was assigned to H Company. On January 14, 1919, he was granted a two-week furlough. On the same day, his father was notified by Newfoundland's Minister of Militia of Hallett's release and imminent repatriation.

Hallett left England aboard the SS *Corsican* for St. John's on January 30, 1919, arriving on February 07. On April 03, his discharge from the Regiment was approved for two weeks hence; he was granted a clothing allowance of \$60.00 and he informed the Civil Re-establishment Committee that he intended to return to his clerking position at Ayre & Sons Ltd.

Officers of the Newfoundland Regiment, usually Captain Robert Tait, conducted interviews with all of the returning prisoners-of-war. Hallett's interview took place on April 07, 1919. Here is that interview in his own words: *"There were only six left of our Company as far as I could see and we were in a shell hole, waiting our chance to get back to our lines under cover of darkness. But when the Germans broke through on our left we found ourselves surrounded and so were taken prisoner.*

After a few days at Douai and Fort McDonald, Lille, I was sent to Guesnain for about 3 months. I had a pretty rough time of it here, as there was practically nothing to eat, and we had a look for tins or any kind of a receptacle on the ground to drink our watery soup from. We had no blankets and had to sleep on the concrete floor just as we were. The guards and sentries were very harsh and were always on the look out to report us and have our bread ration stopped. If we slacked for a moment in our work they would beat us with a stick or the butt of a rifle. The work was very hard and the hours very long, and we were not given any pay for our work. Then I was shifted to Germany and was sent to Dulmen Camp for a month. I was so weak from the strain of the work and the scarcity of the food that I had to go to hospital there. Then I was sent on to Jessup (?) and was put to work in a bakery. After a week there I had to give up and go to Hospital again at Parchim. After about 10 days there I was sent out to work on a farm at Kublank, and was kept there until the Armistice was signed. Shortly after I got to the farm the Red Cross parcels began to arrive, and then I began to pick up again and got much stronger. With the arrival of the parcels the conditions got better but they used to charge 4 cents each on the parcels and our pay was 6 cents a day. I was repatriated via Copenhagen and arrived at Hull on January 14th.19."

Hallett was formally discharged from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment on April 17, 1919, having served for three years and three days. He remained in St. John's for several years, one assumes working at Ayre & Sons, Ltd. The 1921 Newfoundland Census has him living with his parents at 26 Balsam Street. His sister Mabel and an elderly cousin, Charlotte Richards, also lived there.

Hallett's oldest brother, George, had relocated to the Boston area of Massachusetts, some years previous to the war. In the Spring of 1921, John decided to pay his brother a visit. He sailed from St. John's to New York City on board the SS *Olympic*, arriving on June 22. George seems to have had a positive influence on John. By the end of 1922, not only John, but both his parents and his sister Mabel were living in the United States. John returned to Boston in September and the other three sailed in late December. The 1926 city directory for Whitman, Massachusetts, has John, his father and mother living at 140 Franklin Street, while George and his wife Irene resided at 436 Plymouth Street. John's occupation is listed as carpenter.

The 1930 United States Federal Census records John, his father and mother still living in Whitman; John is employed in a shoe factory, quite possibly the Regal Shoe Company. The following year he married Mildred Waters (1907-1976), whose father also worked in a shoe factory; in all likelihood, the same one Hallett worked for.

Hallett continued to appear in various city directories for Whitman, Newton or Waltham, all in Massachusetts; his occupation is recorded as carpenter (1931), dispatcher with the General Heat and Appliance Company (1941), salesman with Wadsworth & Howland & Company (1946 & 1947) and mechanic with C. E. Fay Company (1951). Hallett died in Brockton, Massachusetts, on August 31, 1985. He and Mildred did not have any children.



Regal Shoe Company, Whitman, Massachusetts,
where John Hallett worked.

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.