

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Bugler Robert Thomas Dixon Francis**

(1896-1959)



*“I respectfully request that his case be given fullest consideration of your Board. // I might state that he is at present in desperately hard circumstances, being unable to undertake onerous work, and having a wife and four small children dependent upon him. // Kindly advise me of the finding of your Board at your earliest convenience.”* (letter from the Archivist, Office of the Archivist for Militia Records, to the Secretary of the Board of Pensions Commissioners, June 17, 1926)

Robert Thomas Dixon Francis was born in St. John's on July 12, 1896, the son of Margaret Cave and Henry Francis. He was the oldest of three children, the others being a brother, Gordon Sidney (b. October 16, 1899) and a sister, Gertrude Elizabeth. His father was a native of England who came to Newfoundland sometime in the late 1880s. According to his marriage record he had been a steward on a ship, quite probably one of the passenger liners that travelled between Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Halifax, St. John's and Liverpool. He and Margaret Cave of St. John's were married on January 12, 1891, at George Street Methodist Church. John Cave and Jane Cave were the witnesses.

Very little is known about Robert's early life. He first appears in a St. John's city directory in 1913, where he is listed as a sailor and was resident on Pleasant Street. He first attempted to enlist in the Newfoundland Regiment on January 15, 1915, but was rejected, perhaps because of his physical size. Taking that rejection in stride, he continued his life in St. John's and at sea. On September 18, 1915, he and Jennie Janes of St. John's were married at Gower Street Methodist Parsonage by the Rev. D. B. Hemmeon, with his sister Gertrude and Mrs. Hemmeon as witnesses.

Not one to accept that first rejection as final, on March 27, 1916, he went back to the Church Lads' Brigade Armoury to make a second attempt at enlisting. This time he was successful. His Attestation Paper gives his occupation as seaman and his residence at 11 Fergus Place. His next of kin was his mother, now Mrs. William Butt, living at 116 Bond Street. His father had died in 1908 and his mother had remarried later that year. It would appear that he did some form of physical training between his rejection and acceptance: his chest size had increased from 32½ inches with three inches expansion to 34½ inches with four inches expansion. He was 5 feet 4 ½ inches tall.

Francis was assigned Regimental number 2327 and, on July 01, 1916, was named to the rank of bugler. As such he probably had some musical skills. He would also have been faced the constant task of having to get up before everyone else in his company in order to get them out of bed. He

and his comrades left St. John's on July 19, on board the SS *Sicilian*, which took them to the United Kingdom.

Within a month after leaving St. John's, Francis was at the Regimental Depot at Ayr, Scotland. It was while he was there, on August 23, 1916, that he was admitted to Carrick House in Ayr with what was diagnosed as Disordered Action of the Heart (DAH), a term used to describe what today would be classified as Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. He spent 33 days in hospital on bed rest.

On September 25, Francis was released to the Depot. Two weeks later, on October 09, he was admitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Scottish General Hospital in Glasgow, again with DAH. His medical report indicated that "*There was no organic disease of the heart. There is Tachycardia – diffuse cardiac pulsation & slight V. S over most of cardiac area but heard best at pulmonic area.*" After 36 days in hospital, he was discharged to the depot on December 04. Six weeks later it was determined that Francis "*is unlikely to be fit for Service with the Expeditionary Force for six months, on account of D. A. H.*" Consequently, ten days later, on January 26, 1917, he left Glasgow for Liverpool, where he boarded the SS *Scotian* for St. John's and eminent discharge.

Once back in Newfoundland, on February 10, 1917, he was attached to strength at the St. John's Depot. A medical report completed at that time stated: "*History: about two months after arriving at Ayr (about Sept 1916) had to report to D. with pain in cardiac region. Was sent to hospital, was in there about 10 weeks. Present condition: on climbing hills or walking fast feels pain in cardiac region. No organic trouble – no murmur. Pulse 110 standing.*" It also listed his previous occupation as mechanic.

On February 28, 1917, Francis was discharged from the Newfoundland Regiment as medically unfit. Despite this turn of events, he was not ready to give up. One month later, on March 28, 1917, he attempted to re-enlist and on April 23, 1917 was re-attested for Home

Defense at Fort Waldegrave. He was accepted and his new Regimental number was 3665.

On July 12, 1917, Francis wrote to Captain Charles R. Ayre seeking a discharge badge. Perhaps this was a necessity to keep the white feather brigade at bay. This was a group of local women, who, if they saw a person whom they considered to be able-bodied, and therefore should have been in uniform, they would walk up to that person and pin a white feather on his lapel, signifying that he was a coward. This tactic was used by women all over the British Empire, and ignored the fact that the person that they had targeted might have a very legitimate medical reason for not being in khaki. A discharge badge could be worn by a former soldier to indicate that he was not a coward; that he had already served.

Francis spent the rest of 1917 as part of the Home Defense. His health continued to deteriorate, however, and on January 04, 1918, Dr. F. W. Burden writes to Commander Anthony McDermott, who was in charge of the Naval Battery in St. John's, that he had been treating Francis *“off and on since last winter for sore throat, Rheumatism and bronchitis. He improves somewhat under treatment at home but on return to duty breaks down again. I am of the opinion that he is unfit for duty at the Battery and would recommend that he be sent to Medical Board for Discharge.”* McDermott agreed with Burden's recommendation and Francis was ordered to appear before the Medical Board. It reported, on February 16, that Francis was *“124 lbs pulse 120 heart excitable no tension Lungs suspicious – requires observation”*. As a result, he was struck off the strength once again. His discharge document indicates that he was a man of fair complexion, with blue eyes and light brown hair.

Little information is available on Francis for the rest of 1918. It is not until early in 1919 that he writes to Captain James M. Howley of the Newfoundland Regiment seeking a separation allowance for the time he spent in Home Defense. There is no response to this letter.

His family life also had its ups and downs during this time. First, on a happy note, Jennie Francis gave birth to a daughter, named Doris Margaret, on February 08, 1917. Then, a son, Harold Dixon, was born on January 01, 1919. Unfortunately, Jennie died on March 03, 1920, leaving Francis a single father of two small children. For a while the family lived at his mother's house at 116 Bond Street.

Life went on, as it tends to do: on April 29, 1922, Francis married Mary Stead of Catalina, at Gower Street Methodist Parsonage, with the Rev. E. W. Forbes officiating. Over the 20 years that followed, 12 more children were added to the family: Herbert Dixon (1923-1972); Augustus Dixon (1924-1991); Robert George (1925-1997); Marion Winnifred (1926-1999); Maxwell Dixon (1928-2012); Annie R. (1929-2009); Marjorie E. (1932-2013); Clarence Douglas (1934-2008); Lloyd (1937-2002); Eugene (1938 - ); Lillian (1940 - ); and Curtis (1943-2015).

In 1921, Francis became a Forest Warden in the Mount Scio Road area. In 1932, when the Government introduced fur farming, he became the first man to breed mink in Newfoundland and served as manager of the Government's fur farm in Mount Pearl for 17 years, until it was sold to private interests in 1949. With the loss of his position at that time, he was transferred to the Department of Natural Resources, where he was employed in the Wild Life Division until forced to retire for health reasons in 1954. In recognition of his many years of service, upon his retirement he was presented with a pair of silver caribou fighting. He died in St. John's on July 03, 1959. Mary outlived him by 43 years. She died at the Agnes Pratt Home in St. John's on October 12, 2002, at age 102. Both were interred in Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Four of his sons served in World War II.

# Vet Presented 2 Silver Caribou



Mr. Robert Francis with the two Caribou presented him by the staff of the Department of Mines and Resources.

At the General Hospital one day recently, there occurred a pleasing presentation when the staff of the Department of Mines and Resources handed Mr. Robert F. Francis, formerly of that department, with a set of fighting silver caribou.

He had been attached to the Department since 1921 when he served as Forest Warden in the Mount Scio Road area.

In 1932, when fur farming was begun by the Newfoundland Government, he was the first man to breed mink in the province and he served as manager of the Government's Fur Farm at Mount Pearl for seventeen years until the

farm was sold to private interests.

He was then transferred to the Department of Natural Resources in 1949 where he served in the Wild Life Division of the Department until he was retired through ill health on January 22nd of this year.

He is a veteran of World War I, serving with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment "A" Company. He had five sons in World War II and all returned home safely. He is the father of 14 and the family lives at 1 Graves Street.

Held in high esteem by all his fellow employees, Mr. Francis is wished improvement in health and many more years of life.

Newspaper clipping from 1954.



Robert and Mary Francis

*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](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*