

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private George Ralph Dwyer

(1895-1935)



“Pte. Ralph Dwyer of St. John’s, who was wounded in the July Drive of last year and who is home on sick leave, is in town on a visit to Sergeant Dwyer and family. His friends, who are all pleased to see him, hope he will soon be fully recovered.” (Harbour Grace Standard, March 30, 1917)

George Ralph Dwyer was born in St. John's on October 10, 1895, the oldest of three children of Lavinia Caxon Stowe (1869-1909) of Twillingate and James Gushue Dwyer (c. 1869-1914) of St. John's. There were three younger siblings: brother John Charles (born April 02, 1898); sister Mabel Irene (born September 24, 1899); and sister Mary (died July 10, 1908 at age two years of cervical adenitis). Ralph, as he was known, was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church by the Rev. A. D. Morton on December 26, 1895.

James Dwyer was a carpenter by trade; he worked for the Reid Newfoundland Company, which operated the Newfoundland Railway. He died at age 44 of tuberculosis. Lavinia Dwyer was a homemaker, who also died of tuberculosis, at age 41.

Ralph Dwyer attended the Methodist College: both his future occupation and his clearly legible signature on documents in his Regimental file, clearly point to a solid educational background. He began his working life as an electrician, which is also recorded in his Regimental file, but there is no indication who he worked for.

He attested for the Newfoundland on January 23, 1915, part of what is sometimes referred to as the Second 500. He was 19 years old at the time, stood 5 feet 5 inches tall, with a 29-inch chest, that could expand to 34 inches. He had a fair complexion, light brown hair and grey eyes. He was assigned Regimental number 980.

Dwyer went overseas in the early Spring of 1915. He and his comrades left St. John's on March 20 on board the SS *Stephano* for Halifax. Upon arriving there two days later, they transferred to the Troop Ship (TS) *Orduna*, which left Halifax on the 22nd and arrived in the United Kingdom on March 30. They were immediately entrained for Edinburgh, where the Newfoundland Regiment had been assigned to guard duty since February 19. They were the first colonial regiment ever assigned duty at the famous castle.

The Regiment remained at Edinburgh Castle until May 11, when they were relocated to Stobs Camp, near Hawich, in western Scotland. It was there a few months later that Dwyer got himself into a spot of trouble by being absent from tattoo from July 17 to the 20th. His punishment was six days confined to camp and a forfeiture of four day's pay.

In August 1920, the Regiment finally received orders to proceed to the eastern Mediterranean and the war. They were taken by train from Stobs Camp to Aldershot in the south of England. After a short period of rest and relaxation, on August 20, they travelled to nearby Devonport, where they were put on board the SS *Megantic* for the voyage to Alexandria, Egypt. The trip lasted eleven days. On arrival in Alexandria on August 31-September 01, they were taken by train to Cairo, where they underwent ten days of training and acclimatization.

By September 13, they were back in Alexandria, where they boarded the SS *Ausonia*, and headed north to the Greek island of Lemnos. It was there, from the port of Mudros, that they were ferried across the Aegean Sea on the night of September 19-20 for Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula.

Dwyer spent very little time at Suvla Bay. The men were forced to live under less than ideal conditions. Food often went bad; it rained incessantly and water regularly contained bacilli for a number of pulmonary and gastro ailments, which the men who drank it then contracted. On October 16, less than one month after arriving there, Dwyer was evacuated to the Hospital Ship (HS) *Dongola* with dysentery. Two days later he was transferred to the Red Cross Hospital at Giza, Cairo suffering from what was termed Paral Ephtilis, which appears to have been some form of dysentery.

Newfoundland's Colonial Secretary notified Dwyer's next of kin of his condition in a letter dated December 02, 1915. That letter was addressed to Harry Dwyer, c/o James Dwyer, Springdale Street, St. John's, who were cousins and his next-of-kin.

Dwyer was under medical care for three months, part of that time being spent in a convalescent home in Luxor. He was released from that institution on January 18, 1916. A strange notice regarding Dwyer's condition appeared in *The Harbour Grace Standard* three days later, on January 21: "*Private Ralph Dwyer, nephew of Sergt. A. Dwyer of this town, lost his sight at Ayr, Scotland, some time ago thro the accidental explosion of a shell. At the time of writing he was steadily recovering, and hoped to get back to the regiment about New Year's Day.*" There is no record of this accident in Dwyer's personnel file, nor is there anyone else named Ralph Dwyer in the Newfoundland Regiment, so the source of this information and its relationship to Dwyer is suspect.

On January 31, 1916, Dwyer finally rejoined his unit in Egypt. He was with the main body of the Regiment when they left Port Suez, Egypt, on March 14, arriving in Marseilles, France, on the 22nd. The previous day, on March 21, his next-of-kin were notified of his improved condition and discharge from medical care. Not forgotten at home, his name appeared with a list of other former students then in service on the cover of the April 1916 edition of the *The Collegian*, the Methodist College magazine.

Shortly after arriving in Marseilles, the Newfoundland Regiment was taken north by train, to Pont Remy. They spent the next three months there preparing for what was expected to be a major allied push against German troops in the area adjacent to the Somme River. That "Big Push", as it became known, started on the morning of July 01, 1916, and saw the Newfoundland Regiment suffer severe and serious casualties in fighting near the villages of Beaumont-Hamel: 14 officers and 219 other ranks were killed in action or died later of

wounds; 12 officers and 374 other ranks were wounded; another 91 were missing in action, although some of them later made their way back to their home base.

Dwyer was one of those injured. Two days after the fighting, on July 03, he was admitted to the 12 General Hospital in Rouen, France, with a gunshot wound to the right leg. His wound was recognized as quite serious and he was transferred to England aboard the HS *Carisbrook Castle* a few days later. He was admitted to the University War Hospital in Southampton on July 09, where he remained until September 09. A medical report that accompanied his discharge from hospital reported: *“Wounded July 1st 1916 secondary haemorrhage just before admission here. Posterior Tibial Artery tied. Xray show crack in upper 3rd of Tibial No complete break in continuity. Recovery uninterrupted Discharged to Light Duty.”*

Upon discharge, Dwyer was ordered to report to the Regimental Headquarters in Ayr, Scotland. He was only there for a few days when he went missing for a month and a half, from September 14 to October 27. This may have been some kind of misunderstanding, because he received a relatively light punishment once he was back at the camp: 28 days detention and the forfeiture of 43 day's pay. British soldiers were declared deserters and executed by firing squad for being absent for much shorter times. Dwyer served his time at Barkimmie Detention Barracks and was granted four days remission for good conduct.

A medical assessment of Dwyer's condition on February 04, 1917, declared that he would not be fit for service with the Regiment for at least six months. Fifteen days later, on February 19, he was sent back to Newfoundland aboard the SS *Scandinavian*, where he was attached to strength at the St. John's Headquarters on March 14. Further medical testing indicated little improvement in his condition and on April 04 he was discharged as medically unfit. He had served for two years, 72 days.

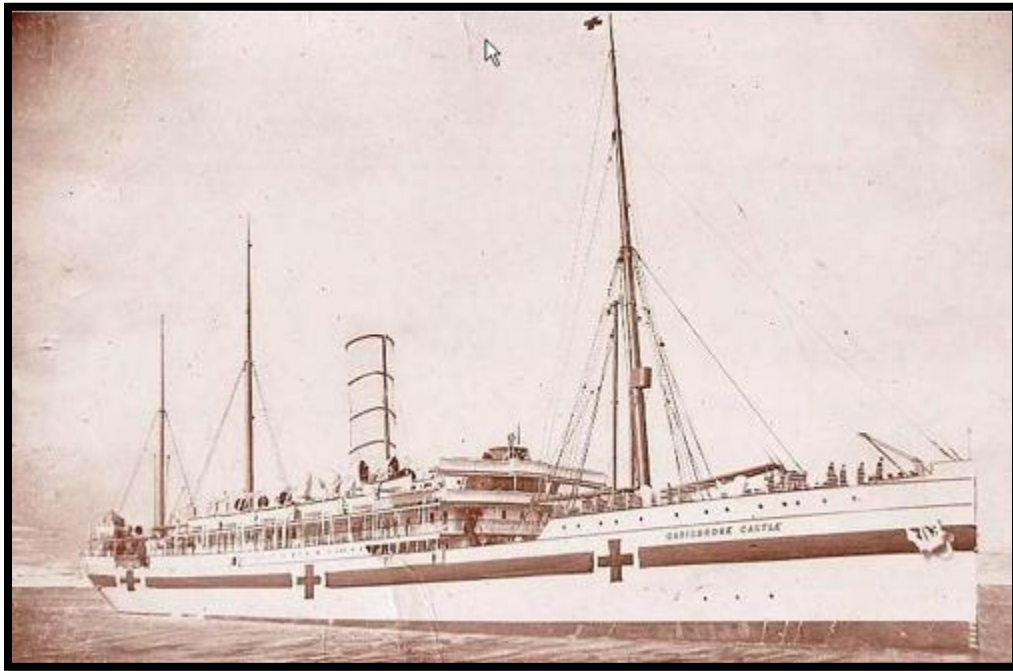
Back in Newfoundland, Dwyer re-integrated into civilian life. After a visit to relatives in Harbour Grace at the end of March, he soon rejoined the work force, in all likelihood as an electrician with the Newfoundland Light and Power Company. On August 18, 1917, he married Daisy Noonan Skinner of St. John's and went to live at his wife's family residence at 5 Knight Street. His father-in-law, Edward Skinner, died on March 05, 1919. Three months later, on June 11, Daisy gave birth to her and Ralph's first child, whom they named Hope Francis. There were two other children, a son, Byron Kiel, born in 1925, and a daughter, Daisy Skinner, born in 1927.

Quite possibly a result of the birth of her third child, Daisy Dwyer died on October 30, 1927. By that time, Dwyer was manager of sales at Newfoundland Light and Power. During the summer of 1930, he took his three children to Halifax on board the SS *Nerissa*, headed for to Vancouver where his uncle, Charles Dwyer, lived. Their next-of-kin in St. John's was Mrs. Albert Guzzwell, a great-aunt.

It is unclear how long they remained there, but they were back in St. John's by 1935, as Dwyer's death was reported by *The Veteran* magazine's December 1935 edition as having occurred on May 13, 1935. The Census for St. John's taken that year records the three Dwyer children, Hope, Byron, and Daisy, were listed as living at 5 Knight Street, with 17-year-old Hope as head of household. Not long after, on August 17, the three children left St. John's aboard the SS *Fort St. George* for Halifax. Hope and Daisy were going on to Vancouver to live with Uncle Charles, while Byron was planning to live with an aunt, Mrs. G. A. Langtry, in Toronto. All three were listed on the passenger manifest as students, but Hope indicated a desire to find work as a housekeeper.

Little is known about the remainder of these individual's lives. Hope married a man named Jack Edmund Cleathero in 1938 but the

marriage ended in 1943. She died in 1959 at age 40. Byron is listed in the Canadian Voters List for Toronto in 1953 as living with his wife, Elizabeth, at 94 Sandown Avenue. Daisy's life remains a mystery.



The HS *Carisbrook Castle*, which brought Dwyer back to England.

Worth noting: A notice that appeared in *The Evening Telegram* for December 24, 1923, providing information on the Christmas morning service at the Congregational Church in St. John's. It stated that the service would have the Rev. Thomas B. Darby, a Methodist clergyman, in the pulpit. One of the anthems was to be "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" with soloists Miss Marguerite Ross and Ralph Dwyer. As there was another Ralph Dwyer living in St. John's at the time, it may refer to him, but it just might apply to Ralph Dwyer, Newfoundland Regiment 980. Interestingly, all collection received at the service would go to the Benevolent Fund.

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.