

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private William Thomas Hallett (1895-1961)



“Invalid was admitted to 23rd General Étapes on 8-6-16. Evacuated to 1st London General on 11-6-16. Sent to Bromley Convalescent Home in Sept 1916, there to Village Convalescent Home. Sent to Ramsgate for special treatment Medical Board found him fit for permanent base duty on 6-11-16.” (Medical report in personnel file, March 07, 1917)

William Thomas Hallett was born in St. John's on October 28, 1895, the third youngest of seven children of Jessie Wilkinson and John Hallett. The other children were George, Harriett (Hettie), Ethel May, Florrie, Mabel Wilkinson and John Kitchner. 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 building 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.

In all likelihood, William attended the Methodist College in St. John's before entering the workforce. He does not appear in the 1904 St. John's city directory, though his brother George and his father were there. He first appears in the 1913 city directory, as a labourer, living at his father's house.

He seems to have had a spirit of wanderlust. In June 1914, he left St. John's on board the SS *Lintrose*, for Sydney, Nova Scotia, planning to spend two months with his brother George, who was then living in Medford, Massachusetts. By September, he was in Valcartier, Quebec, where on the 22nd of that month, he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He was assigned to the 14th Battalion of the 1st Canadian Division, with the rank of Private; his regimental number was 25845. He gave his mother, resident at 26 Balsam Street, St. John's, as his next of kin.

Hallett's Attestation Paper records that he was a member of an active militia at the time of his enlistment but it does not say which one. He gave his occupation as a newsagent. He was 5 feet 7½ inches tall, with a fair complexion, blue eyes and brown hair. He had a 34-inch chest, with three inches expansion. There was a 1½-inch long scar on the right side of his throat and a scar shaped like a triangle on his left forearm, two inches below his elbow. His unit sailed for the United Kingdom on October 03, 1914.

Once in the UK, Hallett managed to get into trouble on a regular basis, which might help explain how he received the two scars he had acquired before his enlistment. In November he received 72 hours detention and shot drill¹ for being drunk in the canteen and abusive to an officer at Larkhill, a village not far from the Salisbury Plain, where they were encamped. Later that month, on the 28th, he was charged with being absent from parade and with attempting to strike a non-commissioned officer (NCO). He received 48 hours Field Punishment and loss of pay for the first offense and 96 hours Field Punishment and loss of pay for the second.

This behaviour carried on into the 1915 year: he was sentenced to another five days Field Punishment and loss of pay for using foul language to an NCO on January 18; and ten days at Gosport Detention Barracks for being absent from defaulters on the 20th. While he stayed out of that kind of trouble for the three months that followed, he was up to other mischief; on May 01, 1915 he was admitted to the war hospital at Graylingwell suffering from an illness resulting from physical contact with another individual.

He did not remain in hospital long, as on May 06 he was taken on strength at Shorncliffe and sent to France, where he joined up with the 14th Battalion on May 08. He appears to have been with that Battalion at the Front until early September, when on the 08th he was admitted to Number 02 Canadian Field Ambulance with influenza. On October 31, he was back in hospital, this time Number 01 Field Ambulance, afflicted with chancroid. This resulted in the loss of 50 cents pay per day for the ten days he was in hospital, a standard penalty assessed to enlisted men who found themselves in this type of situation. He was remained under medical supervision in several convalescent facilities until his discharge to camp on November 10. The following day he received three days Confined to Camp for being improperly dressed at the 8:00 a.m. Company Parade.

¹ **Shot drill** involved stooping without bending the knees, lifting a heavy cannonball slowly to chest height, taking three steps to the right, replacing it on the ground, stepping back three paces, and repeating, moving cannonballs from one pile to another.

Hallett was given the all clear and returned to strength on December 11, 1915. He rejoined his unit in France on January 03, 1916, and took part in fighting at various interactions with the enemy during the Winter and early Spring of 1916. He was still prone to trouble, however; on January 23, he was awarded 28 days Field Punishment No. 1 for disobeying an order and malingering in the field. This infraction had occurred on January 01. Then, on May 12, he was granted eight days of leave in England.

Back on the front lines later in May, he sustained a serious injury on June 03, while fighting at Sanctuary Wood, Ypres, necessitating his being invalided from No. 23 General Hospital in Étaples to Brighton in England. He had suffered gunshot wounds to his neck, to the backs of both thighs, front of his right thigh, the back of his right hip, and to his penis and scrotum. He also had fractures in his right femur. Even after treatment, a bullet remained in his right thigh, one that medical personnel had been unable to remove. It required constant draining and was finally taken out on August 02, and he spent a period of time in a Thomas hip splint to assist in healing. That wound, however, continued to require treatment until well into the Fall of 1916. As well, there had been subsidiary damage to his left foot from the wounds he had received. He was finally discharged from hospital on November 14.

His whereabouts for the two and one-half months following his discharge from hospital are not recorded in his personnel file, although he may have been on furlough, which was common practice after lengthy stays in hospital. On January 30, 1917, he was attached to the Military Postal Section at Hastings. His status was reviewed by a Medical Board early in May. Its report, issued on May 07, found that his *“Wounds are all healed but invalid states that there is a discharge at times from scar at internal fold of Right Buttock. Invalid complains of pain in Right Groin on lifting any object also pain in left leg on walking. He walks with a slight limp, knee slightly flexed & foot somewhat everted. Heart & lungs are normal. Nervous system normal. Urinalysis show urine normal.”*

As a result he was recommended for a medical discharge and sailed for Canada from Liverpool on the SS *Olympic* on May 21. He was in and out of a military hospital in Toronto between from June 01 to August 28, 1917, with his discharge taking effect from the latter date.

Not a great deal is known about Hallett's post-war life. In January 1918, he travelled to Medford, Massachusetts, to visit his brother George. Later that year he travelled to England, where he married Annie Maude Isley, who had been in Portsmouth, Hampshire, in 1896. She was a millinery apprentice and it is likely they met during the war. The wedding took place in the Fall of 1918. Sometime following their wedding, the couple travelled to Newfoundland. In an application, dated April 19, 1919, to the Canadian Department of Militia and Defence, in which he is seeking a War Gratuity, he states that he and his wife Annie were living at 26 Balsam Street, St. John's, with his mother.

It would appear that they left Newfoundland later that year, as both appear in the Census of Canada for 1921. They are living at 287 Salem Avenue, Parkdale, Toronto, and their year of immigration is listed as 1919. No evidence has been found regarding what he did in Toronto. At some point he moved to Montreal, where he was living at 615 Belmont Street in that city in 1939. He later returned to Toronto, where he died at Sunnybrook Hospital on April 01, 1961.

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 the list, 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.