

GOWER REMEMBERS

**Lance Corporal Harold Perley Johns
(1893-1947)**



**Harold Johns (left) unloads a two-base hit for his team, the Wanderers, against their rivals, the Shamrocks
(*The Newfoundland Quarterly*, Summer 1913).**

*“In consideration of having been granted leave of absence without pay from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment for **until recalled** I agree to free the Royal Newfoundland Regiment from any responsibility or claim whatsoever on my behalf arising during that period of absence without pay on account of my service in the Regiment since attestation.*

This leave of absence is subject to my reporting for duty at any time when ordered within the period mentioned.” (Royal Newfoundland Regiment official form signed by Harold Johns on November 21, 1918)

Harold Perley Johns was born in St. John's on February 15, 1893, the oldest child of Elizabeth Ann Goobie and Augustus Johns. His mother was a native of Old Perlican, who was born there on August 07, 1854, and died on October 16, 1933 of dysentery. His father was born in Stettin, Prussia, Germany, on September 08, 1848; he came to St. John's in his early 20s: his first child, George William was born circa 1882. Augustus Johns is listed in the St. John's city directory for 1890 as a master mariner, resident at 119 Gower Street. The 1904 directory lists him as a sea captain. He died in St. John's on June 03, 1909 of heart failure.

Elizabeth Goobie and Augustus Johns were married on March 21, 1889. Johns had been married previously, but information on his first wife is scant. They did have three children: the oldest, George William, died at St. John's on October 27, 1903, at age 21, of peritonitis. The second, Augustus (junior), is listed in the city directory for 1908 as an apprentice tinsmith; his birth date is uncertain. Their sister Jessie was born on October 11, 1885; she worked for some time as a dressmaker before marrying a man named Baldwin; she died at St. John's on January 30, 1951.

In addition to Harold, there were also three daughters born to Elizabeth and Augustus: Violet Mary Parkins (1890-1983); Annie Florence (1895-????); Mary Elizabeth "Bessie" (1897-1983). Bessie was one of the first female pharmacists in Newfoundland and worked for many years for O'Mara's Drugstore. The Johns family lived at 30 Young Street.

Harold, attended the Methodist College in St. John's, completing his schooling there around 1912. During his time at the College, he was a member of B Company of the Methodist Guards; he was one of a select number of guardsmen who received good conduct badges at the Guards exhibition and presentation of the shield at a special ceremony held on April 21, 1910.

Organized baseball came to St. John's in 1913, when Robert G. Reid Jr. introduced the sport. That first season had four teams: the Wanderers, the Red Lions, the Shamrocks and the St. Bon's. Johns was a member of the Wanderers, which won the league championship in the opening season. He played for the Wanderers again during the 1914 season.

After leaving school, Johns gained employment as a clerk at George Knowling's department store on Water Street. He was working there when war

broke out in the late summer of 1914, and while he was not one of the first enlistees in the newly re-formed Newfoundland Regiment, he did make the decision to join up late in the year. According to a report in *The Evening Telegram* (December 08, 1914), Johns was one of a number of young men who had presented themselves at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury on Harvey Road, with the intention of becoming a member of the Regiment. It appears, however, that he was rejected, probably on medical grounds, which must have been a major disappointment for him.

Johns continued to work at Knowling's in the years that followed. One highlight of those years occurred on October 18, 1916, when he stood as best man for his friend Frederick A. Lindsay, when he married Florence M. Wiseman at the Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Baptist.

By the Spring of 1918, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, having suffered an exorbitant number of casualties within its ranks, was having challenges with recruiting. The Government brought in conscription to help alleviate the pressure on the Regiment and the Regiment began to let it be known that it would not be nearly as stringent with the rules for enlistment as it had in the past. Johns took advantage of the situation to present himself for membership in the Regiment a second time. On April 23, 1918, he was accepted as a recruit and given Regimental number 4614.

As with most members of the Regiment, their Attestation Paper provides a snapshot of the physical person. From his, we learn that Johns was 5 feet 7 inches tall, weighed 124 pounds and had a chest of 31 inches, which could expand to 36½. He had a fair complexion, with blue eyes and light hair, and he had a scar on his left arm from a vaccination he had had in 1903. He listed his occupation as grocer, still in the employ of George Knowling. He lived with his mother and some of his sisters at 30 Young Street, where he contributed \$25.00 per month to the household expenses, from a yearly salary of \$820.00. His three sisters each contributed \$3.50 per month.

Johns was ordered to report for duty on June 01, 1918. He underwent a period of training before being made Lance Corporal on July 13. On that day, he also received his first assignment. He was not going overseas to Europe, but was, instead, destined for Special Duty Home Defence at Cape Race. There he was part of a group of soldiers who monitored the coastline of the southern Avalon Peninsula for enemy vessels and submarines. He spent 17 weeks there

before he was instructed to report to Headquarters in St. John's on November 10, 1918, the day before the Armistice was signed.

Twelve days later, on November 22, John's was granted a Leave of Absence Without Pay (until recall if necessary), to resume his position with George Knowling Grocery. On December 18, 1918, he informed the Civil Re-establishment Committee that it was his desire "*To work as a Clerk.*" On December 21, he was removed from strength at the depot and transferred to discharge status, pending confirmation. He was demobilized at St. John's on January 15, 1919, after 176 days of service. His Discharge Certificate was Number 512.

Johns continued in the grocery trade through the year that followed. At some point he met a young woman, Doris Winnifred Dowden, daughter of Hannah and Thomas Dowden of St. John's. They were married at St. Thomas's Anglican Church on July 27, 1920. The description of their wedding can be found in *The St. John's Daily Star* for July 28, 1920:

"A very pretty wedding took place in St. Thomas's church at 6:30 last evening when Miss Doris Dowden, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dowden of Mullock street was united in the holy bonds of matrimony to Mr. Harold Johns, an employee of Knowling's grocery.

The ceremony was officiated by Rev. A. Clayton in the presence of the bridal party and a large number of guests. The bride entered the church leaning on the arm of her father. She looked very prettily gowned in georgette over silk with hat to match and carried a magnificent bouquet of white carnations and sweet peas. She was attended by Miss Bessie Johns, a sister of the groom, who was very attractively gowned. Mr. George Dowden, a brother of the bride, ably supported the groom.

After the ceremony the bridal party drove to the residence of the bride's parents, Mullock street, where supper was served and the health of the couple enthusiastically toasted.

At 9 o'clock Mr. and Mrs. Johns motored to Keligrews where they will spend their honeymoon, taking with them the best wishes of their many friends.

The presents received were very costly and included a most valuable assortment which justified in the esteem in which both couple were held. The groom's present to the bride as a handsome case of silver, to the bridesmaid a cameo ring and to the best man a pair of sleeve links.

The Star, like their many friends wish Mr. and Mrs. Johns many happy years of wedded bliss.”

Life for Harold Johns continued apace in the 25 years following his marriage. A daughter, baptized Ruth Elizabeth, was born on June 12, 1922. He became active in the Church Lads Brigade Old Comrades, being one of the supervisors in their fundraising lottery, held on January 24, 1924: there were 45 prizes, the winners of which could choose from coal, flour or butter. He also became a member of the Newfoundland British Society, serving as its Vice-President for at least one term, having been elected to the office on January 20, 1931. His wife, Doris, had served in a similar capacity with the Society's Ladies Auxiliary during 1925.

Johns continued working in the retail trade, but had moved from Knowling's to Ayre & Sons by 1932, when the city directory for that year gives this as his occupation, and his place of residence as 7 Parade Street. In both the 1935 and 1945 Census returns, he, Doris and Ruth are living at 9 Newtown Road.

Harold Johns died in St. John's on August 26, 1947, at the age of 54. He was buried two days later in the General Protestant Cemetery on Topsail Road. Doris, for whom three different birth dates have been found (April 18, 1892, 1894 and 1896) outlived him by some years by her date of death has not yet been located. Ruth married Lloyd Churchill (1920-1998); she died in St. John's on February 09, 2002.

While his service was relatively short and he did not see action overseas, Harold Johns did serve in the Newfoundland Regiment, something he had wanted to do in the first year of the war and was able to do in the last.



George Knowling's department store on Water Street where Harold Johns worked in the grocery department for many years. East of Knowling's is Ayre & Sons department store, where he worked after leaving Knowling's. George Knowling's premises were eventually sold and renamed the London, New York and Paris Association of Fashion Limited.

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 204th 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 753-7286 or 726-6169.