

GOWER REMEMBERS

Corporal Francis Spooner, MM
(1891-1963)



“For great courage and determination during reconnaissance PETIT VIMY 10th April. Although severely wounded in the leg while on reconnaissance of PETIT VIMY defenses on afternoon of 10th April, this man volunteered to and succeeded in reaching Company Hdqrs., with information which was urgently required. (Citation accompanying Spooner’s award of the Military Medal; source: London Gazette 30172)

Francis (Frank) Spooner was born in Brigus on April 05, 1891, the fifth of eight children of Clara Watts and Thomas Vey Spooner. Both of his parents were born in Brigus where Thomas earned his living as a fisherman and where his first five children were born. Sometime within a year to eighteen months after Frank's birth the family relocated to St. John's where their son John was born on January 11, 1893. In St. John's, Thomas found work as a labourer for a decade or so, before being taken on as a storekeeper at E. J. Horwood Ltd., a general import, groceries and provisions business located at 133 Water Street. The younger three children, John, Clara and Harold Watts, were born in St. John's, where each of them was baptized at Gower Street Methodist Church.

There is no indication that Spooner attended the Methodist College, although there is ample evidence from his future endeavours that he did receive some type of formal education. He may have attended Bishop Feild College, since he and his brother John were both members of the Church Lads Brigade. He was quite active in sports, winning top honours in the parallel bars in CLB-sponsored sporting events held on April 05, 1906 and April 11, 1907.

Spooner appears to have entered the workforce sometime around the middle years of the first decade of the new century. When he left Newfoundland for Canada in the Spring of 1909, he had been working as a newsagent for the Reid Newfoundland Railway. A local paper remarked on his leaving that he was a *"bright, energetic lad, is a member of the C. L. B., and his comrades will be sorry to miss him."*

His activities during his early years in Canada are unknown although he did reside in Seattle, Washington for part of that time. It was there that he met the woman who won his heart.

Ruby Harriet Frances Grosser, born on July 17, 1894, was a native of Jacksonville, Florida, whose family moved to Tacoma, Washington, in 1910. She and Frank Spooner were married in Vancouver on

February 03, 1915. Their first child, a daughter named Lois Ida, was born on March 19, 1916, in Vancouver. That was less than six weeks after Spooner had become a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. At the time he and his wife were living at 510 11th Avenue North, Seattle, Washington. He went to Vancouver to sign up. Ruby appears to have remained in Seattle during her husband's time in training and overseas.

Spooner formally became part of the war effort on February 08, 1916, with his enlistment in the Second Canadian Mounted Rifles. He lists his wife as his next of kin and his occupation as stenographer. *The Daily News*, for September 01, 1917, stated that he had been employed with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company and at the time of his enlistment had been private secretary to the British Columbia-based millionaire entrepreneur Alexander D. McRae (1862-1926), which post he had vacated in order to become part of the war effort.

According to his Attestation Paper, in February 1916, Spooner was 5 feet 6¼ inches tall, weighed 128 pounds and had a 32-inch chest which could expand to 35. He had a fair complexion with blue eyes and dark brown hair. He also had a number of vaccination scars. His regimental number was 687616.

Spooner spent several months in training in Canada before being ready to proceed overseas. In September he came down with *La Grippe* (influenza) and was admitted to hospital on the 15th, spending three days there. He left Canada from the port of Halifax on October 25, 1916, on board the SS *Mauretania*, arriving in England six days later on the 31st. He and his comrades were taken immediately to Camp Bramshott in Hampshire, where, on November 01, he was named acting Corporal for his unit. He held that temporary assignment until December 10, when he reverted to Private. Three days later Spooner and other new recruits left Bramshott for France, landing there on the 14th. They were taken on strength with the Second Canadian Mounted Rifles.

During the late Winter and early Spring of 1917, Spooner saw action at Petit Vimy in France, where, on April 10, he was wounded in the left thigh by shrapnel and awarded the Military Medal for “great courage” in the field. Two days later he was admitted to the no. 3 Canadian General Hospital at Boulogne; later that day he was transferred to No. 32 Stationary at Wimereux; and then taken aboard the hospital ship *St. Patrick* for transfer to England. There, on April 14, he was admitted to Egginton Hall Hospital in Derbyshire. On April 25, he was taken off strength.

Spooner remained at Egginton Hall until June 20, when he was transferred to Princess Patricia’s Canadian Red Cross Hospital in Ramsgate. While there, on July 09, he received his Military Medal. During July he was moved to the 3rd Canadian Casualty Depot at Salford, from which he was discharged on August 03. The remainder of 1917 and most of 1918 he was assigned to various clerical duties at a number of Canadian military headquarters in England. He underwent a medical review in November 1918, which indicated that while his wound has healed successfully, he had residual aches and pains from the wound, which resulted in wasting of muscles and stiffness in his left knee. On December 12, 1918, he was attached to the Canadian Casualty Depot at Buxton awaiting return to Canada.

On January 15, 1919, Spooner arrived in St. John’s on the SS *Scotian*, his first visit there since he left a decade earlier. He then travelled to Vancouver, where he was discharged on February 20. He took up residence with his wife and daughter at 2705 Hemlock Street. His son, Robert Edward, was born on September 12, 1920.

According to the Canadian Census Return for 1921, Frank, Ruby, Lois and Robert were living in 77 Bellevue Road, Saanich, British Columbia at that time, where Frank was employed with an alloy manufacturing company. A second son, Richard John, was born in nearby Victoria on August 12, 1924.

The Spooners attended Metropolitan United Church in Victoria, where Frank sang in the choir for many years. There exists a vinyl recording of the choir performing Handel's Messiah, with Frank's rich tenor voice evident at the very beginning singing the introductory part. Metropolitan United amalgamated with First United in 1996 to form First Metropolitan United Church. The former Metropolitan United church building now houses the Victoria Conservatory of Music.

During World War II, Frank Spooner held the rank of Warrant Officer I in the Canadian Service Corps. He died on March 02, 1963, at the age of 71. Ruby outlived him by more than 25 years. She died on February 11, 1989, at age 94. Frank's brothers, John and Arthur, both served in World War I, as did a cousin, Alfred. John was profiled in Gower Remembers No. 46; Arthur and Alfred will be profiled in due course.



Frank Spooner (l) with his sons Robert (c) and Richard, who both served in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. Robert was a Flight Lieutenant and received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

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 enter into 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.

If you are interested in receiving copies of back issues of Gower Remembers, please contact the Gower Church Office at 709-753-7286.