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A forgotten horror

Newfoundland lost two-thirds of the soldiers it sent to Europe during the First World War --and yet the sacrifice goes unremembered

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Paul Gross's film *Passchendaele*, in theaters now, would have you know it's the last word on Canada in the First World War. It would have you believe that the British prized the fighting Canadians for their doggedness and their courage, not for their usefulness as cannon fodder. The breast-beating and the marketing has been relentless: even the venerable Dominion Institute is sending "education guides" to schools countrywide.

It all puts bums in seats, no doubt. Canada could probably use a dose of belligerent nationalism, and historians agree that our forces fought hard. But Gross's story is about his grandfather's Alberta battalion, and his *Passchendaele* is not the only one. I'm a Newfoundlander, and the dreadful contribution my forebears made to the war too often gets written out. How's that education guide going over in Newfoundland, I wonder?

When my mother was small, she'd pull a chair up to the wall of her mother's bedroom in the family's outport home. She'd climb it to inspect an ornately-framed photograph of two winsome boys she didn't know -- they were missing, somehow, and always had been. My mother loved those boys. They were blond, with Mona Lisa smiles, and despite the infantry khaki they wore they didn't seem serious at all. One sported a service cap, the other didn't; that deepened the mystery.

My mother's mother had a sister, Maud, 16 years her senior: these were Aunt Maud's youngsters, Harold and Clyde, in the "shipping out" portrait they had done in St. John's as they left for Scotland and training for the front. Harold and Clyde's portrait was their first and last. They were lost in the war -- and there was something about a third brother, too. Aunt Maud's youngest, Max, was just 14 when he walked 45 miles in sleet and snow from the outport to Grand Falls, where he lied about his age and tried to enlist. He was turned away, but he came down with pneumonia, then tuberculosis, and he died too.

My mother knew it was the same with everyone, that some years back the boys and men from every family around had gone missing in this thing, the war. It was a child's version of events, but it was true: the Island was emptied of its men. Britain lured Newfoundlanders to the front, then threw them to the dogs. Newfoundland's casualty rate -- two-thirds over the course of the war -- was far worse than Canada's or any nation fighting. (The real numbers are higher still:

about 5,500 Newfoundlanders fought with Britain, but another 3,000 or so enlisted in the Canadian army and are buried in Canadian stats.) 90% of the Newfoundland Regiment and every one of its officers was lost at the Somme on July 1, 1916, a date still mourned in Newfoundland as the July Drive, but celebrated in the rest of the country as Canada Day.

It's a sad thing, to be best at death. Sadder still, to be forgotten.

Harold, lured to enlist by the dollar-a-day promised to Aunt Maud at home, was 20 when he died in the July Drive. Brothers were sent out together to fight, but Clyde had been sick and was held back. His luck wouldn't last; for him the first anniversary of Harold's death would be the only one. Rebuilt, the Newfoundland Regiment joined the Canadians in Belgium the next year as part of the ongoing and pointless attempt to take and hold the Passchendaele ridge. The Newfoundlanders helped secure Passchendaele in the fall of 1917 and helped hold it over the winter—for the Germans to take back in April. They helped pull it back one last time in September, 1918, and helped hold it until the November armistice. Before Passchendaele they'd seen heavy action at the battle of Langemarck. Now their losses were terrible again. Clyde, by then 19, was among them.

He died in a trench just west of Passchendaele village where he and five other boys from the outports waited vainly to be replaced by British soldiers they'd agreed to spell. They were clear of the line, but in just the margin of attack that the Germans liked to neutralize with gas. Soaked in mud and bleach powder, they clung for a week to the rotten duckboard and the firestep. Then came a cloud of "green cross three"—a mix of mustard and suffocator that killed faster than mustard alone—and with it an incinerating whizz-bang. The six are marked by just three headstones in Belgium's Artillery Wood Park, each saying the same dreadful thing: Two Soldiers of the Great War.

The Newfoundlanders were equally heroic as the Canadians at Passchendaele and throughout the war, and they were even more damned. So where are they in *Passchendaele*, the film? In any world war one film?

After Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the observance of the July Drive lapsed into Dominion Day and later Canada Day, where (my mother says) a bunch of kids got together and rode bikes with coloured streamers in the wheels, rang their bells and ate ice cream bars, just glad to be off school. Newfoundland was a self-governing dominion during the war, the same as South Africa, Australia, New Zealand; the same as Canada itself. The Regiment served as itself, not as part of anyone's forces. Newfoundlanders had lost enough, not least of which now was the honoring of their dead.

As he shipped out from St. John's, Clyde wrote a postcard back to his girl in the outport. "Dear Daisy," he wrote. "How are you I am OK and hoping your the same." Every Newfoundlander said that in letters and postcards. But Clyde added a line Newfoundlanders rarely wrote till then: "I am leaving for Scotland tomorrow. Be good," he signed it. "By By Clyde." Today, that postcard is still pinned to the wall of the outport church. Since no one's written them into the story yet, it's a way Clyde's people have of remembering.