



Pictured is the cast of We Remember. From left to right are Geoff De Gannes, Frank Allen, Scott Nowak, Andrew Melanson, Carolann Con, Erin Lewis, Terry Farrell, Kathy Legere, Dale Fawthrop and Hal Davidson.

Letters bring ‘We Remember’ to life

Play tells the stories of Atlantic Canadians at war

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“The morning on the river was perfect and at night as we neared Quebec, the lights in the city and the last lights in the sky made a scene like a fairyland.”

Clare Gass wrote in her diary on May 6, 1915, as the young nurse from Pictou steamed toward Europe at war.

The excitement of being young and off on a great adventure rings through the early letters and diary entries of Atlantic Canadians heading off to World War I and World War II that Dale Fawthrop poured through for his play We Remember.

Performed by volunteers to packed houses at the Royal Canadian Legion in Amherst last week, We Remember tells of the last century’s great wars through the written words of those who were there.

“They were real people,” said Fawthrop.

“You get a lot of history from the generals and historians and politicians. But this is from the everyday person. People who were there, who wrote letters home to their mothers.”

The tone of the letters and diaries all changed quickly as the writers experienced the realities of war.

“Such terrible wounds among these patients and such nice men. One boy in our ward is just 20 years old, loses a leg and he is so patient,” Gass would later write during a rare quiet moment at a field hospital in France.

What follows are excerpts from some of the letters home, diary entries and post-war written recollections by young Atlantic Canadians used by Fawthrop in We Remember.

Quotes from Fred, Walter Horace and Herb Morells’ letters home to their mother in Newcastle, New Brunswick, from France.

HORACE MORELL, NOV 16 1916

Dear Mother,
I have been a long time making up my mind to write. I haven’t had much chance as I’ve been pretty busy.
We never take our clothes off at all. For all that, I am quite contented here and am running away with the idea that I’ll be on my way to Canada this time next year.
It seems strange that I was the last of the three of us to enlist and got to the land of the big noise first.
I don’t suppose that Fred or Herb will be over here before January or February as they will have three or four months training in England.
I wonder how Hazel is getting along. I wish Hazel would go over and spend a month or two with you this winter.
It would break up the monotony of Springhill. I will send you some souvenir as soon as I get a hold of something worthwhile. Tell Jim I’ll bring him a German helmet. Must close now, but will write again in a few days. Sincerely
Walter Horace Morell

HERB MORELL, DECEMBER 5, 1917, PASSCHENDAELE

Dear Mother,
It’s not so frosty today so we feel a little better. Yesterday was an extra cold one. If you ever thought for a minute that you have seen mud and water. You have made a mistake. Up at the guns and within a few miles of the guns if a horse gets off of the plank road and into the mud he’s finished. I can’t tell you what country we’re in but follow the movement of the Canucks. Our scrap last April was a picnic compared to this, but it’s no use explaining as words can’t express war of this kind. The country is so broken up and turned over and over by shell fire that the troops have to build a trench mat track to walk on. It zigzags down from the front line to roads several miles

behind the guns. Fritz will start at the top of this walk and shell it all the way down. Every third or fourth shell will be a direct hit, the others will be a few yards to the left or to the right. The engineers fix it up and Fritz blows it up again. We are doing the same thing to him only we keep it up day and night giving him no rest. Best wishes for Christmas...
Love to all
Herb

FRED MORELL, AUGUST 14, 1918, SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE

Dear Mother,
I’ve never before felt less like writing a letter than I do now, but will try to get one off to you while I have a few quiet moments. Nothing has ever upset me as much as Horace’s death has, (HORACE TURNS BACK TO AUDIENCE) I find it impossible to stop thinking about it. I realize fully what a terrible blow it must be to all of you, but it is a great consolation to us all, to know that he died an honourable death, and for a cause that the world knows is right. I can’t dwell on the subject any longer, Mother, for after all there isn’t much that I can say. I might tell you about the accident though. He went up to the guns the night before to do some preparation work for this great Canadian advance which started the next morning. He was hit about midnight and was carried to the nearest dressing station. He was hit in the back and the left lung was punctured. The boys who carried him to the dressing station say he regained consciousness on the way down, and spoke to them as though nothing was the matter. I wish I could have

got to the hospital to see him before he died, but it was impossible as I was in the strafe myself and we were advancing by the mile. I might say that we are still going so the place where our guns were then is miles to the rear of us, so there is certain consolation in knowing that the German shells will never disturb his grave. I must close for now but will write as often and as soon as I can. Tell Jim that I have a German officers cap for him.
Your loving son,
Fred

Will R. Bird, who served with the 193rd Battalion and the 42nd Battalion, left this written recollection of being woken in his trench near Vimy, France, in 1917.

“I had a look at my visitor. In an instant I was out of the bivvy, so surprised I could not speak. I was face to face with my brother, Steve, who had been killed in ‘15.” Steve told me to gather my equipment and follow him. We walked through trenches and past makeshift shelters inhabited by men from my platoon, but the gear on my shoulder fell off, and then I was separated from my brother, Steve, who had entered a passageway. By the time I made it to the passageway, I had two options — going left or right. I went right and my brother was nowhere to be found. I ran back and went left, but again I was unsuccessful. I couldn’t find him. I was so tired, excited and sweating, that I dozed off as I leaned up against a wall. Not long after, I was awoken by a soldier shaking me. He asked me why I was there. They’re digging around that bivvy you were in. ‘All they’ve found is Jim’s helmet and one of Bob’s legs’. And, I remembered, my brother Steve, I remembered the warm hands.”

In 1941, 15-year-old Newfoundland inshore fisherman George Evans lied about his age to the master of the Norwegian vessel SS Einvik when it visited St. John’s to join the Merchant Marine. He would survive the war, settle in Amherst and fight his own government to recognize veterans of the Merchant Marine.

“In August of 1941 sixty-one merchant ships steamed out of Sydney harbour protected by corvettes and destroyers. The ships carrying war materials and supplies for Great Britain were Dutch, British, Norwegian, American, Polish, Free French, Greek, Yugoslavian and Swedish. The convoy left Sydney on August 24th and by

Sept 4th we were bucking high seas and two days off schedule. It was about 23:30 hours when the mate on watch came to call the 24:00-04:00 watch. He told me you better go to your cabin and get some sleep and stop talking about torpedoing and the war, you’ll jink us. I was worried we’d not make it across to England. My cabin was 2 feet wide and 6 feet long containing a bunk, table, chair, wash basin, locker and my trunk. I lay on the bed with my clothes on.

A while later I was awakened by a big bang on the starboard side, the side where my cabin was. I grabbed my life jacket and lit out for the lifeboat deck. On the way I did hear a crew member shout a torpedo had hit us on the starboard side. Then something hit me across the back and knocked me to the deck. There was another bang. I was picked up and put into the lifeboat. At the same time lines were let go and we got away from the ship. The U Boat fired a salvo of shells onto the bridge that set fire to the aft quarters. The next morning the Master made sure that everyone was accounted for. We were split into two lifeboats. The Master said the Westmann Islands were 450 miles away-so we set out rowing for the Westmans.

By the 7th day, most of the crew were ill. In order to survive we had to keep moving so we took turns rowing. On Sept 8th we spotted land — but it was very far away. We were on our last rations of hard bread and there was very little water left. Around noon a fishing boat from Iceland came alongside. The Icelandic fishermen gave us their lunches, hot chocolate and tea. It was the first hot drink we’d had in 9 days. We were now safe and on our way to the Westmann Islands. I was admitted to the hospital with edema. My arms, ankles and feet were severely swollen and I had acute bronchitis, but we were safe and we were alive.”

The daughter of an English nurse and a Canadian Soldier in WWI, Doris Rhinedress would herself become a war bride. She grew up in England and met Robert Bernard Rhinedress of Napan while working in a factory making equipment for bombers. Rhinedress served with the Carleton & York Regiment, serving in England, fighting in Italy and Holland. Doris’ mother nicknamed him ‘Bobby Dazzler’. Both would survive the war and live long lives. After emigrating, Doris would become a fixture of Amherst as a member of the First Baptist Church, the Nova Scotia British War Brides Association, the Brookdale Hog Growers Association, the Amherst Golden Years Society and the Wednesday Afternoon Ladies Bowling League.

“I moved to East Grinstead to be closer to Bob.

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