

# reliving the Great

Gay Decker speaks to descendants of the Newfoundland Regiment who are playing their ancestors in a soon-to-be-aired docudrama about the First World War.

# War



Greg Connors photo

# Artillery fire splinters the air

as Private Greg Connolly of the First Newfoundland Regiment takes one last slug of Screech and whispers a prayer before vaulting himself over the top of his trench. He has minutes, maybe just seconds, to help advance the Allied forces. His bayonet leading him forward, he navigates as fast as he can over the bodies of his fellow soldiers, some still crying out for help.

Squinting through the smoke and dirt, he spots an opening in the barbed wire. But a flash of metal pulls his attention to the left and he realizes he's closer to enemy lines than he thought: a German machine gun is aimed squarely in his direction.

Connolly falls hard, bruising his ribs, and lies there unmoving until he

hears a voice call "Cut!"

Slowly, Connolly and the fallen soldiers around him resurrect themselves while the cameras are repositioned for the next take in a docudrama being directed by Gemini Award-winning documentary filmmaker Brian McKenna (*Big Sugar, Korea, The Valour and the Horror*). His latest

production, *The Great War*, is the first docudrama ever produced to include footage of descendants of First World War soldiers actually living in conditions approximating those of their ancestor soldiers. *The Great War* is scheduled to air on CBC TV in 2007 in time for the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, which took place April 9, 1917.

In real life, Connolly is an RCMP officer based in Windsor, Ontario, who hails from Springdale, Newfoundland. He says no training he's ever received would have prepared him for the conditions of a First World War battlefield.

"(Today) you wouldn't climb out of a trench and walk into open land without any cover, knowing that you were going to be shot at. It's suicidal. There's no way you can mentally prepare for that kind of situation," Connolly says.

He was one of 13 Newfoundlanders and 150 Canadians chosen from the 6,000 who applied to appear in McKenna's film. To prepare for it, he spent two weeks at movie-making

boot camp in St. Bruno, Québec, in July 2006.

Representing his great-grandfather Lance Corporal William Joseph Douglas Tilley, from Kelligrews, Connolly woke every morning at 6:30 to the bugle revelry. His "shower" was a bucket of water dumped over his head by a fellow soldier. Meals consisted of porridge, bread and cheese, and stews. Clad entirely in wool and lugging a heavy kit on his back, he marched for miles in military formation, enduring temperatures above 40°C and a humidex of nearly 60°C. He even learned the basics of attacking his enemy with a bayonet – how to lunge aggressively, targeting the heart and then twisting the blade to the right and back again. After an 18-hour day, he tossed and turned all night on the hard ground that was his bed.

"It (the set) was like a war zone," confirms Janet Torge, one of the film's producers. "They had blisters on their feet. They were fainting from heatstroke. We turned a car into an ambulance to run them to the clinic."



Greg Connolly photo



Private Greg Connolly (top) portrays his great-grandfather Lance Corporal William Joseph Douglas Tilley (right) in the wartime docudrama.



All the Newfoundlanders stuck it out, though, including Private Dave Mallowney from St. John's, who thought his worst fear was about to come true when he spotted a huge box of black, slithering rodents on the set.

"I hate rats. I'm petrified of them, but I figured this is what my grandfather would have had to live with in the trenches, so I'll stick it out," Mallowney says.

Mallowney's mother had always reminded him that his grandfather, Private Thomas Colton Carmichael, had been one of the First 500 Blue Puttees who fought at Beaumont-Hamel and one of the few who had survived. However, beyond what his mother told him, Mallowney knew little of what his grandfather had actually experienced.

Applicants for *The Great War* docudrama were asked to provide an overview of their ancestors' participation in the war and, if possible, journals or artifacts

that would give insight into what they had gone through. Mallowney's research into his grandfather's past had a profound impact on him, and his initial attraction to be in a movie was soon replaced by the desire to do his grandfather proud. In fact, Mallowney - who studied folklore and history at Memorial University - was so interested in historical accuracy

that he sometimes got frustrated with the production company when the artistic licence of movie-making took precedence. It was a frustration that Janet Torge says was shared by many other descendants.

"They were just so into it," she explains. "On the one hand they understood we were making a film. On the other hand, when they would march in perfect order onto the set, they were none too pleased that they had to wait for the shot to be set up. We had a lot of angry soldiers much of the time."

In one scene, Mallowney found himself writing letters home from the trench, just as he knew his grandfather had done more than 90 years ago. He even used actual postcards written by him. Mallowney had to pretend he was preparing to fight the battle of Beaumont-Hamel and, like his ancestor, knew nothing of what would await him. "We're here and we're getting ready now," he says, paraphrasing what Carmichael had written. "The Germans are going to get a big surprise tomorrow. We're 800 strong and we're going to give it to them tomorrow. We're going to be remembered forever."

Remembered and immortalized, as in the case of Sandy Gow's ancestor, Dr. John McCrae, author of the famous poem *In Flanders Field*. As with Mallowney, Gow knew a bit of his story, but it was her father who reminded her of her family connections to the First World War and

encouraged her to reply to *The Great War* casting call. Gow was McCrae's first cousin three times removed, and her great-great aunt Margaret Gow, at 48, had lied about her age in order to join the Volunteer Aid Detachment.

But Gow, a graduate of theatre arts at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, thought she had little hope getting cast because the filmmaker would be seeking mostly male descendants. So when her sister called to tell her she'd



Private Dave Mallowney in character as his grandfather, Private Thomas Colton Carmichael - one of the First 500

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so lush," says Gow. "And then I remembered this was somebody's hell and they never walked away from it. I hoped they had these moments, too, when they also appreciated the beauty, even for just a second."

Private Ed Martin, who has been living in Newfoundland for 15 years, says his insight came while lying "wounded" on the battlefield. He happened to fall facing his own Allied lines and watched as row after row of his friends dropped

like flies. "I realized then what it must have been like, and I wondered why anyone would go over the top when they knew they'd likely be killed," he says. "I don't think it's for king or country. I think it was for the guy to the left of them and the guy to the right. They did it for them."

Martin played the role of a Newfoundland soldier though he is in fact the descendant of a British soldier, Noel Parsons, who survived the First World War only to sign up for the second one. Pondering his grandfather's courage, he thinks the level of friendship between soldiers might have been part of his ancestor's motivation to return to war. "Even for just the eight days I was there, I learned there's a connection that you make with people under those kinds of harsh conditions that you just don't find in doing other things," he says.

It's a connection that Martin, Connolly and Mullaney all obviously feel, as they all retell the same experiences, frustrations and jokes in a way that befits the oldest of friends, even brothers. And they all profess a love for Newfoundland and a respect for

its people. While on the set, Connolly had pointed out to the film crew that in 1916, Newfoundland would have been its own country and therefore would have flown the Union Jack. Next morning they were presented with their flag, and henceforth every morning, after the Canadian flag was raised, the Newfoundland Regiment hoisted the Union Jack and sang the

"Ode to Newfoundland."

It may have just been a movie set outside Montreal, but in spirit, these Newfoundlanders were in the trenches and on the battlefields of Beaumont-Hamel, Ypres and Vimy Ridge. "It's like in the 'Ode to Newfoundland,'" says Connolly. "'Where once they stood, we stand.' That's how real it became." ☞

Sandy Gow playing the traditional song "I'm Sleeping, Don't Wake Me" for the film, in a scene shot near the Brooding Soldier monument in Belgium.

better brush up on her French – she was going to France – she was dumbstruck. In addition to the two-week boot camp at St. Bruno, Québec, Gow spent 10 days with 12 other descendants filming documentary scenes at the site of the actual battlegrounds of Ypres, Beaumont-Hamel, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele and Menin Gate.

Given her background as an actor, musician and singer, Gow's role was not only to represent her great-great-aunt, but also to represent Newfoundland through music. She remembers one moment in particular at the Caribou Monument at Beaumont-Hamel. She wanted to pay homage to the Newfoundlanders who had died there and asked the producers if they would let her sing the "Ode to Newfoundland" for the documentary. She says if there was ever a time in her life that she wanted to do something right, that was it.

"I was struck by how incredibly beautiful it is in France. It's so green,



Greg Connolly photo

The "soldiers" in the trenches on the set of *The Great War*

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