

## **Singing Songs and Hooking Stories from Newfoundland to France**

### **By Frances Ennis**

“From the moment young men left their homes to fight in the Great War, one could almost hear a collective prayer for peace and the safe return of loved ones. Families left behind couldn’t even imagine the hardship their soldiers would face in that faraway place. Many would feel powerless and the only way in which they could help was to offer a prayer. Some prayers were answered...many were not.”

Elizabeth (Duggan) Matthews wrote these words to explain why she hooked a rug called *A View of Peace*. Her words were all too real for soldiers of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and their families on a fateful day in 1916 – July 1, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, in France.

On that day, the Regiment was part of a huge allied offensive to break through German lines near the French villages of Beaumont and Hamel. As the soldiers emerged from behind their lines they ran directly into enemy fire. Of the 881 men who fought that battle only 68 answered roll call the next day. This tragic loss, which is said to have occurred within a 30 minute period, was devastating for those who survived. And as the news trickled home to the families, this small island colony was wrapped in grief. Few were untouched by the tragedy.

Nearly a century later, a group of women from Newfoundland still remember. And they remember in quite a unique way. These women, who are members of the Holy Heart of Mary Alumnae Choir, have designed and hooked rugs that tell their story about that fateful day and what they believe it meant to families and communities in this province. Many, like Anne LeMessurier Lilly, had a direct family connection to the losses. She explains:

“World War I was a tragic war for both sides of our family. My mother’s uncle was killed in October 1916. My father’s father was badly wounded in the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. He was a sergeant in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment...”. Anne dedicated her rug *Hope for the Wounded* “with love and pride to Papa, my grandfather, Sergeant Francis LeMessurier...”.

Gerri Fleming invites us to meet her grandfather, Leo Terry, who joined the Royal Newfoundland Regiment November 1, 1915 at age 18 and was almost immediately deployed

to Europe. The strong facial features in *A Tribute to My Grandfather* offers a striking resemblance between grandfather and granddaughter.

There is no doubt that Beaumont-Hamel holds a significant place in the hearts and minds of people in this province and the response by choir members to the rug hooking project is indeed a living testament to that fact.

The project came about because during the summer of 2008 our Choir, under the directorship of Dr. Valerie Long, will be traveling to Europe on a musical and cultural journey. One of our stops will be Beaumont-Hamel. There we will sing during the Commemorative Ceremony that takes place on July 1 every year. This is truly an honour.

While there we will visit the battle field, called No Man's Land, which is the only commemorative site in France that has maintained the original trenches. Janet Lacey and Glenda Bursey created a vivid image of *No Man's Land* in their rug of two soldiers crawling out of the trenches and moving onto the battlefield. They talk about their rug as portraying the hardships and obstacles soldiers they had to overcome and how fellow comrades were always close by to help each other.

We will have an opportunity to walk past those very trenches, where so many of our young men died, to a path that brings us to the Danger Tree. Under the spreading branches of this legendary tree, many Newfoundland soldiers were killed or wounded as they tried to funnel through a break in the barbed wire defenses. It is rumored the tree died on July 1, 1916 – its bare withered skeleton still stands forever reaching to the sky. Two renditions of *The Danger Tree* are included in our rug collection – one by Noreen (Reardon) Grace, and the other by Jo-Ann Clarke, Madonna Cole and Donna Evans.

From there we will move on to one of many graveyards where headstones tell about the losses – some have familiar names, some are marked *Known Onto God*, the title of a rug by Mary Anne Murphy. These are the ones that families hoped against hope were still alive somewhere in a foreign land. Their names are now engraved in bronze on a giant plaque that rests beneath a spectacular statue of the caribou that overlooks the fields. This familiar image of home is a symbol used by the Regiment, and there as it overlooks the fields, it is surrounded with brush and hedge transported from our native Newfoundland.

## The Caribou

Just like the one in Bowring Park\*  
It stands – majestic – on the stones,  
Head raised to the sky,  
Mouth opened.

It heralds the dawning of each new day,  
Watches over the once muddied trenches,  
Now manicured grass,  
Patches of colour.

When dusk comes and all is silent  
It joins the others in the field  
Who have drifted there to talk  
Of days gone by.

Frances Ennis, July 1998

(\*Bowring Park is located in St. John's, NL)

Anne Donnelly created a rug called *Forget Me Not* because after the battle at Beaumont-Hamel, forget me nots were worn every July 1<sup>st</sup> to honor the bravery and sacrifice of our soldiers. Anne remembers the pride her parents showed when they talked about the soldiers who fought at Beaumont-Hamel. They were also known as 'the Blue Puttees'.

## About the Rug Hooking Project

The project started in March 2007 by choir members Frances Ennis, Barbara O'Keefe and Mary Anne Murphy. It was intended to be an opportunity for others to learn a new skill and at the same time contribute to the fundraising efforts for our trip to Europe. Once the call went out it quickly became apparent that this project would become much bigger than anticipated. Thirty-four women became actively involved in hooking 25 rugs just as their mothers and grandmothers had done in the past – using burlap and cut strips of recycled materials.

We began with an evening session where the women were given an overview of the rug hooking process and viewed *I Remain, Your Loving Son*, a locally produced documentary based on letters and memoirs between members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and their family and friends back home. A week later they participated in a day long workshop that drew on their response to the video, their individual research, and personal family

artifacts to create ideas for their rugs and transfer them to burlap. By the end of the day and with assistance from the planning group along with an additional teaching team - Maxine Ennis, Sheila Coultas, and Bridget Woodrow - the women had designed and transferred 20 rugs to burlap. We were all ecstatic!

Five more images were put to burlap in the coming weeks, frames were purchased or borrowed, hooks were ordered, rotary cutters and cutting boards collected, and recycled fabrics gathered. We were ready to begin hooking. Women met every Tuesday night throughout the spring and summer – some chose to work individually, others in twos or threes. All of the women learned the fundamentals of rug hooking, how to use color and texture to create dimension and mood, and how to square off and hem their rugs. Most importantly they learned a traditional skill and how they could use that skill to tell a story using old t-shirts or sweaters, new scraps of material, or discarded wool blankets.

## Symbolic Images

Several women chose images of medals and badges for their rugs as a way of honoring those who served. For example, *Regimental Colours* by Anne Marie Whelan was dedicated “to the memory of my mother as she waved good-bye to my father as he left ...to go to war.” Bridget Woodrow, a current student at Holy Heart, continued to meet with the women on Tuesday nights to help out where she could. She also hooked a mat of the present-day *Royal Newfoundland Regiment Badge*. Geraldine Sinnott hooked an image of the *Regiment Cap Badge WWI* as a tribute to her father, and fondly remembers: “As soon as I was old enough, I helped polish his cap badge, uniform buttons, and belt buckle.” The main image on both rugs is the much revered caribou head. The *Victory Medal*, instituted in 1919 was an image Helen Handrigan chose to hook because it was awarded to those who directly served the war effort - home and abroad. Marilyn Cameron, Barbara O’Keefe and Sheila Power created a rug called *Honour*. It is a representation of four WWI service medals awarded to Staff Sergeant Major Cecil Green of Trinity, Newfoundland.

Other symbols include the Newfoundland Dog, a beloved animal that exemplifies the loyalty and bravery of our people. *Sable Chief* by Sheila Feaver and Pat Edney was one such dog who served as mascot to the Regiment. A strip of fabric in his tongue is taken from a t-shirt owned by Sheila’s nephew who is now serving in Afghanistan – a haunting reminder that we have not yet achieved the peace we all want and that so many have died for.

Any visual presentation of WWI would be incomplete without the brilliant red poppy. Sandy Nixon featured magnificent ones on her rug called *Lest We Forget* in a scene that depicts

soldiers who had just buried their comrade, honored him with a rough wooden cross and placed his helmet on top. *Poppies* were also the main image of a rug by Sheila Hynes, and in another by sisters Moya O'Neill and Brenda Wolfe. Four women – Patsy Reddy, Joan Dawe, Helen St. Croix and Marguerite Peddigrew - hooked the logo for Chartwell / Elizabeth Towers, the company that provided us with the space to carry out our project. In keeping with our theme it too included poppies in the background.

Brenda and Moya also worked with an idea begun by Shirley Moss to create *A Pair of Grey Socks*. This image recollects a role played by those on the home front, in particular the Women's Patriotic League, who set about collecting items that could be sent to the troops. Many women joined in and knit wool socks for the soldiers, a piece of home that was greatly appreciated and noted in letters written to family members.

### **Images from Letters**

On both sides of a vast ocean families and friends eagerly awaited news that would arrive in the form of a handwritten letter – they became a life line. Salutations were often particularly poignant as is recounted in Michelle Sullivan's rug, *Remember Me to Mother and the Little Ones*. It depicts a fallen soldier, represented by the Red Badge of Courage. He is mourned by his mother who is standing outside her home in Newfoundland, and a toy belonging to 'the little ones' is seen in the garden. Sheila Feaver and Diane MacDonald together created two mats along this theme. Their explanation of *My Boy* is vivid: "In the peace and tranquility of her garden, a mother reads a letter from her soldier son. She longs to see his face and prays for his safe return." Similarly, *My Mother* in the reverse is described as: "In a war torn trench a young man reads a letter from his mother. He is filled with a sense of peace and love that her words bring."

Pat Greene presents a piece of her living memory in her rug, *The Kettle* - it, "depicts the letters written to our family by my brothers...from the Front during World War II. I can remember the kettle where my mother stored these precious missives."

In a letter written to his family in July 1916, the young soldier Howard Morry said: "After the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, about the 6<sup>th</sup> I think, we left for a rest and what a march that was. All our chums gone. We were just dragging along the road when Sergeant Major Hicks brought a couple of accordions and put one in front and one in the rear. They started up *The Banks of Newfoundland* and we all cheered right up." These words, recounted in the video *I Remain, Your Loving Son*, resonated with Mary Anne Murphy and Frances Ennis. It prompted them to model and adapt an image from a Veteran's Affairs Canada poster for their rug which they named, *What a March That Was*.

Together the collection of rugs became much more significant than we could ever have imagined. Each one tells its' own story and together they represent a sincere act of reverence to the individuals and families impacted by The Great War. As we worked on our rugs, and as others began to see the stories emerging it became clear to us and to them that these rugs should not be separated.

It is now our plan that these rugs will remain together as an educational and historical representation of the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel. In an effort to make that happen we have invited government, individuals and business to partner with us in this exciting venture. We look forward to the possibility that these rugs will eventually find their permanent home on the walls of a new Veteran's Pavilion that is scheduled to open in St. John's in the summer of 2008.

Tina Murphy's rug, *The Last Goodbye*, is a fitting ending to this snapshot in time that briefly tells about a remarkable collection of work that has touched the hearts of all involved. The poem below, used with permission, captures the essence of her rug.

*A Soldier's Thoughts*

Standing straight  
Head high  
Pride swells within me  
I gaze back on the rocky shore  
A hero for my country  
Stooped low  
In blood and filth  
On a battlefield I stand  
I close my eyes  
I yearn for thee  
My home, my Newfoundland.

by Patricia Conway