



**Private William McGrath (Regimental Number 4994) lies in Delby's Cove Cemetery, Trinity Bay.**

**His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *fisherman*, William McGrath presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on May 11, 1918. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.**

*\*The building was to serve as the Regimental Headquarters in Newfoundland for the duration of the conflict.*

It was to be on the day of that medical assessment, May 11, while at the same venue, that William McGrath would enlist. He was thus engaged...*for the duration of the war\**...at the daily private soldier's rate of a single dollar to which was to be appended a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.

*\*At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits – as of or about May of 1916 - signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their original enlistment.*

Only some few hours were now to follow before there subsequently came to pass, while still at the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the same tenth day of that month of May he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, William McGrath became...*a soldier of the King\**.

*\*This was the day on which the Newfoundland Military Service Act (conscription by another name) came into effect. From May 11, 1918, through to the end of the War, the Department of Militia called a total of 1,470 men into active service. However, there appears to be nothing among his documents to suggest whether or not William McGrath fell into this category.*

Following his enlistment, Private McGrath was likely to have been ordered to report to the temporary barracks in the curling rink and the Prince's Skating Rink, quarters which had been established in 1915 in the eastern end of the city, although some of the recruits appear to have stayed in various boarding-houses.

(Right: *This photograph of the Prince's Rink in St. John's with military personnel, apparently attired in uniforms of Great War vintage and on parade is from the Ice Hockey Wiki web-site.*)



Private McGrath, Number 4994 was now expected to await thirty-one days before his departure for...*overseas service*. In the meantime, on May 31, having been granted a ten-day furlough, he would travel home to the Trinity Bay community of Delby's Cove. However by June 10, the date on which he was to report back to St. John's to await further orders, Private McGrath had taken sick.

(continued)

It was necessary to call a doctor - Dr. Borden of Trinity was dispatched to Delby's Cove by the magistrate at Trinity - and correspondence was sent to St. John's on Private McGrath's behalf to request extra furlough because of his sickness. Headquarters in St. John's thereupon replied with a telegram to Trinity to enquire of the doctor as to the seriousness of his case. Serious it was: Private McGrath was diagnosed as suffering from...*'flu and bronchitis*.

The son of John McGrath, fisherman, and of Mary\* Ann McGrath of Delby's Cove (see below for family information), Trinity Bay, he was reported to have...*died of sickness...at home on June 11, 1918.*

William McGrath had enlisted in St. John's at the *declared* age of nineteen years – but also recorded on a further page as eighteen: thus far the exact date of his birth has proved to be elusive.

*\*A single source (see below and on first page) furnishes much the following data: In Private McGrath's file, a single sister and two brothers are noted. In Delby's Cove Cemetery a single headstone commemorates Sarah, Philip, Sadie – all dying young, before the date of enlistment. There were three surviving children at that time, Laura-Bell (died 1920), John (died 1927), and Edward (no date of death) – one sister and two brothers. The mother's name was Mary McGrath.*



(Right: *The sacrifice of Private McGrath is also honoured on the Screen Wall in the Military Plot, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, St. John's. – photograph from 2011*)

*\*The headstone records the year of Laura-Bell's birth as 1897. A copy of Newfoundland Vital Statistics has 1895.*

Captain Murphy

Delby's Cove  
June 18<sup>th</sup> 1918

Dear Sir

I am taking upon me to write you these few lines concerning the death of my son Pte William McGrath he was a very sickly boy that we was taking great care of more over doctors told me he was consumptive as you know as I have all ready told you Dear Sir he told me on his death bed he applied to the doctor saying he felt of his side and the doctor did not examinen him he told the officer to put him on duty Dear Sir I am laying the death of my boy upon the doctor or doctors that examined hime. His mother is dying on

her bed very ill on the thoughts of her boy don't know if she will recover or not at the lads death I sent a letter to Captain OGrady saying he was dead and got no answer. I beared the expense of his burial and had to sell my little engine out of my fishing boat to do so I think this is hard for a father to have to do for a sick boy that was taking away from hime. Please wil you send to me what I shall do with is cloths also what arctles I should send back if I is to send back any as you know I am helpless myself

Yours Truly

John McGrath Delby's Cove\*

Smith Sound Trinity bay

***\*Delby's Cove is no longer a community – although several summer residences exist in the area – and is accessible only by boat and on foot. The cemetery is outside the bounds of the once-community and is on the path leading from Delby's Cove to British Harbour, also now abandoned.***

Justice Bennett

St John's, March 7<sup>th</sup> 1919

Dear Sir:-

This is my last time writing to you in regards to 4994 Pte. William McGrath. Now sir, if the doctors can pass a boy like mine that was consumpyive as so cruelly ill treated him. I know it was every boy's duty to come forward at the time of call. Now, sir, it was in the prime time of fishing when my boy came home on leave and died and I had to tend to him myself, and give people my trap on shares, but one share out of three was to be mine. I have also sold my saw mill and motor engine. I sold my motor engine to put my boy in under ground. I have a very bad complaint myself, I am not able to work hard. If the doctor had treated my boy he may have been living now, and if ther is nothing for me I will be leaving tomorrow, Saturday, if possible, but I assure you it is not for home, although I have a great regard for my wife and children, as much as any man. I am not coming to beg any more, and I have always got my bread

hard and honest. I was never used to begging; I am not going to beg any longer. I am staying with Mrs John Leonard 74 Cabot Street. I will be leaving Saturday evening if possible. I think that some chastisement should be upon the Doctor for doing such a thing.

Good-bye for ever,  
(Sgd) John McGrath  
Delby's Cove, Smith Sound, T.B.

Reply to a later letter from Mr. John McGrath:

**Mr John McGrath**  
**Trinity**

**Nov 15<sup>th</sup>, 1920**

**Dear Sir:-**

**I am in receipt of your letter of Nov. 9<sup>th</sup> with reference to the matter of your son, No. 4994 Pte. W. McGrath, deceased, and in reply I have to state that it is regretted that there is nothing that this Department can do to assist you.**

**Yours faithfully**  
**XXXXX**  
**Lieut. Col.**  
**Chief Staff Officer**

**From the files of Private William McGrath: John McGrath became obsessive about the culpability of a Dr Burden and was likely to do him harm. He was admitted into the insane asylum.**

*The Commonwealth War Graves Commission Headstone for Private McGrath was shipped to Delby's Cove in July of 1923.*

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 30, 2023.