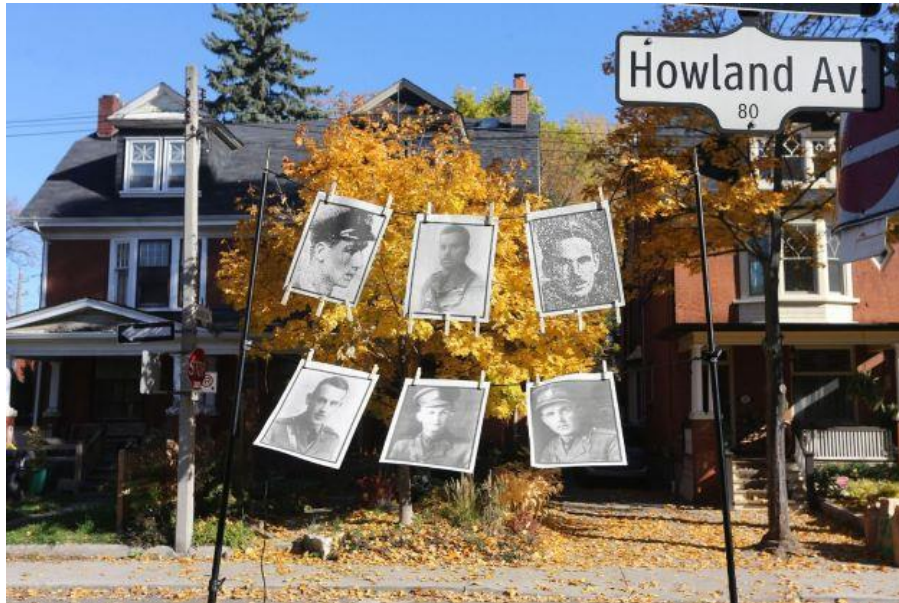


The heroes of Howland Ave.

By [Paul Hunter](#)

Feature reporter

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They grew up on the same West Annex street, a few doors from each other; boyhood pals, then teenaged running mates. Four of them attended Harbord Collegiate together.

They had names like Billy, Kenny and Cecil, a champion runner who may have been the best athlete of the gang. Though young Eustace, part of a provincial rugby championship, would have argued that.

Life was good on Howland Ave.

There were about 35 red-brick houses, many with impressive gables, on each side of the first block north from Bloor St. to Barton Ave. It was a place where neighbours looked out for neighbours. And a time when the future seemed boundless.

Soon, as happens with childhood friends, the boys became young men and left their tree-lined street to find their own way.

Soon, most would be dead.

Swept up in patriotic fervour, they signed on to serve King and country in the First World War.

Six men in their 20s, all from the same city block. Six different units, six different cemeteries.

Rare was the man who returned to Howland.



My brother and I were among the young men of Howland Avenue who one by one quietly slipped away to fight in World War 1. Joe Junior came back an RAF flight commander, wearing the Distinguished Flying Cross. I, an infantry officer, returned wearing the Military Cross. Number 66 Howland Avenue was a proud house that spring day in 1919 when a party was held for all our relatives and friends to welcome us home. We were in uniform still, of course. We were hugged, kissed, slapped on the back. The house became crowded.

— Maj. Gregory Clark, a post-war *Toronto Star* journalist, edited from his parable “One Block of Howland Avenue” published in *Weekend Magazine*, Nov. 9, 1968.

That one Toronto street would be decimated by death was not unusual during the savage, demographic-altering four years of the war to end all wars. Posters in store windows, public rallies and stirring newspaper editorials beckoned new recruits.

Young men, enticed by what was supposed to be a big adventure, volunteered by the thousands. Streetcars, decorated in bunting and Union Jacks, became mobile recruiting stations with signs promising a “Free Trip to Europe.” One need merely step on board.

Many lied about their age to go.

When Britain declared war on Germany on Aug. 4, 1914, automatically bringing Canada into the conflict as a British dominion, cheers broke out on the streets of the city. About 85 per cent of Torontonians were of British heritage.

This, it was understood, was a war of Germany's making and the empire had to respond. Mothers and wives urged their men to enlist, and many expected victory by Christmas.

James Wells Ross, a local artillery reservist who was about to volunteer, mentioned the buoyant atmosphere in his diary.

"Bands played on the streets and impromptu regiments of small boys paraded with flags and drums," he wrote.

By the time people took to the streets with sing-alongs and fireworks to celebrate the armistice reached on Nov. 11, 1918, more than 4,000 Torontonians, about 2 per cent of the male population, had been killed. Tiny one-block Shannon St., near College St. and Ossington Ave., lost 10 men. A single block of Seaton St. downtown suffered five deaths as the blood ran in European trenches. On Howland, 10 were gone from the entire four blocks.

Parents learned on their doorsteps that their sons would not be coming home.

"The great terror for loved ones at home was to see the telegraph boy, bicycling in his short pants up and down the streets," says Tim Cook, a First World War historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

Although pinpointing the addresses of the war dead can be inexact — sometimes newspaper articles, attestation papers and records from the [Canadian Great War Project](#) yield different locations — there is no arguing the despair that war brought to Toronto's neighbourhoods.

"The casualties kept coming day after day, month after month, year after year," says Cook. "On a street where there were three, five or 10 dead, whatever the number is, you can just imagine the tremendous shock."

Amid the gaiety and the chatter, my father signaled Joe Junior and me. We followed him upstairs to the front room, his library and den. He closed the door.

"Boys," he said, "I have a favour to ask of you."

"Yes, sir!"

"I ask you," he said, his face tense, "not to walk up or down Howland Avenue. I want you to come to the house, from now on, by coming up either (parallel streets) Albany or Brunswick to Barton, then along Barton and down to the house."

Our house was seven doors below Barton.

Of the boys who grew up together on the first block of Howland, William (Bill) McLaren, who had lived at No. 41, was the first to sign up, becoming an infantryman in the 19th Battalion. His little brother John was his witness on his attestation papers Nov. 14, 1914. Bill was 24.



Next was Cecil Perry, across the road at No. 40, joining the Royal Field Artillery the following March just before he turned 23. Then John (Jack) McLaren, 22, a year later enlisted in the infantry with the 58th Battalion, followed by Eustace McGee from No. 56 and Kenneth Buist from 17 and his next-door neighbour William (Billy) Hall from 15.

Greg Clark, the parable author, enlisted in the infantry on March 27, 1916.

No matter how eager some men were to serve, not all were automatically accepted in the early days. The Queen's Own Rifles, for example, limited their initial recruits to men who had military experience. That virtually eliminated any Canadian-born men. When learning of that restriction, some 4,000 hopefuls headed to the 48th Highlanders recruitment office, numbers which allowed that unit to cherry-pick the most physically fit.

It was considered a privilege to serve. As the troops left for a training base at Valcartier, Que., citizens would stand 20 deep to cheer their final parade and train departure.

"Large crowds gathered in driving rain on 20 August 1914 to see the first of Toronto's soldiers off to war," wrote Ian Hugh Maclean Miller in *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War*.

“The people were thrilled to be part of this great adventure; they were also concerned for the welfare of their sons. Cherry Street Station was the scene of the final parade of one thousand volunteers before they left the city. Military bands played martial music from the platform, with soldiers and civilians alike joining their voices in song. Just over two weeks ago, these men had been office clerks and factory workers.”



Of the boys from Howland, Buist had been a bank clerk, Hall an electrician, McGee, just 18, was still a student, recently graduated from the University of Toronto Schools, where he was a prominent hockey player and rugby champion.

Four thousand rode that train out of Toronto before that first month of war came to a close.

“This is an army of citizen soldiers,” reminds Cook. “These are fathers, uncles and sons and they come from all classes, almost all religions, almost all regions. This army overseas is probably made up of your neighbours.”

We stared at our Dad. He went over and kicked the cannel coal flickering in the fireplace and pulled himself together.

“Starting at the bottom, at Bloor,” he said. “Billy Hall, air force, killed in action.”

We didn’t know.

“Then,” said our Dad, “up the street a few doors, this side, Captain Cecil Perry, artillery, killed in action.”

“Oh no!” I muttered.

“Across the street, up from the Perry’s,” continued our father. “Captain Bill and Lieutenant Jack McLaren, infantry, both killed in action.”

He was naming all our boyhood playmates, our high school chums, the comrades of our young manhood.



Lt. John McLaren’s death was particularly poignant. He’d been a merchant, likely at the spice importing business of his parents, who had moved from Howland by the time he signed up June 23, 1915. He shipped out to England Nov. 22 and was deployed to France in February.

McLaren was on the front lines in France with the 58th Battalion early in 1917 but, according to a Toronto Star report, the 24-year-old returned to London for an operation. His fiancée, Rita Harvey, crossed the ocean and the two were married Feb. 11. Three days later McLaren returned to France.

What happened next is uncertain.

McLaren’s war records show he suffered “multiple wounds” April 19 and was “dangerously ill.” He was likely struck down near Vimy Ridge since he was taken to nearby No. 22 Casualty Clearing Station in Bruay, France.

On April 20, McLaren died of his wounds and was buried at a military cemetery, Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension at Pas de Calais.

The newly married Rita McLaren didn’t arrive back in Toronto until April 23. Five hours after returning home a happy bride, she received word that she was already a widow.

Earlier that evening, two telegrams had been delivered simultaneously to James McLaren on the steps of his home. He opened the first to learn his son was badly wounded and more details would follow.

The second announced John's death.

John's brother William was killed in action the previous year; likely falling in the lead up to the Battle of the Somme, on the Western Front, as that's where his 19th Canadian Battalion was engaged at the time.

One by one, the boys of the first block of Howland fell.

Cecil Perry, 25, killed in April 1917 when a shell struck his trench at Vimy Ridge.

William Hall, 24, killed in May 1917 when the wings of a plane he was testing crumpled.

Kenneth Buist, 24, killed in a July 1918 motorcycle accident in England, working as a courier before deploying to France.



Eustace McGee, 20, was killed in February 1919, after the war ended. While with the Royal Air Force, he was in an airplane accident in England.

My father went over to the window and, without parting the curtains, stared out at Howland Avenue.

From downstairs came the tumult of our party.

All the young men of the one block of Howland were gone, except us.

How does an aging man equate his pride at having his sons home and his grief for his long-time neighbours and friends?

"Sir," I said, when I could get my voice, "that is an order! And we shall obey it."

“They might be looking out their windows,” said Dad.

Joe Junior got up and put his arm around him.

Thus it was that we never walked up or down the first block of Howland Avenue.