



## October

It's been a long, long time since our last newsletter. Too long. We hoped to get one out over the summer, but there just never seemed to be time to sit down and put key to screen. Nova Scotia had a challenging summer, starting off hot and dry, only to be relieved by endless rain. And while the rain was desperately needed and most welcome, it did wreak havoc with our favourite past time – lots of rain and runoff makes for less than ideal visibility. But judging from all the social media posts by divers and snorkellers, our intrepid community soldiered on to play under the waves!

This edition is a bit different than usual. We have the usual NSUC updates and a new section promoting special upcoming dive events, but just one additional article. It is a story about the HMHS Letitia and a wounded soldier she transported from the front in Gallipoli, Turkey in World War I. It is a long one and includes a few attachments, but we hope you enjoy it!

## What Have We Been Up To?

**AGM:** We had a great turn out for our AGM at the Admiral Club in Spryfield on May 16, 2023. The meeting included our financial review, current projects and a Q&A open forum. Of most interest, though, Bob Semple was announced as this year's Jane Bigg's Award winner! Many attendees stayed around for a brief social after the formalities.

**Dive Against Debris:** The NSUC hosted a clean up dive in Lower Prospect on Sunday, May 28. It was a perfect day for a cleanup – bright, sunny and a bit cool to start off so no overheating in the drysuits! 100 pounds of garbage was collected, including plastics, beer cans, glass and a car battery.

**Ocean Week:** NSUC hosted a large event with many other groups on June 10, 2023 as we celebrated Ocean Week at Queen's Marquee on the Halifax waterfront. The NSUC booth showcased dive gear, old bottles, photography and a lot of dive talk. The touch tank was a huge hit with the kids! A live video feed from an ROV provided permanent surface dwellers with a view of the harbour's underwater world.



*Booths and interactive floor map on Queen's Marquee. Photo by Cliff Andrews.*



*Ken Deboer prepares his ROV for launch. Photo by Carolina Andrade.*



*The NSUC table. Photo by Carolina Andrade.*



*Jenn and Alanna interview with Global News. Photo by Cliff Andrews.*



## Upcoming NSUC Events

General meeting: Our next general meeting will be 6:00 pm at the Admiral Club on Monday, November 13. Address is 106 Leiblin Drive. Agenda will be posted as the date draws near. Mark it in your calendar!

Clean Up Dive: Our next Dive Against Debris will be Saturday, November 4. Non-divers are welcome to join the fun for a shore clean up. Meet at Terence Bay Government wharf near Sandy Cove at 10:00am.

## Dive Community Events

Throughout the year Nova Scotian shops and clubs host a lot of fun and exciting dive events bringing the dive community together to support a good cause, celebrate special days or just to participate in a unique dive experience. Many divers follow the various dive groups on social media, but not everyone does so. And among those of us who do, not everyone follows all groups. We would like to use this section to spread the word and reach those who might not be aware of such events and encourage them to come out for some fun. The intent is to include all organizations, but if you ever notice an omission, please let us know and we will take steps to rectify the error – such as sending an update email and/or posting the omission to our Facebook page.

Annual Treasure Hunt: We're a bit late on this one, but this charitable event is very popular so we decided to include it. After being postponed due to Hurricane Lee in September, Torpedo Rays Scuba Adventures hosted their 25<sup>th</sup> annual Treasure Hunt on a beautiful, sunny October 1<sup>st</sup>. Highlights of the day included the dive, SCUBA sports, prize give aways, and barbeque. This year's proceeds were donated to Jamie Rygiel and family.

Diversnight: Join East Coast Scuba & Watersports November 4 (this Saturday!) at Mill Cove Marina in Bedford. Diversnight began in Norway where it was started by Tone Svee Dahl in November, 2005 as a way to bring divers together for a night of diving. It is a global event and on Saturday evening divers will participate in an international night dive to demonstrate the strong community that exists in the world of scuba diving. There will be post-dive cake for everyone. Yes, cake is part of the tradition! Arrive at the site for 7:00 pm.

## HMHS Letitia – A Local Connection

The SS Letitia initially carried passengers from Glasgow, Scotland to Quebec and Montreal for the Donaldson Line. With accommodations for 1250 passengers and 137 crew, the 470-foot-long liner made her maiden voyage on May 4, 1912 and served this route for the next two years until late 1914. In August of 1914, World War I broke out and by November she was requisitioned by England for war service. The ship was retrofitted as a hospital ship, renamed His Majesty's Hospital Ship (HMHS) Letitia, repainted white with a green stripe and three red crosses along each side of the hull.

The Letitia was assigned to the Mediterranean, evacuating wounded troops from the Gallipoli front in Turkey to hospitals in Greece, Malta, Alexandria and England. Although not part of her official duties, the Letitia also conducted two at sea rescues: Whilst sailing between Gallipoli and Malta, she rescued



350 survivors from the torpedoed cargo ship SS City of Birmingham and then later on that same trip she altered course to rescue survivors from the French passenger ship Karnak, torpedoed by the same U-boat<sup>1,7</sup>. In 1917 she was reassigned to the North Atlantic, carrying wounded Canadian soldiers from Liverpool, England to Halifax.

The Letitia returned thousands of troops home to Canada, but there is also a local connection to her days plying the waters of the Mediterranean. Near the end of the Gallipoli campaign, Arthur Marson, grandfather of local resident Margaret Swain, was wounded and transported to Malta, and later to England aboard the HMHS Letitia. After his passing in November 1913, Margaret and her husband Bernie acquired a collection of letters he wrote to his mother and wife from the front line in Gallipoli and the Western Front in Europe. The Swains have since donated the originals to the Royal Staffordshire Regiment, but before doing so they copied several and were gracious enough to share them along with some notes gathered from the UK Archives.

## **Captain Arthur Marson**

In February, 1909, 20-year-old Arthur Edwin Marson enlisted into the 15<sup>th</sup> (Prince of Wales Civil Service Rifles) Battalion, London regiment: The Civil Service Rifles – Territorial Army. He remained with the regiment for the next several years, participating in their annual two-week training camps. In December, 1913 he re-enlisted for an additional two years. Then, seven months later, on August 5, 1914 his unit was called upon for war service and over the next several months Arthur would be promoted to Lance Corporal and later to temporary lieutenant. In December 1914 he joined the 11th battalion South Staffordshire Regiment delivering supplies to the front. By early October 1915 he joined the 7<sup>th</sup> battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment at the front in Suvla Bay, Gallipoli as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. Within a few months Lt. Marson would find himself recovering aboard the HMHS Letitia.



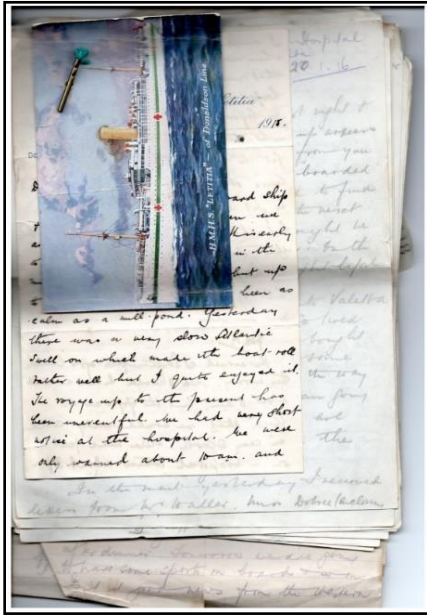
*Arthur Edwin Marson – Photo from the Swain's personal collection*

Arthur wrote many letters home to his family in England. But rather than focusing on the hellish horrors he must have faced every day during this period, his letters spoke mainly of daily life in the trenches. There is an occasional reference to snipers, “who like the poor are always with you”, and once referred to the possibility of increased shelling as they moved two miles back from the front line, but never offered more detail than that. Perhaps he knew the letters would be censored for content, or maybe he just wanted to spare his family the worry that accompanies the reality of war. Or perhaps writing about living conditions and his busy days as Company Commander provided an escape from the war as he tried to maintain a connection with his loved ones back home. But one wonders if the letters really did ease his mother's and wife's concern as the conditions he described were atrocious. He wrote of flies so bad that they not only swarmed the men, but also covered their food to the extent the men suspected the flies might be the source of so much illness, rather than the food itself. They endured a lack of cleanliness, and had to be careful not to cut oneself for risk of sepsis. The lack of regular washing or a clean change of clothes required them to deal with “visitors under the clothes”. And as if that were not enough, there were the extreme weather events and misery that followed. In one letter, Arthur describes a late November storm with such heavy rain that a one-foot-

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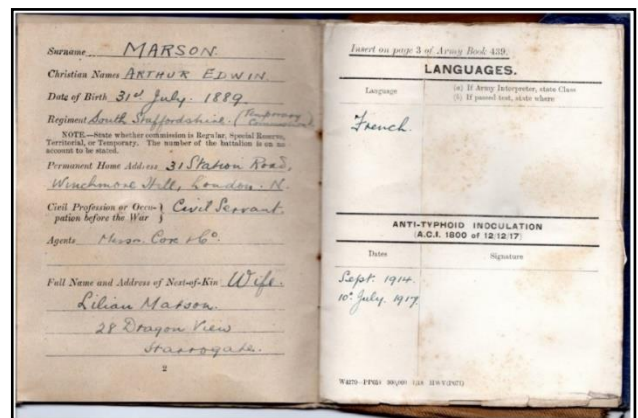
deep torrent of water flowed through his section of trench. He was lucky - this section was sloped and his dugout held at most 3 inches of water, but for some at the bottom of the slope the water pooled in their dugouts up to depths of four feet. It was so wet they could not cook food or even prepare a hot drink. During the night the temperature dropped and the men had to face snow and piercing wind. With all their clothes and blankets soaked from the earlier rain they now had to endure two days without fires for warmth. And yet, despite all of this, he still reassures his mother he is "A1" and tells her not to worry.



*Letitia Postcard attached to stack of Arthur's letters.*

The Gallipoli campaign continued into the winter, when on the evening of December 10, 1915, his battalion was fighting under heavy fire and suffered a large number of casualties. It was during this fight in which Lieutenant Marson was severely wounded by a sniper's shot to the chest, with the bullet passing through his right lung. Carried by hand stretcher, he was soon aboard a ship and taken to hospital in Malta. Based on the dates, it appears he wrote two letters along the way – one to a Chaplain W. Bradley and one to his mother - but the letters do not mention the ship's name. He encloses his mother's letter with Chaplain Bradley's in which he asks him to gently break the news to her, "although it's quite obvious that I am alive and kicking." In each of these letters he explains he was wounded in the chest by a sniper's bullet and then carried by hand stretcher for 12 hours across four and a half miles. True to form, he once again tells them both not to worry – he's doing fine, is eating and feeling no pain.

Although his surface wounds were healing by mid December, he needed to be transferred to hospital in England due to his high fever and hemothorax. And so, according to the UK Archives, he left for England on January 24, 1916 aboard the HMHS Letitia. Now, there is some discrepancy between the dates of Lieutenant Marson's letters and the notes from the UK archives regarding his voyages aboard the Letitia. The archival notes place his wounding on December 10, but the date on his letters from the ship is November 13. Considering what he was going through, it is quite possible he wrote the wrong month. On the other hand, it is also plausible that the date was copied incorrectly from the archive. Either way, it appears it was the Letitia that took him to Malta and then from there to England.



*Arthur Marson's Record of Service booklet. From the Swain's personal collection.*

Upon recovery, he joined the 11<sup>th</sup> (training) battalion and in March of 1917 was deemed fit for general duties, but not for active service. Sometime between March and August he was promoted to captain.



He did return to service, but it is not clear exactly where, although it appears from the letters to his wife it was under better circumstances. Except for one reference to shelling, there is no mention of combat or the harsh conditions described in earlier letters. In fact, he writes of nice baths and meals, some hotel stays and just once he talks about his dugout, but even that was comfortable, relatively speaking. Finally, in January, 1919, Captain Marson was released from war service.

Captain Marson also served in the second world war and although there are few details regarding this service, he was awarded the Member of the British Empire (MBE) medal in recognition of his courage for entering bombed and burnt properties in the search for survivors.

## HMHS Letitia's Final Assignment

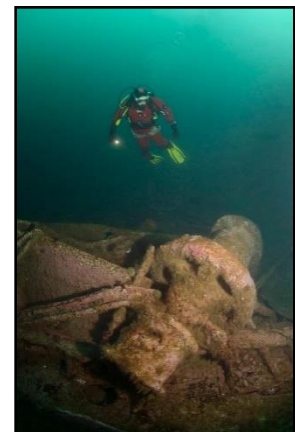
The Letitia continued to serve the Mediterranean until around March 1917<sup>9</sup> when she was reassigned to the Atlantic to transport wounded soldiers home to Canada from England. In July of 1917 the Letitia embarked from Liverpool on her 5th<sup>6</sup> and final voyage carrying 546 wounded, a crew of 137 and 37 medical personnel. On the morning of August 1, the Letitia approached Halifax Harbour in heavy fog. The harbour pilot boarded the ship to guide the ship into port, but having estimated their position incorrectly he set course for the shores of Portuguese Cove. Upon seeing the approaching rocks through the fog, Captain William McNeil ordered the ship full astern, but it was too late. The ship grounded, unable to reverse and move off the rocks. Nearby vessels soon arrived and rescued all those on board except for the captain and a few crew members who remained on board overnight hoping they could save the ship. By the next day it was apparent the ship was lost so all on board departed, except for a stoker who was accidentally left behind and then drowned while swimming for shore<sup>2</sup>. The ship remained on the rocks for the next several months until she split in two and sank, where it now serves as a popular dive site after having safely ferried 2635<sup>6</sup> soldiers home to Canada.



*Letitia on the rocks at Portugese Cove. Photo from Halifax Public Libraries Facebook page.*



*A diver hovers above the Letitia's stern. Photo by Bob Semple.*



*A large capstan on the wreck of the Letitia. Photo by Bob Semple.*



## The Attachments

Attached are two of Arthur Marson's letters. A typed, transcribed version is provided along with the scan of the original letter. The yellow highlighted text in the transcribed version represents passages that were difficult to read and could not be interpreted with 100% confidence.

1. "Letter from Front": a letter from Arthur to his mother from Gallipoli. Notice the date of the letter: November 30, which is after the date he put on his letter from the hospital ship.
2. "Letter From Letitia To Bradley": the letter he wrote to Chaplain Bradley from the hospital ship, presumably on the voyage from Gallipoli to Malta. Included with this letter was a similar letter to his mother telling nearly the same story.
3. "Letter to Wife": a short one, but one of the many letters Arthur sent to his wife while stationed in Europe after recovering from his wound.

## References

1. Wreck Diving Tales – Diving Nova Scotia's Shipwrecks – Allan P. Henneberry Copyright 2008 by Atlantis Marine, pp 1-4
2. CBC: [100 years ago today, a ship carrying 546 wounded WW I soldiers ran aground off Halifax](#)
3. CTV: [The day 546 soldiers were plucked from a foundering ship off Halifax](#)
4. [On the Rocks Marine Heritage Database](#)
5. [Library and Archives Canada](#)
6. [The World War I Document Archive](#)
7. [The Great War \(1914-1918\) Forum](#)
8. [Halifax Public Libraries Facebook Page](#)
9. [The Great War \(1914-1918\) Forum](#)

## What's Happening Out There?

Are there any events or activities taking place in the upcoming months you think might be of interest to the underwater community? If you would like get the news out there let us know and we can post it in our newsletter. Just send your idea to any of the email addresses below and we'll get in touch.

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