

How I Became a Dispatch Rider

As a boy, I rode an Indian Pony. As a teenager, I rode an Indian motorcycle (1937). At age 17, I signed up with the Hamilton Signals. I had been building crystal radios since the age of 12. I was eager to learn more about Wireless radios and Morse code so I began my training, two nights per week. I attended summer camp in Niagara with the Haldimand Duffs. I was also apprenticing in the Electrical trade with a friend, Ross Lindsay.

That summer 1939, my father found me a job in a munitions factory, United Steel, in Welland. The factory was damaged, suspected sabotage, so I transferred to Cockshutt Company in Brantford where they made the undercarriage for the Avro Anson. After a while, I got a job as a Chauffeur for a local chicken sexer, Jack Clark. By the Spring 1942, many of my peers were already signing up to serve in WW2 so I sold my motorcycle and signed up with the R.C.C.S. (Royal Canadian Corps of Signals).

My parents were not in favour of my decision, but eventually accepted that it was my choice. I went to MD2 at the Horse Palace in Toronto where I received all my shots and vaccinations, picked up my uniform and gear. Next we went to Orillia for six weeks basic training. After that, we went to Kingston, Vimy Barracks, the advanced Signals training centre. Here I discovered that Wireless operator did not suit me and I transferred to Dispatch Rider. I considered myself an experienced rider and the opportunity to ride a Harley Davidson was appealing. We rode all over Eastern Ontario, cross country and hill climbing. I also did a stint chauffeuring Colonels on military manoeuvres on Indian Chiefs with sidecars. I gave them a few thrills.

In December 1942, I was posted overseas and shipped out on the Queen Elizabeth before Christmas. Five days later, we docked in Gourock, Scotland, then took a train to Cove, Hampshire, just in time for Christmas dinner (mutton in a mess tin and a pint of English Bitters). Training continued on Norton's, BSAs, Royal Enfields and Triumphs with blackout riding at night, no headlights. We rode daily to Camberley, Bagshot, Slough, London, Richmond, Maidenhead, Reading, and Windsor.

By September of 1943, I was posted to 2nd Canadian Division HQ Signals. We were located at Billingshurst, Sussex. The whole division was spread out in the neighbouring towns: Harsham, Petworth, Pulborough and Arundel. And after a few months, 2nd Division HQ moved up to Knepp Castle on the London to Brighton Road. Signals Billets were at Partridge Green. We spent the winter there, going on schemes around Southampton and Portsmouth. I met Montgomery while directing traffic during convoy duty.

Finally, in December 1943, we settled in Dover where we stayed for six months leading up to D Day. Looking across the Channel, I could see the flash from Big Bertha, the guns firing from Calais causing much devastation in Dover and London. Meanwhile I made daily runs to Canterbury, Ashford, Deal, Folkstone, Margate, Ramsgate and other seaside towns, picking up the local newspapers to see how the war was progressing.

I had a birds-eye view of the ships leaving the harbour preceding D Day Normandy landings. Meanwhile, Doodlebugs (flying bombs) began coming across the English Channel and exploding in London. We were aboard a Liberty ship on the East India Docks (London) when

(Hugh B. Patterson, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, Royal Canadian Corps of Signals)

one of these flying bombs exploded, destroying a floating dock next to our ship. We were very anxious to be on our way. 2nd Canadian Infantry Division would follow two weeks after D Day to provide much needed reinforcements.

Our landing on the beach between Gold and Juno was dry, calm and without resistance. All the waterproofing of vehicles had to be carefully removed. It was late by the time we finally settled for the night, sleeping in an open field on a groundsheet. Suddenly an Ack battery (anti-aircraft guns) began exploding above our heads sending us scrambling for cover in ditches or hastily dug trenches.

Next day we moved up to where the action was taking place and ran the gauntlet of mortar fire down the road to Caen. The stench was unforgettable. Decaying corpses strewn the countryside, German, Canadian and animal. By nightfall we settled on the edge of Carpiquet Airport. The enemy mortared us all night as we stood on guard in slit trenches. We suffered our first casualties. Next morning, our kitchen set up in a wheat field littered with corpses of German paratroopers. No one was hungry.

We moved to a quieter area, but here we had our first casualty in the DR section, Russ Burkett, who volunteered to help a Lineman lay some telephone lines. A shell landed, killing the Lineman, and injuring my friend, Russ, in the spine. He was taken back to Base Hospital, where I visited him the next day and gave him some photos to post home. I wanted my family to know I was okay.

Our next billet was down the Orne River, just outside of Caen where we stayed for the next month during the siege of the city. At this time, it was decided that a lone DR on a motorcycle was too vulnerable so we were issued jeeps. Dispatch runs would require a driver and a gunner. Our jeep carried two rifles, one Bren gun, two Sten guns, and two 9 mm handguns. Luckily, we didn't need to use them. I was the driver.

After Caen fell, we headed down the road to Falaise. As with Caen, Falaise was bombed and roads were reduced to rubble. We changed flat tires often. While trying to track 8 RECCE regiment at night, I found a field full of armoured cars, and had to creep on hands and knees. I had to feel the tires to determine if they were Canadian or German. Lucky for me, the tires were Canadian.

The situation was horrendous in the Falaise Gap. German soldiers were determined to escape and the Allies were determined to close the gap. There was much death and destruction here as well as abandoned vehicles due to fuel shortages.

After Falaise, I pressed on with my dispatch duties and headed toward Belgium. Our next objective was to secure the port of Antwerp. In September, I was involved in clearing the Scheldt Estuary which was an enemy stronghold guarding the port of Antwerp. It was a rather harrowing experience. The whole division was strung out for miles on the only road to North and South Beveland, flooded on both sides. Some Messerschmitts did manage to strafe our convoy. We completed our task and were allowed to go on leave for a week in late October. Unfortunately, while I was engaged in convoy duty in the town of Goes, an inexperienced rider swerved out of the convoy in front of me. I had to lay my Norton down on

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its side and continued down the cobblestone street, scraping my elbows and knees and dislocating my shoulder.

I ended up in front of a Casualty Clearing Station. They dragged me in and bandaged my wounds. Looking around me, I saw soldiers in far worse shape. Next morning, I bribed the ambulance driver to take me to Antwerp. Once there, I decided to make my way to Brussels. I hitched a ride in a civilian lorry where I found my Signals billets. Two days later, I got a dispatch run back to Army Headquarters in France. I drove the jeep, having some trouble lifting my leg from clutch to break, to accelerator, but I managed. I returned to Brussels a few days later. I was grateful to be reunited with my Unit. If I had been out of commission too long, they would have transferred me to another unit. My survival depended on the loyalty of my peers. We had each other's backs.

September was also the time of Market Garden. While I was not stationed in Nijmegen until November 1944, I was well aware of what happened there. Many men lost their lives trying to claim those bridges. During the bitter winter of 1944/45, I saw the remnants of gliders scattered near Groesbeek. It was a valiant attempt by the Allies, but as the book says, they may have gone "a bridge too far".

My Signals Unit was camped at Vossenlaan (Fox Lane) and ended up spending the winter there. The Dutch population was starving so we shared our rations while we were billeted with local families. They shared all they had and we did the same. I remember eating roast rabbit for Christmas that year.

By mid December, the Germans attacked unexpectedly in the Ardennes forest where American troops were on rest. While the Allies responded to this surprise attack, there was a very real threat that the 2nd Canadian Division and Signals would be cut off completely. DRs were issued incendiary flares to destroy dispatches if in danger of falling into enemy hands. If the enemy had secured the bridge over the Maas, we would be dead. Luckily, the crisis was averted.

Spring arrived and the roads became a sea of mud. I left the Signals Office one morning on a run to 8 RECCE and halfway to my destination, my Jeep tires became mired in the mud. I got out and walked the rest of the way. I reached RECCE Signals Office, a room about 6 feet square with four people in it, plus me, after dark. I had to sleep there standing up. Next morning, they had to send out the big Diamond T Breakdown vehicle and pull the jeep out by all four corners. I finally got going again, and returned to Nijmegen earning a rum ration and about 12 hours of sleep.

At this time, we were ready to cross the Siegfried Line, crossing the bridge at Arnhem and onward to the Reichswaldt Forest and Cleve. Then back to North Holland and back again across the Rhine. We ended up in Oldenburg where we happened to be on VE Day. We got our hands on some champagne and celebrated.

In the summer, we moved to a former SS Camp, situated on a small lake, where we remained for a few weeks. Next we went to Amersfoort, Holland, staying in a former hospital. In the autumn, we went back to England and worked to restore the country estates of Berkshire.

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It was mid December when I finally earned my place on a ship bound for Canada. In my case, it was a berth on the Empress of Scotland. I had spent exactly three years overseas. I had witnessed much loss, death of friends, comrades and civilians and felt grateful my life was spared. That is why I have never missed a Remembrance Day in 75 years.

Hugh returned to his hometown, Caledonia, Ontario. He married his sweetheart (Barbara) and bought a farm across the road from his parents. Together they raised nine children. Hugh worked as an Electrician and part time farmer, sang with the Glee Club, the Chorolairs and the Presbyterian Choir. He is a member of Legion Branch 154. Community was always important and still is today.

by T. Campbell