

Lives Lived

RALPH SIMPSON WILSON HUNTER

Decorated Second World War soldier and bricklayer. Born on March 23, 1910, at Annfield Plain, County Durham, England; died of heart failure on Nov. 3, 1997, in Toronto, aged 87.

If he had been so inclined, Ralph Hunter could have been forgiven for thinking that his family had already done its bit for King and country when Hitler's blitzkrieg forced England into another world war. After all, hadn't his family already made the ultimate sacrifice?

The year was 1918. His father, Edward, a mason, was in the Durham Light Infantry. He was also in France, not a good place to be in the dying months of the First World War. In the seesaw slaughter that characterized that conflict, Edward Hunter was felled by a mortar round, instantly making a widow of his wife and leaving his four boys fatherless. Ralph was eight years old.

The following years were a struggle. The family lived off a meagre war pension until 1923 when Ann Hunter remarried. Still, there was not much opportunity for a young man in England, especially one who had no intention of furthering his education and every intention of following in his father's footsteps as a mason. In March, 1928, he celebrated his 18th birthday on a steamship heading to Toronto.

Mr. Hunter, a strong-willed and determined man, figured there would be more opportunity for a mason in a country not yet 100 than in one nearly 1,000 years old. And he was right. With the help of his uncle — also a mason — he worked steadily despite the Depression. In 1937, while building a house for a bush pilot in King City, just north of Toronto, he met Verna Cairns. They married in April of 1941.

In the spring of 1943, Mr. Hunter left for Europe as a Royal Canadian Engineer. He had not, as it turned out, figured his family had sacrificed enough. Quite the contrary: His father's loss made joining up even more imperative, to help preserve what he had died for.

Mr. Hunter was assigned to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division in England, where he spent most of the war learning the tools of his specialized trade: building bridges, runways and roads, constructing defences and mine fortifications. It would also be his job to clear a path through enemy minefields. One terrifying night in the last year of the war, Ralph Hunter would be called upon to use this training.

It had been two months since D-day, and the Allies were making steady progress. Though the 2nd Infantry had arrived in France a month after the initial assault, they had seen plenty of action in the battle of Caen. They were about to see more, as they prepared to take Falaise, a small, heavily fortified town about 35 kilometres south of Caen.

But before they could move forward, they had a problem: Had the Germans laid any new mines that would slow the Allied advance before it could get up a head of steam? Corporal Hunter was put in charge of two men and the three were ordered to find out.

It was an extremely dangerous mission behind enemy lines. Just after 11 p.m. on Aug. 4, 1944, as his sergeant said a prayer, Cpl. Hunter and his men set out. Without that prayer, Cpl. Hunter later said, he never would have survived.

As the three men moved ahead of their troops, the Germans unleashed heavy mortar fire, so heavy it began to look as if Cpl. Hunter would die the same way his father had. He dropped to his belly; between explosions, he could hear the pop and zing of bullets passing close by.

For cover he would dash behind haystacks, until gunfire inevitably fleshed him out and set the hay on fire. Though terrified, Cpl. Hunter somehow maintained his composure and carried on with his mission, sweeping and checking the route for mines. In less than two hours, the three men gave the okay for the troops to proceed: There had been no mines. For this bit of heroism, Cpl. Hunter received the Croix de Guerre with Bronze Star from the French government.

The award read, "His gallantry and courage under fire materially assisted in the successful mounting of the initial attack which was followed by the divisional breakthrough toward Falaise."

He rarely spoke of this after the war, or any aspect of his duty. He just went back to his bricklaying, providing for his wife and two boys, Edward and David, born in 1949 and 1954. But every now and then his mind would drift back to the war, to a terrified 18-year-old private from Owen Sound, whom he had taken under his wing. He had assured the teen-ager he would survive the war. He didn't, and it bothered Ralph Hunter for the rest of his life.



Ralph Hunter in 1940s

James Macgowan

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