

1945  
1946  
1947



# 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 fished 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

James Macgowan is a Toronto writer.

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HEADQUARTERS  
2 CANADIAN INFANTRY DIVISION  
IN THE FIELD

C I T A T I O N

B-131588 Cpl Hunter, RSW

On the night of 4/5 August 1944, immediately preceding the armoured drive of Canadian forces through the strong enemy positions at CAEN, it was necessary to determine whether there were any new German minefields which would hinder the advance in its early stages.

A reconnaissance party was therefore ordered to proceed forward of our advanced infantry positions in the vicinity of BEAUVOIR FARM between VERRIERES and MAY-SUR-ORNE.

In order that the reconnaissance could undertake its task without detection by an alert enemy, party was limited to three sappers, without infantry support, commanded by Cpl Hunter.

Cpl Hunter took his party forward on this difficult and dangerous mission at 2300 hrs. On reaching a position in front of our own forward troops, the enemy laid down a mortar barrage which was followed by local attack. The party came under heavy small arms and mortar fire but realizing the importance of the search for mines, Cpl Hunter continued his work in an exposed position, leading and encouraging his men in their task. With complete disregard of enemy fire, this NCO made a most thorough job and completed the reconnaissance in two hours. It was then definitely known that the armoured drive would not be held up by mines at the start line.

Cpl Hunter did his work efficiently under difficult conditions displaying outstanding leadership and determination. His gallantry and courage under fire, materially assisted in the successful mounting of the initial attack, which was followed by the Divisional break-through towards FALAISE.

HEADQUARTERS  
2 CANADIAN INFANTRY DIVISION  
IN THE FIELD

17 April 1945

B-31000 Cpl Hunter, RSW  
2nd In Fd Coy (RCE)

The French authorities have conferred on you the award of the Croix de Guerre with Bronze Star for gallant and distinguished conduct at BEAUVOIR FARM, in the Caen battle.

His Majesty the King has granted unrestricted permission for the acceptance and wearing of the decoration.

I wish to congratulate you, not only for your example and courage, but also for the honour which you have brought to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division.

I am enclosing herewith a ribbon and emblem which you may wish to wear immediately, and a copy of the official notification.

*B. Matthews*  
(Bruce Matthews) Maj-Gen  
Commanding  
2nd Canadian Infantry Division



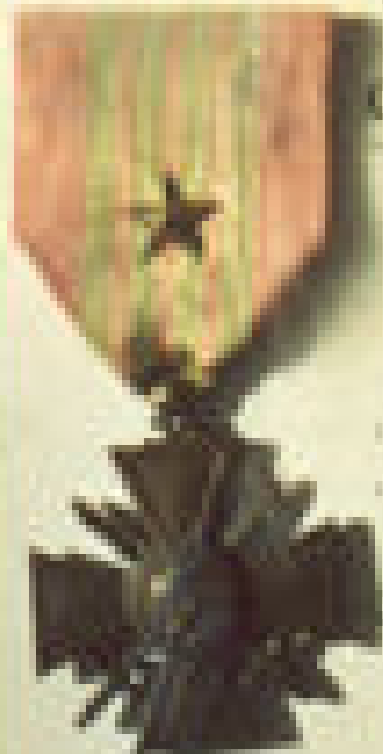
# Campagnes pour la libération de la France

(Juin - Décembre 1944)

## Décision N° \_\_\_\_\_

*Le Grand Chancelier,  
Ministre de l'Intérieur, Préfet de la  
Seine-et-Oise*

Chef à l'Ordre \_\_\_\_\_



*Pour services exceptionnels de Guerre rendus au  
cours des opérations de libération de la France.*

Cette Citation complètera l'attribution de la Croix de  
Guerre avec \_\_\_\_\_ de années.

PARIS, le 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 1945.