

# **Chaplain with a Bren Gun: RHLI Regimental Chaplain won the Victoria Cross at Dieppe**



Dieppe Veteran Major John Foote, VC, while posted to Camp Borden after the war. Historical photo.



Major John Weir Foote, VC. Photo: McGill Reporter, McGill University.

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The Victoria Cross is the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to members of British and Commonwealth militaries in times of war. Only one has been awarded to a member of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service, that being to Honourary Lieutenant-Colonel The Reverend John Weir Foote, VC, CD.

Reverend Foote was born on 5 May 1904 in Madoc, Ontario. He was educated at the University of Western Ontario & Queen's University. He then attended the Montreal Presbyterian College at McGill University, graduating from their Theology program. Foote was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and served congregations at Fort Coulonge, Que., and Port Hope, Ont.

The outbreak of World War II in saw many young men enlist in the Armed Forces of Canada. Reverend Foote felt the call too and enlisted in what was then called the Royal Canadian Army Chaplain Corps in December 1939. He was appointed to the rank of Honorary Captain and assigned to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (Wentworth Regiment) in Hamilton, Ontario, as their Regimental Chaplain.

When the 1st Battalion, Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) was posted to England in July 1940, Captain Foote went with them.

On 19 August 1942, the RHLI deployed to the beaches of the French port of Dieppe as part of Operation Jubilee, marking the second time the Canadian Army had gone into action in WW II.

At the age of 38, Foote deployed along with the regiment, although he wasn't originally supposed to be a part of the raid. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Labatt, Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, changed his mind after Foote told him he was indeed going on the raid and that he (Labatt) could arrest him on the boats for disobeying an order.

Upon landing on the beach, the burly chaplain attached himself to the Regimental Aid Post, assisting the medical officer and wounded soldiers both spiritually and physically. Descriptions of his bravery that day are utterly incredible and inspiring.

During the eight hours that the RHLI was on the beach, Foote carried more than 30 wounded soldiers to the aid post while enemy fire rained all around him.

For Foote's actions that day, he was awarded the Victoria Cross. His citation reads in part:

**"...with utter disregard for his personal safety, Honorary Captain Foote exposed himself to an inferno of fire and saved many lives by his gallant efforts.....his example inspired all around him. Those who observed him state that the calmness of this heroic officer as he walked about, collecting the wounded on the fire-swept beach will never be forgotten."**

When the time came to evacuate, Foote volunteered to remain behind with those who couldn't be evacuated, so he could provide pastoral services to those who needed them.

As a non-combatant, Foote was not allowed to carry a rifle into battle. However, during the evacuation, Foote grabbed a Bren Gun and provided covering fire for his comrades as they evacuated the beach, a rather unusual thing for a padre to do. Apparently, Foote took his oath to bring people closer to God a little too literally that day.

Foote was taken prisoner along with 173 other members of the RHLI, including LCol Labatt. He remained a prisoner of war until released on 5 May 1945.

Upon returning to Canada, Foote chose to remain with the Royal Canadian Army Chaplain Corps and was posted to Camp Borden in September 1945, as the Senior Protestant Chaplain, with the rank of Major. He took up residence in the nearby Town of Barrie, living at 135 Mulcaster Street.

On 28 March 1946, Foote traveled to Buckingham Palace where he was formally presented his VC by King George VI, becoming the only member of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service ever to receive such an honour.

Foote remained at Borden and with the Chaplain corps until finally releasing from the Army in 1948. That same year, Foote left pastoral ministry for a career in politics, winning a seat in Ontario Legislature as the Conservative member for Durham County. He held the riding until retiring from politics in 1959.

In 1964, Reverend Foote returned to the RHLI as its Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel. He relinquished the appointment in 1973.

Among the other honours that Reverend Foote would see in his lifetime was having the Royal Canadian Legion branch in Grafton named after him in 1982.

Reverend Foote lived with his wife Edith in Cobourg, Ontario until his death on 2 May 1988. He was laid to rest in Cobourg's Union Cemetery.

The James Street Armouries in Hamilton, home of the RHLI, was re-named the Lieutenant-Colonel John Weir Foote, VC, CD Armouries in his honour in September 1990. Foote's medals are on permanent display at the RHLI Museum.



Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel The Reverend John Weir Foote, VC, CD, inspecting the Guard of Honour at the official opening of the Hamilton Military Museum at Dundurn Castle in 1976, accompanied by LCol James Forsyth, Operations and Training Officer from Hamilton Militia District Headquarters. Photo: The Hamilton Spectator.



Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel The Reverend John Foote, VC, CD, with fellow officers of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry in the Officers' Mess at the armouries that now bears his name, November 1976. Photo: Courtesy of Colonel (Ret'd) James Forsyth, CStJ, CD, CA.

# HEROIC DIEPPE PADRE AWARDED V.C.

## Tugboat Strike Paralyzes All Activity In New York

NEW YORK, Feb. 12 (BUP)—The nine-day old strike of 3,500 tugboat operators brought to a complete stop today all activities in Greater New York except those necessary to sustain life. The city of 2,000,000 persons was placed under the seldom summoned Disaster Control board composed of the commissioners of the city's 22 departments.

Only "public utilities, transportation and communication services, hospitals, clinics, institutions caring for infants, the aged and the infirm," and milk and food plants were permitted to operate under a drastic order issued by Mayor William O'Dwyer to combat a critical fuel shortage resulting from the tug strike.

## 50,000 Vets May Attend Victory Convention Here

CROOKSTON, MINN., Feb. 12 (Special)—Canadian and American directors of the International War Veterans' Alliance decided at a meeting here over the weekend to hold their International Victory Convention in Winnipeg from June 28 to July 1.

The Canadian delegation, headed by C. Rhodes Smith, K.C., M.L.A., of Winnipeg, president of the Manitoba Command, Canadian branch of the I.W.V.A., set an objective of 50,000 visitors, with 15 bands for the Victory parade, was indicated.

Speakers at Memorial Service on the Legislative Buildings grounds on Sunday evening, June 25, will be internationally famous men and women who will lead the community singing of service hymns.

The Canadian delegation carried a letter of invitation to the convention from Mayor Coughlin and a verbal invitation from Premier Garson. American delegates pledged themselves to organize 500 to 1,000 persons en masse to train thousands of Americans.

A feature of the Memorial service will be the pledging of the living to support the principles of world co-operation for which the dead died.

Mr. Rhodes Smith declared Sunday that atomic bomb had elevated the door on the era of civilization and thrust humanity into a new era.

One way was a severe punishment. One way was a severe punishment. One way was a severe punishment.

on city even during the war, after federal seizure and pleas from officials concerned with the health of the city failed to bring a settlement of the strike.

The striking tugmen sought to increase pay and shorter hours. Tug operators balked at submitting the dispute to arbitration. Strikers and operators were in conference until 3 this morning and reported progress toward ending the strike, but O'Dwyer said his orders would not be rescinded until fuel stocks had been replenished.

Every phase of life in the city was affected by the strike. It closed every department store, every office and every industrial establishment. There were closed against every office worker from the president of the stock exchange to the lowest clerk.

Blue New Yorkers found themselves with nothing to do, and no place to go but home.

O'Dwyer told them to stay off public transportation vehicles unless their movement was necessary to the welfare of others.

Subway service was curtailed to reduce consumption of electrical power.

Closed by the order were all places of assembly and all amusement places including theaters, bars and nightclubs. Schools had been closed by O'Dwyer last Friday.

The emergency order was issued after a long struggle with the tugmen.



Supplies of nylon stockings to be released for sale in Winnipeg stores Feb. 19 are unloaded from aircraft above, while T.C.A. hostesses exhibit preview samples of the hose that has been merely a memory for the ladies for the past five years.

## MERCHANTS WAIT WITH APPREHENSION

## Nylon Stocking Stampede Shaping Up For Next Week

A stocking stampede is expected by retail merchants February 19, when nylon hose go on sale for the first time since the war.

While girls are gleeful in anticipation, the merchants await with apprehension, the fearful hour.

It will be sensational, the manager of one chain of ladies' wear shops predicted. "Women have waited in line for five years for nylon stockings."

Wicket and there will be a wicket for each size ranging from 8 1/2 to 10 1/2.

All stores are rationing their stock and no customer will get more than one pair. No phone orders will be accepted. It will be strictly first come, first served.

## First Canadian Chaplain To Win Top Empire Honor

OTTAWA, Feb. 12 (CP)—Defense heads waiters announced early today that Maj. John Weir Foote, 41, tall, rugged padre of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry who stayed behind at Dieppe, has become the 14th Canadian to win the Victoria Cross of the Second Great War and the first chaplain of the Canadian armed forces ever to win the empire's highest award.

He was taken prisoner and imprisoned in a prisoner of war camp as a hard-working chaplain until liberated by the British in the German island of Scharnhorst, April 25, 1945.

Four weeks after the Dieppe raid, the story of Maj. Foote—known then only as Padre A—was told by Canadian survivors of the big raid who marveled at his courage. "Padre A" became a Canadian legend and it was not until April, 1941, that his wife, at Hamilton, Ont., disclosed his identity.

Announcement of the award originally had been set for Thursday when it will be traditionally announced in the London Gazette, but a report from Toronto Monday night led defense headquarters to make an immediate release.

But quiet, almost shy, Maj. Foote, a native of Madoc, Ont., and Presbyterian minister at several places in Canada, had not been officially advised the announcement was official. A Canadian Press reporter found the second Canadian Dieppe hero preparing for bed at the home of friends in nearby Rockville.

On leave from his present chaplain post at Camp Borden, Maj. Foote had spent a quiet evening with his friends.

Putting his brief pipe, he had started for bed when a reporter arrived. He knocked out the ashes and smiled broadly and told his questioner he hadn't heard anything about a decoration. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I just can't say anything about anything like that."

With the official announcement available the Canadian Press called Maj. Foote to notify him.

"Well," he said, "it's now official. I would like to say only that I look upon the first V.C. award in a Canadian chaplain not as a tribute to myself, but to the chaplain service and to the great regiments with which I served."



CANADA'S FIGHTING PADRE . . . V.C.—Hon. Major John Weir Foote, a Canadian Protestant padre of Madoc and Port Hope, Ont., is his country's 14th Victoria Cross winner in World War II. The 41-year old chaplain was awarded the Empire's highest decoration for valor in moving Canadian wounded to medical aid posts at Dieppe. Taken prisoner he was not liberated until April, 1945.

# Lt. Col. John W. Foote V.C. C.D



John Weir Foote was born on the 5th of May 1904 at Madoc, Ontario. He received his education at the University of Western Ontario in London, at Queens University in Kingston, and at McGill University in Montreal. He then became a Priest for the Presbyterian Ministry and served the congregations at Fort-Coulonge, Quebec, and Port Hope, Ontario.

In December 1939 he enlisted in the Canadian Forces Chaplain Services and was posted to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. They all joined with other troops on a supposedly quick in and out raid to test German defences and support Russian Allies. Approximately 5,000 soldiers on 237 ships attempted to sneak across the English Channel to Dieppe to surprise the Germans guarding the beaches. On the way they encountered a small German convoy who alerted the German forces on the shore. At Dieppe on the 19th of August, 1942, Lt. Col. Foote was the Regimental Chaplain with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry.

From the London Gazette (UK), Thursday, February 14th, 1946:

*DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE, OTTAWA.  
THE CANADIAN ARMY.*

*The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the VICTORIA CROSS to:  
Honorary Captain John Weir FOOTE, Canadian Chaplain Services.*

*At Dieppe, on 19th August Honorary Captain Foote, Canadian Chaplain Services, was  
Regimental Chaplain with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry.*

*Upon landing on the beach under heavy fire he attached himself to the Regimental Aid Post which had been set up in a slight depression on the beach, but which was only sufficient to give cover to men lying down. During the subsequent period of approximately eight hours, while the action continued, this officer not only assisted the Regimental Medical Officer in ministering to*

*the wounded in the Regimental Aid Post, but time and again left this shelter to inject morphine, give first-aid and carry wounded personnel from the open beach to the Regimental Aid Post. On these occasions, with utter disregard for his personal safety, Honorary Captain Foote exposed himself to an inferno of fire and saved many lives by his gallant efforts. During the action, as the tide went out, the Regimental Aid Post was moved to the shelter of a stranded landing craft. Honorary Captain Foote continued tirelessly and courageously to carry wounded men from the exposed beach to the cover of the landing craft. He also removed wounded from inside the landing craft when ammunition had been set on fire by enemy shells. When landing craft appeared he carried wounded from the Regimental Aid Post to the landing craft through heavy fire.*

*On several occasions this officer had the opportunity to embark but returned to the beach as his chief concern was the care and evacuation of the wounded. He refused a final opportunity to leave the shore, choosing to suffer the fate of the men he had ministered to for over three years.*

*Honorary Captain Foote personally saved many lives by his efforts and his example inspired all around him. Those who observed him state that the calmness of this heroic officer as he walked about, collecting the wounded on the fire-swept beach will never be forgotten.*

Lt. Col. Foote had many opportunities to leave the War Zone and return with the wounded, but he refused to leave. When the last craft was to leave, he again refused and instead chose stay with his men to be captured by the Germans. They suffered their fate in a Prisoner of War Camp for over three years. They were not released until 5th of May, 1945.

He chose to remain in the Canadian Chaplain Services until 1948 when he accepted demobilization. He then went on to represent Durham County in the Provincial Legislature of Ontario.

Lt. Col. Foote is the only member of the Canadian Chaplain Services ever to be awarded the Victoria Cross. Before his death he donated his Victoria Cross, and other medals to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry.

He resided with his wife in Cobourg, Ontario, until his death on May 2nd 1988. He is buried in the Union Cemetery in Cobourg, Ontario.

### ***References:***

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