



PHILIP and MAVIS COCKBURN

August 4, 1945, St. Helens, Lancashire



Courtesy of: **The First Hussars**

Written by: Nick Corrie

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HODIE NON CRAS

Name: Philip Cockburn

Rank: Trooper

Service Number: L 36214

Born: July 26, 1922

Discharged: November 1945

Served in: WWII

Service: Canadian Army

Battle Group: 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade

Regiment: First Hussars - 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment



Service Details: As a former trooper in the 16/22 Saskatchewan Horse but on D-Day now a First Hussar and crewing as a gunner, Trooper Cockburn landed on “Mike Red” beach in a DD tank as part of “A” Squadron. He survived the entire war despite having to again man a DD tank when crossing the Rhine into Germany on April 2, 1945.

Service Notes: The heavy seas encountered far off shore convinced the Naval Commander, further agreed to by the Squadron CO Major Brooks, it was too rough to launch tanks into the water opting instead to run them into shore. This plan was countermanded when conditions improved closer in allowing the floating tanks to launch; not all made it to shore: ten were launched, seven made it in. One fortunate LCT did deposit its five tanks directly onto the beach.

The concept behind the DD tank employment was to have armour on the beach ahead of the infantry, protecting them by attacking the gun emplacements. It was all a question of the weather and timing if this scheme would work; for “A” Squadron everything conspired against this bold plan when the infantry hit the beach first – “PBI” - Poor Bloody Infantry.

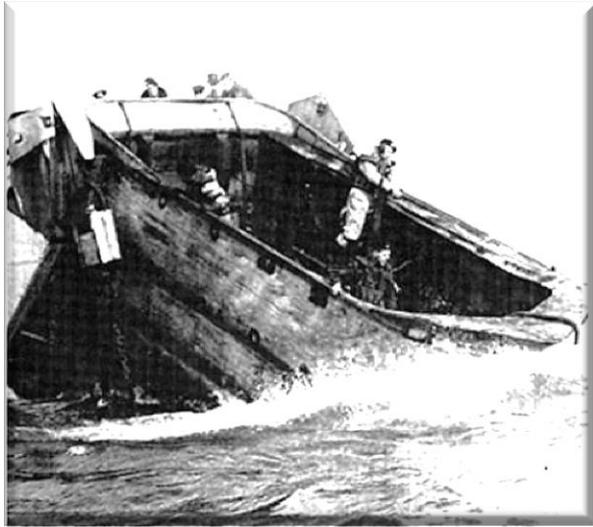


HODIE NON CRAS

(Today Not Tomorrow)

CANADIAN WAR MEDALS - NW EUROPE

Personal History: Before, during and after the war.



DD tanks when tested for suitability, seen powering along through still water inland lakes, worked reasonably well; in combat battling heavy seas and cross winds the experience varied but never dull! The protective screens were activated by compressed air supplemented by steel struts to hold it in place. Against the pounding seas they often began to collapse demanding corrective

action by the crews who scrambled out from behind their protective armour (first part of the armoured attack gone awry) to hold it up - either this or sink!

Despite "A" Squadron's unavoidable late arrival on the beach, arriving after the infantry instead of before them, on June 25 the Commanding Officer of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles (Little Black Devils) wrote a letter commending the assault exercised by the Squadron in support of his Regiment. He recalled "... that the pre-assault bombardment had been ... ineffective...and if it had not been for the gallantry, determination, dash and skillful use of fire-power on the part of Major Brooks and his Sqn, it's conceivable that this



Bn's casualties...would have been much heavier..."



By day's end, "*The Longest Day*," the First Hussars took count: some tanks were at the bottom of the Channel, 35 tons of useless metal, others were stranded at water's edge with their engines swamped by the same sea, a few, but not too many, were

knocked out to some degree by enemy fire. The human toll was 21 killed in action, 17 non-fatal casualties.



Phil holding child

War is hell! Many who have survived one have afterwards made that observation and exclamation but, to some degree they are better off than others on the battle field. To keep an army in fighting form the men must be supplied with food and some comfort items, it's only natural; for the civilians caught in the middle between two combating forces, there are no supplies, no comforts, they're on their own. Perhaps Holland suffered the most during the winter of 1944-45, still occupied by the Germans who stripped the country bare for their own needs. When the Canadians arrived they did what they could to alleviate their suffering being especially generous to the children. Phil, who would

eventually father six children, was no exception. He remembers seeking out extra rations and treats for the needy children who instinctually seemed to know a good soldier from a bad one, i.e. Phil, other First Hussars and all Canadian troops.

One would never confuse Trooper Philip Cockburn with a giant or ever call him a large man, not in stature maybe but if we can judge his younger self as he is at age 95, we know he had something better than bulk - he had spunk! Phil was born like so many veterans in the "Old Country," in his case Anwick England, up north on the Scottish border. He arrived in Canada at age seven with his parents, two sisters and brother to settle in Clandonald



Phil is the little kid in the middle

Alberta, some 30 miles north west of Lloydminster and the Saskatchewan border. The family were recruited by the Canadian Pacific Railway to act as

“Pioneers” and populate the prairies, grow crops and forever more harp the prairie complaint about the despised “Crow Rate” transport costs imposed by the CPR for shipping their grain out to world markets.



Crossing on the CPR liner, *The Duchess of Bedford*, the Roman Catholic family arrived in Halifax transferring from some degree of shipboard luxury to hard wooden immigrant coaches well worn by thousands before, to undertake a week long journey west across thousands of miles, a distance never contemplated back home in tiny Britain.

In some cases a man’s early life is a rehearsal for challenges encountered later in life; this is probably true where Trooper Philip Cockburn is concerned. His coolness during training and life after D-Day could well mirror at least one event he survived when young, alone, hungry, injured, but full of resolve to remain calm, cool and collected. A spunky young man.

Boredom fills children with lightning speed. On the train now chugging along across the prairie landscape, a flat expanse of grass and potholes passing with boring repetition to even the most inquisitive of adults, young Phil found other youngsters eager for play. Somehow their play took them between the coaches, down onto the steps left open by some unattentful trainman creating a little play cove too tempting for Phil into which he innocently ventured and – promptly fell off!



What to do? As the train disappeared westward, little Phil was left staring into the vastness of the prairies and the empty tracks. No one came to his aid because no one knew he was missing, no child squealed on him. The resilience of a seven year old when faced with an emergency can best be appreciated by

Phil’s actions. Standing there alone he may have cried somewhat, who can blame him, but, undaunted he rubbed his sore head that was cut and bleeding, looked about, then struck out to find help. He walked some distance, found a friendly farm house, told his incredible story to a bewildered farmer who, with

no other plausible explanation to explain how a young boy ended up at his remote door, alerted a nearby station and bundled Phil over there to await developments. Somehow the train was notified and next – when was the last time you saw a train back up many miles to pick up a small boy fresh in from England?

Phil was forgiven, grew up on a farm near remote Clandonald Alberta, eventually joining the army to fight the Nazis and Uncle Adolf; that's spunk in any language.

On the 24th of May, 1940, the 16/22 Saskatchewan Horse was activated for war in Europe; to their recruiting office ventured Philip Cockburn to become a Trooper, age 17. By this time the army accepted the fact that horses against tanks was passé; the problem was that Canada had no tanks to train crews to fight an armoured war, the country's entire armoured compliment only existed in Camp Borden and they were WWI relicts already training the First Hussars and the Fort Garry Horse, the first two armoured regiments to be called into active service.



The army hates to see troops standing about earning their \$1.50 per day doing nothing. With the war heating up in Europe the army in typical style, employing military logic, sent the 16/22 SH west to Vancouver and then Nanaimo. The Japanese war was still in the unforeseen future prompting the big army brains in Ottawa to next send the Regiment back across Canada, stopping at many places for various types of infantry training, the only type



possible under the circumstances. Upon further reflection, army headquarters noting the Blitz in England, perceived similar grave danger to the Welland Canal, requiring a military guard to ward off German bombers, espionage, submarines and rogue whales. The 16/22 SH were dispatched to this

danger zone living under canvas in old Fort George, a peaceful, grassy encampment since the war of 1812-14 which historically in Canada was a real war on that same home soil where we beat the Americans to a stand-still.

The troops amused themselves, call it training, by firing at shadows, fish or any other flotsam drifting by since no German dared to venture near while they were on guard, a real success story if ever the army has written one!



The 16/22 Saskatchewan Horse did eventually when their turn came around, train at the Armoured School then off to Britain on June 16, 1943, only to be disbanded on November 1, 1943, their numbers posted away to other regiments and for Phil Cockburn that meant to the First Hussars.

Rebadged as a Hussar, Phil underwent the long hours of training common to all. In due time new tanks were introduced, coincidentally, now that the troops were in England, the new tanks issued were made in – Canada!

Ram tanks had followed them over only to quickly succumb to time and advancements in armour technology, or basically described as new ways and means of staying alive long enough to kill the enemy, which soon rendered them obsolete. In quick succession along came American Lees, Stuarts and finally the tank which would see them through to the end, the ubiquitous Sherman.

Tank crews are cross trained in all the tank's fighting stations. Phil became a gunner, loader and wireless operator right down to learning the art of Morse code which doubtfully was ever used. Because he would come ashore in a DD tank, the training syllabus called for him to be submerged in a tank with navy breathing apparatus and told to get out and swim for it. The record is unclear how many were excused from this ordeal. Phil didn't flinch, he made it!



Canadian ram tank



Of course you can't train all the time, some rest and relaxation (R&R) was allowed, a time our spunky Phil put to good use submitting to a blind date with a pretty young girl, Mavis Welton, from St. Helens, Lancashire. b. August 14, 1927. d. March 2, 2007. It must have been quite a date because the next time he met Mavis it was on August 4, 1945, to marry the girl. She age 17 and Phil the old man of 23. As Phil so succinctly puts it, "It was love at first sight" and maybe a touch spunky too.

Mavis was one of 47,783 war brides who left behind hundreds of years of civilisation to venture into a country that was less than one hundred years, in parts still wild and raw like out west on the prairies where she was headed. The plight of the war bride is well documented. Sometimes the groom would embellish his Canadian home to impress his lady intended, hopefully, as bad consequences might develop, not intending to outright deceive her. Whatever transpired in Britain if it wasn't altogether truthful was soon revealed when the bride arrived in the new land, to her new home.

Phil's family house outside Clandonald on the "bald prairie," is described today by his oldest son Ray who saw it for himself as – "not much more than a chicken coop." This unworthy abode purposely built by the CPR, says a lot about the resolve of the old world immigrants who stayed to make a life earlier in the century and the total lack of respect for humanity displayed by the railroad.



Typical early prairie home

But 1946 was a later time with greater expectations in life. Coming to Canada even after enduring a war, Mavis nurtured a more modern outlook, seeking a

bright and happy married future - she was predictably disappointed, so much so that she wanted to leave the prairies, stopping only long enough to give birth at home to her first child, Raymond. If she intended to return to England at that point perhaps Phil sympathetic to her views, advanced the idea of trying London Ontario or maybe Montreal first before going back. Inside the next year a second son, Gerald, was born in Montreal. Homesick with the die cast, the now mom and dad with two young boys re-crossed the Atlantic to Old Blighty to start again.



London circa 1947

Unemployed in England, the resourceful Phil first found work driving a bus. Why not? He knew how to drive a tank didn't he? Next he sought work on an American air force base where he took up the welding trade. (He told them he knew how to weld which he didn't. No matter, it was employment and training to boot that prepared him for a return to Canada.)

While all this travelling back and forth with Phil and Mavis was happening, her sister June married also to a First Hussar, Eddy Rice, living in his home town London, Ontario, likely sent along good reports on the city and its prospects to the couple who after three years in England packed up and back they came again, to London, where they basically stayed most of their lives.

Of course Phil may have seized on another good aspect provided by a London home, it was the home base for the First Hussars.

Utilising his American welding training, Phil for the next 17 years was a welder for Union Gas, the local natural gas supplier. His final round of work was as the the head custodian for the Separate School Board, retiring in 1987, age 65.

Throughout his post war years Phil commemorated his war time experiences both at home and abroad. Over the years many veterans have volunteered especially near Remembrance Day, to visit schools intent on impressing upon children that sometimes when the need is there, like a threat to our nation and security, a man or woman must stand up in the face of danger and make a

stand despite the likelihood that he or she could be killed. Phil in his blue blazer, First Hussar crest and shiny medals, cut an imposing figure standing before an intrigued and appreciative young audience.

He travelled back to Europe four times, visiting the many cemeteries of his fallen comrades, strolled the now peaceful D-Day landing beaches then moved inland to the various battle sites special to the Hussars where they suffered such terrible losses. One special early morning visit to Juno Beach near the June 6th date, an eerie day with fog rolling in from the sea, Phil and Ray encountered two men doing the same only as they soon discovered, these two men were Germans, one young like Ray while the second was a contemporary of Phil's generation. Today Ray and Phil can't believe the coincidence of this chance encounter because not only were they Germans, they discovered that the older man had been a defender in a bunker on that same beach, firing at the Canadians – and Phil – on that incredible day, June 6, 1944. Of course the good part of this coincidence is knowing they both survived not only that day but the war, returned home to a full life and family. Many on both sides didn't.

Along the way Mr. and Mrs. Cockburn, Philip and Mavis, had three boys and three girls, seen here in later life along with a cousin in the background, he seemingly pleased to be in the company of this obviously happy and loving family: Ray, Gerry, Wendy, Sharon, Keith, and Robin with parents Phil and Mavis.



Medals:

1939-1945 Star

France and Germany Star

Defence Medal

Canadian Voluntary Service Medal

War Medal 1939-1945

Post War Honorary Medal:

National Order of the Legion of Honour (France)



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(TODAY NOT TOMORROW)