

John Potter & Olive Webber



Courtesy of: The FIRST HUSSARS

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HODIE NON CRAS

Name: John H. Potter

Rank: Lance Corporal

Service Number: A 495

Born: February 18, 1922

Discharged: December 5, 1944

Served in: WWII

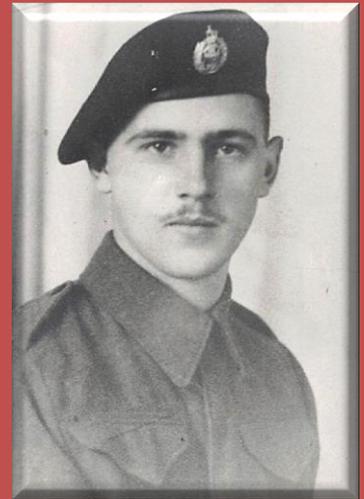
Service: Canadian Army

Battle Group: 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade

Regiment: First Hussars - 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment

Service Details: As a dispatch rider (DR) attached to Headquarters Squadron, John, nickname "Pots," went ashore on D-Day + 1.

Service notes: His main function was to carry messages up and down the command structure. Riding a Norton bike ranging far and wide through battle zones with no protection save for a helmet, often under fire and a favorite target for snipers, his role was extremely dangerous but an exciting one. In any 24 hour period he made a variety of contacts providing him with an insight on all the Regiment's fronts seldom witnessed by anyone of any rank.



HODIE NON CRAS

(Today Not Tomorrow)



CANADIAN WAR MEDALS – NW EUROPE

John H. Potter, Personal History: Before, during and after the war.

John H. Potter, or “Pots” as he became known in the Regiment, was born one of six children in Blyth, Ontario, a small town surrounded by farms and tranquil rural beauty. His father Charles worked on the railroad while his mother, Esther McClinchey, was a typical stay at home woman of those times. One might conclude that John was destined to drive something mechanical throughout his lifetime when at age 9 he became a trained farm tractor driver recruited by a neighbour to help with farm chores in the field. Once in the army, in the First Hussars at Camp Borden, truck driving was introduced instead of tanks. Perhaps the Regiment determined a future need for supply drivers to keep their tanks operational. If true, this at best would have been a guess with the war and modern tanks in the very distant future, across the Atlantic ocean in England where the real combat training would begin. Moving from tractor to trucks, more mobile variety was still in store for “Pots” Potter.



Before John Potter became a trooper in an armoured regiment, he was Private Potter, an infantryman in the Middlesex Light Infantry, a militia regiment in the Blyth region of rural Ontario. Mrs. Potter had lost two brothers in WWI, a loss she felt deeply, openly expressed in anti-war sentiments which were held in total sympathy by son John who schemed to keep her from knowing about his new found military affiliation. When Canada went to war in 1939, Esther Potter like so many mothers across the country, had to contain her opposition and fear for the loss of her son to see young John, who had just turned 19 on February 18, 1941, rush to join up on February 25. With this commitment he was off to war, shipping out to England with the entire Regiment in October '41.

After a months embarkation leave, the Regiment boarded the troopship *Oronsay* in Halifax to “enjoy” a cold north Atlantic crossing in this 1925 relic built for the Mediterranean. They were part of the largest convoy yet assembled at that time in the war, comprised of ten more ocean liners crammed to the gunnels with other Canadian units. Perhaps the cold, damp sparseness of the ship was somewhat happily endured with the expectation of

better accommodations to come once land was reached – faint hope! Their reward was Aldershot, the traditional home of the British army since 1854. Within its confines beckoned their new home, Willems Barracks, a remnant of the Crimean War, colder, damper and more forbidding than the ship. Welcome to army life everyone!

In England after some preliminary tank training, Trooper Potter requested a transfer to become a Dispatch Rider, a DR, or more formally a “Don R” which was the phonetic radio alphabet short hand description. War stories prevailing today seem to overlook this distinguished group of “daredevils”, a name plastered on colourful billboards at local fairs depicting a motorcycle rider spinning around a “Wall of Death.”

DR’s cut a dashing figure fully garbed in a distinctive uniform which was not only truly functional but quite smart - real female appealing. The wash bowl helmet still worn by regular troops, was replaced with one similar to a parachutist’s type, round with a leather chin strap reaching around behind for protection from the weather and added comfort. Over his battle dress for wind protection was a widely coveted leather jerkin, more often seen on senior ranks (General Montgomery wore one). Goggles, leather gauntlets and high leather boots completed his riding gear with the important dispatch case draped over his shoulder.



Hanging on his hip, the DR sported a .380 Smith & Wesson pistol with added fire power provided by a Sten Gun cleverly mounted on the front forks and for good measure, grenades in his saddle bags. He probably carried some food, a map case, weather cape and if he was a clever scrounger, some liberated grog - for medicinal purposes only don’t you know.

As the war progressed, making invasion by German forces more and more unlikely, vivid imaginations were working overtime in obscure headquarters producing some weird and wonderful spectacles; the dispatch rider role was not excepted from these fantasies. Picture a line-a-breast contingent of charging riders sitting atop their snorting metal steeds, roaring across some open plain dangerously equipped, to the enemy it was alleged, with blazing Bren Guns mowing down the Hun with deadly firepower, then continuing their



well orchestrated advance to receive a surrender from the conquered foe, all courtesy of - *The Boys' Home Journal*.

One might conclude that Dispatch Riders and Trooper Potter in particular, are unsung heroes of war riding out in all weathers, day and night, into unknown territory over muddy tracks skirting enemy held positions. This was a job for a true "daredevil," much greater than the thrill seeking fun-fair variety.

Various makes of motorcycles came and went through the training process. The Canadian Army first favoured the American made Indian or the so common today, Harley. Eventually English bikes were adopted, Matchless, Triumph and Nortons became the mainstay bikes



Tpr. Bill Conning & Pots

adopted likely because of availability and conformity with British counterparts. How many motorcycles operated in all war theatres with Canadian, British and American units is an unknown quantity, likely in the hundreds if not thousands, performing a multitude of roles. Rider casualty rate is another unknown.

"Pots" Potter (this nickname acquired such common usage that towards the war's end a Hussar officer enquired of him, "What's your real name anyway?") went ashore on D-Day +1 sitting next to a truck loaded with cans of fuel, a sure fry-up if they were hit. The beach by this time was secure but certainly not friendly; still in range German artillery blasted the area punctuated occasionally by Luftwaffe bombing and strafing raids all thrown together with hopes of pushing the allies back into the sea. One such raid introduced Pots sharply to war's deadly reality. Shortly after arriving while still busy trying to get his bearings, a Me-109 came swooping in strafing the roadway where he stood. He remembers watching the rounds hitting along both sides of the road in the ditches. At that moment he acquired a profound sense of danger,

dispelling any sense of naïve invincibility. For the next nine months he never forgot that moment and its deadly consequences for the unwary.

The fact Trooper Potter was on the beach at all was a testimony to this man's strong sense of duty and fearlessness (shaken by the Me-109). Training in England though physically demanding, was long and boring after 2 ½ years. Permission to use the bike for pub-crawling or other happy pursuits from friendly sergeants suffering from the same boredom, was not hard to come by. Short days before June 6, Pots was driving in town when he was struck by a bus, breaking his shoulder and bruising him extensively. Determined to embark with his mates, he basically covered up his partial paralysis in one arm. Riding with little more than one arm, he joined the Regiment parked along rural country lanes. Over the few remaining days before embarking, he worked on his injury to give himself some degree of pain relief, enough he felt to ride effectively. Help came unexpectedly: for two days he became the guest of an American landing ship, relishing in the vastness of Yankee hospitality, slurping down lots of good food and hot coffee, staples unseen since arriving in impoverished England.



Sgt. Cornelious



Typical burned & knocked out Sherman

Pots' DR duties soon were on call, dashing about delivering messages up and down through the command structure. Ranging about to where ever he was needed, afforded him front row seats on all types of spectacles. On June 11, the "Black Day" for the Hussars and "B" Squadron in particular, shot up by deadly German anti-tank guns and tanks well positioned and concealed, Pots found himself nearby, close enough to see the smoking carnage of Hussar Shermans. He was ordered by the most senior officer available at that moment, with wireless communication useless, to hurry back to the rear and bring up ammunition. When he returned with trucks laden as ordered, another officer issued new orders. This officer instantly realised the danger of all the ammunition in the line of fire and was suitably

puzzled by just to whom were they going to distribute it to anyway with the Squadron decimated and the few remaining remnants on the run to the rear seeking safety and time to regroup. The orders and counter orders illustrate the complete confusion prevailing after the terrifying slaughter.

The convoy made an abrupt about turn with Pots crammed between the trucks and a speeding Sherman right behind him. The tank was so close he was afraid of being run over if he skidded out some how; he thinks it was the *Holy Roller* now preserved in Victoria Park, London, Ontario. If he had been killed his name would



be added to the 45 who died that day, each year remembered at the Regiment's ceremony in the Park.

The Hussars' war lasted the best part of eleven months, from D-Day to May 8, 1945 when the Germans finally capitulated. Each day with death and destruction everywhere, tension built up within the individual soldier. This increase usually went undetected until something really extraordinary occurred acting as a wake-up-call, mentally impacting on him just how well he was coping. Such a moment came to Pots one day, a day like any other when he was given a message to deliver from Regimental Headquarters to Brigade. In case of capture he had to remember the codes which constituted the message (codes were used because by now the Germans had captured our wireless sets and were listening in to transmissions giving away details that could be used to thwart carefully laid plans). He hadn't gone far when a real "stonk" of artillery rained down around him, knocking him to the ground and shaking him so badly that he forgot the codes. A return to Headquarters for a refresher put it all right again; the message was delivered and on time.

Frightening times were sometimes offset by humorous ones, like the time Pots discovered that the barrel of his trusty Sten strapped to the forks ready for instant action against a troublesome enemy, had become unscrewed and fallen off. This would probably have meant the end of Pots if that had

happened. One can't help but smile at the bizarre image of him waving about the knackered sub-machine gun in the face of a bewildered German. War humour can be ghoulish but it makes for great story telling after hours, swilling beer around the bar – if you survive to tell it!



War is organised confusion at best; both sides make plans which are cancelled out as the battle unfolds. Often times “friendly fire” can be more deadly than the enemy's, even in peace time. John Potter recalls an incident during the Regiment's time in Germany

when they acted as part of the Occupying Force after Germany's surrender. Housed in abandoned Germany army barracks, he was sitting on his bunk next to that of his best friend's, Trooper Conning. While cleaning his revolver, Pots cocked the gun and fired it in the direction of Conning's bed, - result - a typical case of “I didn't know the gun was loaded.” It bored a hole right through the mattress. Fortunately for both of them, Conning especially, he had just got up to answer the call of nature. A real head shaker aftermath, but another bar story for years to come.

The revolver discharge was no doubt the fault of Pots, pure carelessness; the next hair raising incident was not. Still in Germany, cruising through a German village on some official errand, he noticed a woman and small child strolling along the sidewalk just ahead of him. As he drew near, the child suddenly darted out in front of the bike and before Pots could stop, the youngster was run over. (Pots thinks he somehow managed to squeeze through the gap between the wheel and the motor). He quickly stopped, dropped the bike onto the road and rushed back. While this only took a few seconds, it was enough time for the woman and child to disappear into a doorway followed quickly by Pots only to find, to his complete consternation, in addition to the woman and boy, were also three German soldiers sitting at a table playing cards – yikes! Ignoring the threat of the newly benign enemy, he sufficiently contained his fear of any repercussions to quickly



Different war but same scene

examined the boy, took note of a crooked arm, muttered something about going for a doctor and made a hasty retreat.

War is hell on civilians, they are like meat in a sandwich – they get chomped from both sides. Given the chance, out of the line of fire, men in uniform can be very sympathetic to their plight. The Germans might have been Hussars' enemies yesterday but after, if help could be given, it was. Pots sought out the nearest Medical Officer and brought him to the house where happily only the mother and boy awaited - the German soldiers were gone. The MO examined the boy, determined his only injury was his arm, that it wasn't broken, only bent, a puzzling injury for sure. He laid the arm on a table and pushed it flat – all better! Bob's your uncle! The following day Pots returned again, this time bearing a bag of scrounged candies as a peace offering. He found the boy outside playing as though nothing had happened. All's well that ends well, and Trooper Potter was soon on his way home to Canada.

Motor cycles and DR's were like magnets to children. Both the children and the riders enjoyed moments like this wherever they went.



The First Hussars didn't spend many months in Germany, everyone was yearning to get home, back to Canada where family, friends and an uncertain future awaited.

L Cpl John H. Potter (he was promoted before leaving Germany, he believes as a type of consolation prize) was discharged on December 5, 1945, at London's Wolseley Barracks. What next? Sometimes the army can surprise you; when they allowed Pots to be a DR perhaps they recognised in his person someone who couldn't sit still. A tank crew-man is confined within a steel box for hours to days at a time; one can't imagine Trooper Potter submitting to such

restrictions, he liked to move about, free and clear. Back on civvy street he followed the same pattern.

He first tried truck driving at Swifts Packers in Stratford, he was a trained driver after all. Then back into his life appeared his old friend Conning who fortunately displayed no ill feelings or shell shock from his near shooting demise at Pot's hands in Germany. Conning was another wanderer, convincing



Vancouver docks, 1940's

Pots that the West held out their best chances for a prosperous future so away they went. After a stint at mining in the Canadian north, Pots moved on to take up seamanship on the west coast, shipping up and down the coast from Vancouver to Alaska on coastal freighters. The sea caught his fancy, it offered the same

travelling about that he was used to and craved, only now he wanted it on a world-wide basis. Enlisting in the Canadian Merchant Marine, he took to the open seas sailing away to the Far East, South America, Europe, Africa and the United Kingdom; it was here that good fortune smiled on the wander-lusting Potter, putting him ashore for good.

Sailors are rumoured to have a girl in every port; in 1953 while in England that old bromide was narrowed down to just one girl for seaman Potter. Bristol is a busy port on the west coast of England, well used for centuries. While quenching his thirst in a local pub, Pots spied a comely lass who reminded him of another old saying, "Ship shape Bristol fashion." She was Olive Webber, Bristol born, March 11, 1926, a lovely girl who was similarly attracted to the seasoned young Canadian. They were married on February 13,



1953, and by May decided to vacate war torn England for the post war prosperity of Canada, to London, Ontario, the home base of the First Hussars.

Drawing upon his past military and work experience on land, Pots soon became a driver again. From bread man to beer truck, he was on the move like old times with dirt under his wheels except now he was a married man put ashore for good trying to make a buck or two with Olive pitching in at various plants: Kellogg's, Eaton Automotive and others. His good driving record as a war veteran became a perfect background to make application for a government position as Driver Examiner in Barrie, a city north of Toronto and a mere few miles from Camp Borden's Royal Canadian Armoured Corps School; he had come practically full circle since joining the army in 1941.

In 2017 John Potter and his wife Olive live in St. Catharines, Ontario, where Pots was transferred after 24 years in Barrie, to become Driver Examiner Supervisor. Along the way John and Olive adopted two children, Paul and Andrea to round out their family life. Retired, in their advanced years, they are happy together, living fully content with their good fortune.

Medals and Decorations:

1939-45 Star

France and Germany Star

Defence Medal

Canadian Volunteer Medal

War Medal 1939-45



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