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Leo Major, DCM and Bar

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Of all the British gallantry decorations, the Distinguished Conduct Medal must be considered the most prized because it is so seldom awarded. In the Korean War, only eight such awards were made out of a total of 205 honours and awards to Canadian soldiers.[1] In the Second World War, the DCM was even more rare, making up only three per cent of all honours and awards. Thus, the award of the DCM and bar, spanning both wars, to Léo Major is a remarkable accomplishment.

Léo Major, a native of Montreal, was 19 when he joined the Canadian army in the summer of 1940. He was a fellow of medium size, described as sociable, somewhat happy-go-lucky and, as he was to prove in the war, fearless. He may have learned this latter trait, so valuable to a combat soldier, along with his survival skills, while growing up in a working-class district of Montreal during the depression years.

Major went overseas in 1941 with Le Régiment de la Chaudière and, with his independent character, naturally gravitated toward the scout platoon. He landed with the Chaudières on D-Day and, in the fierce fighting in the early days in Normandy, was wounded in the face by a grenade, leaving him with partial loss of sight in his left eye. Disregarding this disability, he insisted on remaining with the regiment, claiming that he needed only his right eye to sight his rifle.

In early 1945 he found himself in the Rhineland and, in late February, was again wounded when the carrier in which he was riding was blown up on a mine. All passengers were killed except Léo who found himself in a British hospital in Belgium, suffering from two broken ankles and a damaged back. Again, he refused to be shipped back to England and managed *to* return to the regiment before he was fully recovered, for the final advance into the Netherlands. Thus, on April 12, with a patch on one eye and still suffering discomfort from his back injury, he was with the Chaudières when they took up position before Zwolle in central Holland.

Zwolle, a town of 50,000 people, was a main transportation centre and the last bastion of the German "Ijssel Line." The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade was preparing to assault the defences, but had little information on enemy dispositions and strength. A request went out for volunteers to make a night patrol into the town, and Léo Major and Corporal Wilfrid Arsenault volunteered.

Private Léo Major of Le Régiment de la Chaudière, in early 1944. (Photo supplied by author)

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At about 2300 hours on 13 April, the two scouts attempted to slip into the suburbs but encountered a German outpost which resulted in the death of Corporal Arsenault. Despite this, Major decided to carry on with his mission, carrying two Sten guns and a sack of grenades. He arrived in the centre of Zwolle at about 0100 hours and found the streets silent and deserted. Here, he spotted a German machine-gun nest which, since the crew was sleeping, he promptly attacked and eliminated. He then found a German scout car and forced one of the Germans, who he had captured, to drive through the streets with the lights on, flying a white flag. For several hours, Major moved through the streets in this manner, shooting at any target he could find, making an impression that a large Canadian force had arrived.

The citizens were awakened but were afraid to come out of their houses. By a stroke of luck, Private Major came across the head of the local resistance, Frits Kuipers, and three of his men. By now the Germans appeared to have fled the city in panic. The group therefore returned to the town hall and the resistance fighters brought the citizens out into the streets. The local radio station

IN HIS OWN WORDS...

Léo Major on the Liberation of Zwolle

I didn't have any emotion that night in the process of liberating Zwolle because it was the same as each time I went on a patrol or raid during the war. I made a blank of my mind. That was my way of combatting fear and not to think of anything else but to succeed in all my enterprises. I first took that attitude on D-Day, the 6th of June 1944, and I took the same attitude every day until my last raid in Korea. To survive so many days of war without losing your mind....

On 13 April, early in the evening, there was a get together. Colonel Tacherau Gus, who became a friend of mine later on, was there with the brigade commander. They were asking for two volunteers who would try to reach the outskirts of Zwolle and then after that try to go inside the city and get from the people as much information as possible about the strength of the enemy. They added those who go will have very little chance of coming back. All the time the C.O. was speaking, he was fixing me. When I saw nobody was willing to take a chance, I said yes Colonel you got me again. And Willy who was a very good pal of mine couldn't let me go alone, so he volunteer to come along with me. All the scouts were very sad to see us go. To them we were going to execution. That's when I mentioned: Don't worry boys, we will liberate that city.

We begin the patrol at 2130 hours on the 13th April. We notice an outpost beside the road. We were able to get the Germans from behind by surprise but we were very much concerned by the noises caused by our machine pistols because shortly after we saw two Germans run away very quickly toward the city. At 2230 hours we reached the last farm before the outskirts of Zwolle. That's where we met Hendrick and his wife who were hidden in the cellar. At first they were very afraid of us. But they quickly understood we were not Germans. They were the last ones to see my friend alive. We tried to learn something from them using English, French, also signs, but to no avail. They were also very nervous and scared, I guess. After nightfall when we were just about to leave the farm, I noticed how much Willy's hands were shaking. It was a sign of battle fatigue. I said to him if you don't feel well, stay here and wait for me. I will go inside the city alone. Nothing doing he said we stay together until the end. Those were his last words. Shortly after around, 2300 hours, I went across the track to lie down beside a road some distance away. Willy tried to do the same through the railroad crossing to join me but he made a little noise with his sac of grenades and that's when the Germans got him with a fixed of line fire. With my experience I knew right away he was dead. I was very mad at the Germans but also at myself for letting him come with me. I always felt sorry for the mistake I made there.

In a few seconds I got rid of the ones who were responsible for his death. After that I had one fixed idea, it was to liberate Zwolle no matter what I was going to meet in the streets. A thousand Germans or much less I didn't care. My heart was boiling but I was full of energy. I went back to Willy to grab his machine pistol and his grenades. After that I went to a park and sat down to decide how I could manage to liberate a city that big. If I could get in touch with the resistance that would make things easier for me. But I know it's impossible in a city. No civilians are allowed in the street at night as there is a long curfew established by the occupying force, that I know for sure. Therefore the only people I would meet are Germans. So I presume the best thing do is to go around the town and meet each outpost or defense, on each road going inside the city. On each one I must find a way to get them by surprise and to let them know the attack is coming inside the city. I have to keep them guessing and let them know there is quite a lot of allied soldiers attacking Zwolle.

Before leaving for this patrol, the Colonel had promised me he would send all his fighting companies to

was used to announce that the town had been liberated.

Major was exhausted but he had to complete his mission by bringing back the body of his comrade, Wilfrid Arsenault, to his lines. The resistance fighters arranged for a car to transport the body back, but were fired on by outposts of the Chaudières. Major was furious and climbed onto the top of the car so that he could be easily seen from a distance. In this manner, he returned to the Canadian lines to report the result of his mission to his commanding officer.

Major's citation for the DCM concluded:

> The gallant conduct of this soldier, his personal initiative, his dauntless courage and entire disregard for personal safety, was an inspiration to all. His gallant action was instrumental in enabling the mopping up, on 14 April, to be done without a shot being fired.

For his actions, Private Léo Major was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

At the end of the Second World War, Major returned to Canada and finally had an operation on his back, which had bothered him since it had been damaged near the Hochwald. Following his recuperation, he settled into civilian life in his old trade as a pipe fitter. However, on 25 June

occupying the farm lands that are close to the city at 0100 hours on the 14th of April. Having that in mind, I decided to wait until that time in case I get caught with some prisoners in my hands and not knowing what to do with them as I am not a murderer. It's not like Normandy where there were no prisoners taken alive. They were SS. I was already inside Zwolle so I decided to go inside a house. I wanted to study more completely the big map of Zwolle which I had inside my jacket. I knocked at the back of several houses. Nobody was ready to let me in, I guess they were too frightened. I had a shield over my left eye and with my camouflage jacket I could easily pass for a real Nazi. Therefore knowing I was uninvited at each place I had to force myself in one house. A young couple in their 30s with young children flocked together in room caught by fear. Right away I removed my jacket to let them know who I was. They saw Canada. It was like magic, those shoulder patches. To see them smile, I knew I had made new friends.

After going over the city map, I left the house to start my plans for getting the upper hand against the enemies. My first encounter - I was advancing cautiously on a road leading out toward the country. Finally I came close to what I could see was an enemy position. I could see clearly with my right eye that night like always. I was an expert at night fighting. There were soldiers in trenches manning a machine gun. I came behind them in complete surprise. In a flash, with three grenades, and a burst of my machine pistol, I had ten prisoners which I walked away to one of our leading companies.

I came back by the same road now having in mind to go everywhere in Zwolle. It was still early that night when I captured 12 stragglers in one of the streets. A burst of fire, a couple of grenades and a lot of loud noise. That was my aim. Of the 12 stragglers, 3 were civics [sic]. Again I walked back and got rid of them by giving them to another of our fighting companies. Again I went back inside the city doing one street after another. Four more times during the course of the night I had to force myself in into a home. Each time the same story, the people were afraid of me but in no time I was able to prove who I was and I quickly made life-long friends. When I went in houses like I did, it was to rest and recuperated and to give me more strength to go forward. In each house I didn't stay more than a few minutes, I remember. Then I would continue patrolling the streets.

The big church and the river were my reference points. That's how I could get everywhere and come back quickly without getting lost. On a road near the river, I caught my last bunch of stragglers which again I brought to an outpost that was much nearer the railroad crossing. On my way back to the city I met Frits Kuipers, a tall policeman and two other men. From Mr. Frits' wife, who spoke fairly good English, and a few words in French, I learned the four men were from the resistance.

I was very happy to learn that. They were unarmed but I quickly remedied that. Then I told them all: Your city Zwolle is completely liberated from German. I know very well, I was the one who made all that noise during the night. That must have frighten them away across the river. I asked them to come with me to the middle of the city and to pass the word around to all the population to come out of their homes, that they are at last free to do what they like. In a very short time, I was surrounded by a very huge crowd. Then I met the mayor and some of the town leaders. With a small German staff car and the help of the four Dutchmen I brought back Willy to Colonel Tacherau. Then I told him you may bring in the unit on parade. The city is completely liberated. He couldn't, because he was waiting for an order from higher-up before he could make any moves. Many of the scouts were crying and for the first time during the war I was crying too. I went back inside the town alone and an hour later the entire brigade entered the city to join in the celebration.

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excerpted from *Back Door to War: A Personal Diary*, an unpublished manuscript by Hugh D. McVicar.

Men of the 2nd Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment prepare for a patrol. Korea, December 1951.
(Photo by Paul Tomelin, NAC PA 184228)

1950, war exploded again, this time on the other side of the world in Korea. Within five weeks, the Canadian Government made the decision to raise a volunteer force to join the United Nations in repelling the Communist invasion. Recruiting went into full gear to form a brigade group built around battalions of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, Royal Canadian Regiment and Royal 22e Régiment. Jacques Dextraze, a veteran of the Second World War, was called back to lead the latter regiment's contribution. The 2nd Battalion, R22eR turned out to be a unique unit since Dextraze was given a free hand in recruiting picked veterans.[2] One of these, contacted through a network of former officers, was Léo Major.

By the late spring of 1951, the battalion was in action in Korea and Major's abilities were recognized as he found himself in the Scout and Sniper Platoon, a unit made up of men with special characteristics. As described by a former officer of the regiment, they were "individualists in their nature and indeed tough. Tough in the sense of endurance. All of them could live on a bottle of water and a couple of slices of bacon.. .at times out [in no-man's-land] for days."[3]

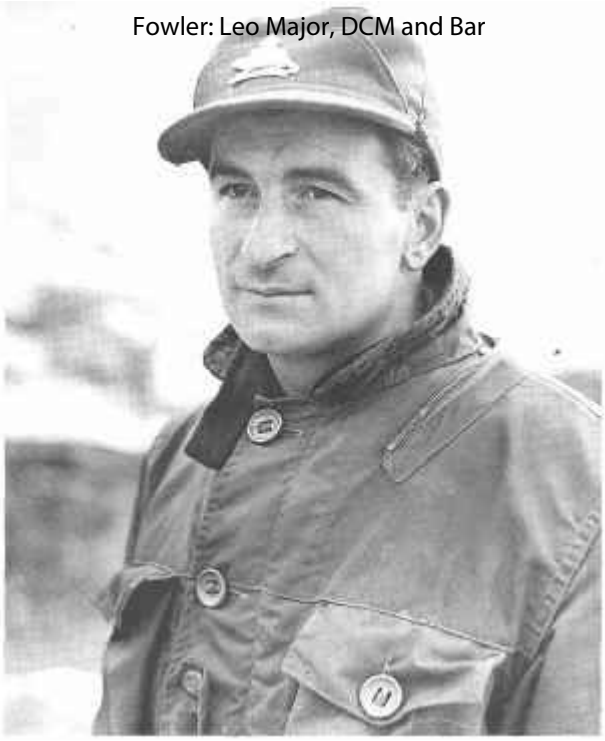
Truce talks with the Communist forces began in the summer of 1951 and dragged on throughout the rest of the year with no resolution. The ground forces of both sides continued to launch limited offensives to secure favourable high ground in case a final cease fire might be declared. In mid-November, as the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade Group moved up to relieve British forces near the south bank of the Imjin River, an agreement seemed close at Panmunjom.

The Brigade was to hold the right flank of the 1st Commonwealth Division's front, with the R22eR on the extreme right flank. Here they would link up with the 3rd US Infantry Division on the east who held Hill 355, nicknamed "Little Gibraltar." At this point, the front line curved southward around the height, requiring the R22eR to hold an awkward position with "A" and "D" Companies on the western slopes, separated by a small valley from the remainder of the battalion. "D" Company was the most vulnerable as it occupied the most northerly position, a saddle between Hill 355 and Hill 227 to the west, exposed on both the northern and western fronts.

As the R22eR prepared to move into its new positions, Lieutenant-Colonel Dextraze issued a statement, that "in the event the battalion is attacked, there will be NO withdrawal, NO platoons overrun and NO panics. All would be expected to perform their duties in a typical 'Vingt Deux" manner."[4] Dextraze's statement was prescient because, unknown to him, his regiment was marching into the face of a determined Chinese assault that would test its determination.

The Chinese sensed that the truce talks were coming close to an agreement which would lock each side into their present positions. They were determined to make a final attempt to seize the most favourable terrain on the western side of the front. Hill 355 was the prize, commanding the terrain for 20 miles around. With some momentum, the Chinese might even roll the United Nations line back across the Imjin River, gaining a great morale advantage in the final talks.

Thus, as the R22eR were settling into their new positions on 22 November, the 64th Chinese Army opened up with a massive artillery barrage, engulfing Hill 355 along with the R22eR. On 23 November enemy attacks intensified, with elements of the Chinese 190th and 191st Divisions directed against Hill 355, and one battalion of the 190th attacking "D" Company. For the next two days, desperate fighting occurred as



Léo Major of R22eR, in Korea, soon after the action on Hill 277. (NAC PA 193072)

the Americans first lost Hill 355, then fought *to* regain it after hastily gathering a counter-attack force.

As soon as they had captured Hill 355 on November 23, the Chinese were able to occupy Hill 227, uncovering both flanks of "D" Company. This left the Company practically surrounded, but it managed to drive off all enemy attacks. The midday hours of 24 November brought a lull to the fighting but, late in the day, the Chinese launched a new attack with two companies from Hill 227 focussed on "D" Company. By 1820 hours the left flank platoon, No. 11, had been overrun. When, in addition, the Chinese again recaptured the slopes of Hill 355, the remainder of "D" Company came under attack from all directions.

The situation was serious. However, Dextraze cooly assessed die regiment's position and refused to consider giving up any ground. While the Americans assembled a counterattack force on his right, Dextraze decided to launch his own counterattack to regain No. 11 Platoon's position and thus relieve the pressure on "D" Company.

His best reserve was the tough, aggressive scout platoon. He used it to assemble an assault group under the command of Léo Major, including a signalman to maintain a link directly to himself. Major equipped a large portion of his men with Sten guns and, wearing running shoes to mask the sound of their movement, they set out at midnight over the snow-swept hills. Proceeding slowly, in small groups, they followed an indirect route in order to come onto the objective from the direction of the enemy's own lines. Once near the summit, at a signal from Major, they opened fire together. The enemy panicked and by 0045 hours Major's force had successfully occupied its objective.

However, about an hour later, the Chinese launched their own counterattack and Dextraze ordered Major to withdraw from the hill. Major refused, saying he would pull back only 25 yards to some shell holes which offered the only cover he could find. From here, he directed mortar and machine-gun fire onto his attackers. This continued throughout the darkest hours and bitter cold of the morning, with the mortar fire raining down almost on top of defenders.

The commander of the mortar platoon, Captain Charly Forbes, later wrote that Major was "an audacious man...not satisfied with the proximity of my barrage and asks to bring it closer...In effect my barrage falls so close that I hear my bombs explode when he speaks to me on the radio."[5] Forbes increased his rate of fire until the mortar barrels turned red from the heat. He finally had to cease fire as the heat had permanently warped the tubes.

As the citation described:

> .. .So expertly did he direct the fire of supporting mortars and artillery that the platoon was able to repulse four separate enemy attacks. Running from one point of danger to anotiier, under heavy small arms fire from his flank, he directed the fire of his men, encouraging them to hold firm against overwhelming odds. By dawn, Major's force had withdrawn 200 yards to the east, reporting that "nothing is left there to occupy... not a bunker or slit trench.[6]

However, despite being attacked by superior numbers, Major's group had repulsed all attacks and succeeded in denying possession of No. 11 Platoon's position to the Chinese. Léo Major's small force remained in position for three more days, holding their gains securely, as the Chinese made several last attempts to gain some ground.

Major's citation for the Bar to the DCM concluded:

> Against a force, superior in number, Corporal Major simply refused to give ground. His personal courage and leadership were beyond praise. Filling an appointment far above his rank, he received the full confidence of his men, so inspired were they by his personal bravery, his coolness and leadership.

No further major attacks were experienced in the sector and Major's counterattack ended what Charly Forbes called "the epic of Hill 355." The Chinese had failed in gaining their objective and, on 27 November, agreement was reached for a tentative demarcation line to be established on the present positions.

Through the Second World War and Korea, the Canadian Army gained a reputation for being a tough, effective fighting force, based on ordinary citizens who rallied to the call to duty. Léo Major, through the award of the DCM and Bar, has been recognized as one of the best examples of the kind of man who established this reputation. One of his former officers summed it up best: "What type of soldier was Léo? He was tough minded...a man of action...always ready to undertake any task assigned to him with courage and determination."[7]

Notes

1. John Blatherwick, *Canadian Army Honours - Decorations - Medals 1902-1968* (New Westminster: FJB Publications, 1993) p.2.
2. John Gardam, *Korea Volunteer* (Burnstown: General Store Publishing House, 1994) p.47.
3. Correspondence from Lieutenant-Colonel J. Charles Forbes (ret'd), January 1996.
4. War Diary, Royal 22e Régiment, Commander's Conference, 19 November 1951, National Archives of Canada, RG 24, Vol 18357.
5. Charly Forbes, *Fantassin* (Sillery: Les Éditions du Septentrion, 1994) p.315.
6. War Diary, 25 Canadian Infantry Brigade, NAC RG 24, Vol 18240, 25 November 1951.
7. Correspondence from Lieutenant-Colonel O. Plouffe (ret'd), February 1966.

Robert Fowler lives in Ottawa and is the author of *Valour in the Victory Campaign: The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division Gallantry Decorations,* 1945,1995.