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Captain Louis-René Drapeau, DCM & Bar, ED, CD, Air Medal (US)

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Captain Louis-René Drapeau, DCM & Bar, ED, CD, Air Medal (US)

Gil Drolet

The Montreal telephone directory lists him simply as "Louis-René Drapeau (Capt)." The browser might well ask: "Captain of what?" Like so many others, the ordinary person has very little knowledge of what went on a half-century ago except what he may have seen in John Wayne or Humphrey Bogart movies on late night TV. Unlike these Hollywood heroes who managed to avoid involvement in war in order to continue successful and growing film careers, men now grown old have nothing but memories (and medals tarnishing in dusty drawers) to remind them of days of youth and danger. One of these is a man who earned the rarely-awarded Distinguished Conduct Medal not once but twice in the same war and in the same theatre of operations. Now 78 years old and ill, René Drapeau was unemployed when he transferred from the NPAM (Regimental #393 - Le Régiment de Châteauguay) to Active Service with Le Royal 22ème Régiment (R22eR) on 26 October 1939. In his youth, he had served in the bugle band of the Navy League of Canada. But for this man, war provided a long moment and warm place in the sun.

He proceeded overseas with his unit on 9 December 1939. With limited schooling, promotions came slowly for him but his early and natural leadership qualities saw him rise from Acting Corporal (10/6/40) to Corporal (1/12/40) to Sergeant (27/9/42). He left for the Mediterranean theatre on 15 June 1943.

When the campaign in Sicily had brought the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division to the edges of Catenanuova, D-51078, Sergeant Drapeau (now acting Company Quartermaster-Sergeant) and his unit, "D" Company of the R22eR was to take Hill 204, a heavily-defended enemy position protected by a medium machine gun, an 88, a 105 mm gun and well-concealed riflemen. Drapeau, as platoon sergeant, saw that

his men were caught in enfilade fire from the medium machine gun on the company's left flank. By daylight, the machine gun had been silenced. But then the 88 opened up. While one Van Doos platoon provided protection for the right flank, the other two moved forward and dislodged the enemy from Hill 204. With deliberate coolness, Drapeau began a concerted assault against the 88. From 15 yards the assault section led by Drapeau charged the gun emplacement killing the crew by tossing grenades. Not content with this, he then with the help of Lance-Corporal Gérard Gagnon (whose brother had been killed with Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal at Dieppe), attacked the 105 mm gun located some 100 yards further on. Our own artillery forced them back to the 88 which they then tried to train on the 105 but were prevented from doing so owing to its limited traverse. Shortly afterwards, three men from the section rushed the position causing the gun crew to flee. Prior to this and while Drapeau continued to provide covering fire, Gagnon had ordered Private Grégoire to get a Bren gun. He and Private Lachance, meanwhile, continued to press on to the objective. When they were but 100 feet from the gun, a German carrying a white flag ran towards them. Gagnon, thinking the man wanted to surrender, stepped into the open and was shot by those who had chosen to stay on the gun position. Lachance ran to help Gagnon but saw that it was too late. Meanwhile the rest of the German crew escaped. But the position was taken. 17 Platoon on the company's right flank had been instrumental in securing Hill 204.

Drapeau was recommended for an immediate DCM. The citation is reproduced on the next page. The recommendation was made by then Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Bernatchez, then approved by Brigadier M.H.S. Penhale (Comd 3 Cdn Inf Bde), Major-General G.G. Simonds (GOC 1 Cdn Div), General B.L.

C.F.A. 1
40/P & S/1420 (3080)

3 Cdn. Inf. Brigade 1. Cdn. Inf. Division 30 Corps

Schedule No. Unit Royal 22e. Regt.
(to be left blank)

Army No. and Rank D-51078. Sergeant(A/CQMS)

Name Rene DRAPEAU
(Christian names must be stated)

Action for which commended (Date and place of action must be stated)	Recommended by	Honour or Reward	(To be left blank)
On 30 Jul 43 at Hill 204 near CATENANUOVA? Sicily, Sgt. Drapeau, a pl. Sgt., was forward with the leading section which was commanded by L/Cpl Gagnon. Under the covering fire of this section, Sgt Drapeau and L/Cpl Gagnon rushed an enemy anti-aircraft post, throwing hand grenades as they went. They killed the crew who had been firing on our advancing tps & tpt. Locating an enemy 105 mm gun, which was also firing on our troops, in posn 100 yds S of them, Drapeau & listed Gagnon in trying to train the A/A gun on the 105 mm, but they were unable to do so owing to ltd traverse. These two NCOs then advanced to within assaulting distance of the gun posn, covering each other as they went. Sgt. Drapeau then skilfully furnished covering fire with his rfl, while L/Cpl Gagnon assaulted the position. Throughout this entire action, Sgt. Drapeau was under enemy M.G. fire. This N.C.O. displayed coolness, bravery and determination of high order.	J.E.E. Bernatchez Lt.-Col. OC Royal 22e Regt. M.H.S. Penhale Brig. Comd 3 Cdn Inf Bde. G.G. Simonds Maj-Gen GOC 1 Cdn Div B.L. Montgomery Gen GOC 8 Army Granted an Immediate DCM (Sgd) H.R. Alexander, Gen. GOC 15 Army Group.	Immediate DCM	

P.T.O.



*Left: Citation for René Drapeau's first DCM
Above: Drapeau being presented his first DCM by Field Marshal Alexander.*

Montgomery (GOC 8 Army) and, finally, General H.R. Alexander (GOC 15 Army Group).

It would not take too long for Drapeau to distinguish himself again. Meanwhile, his rank of WO II (Company Sergeant-Major) had been confirmed on 26 August 1943. He was CSM of "B" Company by the time the regiment was to take part in the attack against the Hitler Line.

On 19 May 1944, in a heavy fog, two R22eR companies were to approach the edge of the woods concealing the enemy's forward defensive positions on the Hitler Line. At 0630 hours following a five minute artillery barrage, these two companies had little trouble taking their objectives. But by 0800 hours, after the fog had lifted and the enemy was fully alerted, things changed. Their self-propelled guns and tanks began to take their toll. At 1100 hours, Captain Pierre Potvin's "B" Company moved on the left to pass through the lead units while Major Charles Bellavance's "C" Company attempted the same on the right. As the attack began, Lieutenant Saint-Onge charged an enemy position with a grenade. Just as he was to throw it, he was hit in the forearm, dropped the grenade which exploded, killing him. At the same time, other men from "B" Company were hit, including Captain Potvin who had barely recovered from wounds suffered in Sicily. This time, Potvin was hit in the shoulder, the groin, the left arm and the wrist. He nevertheless carried on leading his

men into the protective shelter of one the tanks from the 51st Royal Tank Regiment. Under intensive fire, the fight, continued and all the officers had been killed or wounded. The men continued to fire with determination but three tanks had been knocked out over on the right. Enemy snipers were shot from the trees while machine gun nests were eliminated. CSM Drapeau now took command of the company and tried to rally the men. His attempts to contact Battalion HQ were fruitless due to a faulty wireless set.

The fighting was so fierce that any movement in the open was impossible. A shell landed a few feet from Drapeau killing one man and hurling Drapeau several feet through the air. He got back up and scurried about visiting each platoon, restoring confidence and directing fire. When the Germans counterattacked, Drapeau succeeded in holding them back, though not without losses. At this point, it seemed the whole German Army had all of its weapons trained and firing on these four Canadian rifle companies. Three days later, the forward positions were taken and the assault against the Hitler Line itself was about to begin.

The citation for Drapeau's second DCM reads in part:

...After the leading companies had secured the first objective, "B" Coy passed through on the left, supported by armour, toward the Adolf Hitler line. They came under intense fire and three

tanks were knocked out by a 105 mm gun in a concrete and steel pillbox. The company was being prepared to attack this post when the Coy. Commander was badly wounded. The three platoon commanders were also killed or wounded and Coy. Sgt. Major DRAPEAU took charge...Communications had been lost with Battalion HQ. This Warrant Officer, unable to get instructions, went forward and reorganized his platoons which were very disorganized as a result of the heavy fire. (Here the shell lands knocking him into the air) Although badly shaken, Coy. Sgt. Major DRAPEAU continued to reorganize his company personally visiting all section positions. (Here the counterattack takes place and is repelled) due chiefly to the efforts of Company Sgt. Major DRAPEAU who moved continuously from post to post, encouraging his men and directing the fire. The company successfully held this position until communication was established with Battalion HQ and they were ordered to withdraw.

Tired and suffering from the effects of blast, Company Sgt. Major DRAPEAU led the company in an orderly withdrawal to the new area. Here he was evacuated suffering from exhaustion.

Throughout the attack Coy. Sgt. Major DRAPEAU set a courageous example for his men. His devotion to duty, cheerfulness and leadership were outstanding, and an inspiration to all who were with him.

The recommendation for the award this time was signed by Major J.E. Charlebois for Lieutenant-Colonel Allard, Brigadier J.P.E. Bernatchez, by now OC 3 Cdn Inf Bde., Major-General Chris Vokes (GOC I Cdn Div), Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns (GOC I Cdn Corps), Lieutenant-General A.W.H. Leese (GOC Eighth Army) and General H.R. Alexander (C-in-C ACMF).

It was just a question of time before Drapeau's name would be considered for a commission. An anecdote circulating in the regiment (told to me by the late Captain Gérard Payette) has it that when he appeared before the Selection Board, a British Brigadier who had not had time to consult Drapeau's records, began the conversation with, "I see you have a DCM, Sergeant-Major. Where did you get it?" To which Draps (as he was known to some in the unit) standing smartly at attention replied, "Which one, Sir?" The Brigadier's reaction is supposed to have been something like, "By Jove! He does have two."

Drapeau returned to the UK on 23 October 1944, attended Officer Candidate School as of 10 January 1945 and was commissioned as a



Drapeau (left) in Korea, 1951.

lieutenant on 21 June 1945. He returned to Canada on 10 January 1946. He was discharged on 5 June 1946. Disoriented, he re-enlisted in the Regular Army one month later and was given ZD2265 as his new number. He rejoined the VanDoos on 29 July 1946. and on 15 November 1950, found himself in Fort Lewis getting ready for his second war, this time with the 2nd Battalion R22eR headed for Korea. Promoted to captain on 27 February 1951, he embarked for Korea on 19 April 1951. While in the Far East, he spent some time spotting enemy artillery positions and movements from the air with the Americans and a letter recommending him for a Distinguished Flying Cross (US) was sent to his CO dated 28 November 1951 from the 6147th Tactical Control Group. Instead he was awarded the US Air Medal. He returned to Canada on 23 March 1952 and retired from the Army on 27 August 1965.

To see this small man in civilian clothes one might easily be misled into thinking his had been a dull, uneventful life. But the eyes tell a different story. The parade square was never his favourite place of work. He was at home in the field and proved it repeatedly in the most difficult times. When I would first meet him in the early morning, I would salute him (he was a Captain after all and entitled to such a gesture from a mere Lieutenant) and he would respond with a wave, a grin and the words, "On vous salue!" Now years later, Canadians should say to such men, "ON VOUS SALUE!" "WE SALUTE YOU!"

Gil Drolet served with the 2 Bn, R22eR in Korea. He taught for 20 years at Le Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean and was Emeritus Professor of War Literature.