

## John Weir Foote VC – Dieppe Hero

November 10, 2022

Lieutenant-Colonel John Weir Foote, VC was born in Madoc on May 5, 1904, and attended public and high schools there. He joined the ministry at the age of 30, after graduating from the Presbyterian College in Montreal. He had grown up in Madoc, and played the organ there in St. Peter's Presbyterian Church. In 1934, he also became a member of the distinguished Loyal Orange Association and was initiated into the Fraserville Loyal Orange Lodge No.46 in Fraserville, Ontario. He enlisted in the Canadian Chaplain Service in 1939, moved to Port Hope, and was assigned to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry when the war broke out.

Foote is most notably remembered for being the Regimental Chaplain with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry at Dieppe on August 19, 1942. He had asked to accompany the troops on "their still secret mission", and his commanding officer tried to dissuade him. In the end, Foote was made a stretcher-bearer. "He would have an appalling amount of work", but was fortunately a tall and rugged man, physically up to the challenge. He was the only Canadian Chaplain to be awarded the Victoria Cross, the British Commonwealth's highest military decoration for valour. This was prompted by his refusal to give up his place on the last departing boat on the Dieppe beach, in order to wade ashore and be voluntarily taken prisoner alongside the 1,945 other Canadians "who faced certain death or capture because he felt they needed him. He was a German prisoner in various camps, and suffered hardship and exposure, until the War's end, three years later." Major Foote at the time was 38 years of age and was one of 5,000 Canadian soldiers at Dieppe.

Following the eight nightmarish hours on the French coast at Dieppe, he "became 'Padre X' – a symbol of courage as he strode up and down the beach under shattering fire, helping the wounded, encouraging the living, consoling the dying...His example inspired all around him. Those who observed him state that the calmness of this heroic man as he walked about, collecting the wounded on the fire swept beach, will never be forgotten."

In his own words, "I knew I had to stay with the men captured at the Dieppe raid. I never regretted the decision. Although I didn't like the prison camp diet, I did get a nice figure then – 140 pounds."

At the time of his investiture by King George VI, Foote's ship was delayed, causing him to miss the main ceremony. Nevertheless, it allowed him to "chat informally with the King." The following appeared in the London Gazette (UK) on February 14, 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 19<sup>th</sup> August, Honorary Captain Foote, Canadian Chaplain Services, was Regimental Chaplain 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



**SOURCE:**

<https://images.ourontario.ca/Partners/Cobourg/0000503371T.PDF>

Regimental Aid Post, but also 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.”

Following his liberation, he came home to Canada, and he and his wife lived in Port Hope. Eventually he became MPP for Durham, and later a cabinet minister. In retirement, he was a sheriff on the United Counties of Northumberland and Durham. John and his wife eventually moved to Cobourg. A summer cottage near St. John's, Newfoundland, kept him quite busy, with a trout pond, motorboat, and abundance of spruce trees to manage.

In the 1970's, he was known for playing several musical instruments, and penning a Queen's Park column for the local Cobourg Star and Port Hope Guide newspapers. In 1972, he and his wife Edith accepted an invitation to visit the Centre Hastings Secondary School in Madoc, where he described his prisoner of war experiences for the students:

“In prison camp as in everyday life, one has to make a life for oneself – there are ways of being agreeable. There were constant escape plans, which kept prisoners interested and hopeful. One of the hardest parts of prison life was that prisoners could not take part in the fighting, and the lack of freedom was humiliating.” Foote brought with him his medals so that the students could see, in particular, the Victoria Cross medal. Prior to inviting Foote and his wife to attend at the school, the class had applied to the Historic Sites Board for a 1969 commemorative plaque, but were told such plaques were only erected after death. They also campaigned to have Foote's image on a postage stamp, but the answer from the Philatelic Society in Ottawa was that “the only living person portrayed on stamps was Queen Elizabeth II.”

Before his death, he donated his Victoria Cross and other medals to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. The largest physical memorial is the massive Armouries complex on James Street North in Hamilton, renamed in his honour – John W. Foote VC Armoury. Foote died in Cobourg on May 2, 1988, and was buried with full military honours in Cobourg's Union Cemetery. A life-long Orangeman, his other principal interests were gardening, golf, fishing and music. He died on May 2 1988, two days before his 84th birthday.

The funeral service was held at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Cobourg, and he was buried with full military honours. His local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion was renamed the Lt Col John Weir Foote VC Branch in his honour, while the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry Heritage Museum, to whom he donated his VC, is based at the Lt Col John Weir Foote VC CD Armoury, at Hamilton, Ontario. A plaque in his honour is located in the County of Hastings, Township of Madoc, on Lawrence Street East (County Road 23), two blocks east of Durham Street (Highway 62). The Royal Canadian Legion Branch in Grafton, Ontario, was renamed the Lt. Col. John W Foote V.C.C.D. Branch 580 in his honour in 1982.

**Sources: (image credits are listed just above the photo images to which they correspond)**

Cobourg Public Library website (Virtual Library, Local Interest Databases, Cobourg & District Images)

[www.rcl580.ca](http://www.rcl580.ca) (Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 580)

[www.ottawacitizen.com](http://www.ottawacitizen.com) (August 18, 2017, article by Andrew Duffy)

[www.ontarioplaques.com/Plaques\\_GHI/Plaque\\_Hastings17.html](http://www.ontarioplaques.com/Plaques_GHI/Plaque_Hastings17.html)

The Cobourg Star, Friday November 5, 1976.

The Cobourg Sentinel Star, June 2, 1972.

<http://www.rhli.ca> (The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry)

<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/gal/vcg-gcv/bio/foote-jw-eng.asp> (National Defence and the Canadian Forces)

<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/37466/supplement/941> (The London Gazette)

<https://reporter.mcgill.ca> (August 16, 2017, Neale McDevitt, Editor, McGill Reporter)

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Weir\\_Foote](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Weir_Foote)

<http://www.rcl580.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/foote.jpg>



A- Foote, John VC (07-00)  
Cobourg Sentinel Star June 2, 1972

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# John Foote VC, Dieppe Hero, honore

"John Weir Foote, V.C., Day" was an outstanding event for special education classes at Centre Hastings Secondary School, Madoc, last Friday, May 25.

Lt.-Col. Foote, a native of Madoc, attended public and high school there. When World War Two broke out he was a minister in Port Hope and enlisted as a padre. He distinguished himself at Dieppe when he chose to remain with the captured men rather than take freedom with 4,000 others.

In 1969, the special education classes became interested in the Foote story and wished residents and tourists in Madoc to know that John W. Foote was a distinguished native. With the permission of principal C. M. Griffith, the class applied to the Historic Sites Board for a 1969 commemorative plaque. In February '70 the Board replied, saying it recognized the contribution of Victoria Cross recipients, but commemorative plaques were erected only after death.

As an alternative, the class asked for a photo of Mr. Foote that could be placed in the hall at the school where he graduated.

Ken Derry, a 1969-70 graduate, returned to the school two weeks ago and spoke of the plans his class had made to complete the plaque project at the opportune time. Allan Reid wrote to Lt.-Col. Foote inviting him to visit CHSS and the invitation was accepted. The colonel, now living in Cobourg, was accompanied by his wife, a former teacher at the school.

Using the story "John Weir Foote, V. C.," by F. C. Biehl, which appears in the text All Sails Set, Randy Holmes and Allen Reid interviewed Mr. Foote who said "I knew I had to stay with the men captured at the Dieppe raid - I never regretted the decision. Although I didn't like the prison camp diet, I did get a nice figure then - 140 pounds."

Referring to the investiture by King George VI, Mr. Foote said that because of a delay with the ship he missed the investiture.

Dan Lummis examines the medals of John Weir Foote, and touches the Victoria Cross. Other class members are Randy Holes, Patsy Neal and Mary Crawford.

MADOC - JOHN WEIR FOOTE



however, because he was able to chat informally with the King.

As a minister of reform institutions, John Foote enjoyed his work with young people. He believes they adjust themselves quickly in training school and improve their patterns of living. Before retiring in the fall of 1969, Mr. Foote was sheriff of the United Counties of Northumberland and Durham.

Using the text "Wooden Horse", by Eric Williams, Patsy Neal, Mary Crawford, and Dan Lummis interviewed Mr. Foote concerning particular aspects of prison camp life. He had been in the first camp with Mr. Williams.

"In prison camp as in everyday life, one has to make a life for oneself. There are ways of being agreeable." Using seeds from Red Cross parcels, they planted gardens;

they formed a band, and books were another form of recreation.

"There were constant escape plans". A security committee planned, and saved food for potential escapees. Orc camp had so many tunnels underneath that it was as if hundreds of giant moles were at work. "Escape plans kept prisoners interested and hopeful."

"One of the hardest parts of prison life was that prisoners could not take part in the fighting, and the lack of freedom was humiliating.

The Red Cross parcels were an asset, but then the Germans cut down on the rations and if parcels didn't arrive, the food supply was almost negligible. However, one learned how to use food supplies.

Lt.-Col Foote referred to war as an abnormal state, a destructive process. There hasn't really been



<https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-ii/padre-foote-stayed-behind.html?chrome=1>



<https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/people/only-wwii-chaplain-to-win-victoria-cross-was-a-canadian-presbyterian-orangeman-3805202>



## Madoc and Local Area History – Facebook Page:

<https://m.facebook.com/369769019861928/posts/major-john-weir-foote-vc-dieppe-hero-from-madoc-ontario/1139906539514835/>



<https://hastingshistoricalplaques.ca/regional-maps/john-weir-foote/70>



<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7033008/john-weir-foote>

