

HOLDER, GORDON ROSEBURGH

Lieutenant

Royal Hamilton Light Infantry

Royal Canadian Infantry Corps



Gordon Rosebrugh (Gord) Holder, a farm boy, was born in the Ontario village of St. George on 31 January 1921, the only son of Thomas and Alice (Rosebrugh) Holder. The male members of his mother's family were active in county and township government, while his father, an English immigrant, farmed a considerable acreage in the locality. Young Gordon attended the public school in St. George, a distinctive late-Victorian building that still stands - thanks to local conservationists --and once served as an architectural model for others in the area. Former neighbours recall a determined Gord walking by on the way to that school, accompanied by sisters Greta and Edna. Edna later recalled that sometimes when she was disposed not to go her older brother would talk her out of it, take her by the hand and lead her off to class.

At both the public school and the St. George Continuation School, which Gord next attended to complete a portion of his high school education, he could take little or no active part in extracurricular activities. The pressing after-school chores that most farm boys then had to do as a matter of course put paid to that. For a time this ongoing commitment to the farm tended to set him apart from the village children and as a result he and other junior cultivators could seldom make an appreciable social impact on the school. All the same, those who do remember him warmly recall a "quiet, bright, sensitive lad" who was proficient in his studies and who was well worth having as a friend. He was well worth having as a brother too.

One fall night when the parents were away Gord and the hired man saved a grateful Edna's life when they woke her and spirited her out of the Holders' burning farm house. The family later moved into the Rosebrugh's spacious home not far away. Edna also recalled that her brother was not always the "quiet lad". Like any male teenager he had his rambunctious moments. On one occasion he risked parental displeasure by driving the family car down the railway tracks near their home.

To complete his high school requirements Gord was obliged to leave St. George and attend Brantford Collegiate Institute and Vocational School (BCI), and for rented living quarters in town he had to settle for a store basement. His academic prowess and the inspired preparation he had received at the continuation school helped him complete the IV and V Form (Grades 12 and 13) work in just one year and obtain his senior matriculation at age 17. Because of his intensive and telescoped studies at BCI he again had had little time for extracurricular diversions, apart from showing up for his class picture in the school's yearbook, HELLO. Following graduation, it was clear that he should follow in the footsteps of a cousin, Stanley Schatz, another native of St. George, and proceed to McMaster University. Schatz had set a fine academic and extracurricular example, graduating in 1920 and going on to Osgoode Hall and a distinguished legal career. When Gord in turn arrived on the McMaster campus in September 1938 it was an ominous time, the month of the Munich crisis, to be judged the prelude to World War II when it came a year later and engulfed Britain and Canada.

Crisis or not, however, Gord had duly enrolled at McMaster. On his registration form, among other more neutral responses, he revealed a good deal when he emphatically answered "No!!" to the question as to whether or not he was planning to train for the ministry, Baptist or otherwise. This may have been because or in spite of the fact that both his parents were Baptist. In any event, having acquired a taste for living away from home, he readily became a denizen of North House in Edwards Hall, reputedly the most boisterous quarters in that residence. At the very least they were a cut above the store basement in Brantford.

As it happened, Gord was one of the very few BCI graduates of that generation who selected McMaster for their higher education, most of them moving on instead to the Universities of Western Ontario or Toronto. In his case, he may have been influenced by a McMaster advertisement in HELLO, which highlighted the availability of a science program he fancied.

Having long shown a scientific bent, it was no surprise when he registered in Honour Chemistry and Physics, one of the more high-powered courses offered in McMaster's Hamilton Hall. (His tuition fees amounted annually to \$140.00, which translates in 2001 terms into approximately \$1650.00.) Vital war-inspired research would soon be launched there under the direction of one of his professors, Harry Thode. As the student weekly, the *Silhouette*, reported in November, 1939, Hamilton Hall soon resounded to "weird noises" as the "merry hammering of Dr. Thode's willing helpers" remodelled the building to accommodate special research projects. Gord may well have been among them. In his final year he participated in the various programs undertaken by an activist Science Club to publicize the role and contributions of the sciences at the University, particularly in a time of national emergency. Throughout most of his time at McMaster he earned money to support himself by working summers as a waiter on a Canada Steamship Lines cruise ship operating out of Sarnia, Ontario. He may well have had as a crewmate fellow student and Edwards Hall resident Nairn Boyd [HR].

As if to make up for the deficiency in his school years, Gord threw himself into a round of extracurricular activities, including intramural athletics. Regularly, in spite of the demands of his science course, he somehow managed to find time to exchange his "remarkable green lab coat" - a classmate's awed description - for a wrestler's outfit or a football uniform. He also applied himself as an assistant to the Board of Publications and served as his year's reporter on the weekly *Silhouette*. As an active member of the Science Club, he may have had a hand in its whimsical column, "Lab Gab". This resident of the supposedly notorious North House was obviously no shrinking violet, being named, as well, Social Convenor for year '42. He was well liked, remembered by one undergraduate as "more like a brother than a friend ... always on hand when you needed him", a tribute that would have resonated with his sister, Edna. Like so many of his male peers Gord also saw a good deal of a McMaster co-ed during his stay on campus and after his graduation. All these varied activities may account for his having to write the occasional supplemental examination to bring his standing up to the required honour level.

Indeed, there may have been more to Gord than met the eye. When a friend gleefully wrote up his graduation "Obit" for the *Marmor*, the custom of the time, he claimed that Gordon "got his psychology from Freud, his philosophy from Omar and the pictures on his walls from *Esquire*". (That generation's man's magazine, *Esquire* featured the staggeringly curvaceous Petty and Varga Girls and at one point sparked a heated

debate between avant-garde and morally outraged readers of the *Silhouette*.) The Obit ended on a serious note, however, stating cryptically and correctly that Gord's "future seems to be in the hands of the Government". Indeed, the *Silhouette* had already speculated, in view of pronouncements from Ottawa, that the "government has in mind a more useful purpose for these sons of science than lugging a cannon", presumably war-related work in industry and the public service.

Nevertheless, Gord opted for "lugging a cannon", having served since the fall of 1939 as a committed cadet in the McMaster Contingent of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC). Because he joined up before his final set of spring examinations he was excused them, thanks to the prevailing regulations, and permitted to graduate BSc, his class work counting toward the degree requirement. Following his formal enlistment on 8 May 1942, he was predictably appointed to an officers' training course at Gordon Head, British Columbia and after successfully completing it was awarded his 2nd lieutenant's commission. Among those he had joined in the course were McMaster graduates like himself. They included Charles MacDonald, a former teacher, Robert Heard, and James Young, all three of whom later died serving in Italy. A poignant picture taken for the *McMaster Alumni News* in 1942 shows them in a cheerful group about to entrain for the West.

Following the award of his commission, Gord embarked in August, 1942 on a tour of instructional duties. His first posting was to No. 10 Infantry Training Centre at Camp Borden where in early September he was promoted lieutenant. Later that month he proceeded to another training centre at Kingston, and after his stint there and a sojourn once again in Borden, he found himself early in 1943 at the Basic Training Centre in Brantford, the city where he had completed his high school education. In late June, 1943 his stay in Brantford ended and after a brief return to Borden he was dispatched in mid-July to No. 1 Transit Camp, the gateway to the war across the Atlantic.

After being formally transferred to the Active Army Overseas, Gord embarked for the United Kingdom, arriving there on 22 July after a speedy crossing, probably on one of the erstwhile luxury liners the British had turned into wartime troopships. Two days after landing he was assigned to the 4th Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit (CIRU) and spent the remainder of the summer and the early fall at an Officers' Refresher School. On the whole, he did not think highly of the course he took there

though, as he told sister Greta in mid-September, 1943, he learned "a few things ... accidentally, or as a result of [the instructors'] mistakes". He derived more from what he called battle drill, a system of attack for small infantry formations that wasn't taught at the O.T.C. in Canada until shortly after I went thru' [sic] so I had a chance to learn it The course was great for physical condition[ing] - everywhere we went we ran, with web equipment, small packs, respirator, steel helmet, and rifles".

Although no "live ammunition" was employed, he jokingly told his sister that "we did use a lot of explosives ... so if you ever want anything blown up, just let me know".

On one occasion Gord conceded that "you think army and talk army so much ... in this country ... that it's hard to keep our shop talk out of our letters", All the same, he made a conscious effort to address other subjects. For example, this one time Ontario farm boy decided to report on the state of English agriculture, in the course of which he remarked on the small and irregularly shaped fields - "but then everything here is irregular" -- and the absence of anything resembling a Canadian barn. He also noted that many of the farmers seemed to be members of the gentry who routinely went to town attired in "tweed jackets and polished boots", a far cry from their counterparts in the Ontario that he knew. He took time out too to comment favourably on the local architecture, particularly the distinctive Tudor construction, which featured "oaken beams and red brick".

Then, partly with tongue in cheek, Gord turned to subjects that he thought would interest Greta and "the women" in the family:

"Around this troop town you rarely see a gal in civvies - the place is positively lousy with the A.T.S. [Auxiliary Territorial Service who] ... wear a poorly designed uniform, with the corniest looking hat you could imagine. So a girl really has to be something to look like anything in that uniform - and the A.T.S. around here don't seem to have many who are "something".

After brusquely dismissing the local ATS, he expressed more positive opinions about London's women - "dressing as smartly as those at home" -- or the pretty girls he encountered in Guildford, a scenic Surrey town that particularly appealed to him. Even so, he confessed to regarding English women "quite impersonally" at times, simply because, as he put it,

"they didn't seem to speak the same language". In time that would change.

After completing the refresher course, Gord enjoyed a short leave in Glasgow, which like other Scottish communities extended a warm hospitality to Canadian troops. Through the good offices of a welcoming committee he was treated to comfortable and affordable lodgings, a game of golf at the local course, and a dance attended by members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC), an event that turned out to be a "swell time". He also seized the opportunity to visit the University of Glasgow where he was given a warm faculty welcome and a tour of its "brand new" chemistry laboratories. He marveled that he was treated "as tho' I was at least a Ph.D. instead pf a mere BSc.", the McMaster degree he had received just a year and half before.

Following his leave and an interval spent with the 4th CIRU, Gord was assigned in November 1943 to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI), the unit he would remain with until the end. It was then stationed at Horsham, in the County of Sussex. He wrote home that the weather was "damp, miserable and cold" but at least he had had the pleasure of meeting a "Riley" soldier who had been a schoolmate of Greta's in St. George. He also expressed his gratitude for the imaginative gifts and parcels that his mother and sisters constantly sent him. In the same letter he tried to explain English currency to them but ended up quipping that "if you [now] understand it you've done better than I have".

Toward the end of November Gord was granted a short leave to London, where he stayed at a Victorian private hotel and enjoyed the luxury of a comfortable bed and a working fireplace. He had obviously read up on these matters because he told his mother that his room furnishings were "quite a happy style, before Victorian became bizarre, heavy, and hideous". Following another London leave early in 1944, he wrote to say that he was "bubbling all over with all sorts of vim and vitality as a result". Yet he also reported that there was little to lavish it on, since there was "not enuf [sic] happening to fill a letter". A few days later he was complaining that "if they don't find some decent work to keep me occupied ... I'll be a psychiatric case soon". The fact that mail from home was not getting through must have added to the malaise.

As other soldiers had noted during their "static" stay in England, inactivity could often have demoralizing effects, so much so that rigorous and time-consuming courses were routinely laid on to help remedy the situation. This may have happened in Gord's case. Before February came to a close he was put to work in various training programs, including eventually the handling of Bren gun carriers. He explained the circumstances in a letter to Greta, dated 26 April 1944:

"... the C.O. said that since I was to be Carrier Officer ... he would get me the last course available in the Imperial Army. There was no vacancy till now.... So far I'm liking the course quite well. Since it's an English School, everything is perfectly organized and the standard of instruction is quite high. There are a fair number of Cdn. [sic] Officers here on course and also a sprinkling of officers from the various European national armies".

Gord successfully passed the course -- perhaps as therapeutic as it was practical -- and was awarded what his service record called an Officers' Vehicle Mastership.

It was about this time that he and other homesick McMaster "Rileys" wrote a joint letter to the Alumni News after reading a 'dog-eared' issue of the magazine in their mess. Gord's contribution was in all probability thinly . encoded. "Spring", he remarked, "is pregnant with memories of Mac - the time of year when wild life returns to the woods and beckons away from work". His mind soon turned, however, from the lighthearted to reflections on other matters. He confided them to Greta "I remember when we were kids", he wrote nostalgically, "the days of a year would stretch endlessly ahead and now a year flies by like a whisper". The process, he believed, was accentuated by life in the military. "The Army", he reflected, " seems to destroy the idea of Time in men's minds, and creates ... a series of periods of change". "How strange it all will be", he concluded, "when we attempt to return to the life we knew before". For him and many others the normal and the familiar had become, like time, mere "whispers", in effect, casualties of war.

Within a matter of weeks Gord and his comrades had to shelve nostalgic reflections and memories of "wild life", however construed. On 3 July 1944 they were shipped to the maelstrom known as Normandy, about a month after the D-Day landings. Given the blood-letting on that newly-opened front, reinforcements and replacements were at a premium. Throughout July and August, as second-in-command of the regiment's Bren gun carrier platoon, Gord was in the thick of it, taking part in the hard-fought

attempt to close the so-called Falaise pocket and entrap German armies retreating eastward. It was obviously in the Germans' interest to keep the pocket intact for as long as possible and to that end they would "fanatically" contest every inch of ground as the rueful RHLI and other Allied units soon discovered. On the afternoon of 12 August 1944, some distance beyond the Normandy village of Barbery, the regiment came under heavy fire from enemy infantry, armour, and artillery, the dreaded 88's, and was obliged to take shelter in hastily dug slit trenches.

At this point Gord Holder enters the picture, thanks to the Whitakers' Victory at Falaise, the regimental history, *Semper Paratus*, and the moving recollections of Lieut.-Colonel Colin Gibson. "I ducked part way under a carrier", Gibson recalled, when an 88mm shell from a German tank exploded near me. The blast broke my right leg; I was in pretty bad shape. Gordy Holder got out of his trench even while we were under fire. He came over, stuck the shell-dressing on me and gave me a jab of morphine. It was one of the bravest acts I can remember. While he was doing that he got hit in the shoulder and I got hit again ... If it hadn't been for that dressing I think I'd have died from loss of blood".

Gord had thus helped to save the life of a grateful fellow officer, who thought the young lieutenant merited a decoration for his brave efforts. Both were among the hundred RHLI wounded that afternoon, one dominated pretty well by the Germans and their Panzer units before they withdrew. In the course of the battle, besides the wounded, the enemy killed twenty of the regiment's men and knocked out much of their outgunned Sherman tank support. After that, to the regiment's relief, its fortunes began to improve, if only marginally at times.

Meanwhile, along with the other wounded, Gord was evacuated and shortly shipped to a hospital in England. While there he did his best to assure the family that the shrapnel wounds he had suffered were neither "deep" nor "serious" and that "all [that] the jerries managed to do was put me out of action for a month or so" Indeed, he seemed more concerned about the possessions and effects he had been obliged to leave behind on the Normandy battlefield. He also went on to describe how he had been evacuated first to Bayeux and then a few days later by air to England. After landing he and his fellow stricken had embarked on an arduous five-hour ambulance ride to the hospital. He reported that morale was good in his ward, helped along by a "cheerful padre" and by the good-humoured "cracks that flew around". One hope the patients all

shared, namely that "jerry" would soon realize that he was beaten and surrender before the next Christmas rolled around. As events proved, it was a forlorn hope.

Following his recovery and before he returned to the regiment, Gord spent a good deal of time in the pleasant company of a young English woman whom he had recently met. Together they visited the scenic town of Richmond, walked the banks of the Thames, and dined and danced at local hotels. Then all too soon it was embarkation time for the Continent, and by the opening days of December, 1944 Gord had rejoined the RHLI and his carrier platoon. The regiment was then in a holding position in Holland and poised with other Allied units to invade Germany and advance on the Rhine. Gord soon discovered, however, that even in the midst of war and carnage, there could be light moments, Christmas for one, spent near Nijmegen. The officers, Gord included, served the men a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings and in their own mess were treated after dinner to a "long table ... set up to provide a crap shooter's paradise". Again Gord may have been a participant, though it is not known whether crap shooting was ever part of his extracurricular agenda, either at university or in the army.

In early February 1945 he wrote a long letter to his mother with the welcome news that "*all is quiet on the Western Front*". He also reported that his "dugout" was warm and that he had enjoyed the "DELICIOUS cake" and other gifts that had arrived in time for his twenty-fourth birthday a week earlier. But he added a sombre afterthought: the quiet fuelled "tenseness and expectation; this quiet that precedes the thunder and the lightning". The latter would arrive soon enough in all their fury. On 15 February 1945, the RHLI, part of the 4th Brigade of the 2nd Canadian Division, already on German soil, was occupying the ancient Rhineland town of Cleve, which had been ravaged by Bomber Command the night before. It was "Normandy all over again", in the words of another carrier commander, "the bomb-smashed towns; the mass movement of tanks, recce cars, trucks, and guns [and] the rolling countryside, dotted with smashed farms and villages" Along with his comrades Gord spent the night of the 15th "in dank and foul cellars, well protected from any hostile action by immense piles of rubble".

No such protection, however, was afforded four days later, on 19 February 1945. After a lengthy artillery barrage, the RHLI joined other Canadian units in an attack along the strategic Goch-Calcar Road with the object of

gaining some advantageous high ground. Gord doubtless shared with most others - again to quote his fellow carrier officer -- the "dread [of] facing that awful feeling of nakedness when ... you must move forward across open country among the brutal sights and sounds of battle". To make matters worse, the attack did not get off to a flying start. Because of heavy rains the night before, the going was problematic and some of the Canadians' motorized equipment bogged down on the way to the objective.

As best he could in the circumstances, Gord, at the head of his carrier platoon, made his own move, hoping to bring to bear his Bren guns and Wasp flame throwers. But that did not happen. The reasons were baldly stated by his commanding officer, Lieut.-Colonel Denis Whitaker, who had ordered him into battle to provide flank protection for the exposed infantry. In his war diary, Whitaker described it as the "most vicious battle I remember [and the Germans] killed Gordie Holder right at the start" by fire from their high velocity 88s. Indeed, the "carriers on the flanks were the first to go", according to a more graphic and unvarnished account written by a "Riley" sergeant: "[The soldier] who was driving for Lieutenant Gordie Holder, was on fire, burning like a torch. Holder was dead. Their carrier exploded like a gasoline-fed bonfire".

A senior RHLI officer understandably wrote "Gordie's" grieving mother a more restrained account of her son's last moments with the regiment. Major Hugh Arrell, an older brother of McMaster graduate Kenner Arrell [HR], who had died in Italy, told her that

Gordon had been with us a long time and during that period endeared himself to all of us. He was well liked and respected by his men and greatly admired by other officers. During recent weeks he displayed courage of the highest standard under conditions of the utmost severity.... Gordon was in charge of our carrier platoon ... and it was while leading his men to support a company about to be overrun by the enemy, that his machine was hit by anti-tank fire and Gord was killed instantly.

Denis Whitaker, whom Gord had described in a letter home as "*without a doubt the best ... C.O... in the ... Div*", matched, in his own hand, Arrell's laudatory message to the grieving Holders. Even allowing for the eulogizing in such circumstances, their heartfelt statements must have

been close to the mark. As one might expect, such tributes did not wither away over the years. In the spring of 2002, on the occasion of an RHLI memorial ceremony at Hamilton's Military Museum, Gord's former superior officer would wistfully recall the death of a "very fine comrade". He was, of course, not alone. For example, even more recently another former "Riley" officer, who was quartered with Gord the night before his death, also had fond memories of a "good man and soldier". George Gilmour, McMaster's Chancellor, had in turn spoken for himself and Gord's alma mater when he wrote the following to Mrs. Holder in March, 1945:

"The lengthening list of our beloved dead ... is a solemn matter and it holds names that make one dream of what these men would have done had they been spared.... I do want you to know that your son was one of our sons also, and that we are bereaved with you."

The grimly determined RHLI as a whole had also been hard hit on 19 February 1945, suffering some 50% casualties before taking its objective and routing the German paratroop defenders, who had been heavily reinforced before the battle. The war, now being fought on the enemy's soil at last, was to consume many more lives before it was finally over some three months later.

Gordon Rosebrugh Holder is buried in Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, Gelderland, Netherland, grave **X. B. 13**.



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Source: <https://www.mcmaster.ca/ua/alumni/ww2honourroll/holder.html>

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SOURCES: National Archives of Canada: Wartime Personnel Records / Service Record of Lieutenant Gordon R. Holder; Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Commemorative Information, Lieut. Gordon Roseburgh [sic] Holder; JM: correspondence of Gordon Holder, Denis Whitaker, Hugh Arrell, George Gilmour, Audrey Johnson et al, and assorted memorabilia.

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