



Latimer Hugh Denison

Torpedoes and Little Black Devils

1920 - 1945

Tim Martin

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Foreword

As a member of the Rusholme branch of the Denison family, I have always been interested in the role the Denisons played in early Canadian history. A focal point for the family history is St. John's Cemetery on the Humber located in Weston, Ontario.

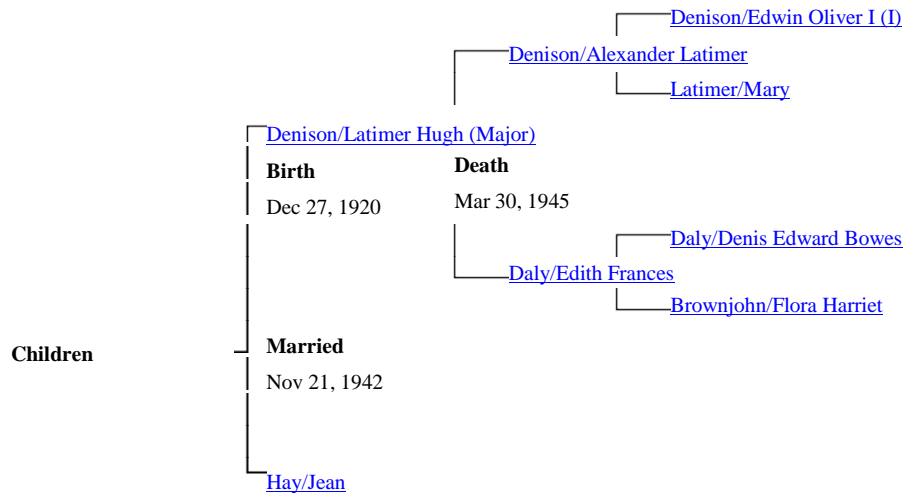
Canada had earned its rightful place on the world's stage with the tremendous contribution and sacrifices in the Great War of 1914-1918. Despite having experienced significant war-time losses, the great depression and growth of non-British immigration, ties to Britain and the empire were still very strong and our family was a leading proponent of service to the mother country in its time of need in WWII.

Latimer's military story is extensively documented and this essay relies heavily on that detailed documentation (see acknowledgements).

Latimer was born into a prominent Winnipeg family and went on to become a twice decorated war hero in the last years of WWII. He was killed in action and buried in Germany. His name is proudly included on the family cemetery war cenotaph located in Weston, Ontario.

About Latimer Hugh Denison

(From the Denison Family tree)



Alexander with Hugh and his sister Ann

Latimer Hugh Denison, who went by his middle name Hugh, was born December 27th, 1920 at Winnipeg, Manitoba. His father, Alexander Latimer Denison was from Minnedosa and married Edith Frances Daly at Rapid City, Manitoba in 1915. The first child died as an infant in 1916. They moved to Winnipeg where Alexander took employment with a fire insurance company.



Hugh as a boy

Hugh's older sister Eileen was born there in 1917 and he was the middle child followed by his sister Ann. He attended Robert H. Smith public school and Ravenscourt School for Boys in Winnipeg and enjoyed a variety of outdoor sports including canoeing, fishing, hunting and tennis. Hugh completed his education included mandatory training with their cadet corps at Ridley College in St. Catharines, Ontario in 1939.

Hugh returned to Winnipeg where he worked for the Bank of Montreal as a clerk at several branches earning \$12 a week.

He joined the Canadian Non-Permanent Active Militia in August 1940, where he was posted to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles 2nd Battalion based in the Minto armory in Winnipeg. At twenty years old, he attested with the Canadian Active Service Force at Winnipeg on June 9th 1941. His medical examination indicated that he had an appendectomy and was described as having blond hair, blue eyes, was 5'11" tall and weighed 158 lbs.

He was enrolled at the Officer Training Centre at Gordon Head, British Columbia that summer and attained the rank of 2nd Lieutenant upon successful program completion. He returned to Winnipeg in September where he undertook advanced infantry training and was made a full Lieutenant on October 30th, 1941.

Hugh and the war

Hugh was shipped overseas, landing in England on November 22nd, 1941 and posted to the 3rd Canadian Division Infantry Reinforcement Unit. He was later transferred back to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles (RWR) on March 1942, then made Acting Captain for his adjutant role on June 8th, 1942.



Hugh and his bride Jean

He met Jean Mary Hay at a dance and later obtained permission to marry. The couple wed at East Preston, Sussex, England on November 21st, 1942.

Throughout much of 1943, Hugh was attached to various Air Liaison Groups, including working with the Royal Air Force while also taking a number of training courses. He was transferred from the RWR in January 1944 to a posting with 10 Canadian Air Liaison Section.



Hugh at the airfield. Back row, second from left



*Winston Churchill visit at Bazenville
July 18, 1944*

Hugh sailed from England to Normandy on D-Day, June 6th, 1944 when his ship was torpedoed and sunk by the enemy. Fortunately, he was rescued and successfully landed on Juno Beach (Courseulles-sur-Mer) the next day and assumed his duties as Air Liaison Officer at 127 Airfield in Bazenville France, co-ordinating air and ground operations.

Quickly built right after D-day, the temporary airfield was used to evacuate thousands of injured soldiers, sailors and airmen back to England. In addition, a constant stream of other allied air force squadrons used the airfield for fuel, ammunition or repair. The airfield was used until August 28th 1944. As the Canadians moved on, it was dismantled and the land returned to the French farmers.

Today, nothing remains of the former airfield. It was for his co-ordination role there that he was later awarded the “**Croix de Guerre**” by the French government.

The RWR, also known as the Little Black Devils, along with other 7th Brigade battalions of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division were among the first Commonwealth infantry units



to land at Juno Beach and suffered heavy D-Day losses. The objectives of the division (including the Royal Winnipeg Rifles) on D-Day were to proceed inland, cut the Caen-Bayeux road, seize the Carpiquet airport west of Caen, and form a link between the two British beaches on either flank (Sword and Gold). After heavy losses and a number of RWR soldiers being captured and murdered by the German SS, they battled their way through Normandy and helped liberate French channel ports.

As the 3rd Canadian division proceeded north toward the Netherlands, The Little Black Devils fought in the difficult battle for the Scheldt near Antwerp in October 1944. While there, Hugh requested a transfer back to the front lines of the RWR. The request was granted and he rejoined his regiment on January 20th, 1945. He was appointed Acting Major in command of D Company on January 23rd, 1945.

On February 21st 1945, the RWR commanded by Hugh was ordered to capture thickly wooded high ground overlooking Moyland, Germany. The objective was won and held despite repeated counter-attacks by the Germans. For his leadership and coolness of command, Hugh was awarded the “**Distinguished Service Order**” (DSO).

After the battle, Hugh was granted nine days personal leave to England. When he returned, he and the Little Black Devils crossed the Rhine into Germany and were ordered to capture the village of Netterdan and the town of Emmerich. It was there where twenty-four year old Hugh was killed in heavy fighting in the early morning hours of March 30th. Upon hearing the news, his father was reported to have been devastated at the loss of his only son.

In a letter written to Hugh's wife Jean, Captain C.D. Shepard described his death:

"Apparently Hugh's company was held up by a German self-propelled gun – a sort of semi-tank affair – and Hugh had crawled forward with a PIAT – the small armour-piercing weapon carried by infantry – until he was only 50 or 75 yards from the Germans. The Germans had seen Hugh and he was killed instantly by a high explosive shell... It was an action that Hugh had every right to delegate to one of his juniors but no doubt he appreciated its hazards and therefore decided to do the job himself".

Major L.H. Denison was temporarily buried at the Vrsasselt cemetery near Emmerich, Germany. On February 18th, 1946 his remains were relocated to the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery near Nijmegen, Netherlands in a practice known as consolidation. There are over 2,300 Canadian soldiers buried there with his specific grave site number being "XX G 12".



Epilogue

Hugh's father, Alexander passed away in 1955. Hugh and Jean were married only three years with no children. After the war, Jean moved to Winnipeg, re-married, had a daughter and relocated to Edmonton. Jean passed away in 1995. At time of writing, Hugh's sister Ann is still alive.

Latimer Hugh Denison is well remembered by the Manitoba Government which named a lake in his honour in 1948. His employer, the Bank of Montreal included his name on the list of their fallen employee plaque at their Montreal headquarters. He is also memorialized at St George's church in Winnipeg, Ridley College in St. Catharines, Ontario and at the cenotaph in the Denison family cemetery in Weston, Ontario.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission and local authorities also do an excellent job of maintaining records, preserving burial sites (such as Groesbeek) and ensuring these young men and women who never came home are remembered and thanked.

At time of writing, historians and Juno beach museum employees in Normandy are filming a documentary entitled "**Little Black Devils – From Juno to Putot**" which will tell the story of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles Regiment from the days leading up to D-Day through to their battle with the German 12th SS Panzer Division near the French village of Putot. Director Frederick Jeanne, was passionate about the role of the Canadian troops who had liberated his home village in Normandy and had already written "Hold the Oak Line" an illustrated history of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade. The following link provides more detail about the film which is due for release in 2024.

[79 years after D-Day, friends in Normandy are making a film to honour Canadian regiment | CBC News](#)

Local inhabitants in Normandy, the Netherlands and Germany still remember and thank Canada after all these years. If any war is righteous, surely the combined effort of all the allies takes its place in history as being justified in stopping the expansion and extermination plans of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi henchmen. Although the death toll was not as great as that in WWI, Canada lost 44,000 service men and women and played a major role in the liberation of Europe.

I am grateful to Hugh's nephew, Timothy Latter for sharing family photos for this story which is written for the extended Denison family. However it is only one of thousands of stories of which many have been forgotten and lost over the last 80 years. In the near future there will be no veterans left to pass their experiences on to future generations.

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Acknowledgements

Manitoba Historical Society

Faces to Graves

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Ms Barbie Kirk (Denison family member)

Mr. Timothy Latter (Nephew of Hugh Latimer)

St. John's Cemetery on the Humber, (Weston, Ontario)

www.stjohnsonthehumber.ca (Denison family website)

Attachments

Hugh was posthumously awarded the following campaign and service awards:

- 1939-1945 Star
- France-Germany Star
- Defence Medal
- War Medal
- Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp

Croix de Guerre (1939-1945)

Period:

Second World War (1939-1945)

Rank:

Captain

Unit:

Air Liaison Section

Citation:

"Capt. Denison commanded a Canadian air liaison section and sailed with the advanced party to Normandy on D-Day. His craft was sunk with all equipment and kit. In spite of these difficulties Capt. Denison succeeded in establishing his section, which worked most effectively from the earliest stages of the landing. This work entailed proceeding with the leading troops and maintaining wireless communication with aircraft. His courage and determination in these operations led to the destruction of a great quantity of enemy material and men."



Awarded with gold plated star.

Distinguished Service Order (DSO)

Period:

Second World War (1939-1945)

Rank:

Acting Major

Unit:

"D" Company, Royal Winnipeg Rifles, Canadian Army

Awarded on:

May 26th, 1945

Awarded for:

Operation Veritable

Recommendation:

On the 21st of February 1945 "D" Company, Royal Winnipeg Rifles, commanded by Captain (Acting Major) Denison was ordered to capture the high ground, which is thickly wooded and overlooks Moyland, Germany to the North East. This attack was quickly pushed home despite the heavy defensive fire put down by the enemy and the few enemy that were left alive withdrew.

Later in the day "D" Company was ordered to pass through "C" Company and to seize the high ground at the eastern tip of the wood. This required a 1000 yard advance through an extremely thick wood which was being subjected to the full weight of the enemy's fire. Casualties amongst Major Denison's men were heavy but ceaselessly moving from platoon to platoon he kept control of his company and by his own personal courage inspired his men to go on. Machine gun fire from prepared positions on the hill feature was intense but by skillfully maneuvering his men he got his now depleted company into an assaulting position and stormed the hill top with himself leading.

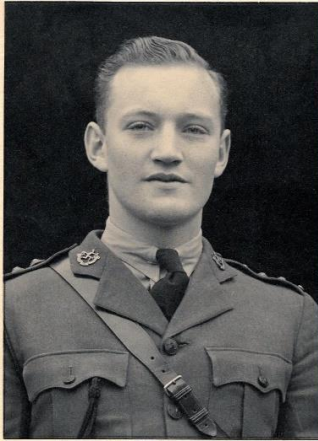
During the consolidation phase they were counterattacked twice by the enemy, both of these were successfully beaten off with heavy casualties to the Germans. When the enemy were seen forming up for a third attack Major Denison, from the crest of the hill and in full view of the enemy personally sited and directed the fire of a troop of tanks, which had come up in the meantime. The defensive fire brought down by the company and the tanks quickly broke up the enemy attack and they withdrew.

By his initiative, leadership, courage and offensive spirit Major Denison was able to inspire his men to hold their hard won objective thus securing the left flank of the Brigade.



The London Gazette, dated May 26th, 1945:

"Awarded in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the field."



Service photo



Award notification



Relaxing on leave

