

Harry Watts and his Military Motorcycles

A brief summery of Harry's horses.

By Jeremy Van Dyke

Harry Watts was an extraordinary man, spending time with him blessed you with memories to be cherished for a lifetime. Such a moment in time was hearing the tale of when Harry rode his trusted Norton by my mother's house in Groningen in April 1945, a few days before the Canadian Army came to liberate the city. That was Harry, independent and always living life one adventure at a time.

Everyone knew Harry as the Second World War Dispatch Rider, yet most have no idea what a dangerous job this young man took on his shoulders. The Dispatch Rider, or Don R was one of the very few voluntary positions in the Canadian Army. The life expediency of a Don R was less than that of a Bomber crew member, less than a one in 4 chance of surviving. These young men went through the war with one of the largest targets on their backs. If a ranking officer was standing next to a Don R the cross hairs of every sniper would be on the Don R. The messages they carried were deemed to valuable to be sent by wire and labeled TOP SECRET, this was very well know to the Axis armies.

During his time as a Dispatch Rider, Harry would have rode various machines, for basic training there were the Indian Scouts and Harley Davidson WLC's. Overseas it was B.S.A's and Norton 16H's. Finally, Harry's last dispatch was delivered on his Ariel W/NG on May 8th 2005, 60 years after VE-Day.

Looking into Harry Watt's life military career on two wheels could be looked at in 4 time periods;

- Basic training at Camp Bordon, Canada
- The Armoured Corps Training at Blackheath, England
- Front line service during the War in Italy and the Netherlands
- Final Dispatch to a Princess

Basic training at Camp Bordon, Canada

The first experience Harry had with a motorcycle was on an Indian Scout with a sidecar. These motorcycles would have been used for a very short time to provide a since of feel to the new recruits. The real basic training would have been done on the legendary Harley Davidson WLC.

Basic training in Canada at Camp Bordon Harley Davidson WLC

The HD WLC was the military version of Harley Davidson's civilian model of the WL. Not to be confused with the American military version, the WLA, the WLC had a number of revisions stipulated by the Canadian Department of Defense.

The most notable difference between the American WLA and the Canadian WLC was the wheel size, the WLA had a 20' front and 16' rear whereas the WLC had 16' for front and rear plus interchangeable. Another notable difference is the position of the headlamp and horn, the WLC had the headlamp mount

above the horn to shine over the tool box mounted on the front fender. The WLC also came without the rear rack (solo), longer front forks and the control features of the bike differed in a number of ways; accelerator on left with the Ignition lever on right and the clutch lever mounted on the left. These differences would have been dictated to British Defense standards set out by the British for all commonwealth countries.

Harley Davidson WLC

Engine – V twin (45°) 4 stroke air-cooled

Power rating – 23 bhp @ 4500 rpm 45.12cu inch/739cc

Chain drive 3 speed gearbox with hand shift

Weight – 625 lbs.

The WLC was a big, heavy motorcycle and use as a frontline bike was limited to good roads. It was the perfect bike for Provost work, convoy duty and basic training. One of the traits that the Canadian Forces found in regards to the WLC was the loud backfire that happened above 4500 rpm, not a great trait when under the cross hairs of an enemy sniper! This, along with the excessive weight and low ground clearance made the choice to keep this motorcycle out of the front lines during the Second World War.

As the WLC and WLA were produced in large quantities (over 70,000 in total) there are still a great number of these bikes around the world. Pictures, stats and endless comments regarding the WL's can be found online in seconds. Below is one of my favourite Harley WLC pictures from the war. It's of a young Canadian Dispatch rider with young children at brigade headquarters in the UK.



*The photo is Credit: Harrison (Sgt),
War Office official photographer*

Notice the coveted leather jerkin. These vests were standard gear for all Don R's however very hard to get as Officers and particularly Paratroopers loved getting their hands on them! The Canadian Dispatch Rider's boots were also special as they were the only boots to have 3 buckles at the top! The helmet is also of interest as the Don R's safety helmet was typically made from pulp. Goggles were often a personal choice. Harry mentioned to me once that the Colonel presented him with a pair of German tankers goggles, the most incredible goggles he ever had.

The Armoured Corps Training at Blackheath in England

Following the Great War Brittan realized that any future conflicts would be using a mechanized form, the days of the horse drawn transport were over. As such the time between the Wars would be spent finding suitable means of transport to replace the horse. To do this military authorities created the Mechanical Warfare Experimental Establishment, later to become the Mechanization Experimental Establishment.

The MWEE/MEE was charged with testing every mean of mechanical power and determine if it was suitable for the Department of Defense. Part of the testing procedure for motorcycles was to a completion of 10,000 miles put on the bike. There would be complete tear down and inspections for wear at 500, 5,000 and the final one at 10,000-mile marks.

Every bit of information would be recorded from the smallest component failure to the wear process of each component. An intern report would be compiled at the 5,000-mile mark and a final report, deemed TOP SECRET filed at the end of the test. By the end of the 1920's the MWEE/MEE had tested virtually every motorcycle manufacture and model in the UK, no small feat when considering the number of manufacturers in the UK at the time.

This testing would continue through the 30's with the conclusion that civilian models would not be completely suitable for military use. The MWEE/MEE set standards (*such as a max weight of 300 lbs.*) for a military purposed motorcycle. Standards set would include the size wheel assembly that needed to be interchangeable front and rear and placement of controls. Various components should also be interchangeable between manufactures to keep the need for spare parts as simplified as possible.

At the end of the 30's and then at the start of the Second World War there would be contracts awarded to B.S.A for the model M20, Triumph for the 3S, Norton's 16H and the Matchless G3, these would be the main staple for the British military up to Dunkirk. Following Dunkirk, the British War Department started placing orders directly with all the motorcycle manufactures in order to replace the incredible losses of equipment left behind on the continent.

Training at Blackheath would have had a mixture of various motorcycle brands and models in 1943. When looking through pictures and the odd video you would find most of the Canadians did the training on the Norton 16H, B.S.A M20 and Triumph 3S. These 3 models would carry the vast majority of Canadians through the War.

During his training at Blackheath, Harry predominantly spent most of his time on a Norton 16H, the same model that would take him through the majority of the War. There is a fantastic, well-known image of a Canadian climbing a very steep hill during training exercises. Harry and I spent many hours talking about that hill and location; know as the *“Punch Bowl”*. Harry was one of the successful candidates to concur the Punch Bowl and every time he told the story it was with that famous grin. However, unlike most of the images you see with a line of recruits waiting for their turn, Harry waited for an invitation from his instructor to give it a go.

“Not everyone would get the chance. The instructors would send everyone home at the end of the day, but ask one or two to stay behind. You knew what was coming. They would pick out a few that they thought were ready and take you to the punch bowl. There you had to take a long run at it, get the bike to the red line and keep it there all the way to the top.”

Not everyone could do it, not everyone had the nerve. Harry did.



Triumph 3SW

Engine – 343c single cylinder side valve 4 stroke

Power rating – 12 bhp @ 4500 rpm

Chain drive 4 speed gearbox with foot shift

Weight – 317 lbs.



Harry's experience with the Triumph was very limited. His buddy Reg did end up with one while in Italy and I can only imagine that Reg and Harry swapped rides a few times during the War.

B.S.A M20

Engine – 496cc single cylinder side valve 4 stroke

Power rating – 13 bhp @ 4200 rpm

Chain drive 4 speed gearbox with foot shift

Weight – 369 lbs.



Harry having a photo op with his well used B.S.A. M20. This is the same image Harry used for the front cover of his book, The Dispatch Rider.

The Birmingham Small Arms company produced 126, 000 M20's for the War effort, making it the most numerous produced and longest serving motorcycle of the British forces, not a bad feat considering it was initially viewed as a failure by the War Dept.

At the outbreak of World War II BSA was Britain's largest motorcycle manufacturer with a long history of armaments supply to the armed forces. Designed by *Val Page* the BSA M20 started development in 1937 as a heavy-framed sidecar model with a simple 500 cc single cylinder side valve engine. It had low compression and plenty of low-end torque through a standard BSA gearbox.

Early K-M20 models from 1939 were made from standard civilian parts with the addition of military fittings, such as a large 8-inch Lucas DU142 headlight (fitted with a black out mask), a timing-gear cover with a screw-in plug for access to the magneto drive-pinion nut and special filler caps for the petrol and oil tanks. These early military M20 models were also fitted with a long spiked prop stand on the rear nearside pivoted from a lug brazed on to the rear frame tube.

Norton 16H

Engine – 499cc single cylinder side valve 4 stroke

Power rating – 14 bhp @ 4500 rpm

Chain drive 4 speed gearbox with foot shift

Weight – 388 lbs.



My favourite image of Harry during his service; the legendary Harry Watts enjoying his first bottle of Canadian beer since leaving Canada. This image was taken just after the Canadians won the battle of the Liri Valley, a hard and vicious battle in Italy. The Canadians were in a rest area refitting and repairing their equipment. Harry had just parked his trusted Norton on a hill overlooking the scene and opened his prize when an official war photographer appeared and asked if he could take Harry's picture.

The following image was taken just prior to the above. I asked Harry if that could be him on his Norton coming down the hill beside the tank on the left, by the grin on his face I'm sure it was.



The Norton 16H was the most widely used military motorcycle by the British Commonwealth Nations. Total production for the 16H was 100,000 machines.

Many Dispatch Riders would lose their lives in the UK from the weather, convoys and blackout conditions. Imagine wet roads at night with very little light. Harry almost lost his life on a few occasions, both on the roads of London and during convoy duty in Italy and always-paid tribute to his training in both Canada and the UK for saving his life.

Front line service during the War

Once Harry reached the continent and started front line service, his entire riding career was on two motorcycles, a B.S.A M20 that should have been used for scrap metal and a brand new Norton 16H.

The B.S.A Harry inherited could be best described as a cat living on its 10th life. After completing training at Blackheath Harry was assigned to the 5th Armored Corps and joined a convoy headed to sunny Italy. The supply ship carrying all the equipment was torpedoed and sunk, resulting in the Canadian's inheriting all their equipment from various British forces leaving Italy to later join in on the D-Day landings.

The B.S.A Harry was assigned came from the legendary English 7th Division, better known as the Desert Rats. The Desert Rats, led by Gen. Allen Francis Harding, were especially noted for a hard-fought three-month campaign against the more-experienced German Afrika Korps, led by Gen. Erwin Rommel. They fought a tenacious, three month battle against the Germans in North Africa and their equipment was in shambles and completely worn out. Sand and dust in the desert severely took a toll on every piece of machinery that was part of the campaign, including the B.S.A.

As soon as it was possible, in military terms, Harry was appointed a brand new Norton 16H and this trusty machine would carry him through Italy, across Belgium and France on train and then throughout the Netherlands. After VE-Day Harry still had the Norton right up until leaving it in a field and departing for home in the summer of 45.

Unfortunately, without the serial number stamped on the frame; there is no way to trace the actual build information for any of the bikes Harry rode, or what happened to any of them. Harry, as with all Don R's not only had the responsibility to deliver those Top Secret messages, but they also were responsible for all maintenance and repairs to their bikes. Harry had many great stories of "fixes" made during this time. He once told me that when the key in one of the drive gears/sprockets broke he had to make one to fit from a piece of slate stone. That stone key was still in its place right up until the day Harry said good-bye to the Norton.

One topic of conversation that comes up regularly about military bikes is in regards to markings and colours. Many take the white tank numbers and letters to reference to units the bike is assigned to or even the individual rider. The white tank markings that generally started with the letter C made reference to the wartime contracts the machines were ordered under, or the place the bike was delivered to. These markings often where painted over when the machines were assigned to units.

As for colours, this topic has no end. Many times the factories would end up using whatever shade of green they had, as long as it was close. Shades also differed from factory to factory. To make life more confusing, bikes painted in the field would use whatever was available close at hand.

When the Canadians left Italy, they would do so under complete secrecy. They were told to remove all badges and markings from their personal uniforms as well as paint over all vehicle markings. When Harry did this he grabbed whatever colours of green he could find. Chances where that can of paint was made from several other opened and used cans combine to make its very own shade of green, "*Dusty Green!*" *Harry's nickname was Dusty...*

Final Dispatch to a Princess

Harry Watt's final, officially Independent dispatch took place on May 8th, 2005. This was a very special book of pictures, sketches, and poetry done by the kids of the *New Dawn School (the first and real New Dawn School.)* in Cambridge (Galt) Ontario. These kids were, Harry's children and they meant the world to Harry.

That dispatch was to be delivered to the Dutch Princess Margriet, the third daughter born to Queen Juliana of the Netherlands and born in Ottawa during the Second World War. The dispatch took place during the National Veterans Parade in Apeldoorn and televised live on the CBC across Canada from coast to coast, as well as live across the Netherlands. Harry also made the front page of several newspapers across the Nation on his trusted steed. It would become one of Harry's most cherished memories.



Harry delivers his last dispatch to Princess Margriet. From left to right, Jan De Vries, Professor Pieter Van Vollenhoven (Princess Margriet's husband), Canadian Governor General Adrian Clarkson and the Princess. The second image is the Front cover of the Record taken just prior to the delivery of Harry's dispatch.

That day Harry's ride would be an Ariel W/NG.

Ariel W/NG

Engine – 346cc single cylinder over head valve 4 stroke

Power rating – 14 bhp @ 5800 rpm

Chain drive 4 speed gearbox with foot shift

Weight – 373 lbs.



Harry's Ariel W/NG at the 2010 Veterans parade in Apeldoorn, May 9th, 2010

During the War Harry did occasionally have an opportunity to ride another Ariel W/NG. He mentioned to me that his Quartermaster had acquired one for his personal use and although he never lent it to anyone, Harry was the exception. Based on a Swiss Trials bike design, the Ariel had extra long front

girder forks that gave it a very nice ride and extra ground clearance. The small 350cc engine had lots of bottom end grunt and also a high top speed, thus making it a very desirable bike during the War.

While we don't know any details regarding Harry's wartime motorcycles, we do know quite a bit about his Ariel. This particular bike was built under contract C12450 numbering 1800 unfits to be delivered to the RAF. It was dispatched on April 23, 1943 of a total of 4,100 delivered. The engine in the Ariel was swapped at some point in time, most likely by the Dutch Army after acquiring most of the Canadian Forces equipment following the end of the War. The engine currently in the Ariel was produced on May 4th, 1945 making it one of the very last engines produced under a Wartime contract. Something I have found very interesting after researching Harry's Ariel was that the official records have this bike assembled by J. Anson on April 24th, 1943, the day after the order was dispatched!

What makes this bike very special and rare is that it is possibly the best preserved, original Ariel W/NG in existence. The bike is 95% original and only one of 12 RAF Ariel's in the Ariel registration books.

Although a RAF machine, we believe this bike ended up with the RCAF in the Netherlands at the end of the War, most likely to a Canadian fighter pilot for his personal transportation. Today the bike is in Harry's unit markings on fenders and tanks with Harry's personal registration number in white on the tank.

Harry took position of the Ariel a few days prior to the parade in 2005 and it stayed in the Netherlands until 2011 when it finally came to Canada. The bike could be then found at various occasions Harry hosted such as the May 5th Netherlands Liberation ceremonies Harry hosted at the Kitchener Market.



Harry and the CAV during the 2018 VE-Day celebrations at the Kitchener market and Harry and his daughter Laura enjoying a moment.



Harry doing what he did best, making life lasting memories at the Veterans parade in Apeldoorn, May 8th, 2005. Harry's close and great friend "Trapper" enjoys a ride during the 2010 Veterans parade in Apeldoorn, NL.

The following pictures were taking at the inaugural Harry Watts Memorial Ride in 2019. These three motorcycles represent the two bikes Harry rode during his front line service in the War, a B.S.A M20 and Norton 16H. The Norton is in desert brown paint and the B.S.A in typical Army green. The bikes from left to Right are the Ariel W/NG, Norton 16H and B.S.A M20.



