



SPECIAL DISPATCH RIDERS – URGENT MAPS AND MESSAGES – “GET THE MESSAGE THROUGH”

By HCol Ken Lloyd, 32 Signal Regiment

Dispatch riders (or despatch riders, as we used the British spelling during WWII) were military messengers delivering important information and equipment that could not be sent through electronic or digital means. While dispatch riders were phased out after the Second World War, the skill is being reintroduced for Signal Operators today. How different is being a Dispatch Rider today with more than 70 years ago? How do the skills compare with those in WWII? We ask Despatch Rider Cpl Hugh Patterson, a 100-year-old WWII veteran, and Cpl Kurt Rajala, Special Dispatch Rider currently serving with 32 Signal Regiment.



In World War II, Despatch Riders (DRs) like Cpl Hugh Patterson rode Norton 16H motorcycles from the D-Day beaches, through France, Holland, and into Germany. The DR rode alone, delivering maps, orders, intelligence, and situational updates critical to the battle. Hugh Patterson was one of 7 Despatch Riders from his

Section of 24 who survived enemy fire, shelling, and neck level garrotting wires set across dark roads. Often, reacting to enemy fire, ‘off-roading’ was a DR survival skill. The Norton was a favoured Despatch bike, with its high ground clearance and its ability to survive being ‘ditched’ when diving for cover, riding between trees, or



hailed through mud. Special skills are needed to be a Dispatch Rider and those skills are now being taught again. In WWII the vehicles of choice were the motorcycle or the Jeep. Today, in Petawawa, the chosen vehicle is the ATV.



Cpl Hugh B. Patterson a Veteran Signaller and Despatch Rider in WWII. Active service # B38779 July 1942 to January 1946 with 2nd Canadian Infantry Division Royal Canadian Corps of Signals.



Cpl Kurt Rayala is a Signal Operator with 32 Signal Regiment, he attended an SDR course (Special Dispatch Rider) with 2 CMBG HQ & Sigs Sqn in Petawawa. The course was run by 2 CMBG HQ & Sigs to meet its own needs for qualified SDRs. Cpl Rayala joined the Canadian Armed Forces Primary Reserve in 2018 and has served in Signals for 3 years. Cpl Rayala completed the ATV and SDR training with 2 CMBG HQ & Sig course in August 2021.

Ten questions were shared with our Despatch Riders. WWII Cpl Patterson's answers are followed by present day Cpl Rayala's answers.

Cpl Patterson

Q1. What is the role of a DR?

I was a despatch rider in WWII. My role was to deliver communications, orders, maps, messages, and mail to all the field formations in the 2nd Canadian Division. There were two daily despatch runs and occasionally, a special despatch if it was required. I also took turns working in the Signals Office as a clerk: processing messages, sorting, and stamping mail. The field formations in 2nd Canadian Division included: 4th, 5th and 6th Infantry Brigades, 2nd Anti-tank Brigade, 3rd Light Anti-Aircraft, Engineering Company, 8th RECCE Regiment, Medium Artillery, and Heavy Artillery. I made my despatch runs on a motorcycle and sometimes in a Jeep depending on the situation and what was available at the time.

Cpl Rayala

Q1. What is the role of the SDR?

Special Dispatch Riders provide courier service in the battlespace by delivering sensitive information in a swift and secure manner. Navigating offroad terrain and under the threat of enemy contact, SDRs ensure the passage of information to enable senior commanders to exercise command and control.

Cpl Patterson

Q2. What purpose did DRs serve in the Army given the use of radios and telephones that send information much more quickly and securely than a despatch rider?

During WWII, radios and telephone lines were not always secure or dependable. Telephone lines and cables could be cut. Radios were finicky and you didn't always get a clear signal. We didn't have the use of satellites or the sophisticated tech that is available today. DRs would get the messages through no matter what, they went and delivered vital despatches as quickly as possible. There were often bulky orders, maps, and other items that had to be delivered.

Cpl Rayala

Q2. What purpose do SDRs serve in the 21st century given the use of sophisticated communication and information systems that send information much more quickly and securely than a dispatch rider?

While modern communication and information systems can send information more efficiently than an SDR, these technologies do have limitations. SDRs fill these gaps by fulfilling the “last mile” in the command and control network by delivering information where voice and data technologies are not able to do so. This can be in the delivery of something that can't be sent via voice or data technologies like a physical map. SDRs can also be dispatched where environmental factors such as terrain and weather limit the use of voice and data systems. However, electronic warfare probably serves as the greatest reason to have SDRs in the 21st century. Whether by electronic countermeasures imposed by the enemy through jamming, or through electronic protection measures such as emission control and electronic silence, voice and data systems can be made unavailable to send information. As such, SDRs would enable continuity of the flow of information that otherwise could not be sent.

Cpl Patterson

Q3. How versatile were motorbikes and Jeeps for this role?

Motorbikes were sometimes more versatile because you could get around craters, shell holes in the road, or climb up hills and difficult terrain. You could hoist it into a ditch and avoid mortar fire. Jeeps were good vehicles for the role because you could travel greater distances. Some dispatches required that I travel more than a hundred miles if I was sent to HQ. Other times, the distances were short, less than 20 or 30 km, if sent to field units. I believe the ATV, currently used by SDRs, would have a shorter range for travel, limited to formations close by, not meant for long distance.



Cpl Rayala

Q3. How versatile is the ATV for this role?

An ATV is a very versatile vehicle that allows an SDR to accomplish his or her objective in delivering information in the battlespace. Since soldiers operate in virtually any environment, SDRs require a vehicle that can go where the soldiers are. With 4-wheel drive and a locking differential, the ATV I drove was capable of traversing through the various adverse terrain I drove through, such as steep sandy inclines as well as muddy and partially submerged paths. However, one limitation I noted with the ATV is that since it is a wider vehicle, it is not particularly suitable for driving in between trees. During my ATV driver training, the path ahead of us was too submerged to traverse through. So, we circumnavigated it by driving around it, through the tree line beside the path. We had to choose our path carefully in order to pass between trees. On a dispatch mission, an SDR would be more limited in the areas he or she can traverse.



Cpl Patterson

Q4. What was your training like? (Classroom and Field portions)

I did my first military training in Orillia, July 1942, Basic training. In September 1942, I did Advanced Signals training at Vimy Barracks, Kingston, ON. In the classroom, we reviewed a range of Signals communications. Wireless radios, Morse Code, and motorcycle riding for DR/SDR (Despatch Rider / Special Despatch Rider).

The field portion of my DR course was made up of riding motorcycles all over the countryside. We practised hill climbing and blackout riding, no headlights. We also studied map reading and the use of a compass for navigation.

The classroom portion of my training included military protocols, procedures, safety and security measures. In December 1942, I was deployed to Europe and was sent to Cove Hampshire. This was a Signals holding unit. I continued some training here in January 1943. In 1944, closer to D Day, I participated in several military schemes. DRs took turns directing the Convoy. We delivered despatches daily.

Cpl Rayala

Q4. What was your training like?

My training consisted of 1 week of an ATV Driver Wheel course and 2 weeks of the Special Dispatch Rider course. During the ATV driver course, I learned about basic maintenance of the ATV, inspecting the serviceability of the ATV, and learning how to drive the ATV to include various offroad surfaces and terrain as well as during daytime and nighttime lighting.

The SDR course was split between 1 week of in class learning, followed by a 1 week field portion. For the classroom portion, I learned about ensuring the security of the information we would deliver such as how to package sensitive information as well as policies and procedures. There was also a lesson related to operating in a battlefield such as IED awareness, and forward and rearward passage of lines. Finally, there was extensive learning on battle procedure and navigation to enable us to conduct a Dispatch mission.

For the field portion, there was a dismounted map and compass navigation followed by a vehicle GPS navigation – both conducted during daytime and nighttime. Afterward, we had practice dispatch missions and concluded with assessments in our ability to successfully conduct a dispatch mission.

Cpl Patterson

Q5. Did you learn about maintenance?

Our DR training included some basic maintenance of our bikes, but there were “Fitters” (mechanics available to service bikes when needed).

Cpl Rayala

Q5. Did you learn about maintenance?

I only learned basic maintenance of the ATV. This included inspecting vehicle serviceability and checking the fluid levels. I did not learn more advanced level of maintenance on the ATV.



Cpl Patterson

Q6. What do you think about being a DR?

I enjoyed exploring the roads and the countryside. I enjoyed riding a motorcycle. As long as you were not in a battle zone or under fire, it was a great job. It was my job to deliver dispatches safely and quickly. I did my job.

Cpl Rayala

Q6. What do you think about being an SDR?

I think it is a unique experience to train as an SDR. In my limited experience in military and the signals world, I would sometimes hear about SDRs and what they do, but it was nothing more than discussion. So, to have the opportunity to learn and experience the role of an SDR is exciting. It is also an honour to follow and continue the legacy of SDRs of the past who played an important role in the success of the Canadian Army in the World Wars.

Cpl Patterson

Q7. What was the best part and the worst part of your role as DR?

The best part was seeing so many countries in Europe, so many places. The worst part was experiencing shellfire and mortar fire and artillery barrages. You had to seek cover, look for a ditch or a fox hole. If caught, you had to burn the despatches. Luckily, that didn't happen to me. Delivering despatches at night was also challenging.

Cpl Rayala

Q7. What was the best bit/ worst bit?

I would say the best part of the training was the offroad driving on the ATV. It was exciting to experience driving across different terrain, especially the more adverse terrain like steep muddy inclines and bumpy and uneven paths. The worst part was the dismounted land navigation portion of the course, specifically at night. Using only a map and compass, I had to navigate to various points. The darkness made it especially difficult to navigate to the points.

Cpl Patterson

Q8. When and where did you do your course?

Basic Training in Orillia, Ontario, (July and August, 1942), Advanced Training, Vimy Barracks, Kingston, (September to December, 1942). Deployed to Europe: December 1942 Cove Hampshire, England, Signals Holding Unit, (1942/43). I proceeded to Dover, England, June 1944. Following D Day, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division landed in Normandy. I followed the 2nd Division through France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany. I was in Oldenburg, Germany on VE Day. I returned to Canada in December 1945.



Cpl Rayala

Q8) When and where did you do this course?

I took this training opportunity during August of 2021 in CFB Petawawa. The courses (ATV/SDR courses) were delivered by 2 CMBG HQ & Sigs Sqn.

Cpl Patterson

Q9. What differences did you notice between SDRs from your experience? From my experience, DRs in WWII did not have the technology that is available today. We had excellent maps which we carried in a map case with a plastic cover. We did not use radios during despatch runs. We relied on our maps to get us there. Sometimes, the units were not exactly where indicated on the map. That is because units were constantly on the move as the war progressed.

Cpl Rayala

Q9. What differences did you notice between SDRs from WWI and WWII compared to today?

The main difference I noticed between SDRs of today compared to SDRs of the past is the use of technology in performing the job. The big advantage that I had while training was the use of a GPS receiver to determine exactly where I was. With a click of a button, I could see my coordinates and plot them on my map to figure out where I was in case I was off my route and needed to navigate back on course. I also was able to input waypoints into the receiver which provided me with the exact bearing and distance to my rendezvous point. SDRs during the World Wars did not have this technology to aid them in navigating to their destinations. They had to rely on a map and compass to navigate to their objective. Furthermore, I had the benefit of having a radio to communicate with the command post to convey information during my dispatch mission. With the radio, I was able to communicate my progress along my route, confirm the delivery of the information to the recipient, report enemy contact, and so forth. Radio communications enable modern SDRs and the command post to keep in contact. However, SDRs in the past were not issued radio. Consequently, the dispatching authority wouldn't know if the information was delivered until the dispatch rider returned and confirmed its delivery.



Cpl Patterson

10. How did you conduct your Despatch missions?

Despatch runs were posted daily and DRs would check the postings. There were two despatch runs per day, normally. You would report to pick up despatches. The

despatches were in a case or despatch bag which slung over your shoulder. We had our orders and list of destinations to deliver despatches. We might have a run to several field units that were nearby or we might have a run to Headquarters, more than a hundred miles away. So we rode a motorcycle or drove a Jeep, depending on what was available or what the situation demanded. Occasionally we could travel in pairs, but most often, we travelled alone. It was our mission to deliver despatches as quickly and safely as possible. We completed our mission, then returned to our unit. We wore a blue

and white armband to show that we were on official Army business. We could go anywhere without question. We had important despatches to deliver.

Cpl Rayala

Q10. How did you conduct Dispatch missions?

Lastly, the other aspect I noticed with my SDR training compared to the past is in how we conduct dispatch missions. While SDRs of the past drove alone to deliver what they had, the SOPs (standard operating procedures) that I trained on was to deploy in pairs. On our dispatch missions, we would go out in twos, with one person as the leader and the other one as the signaller. However, I notice that dispatch riders of the past deploy by themselves. This made the role significantly more dangerous since the dispatch rider had only themselves to rely on to accomplish their delivery.

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“The Message Must Get Through” on the modern battlefield, although not all messages can be transmitted digitally. Documents, code books, and messages must still be delivered safely and securely by special dispatch. Thanks to the Signallers like Cpl Patterson and Cpl Rayala, the Canadian Signals Dispatch Service continues to build on its well-deserved reputation.

What was it like being a DR? In the words of Cpl Hugh Patterson, pictured below, 100 years old and a 2nd Canadian Division Despatch Rider.

"We wore a blue and white armband...we could go anywhere without question... we had important despatches to deliver."



Special Thanks to Theresa Campbell, Hugh Patterson's daughter, who generously offered to ask her 100-year old father 10 questions about his time as a WWII Despatch Rider. Cpl Desiree Cardenas of 32 Signal Regiment shared the same questions with Cpl Kurt Rayala who had recently completed Special Dispatch Rider training.