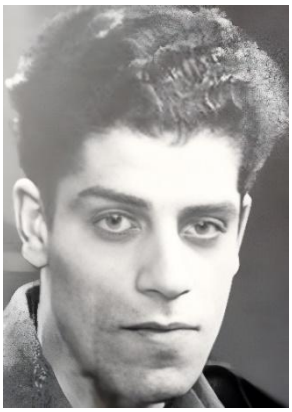
Fortes, John Robert Léon Corporal 11-A-16



John Robert Léon—known as John—is born on February 7, 1921, in Port Arthur, Ontario.
Both of his parents are of Italian descent. The family surname, originally "Fortezza," was anglicized; his father, Michele Fortezza, became Mike Fortes, while his mother—who kept her given names, Caroline Maria—also adopted the surname Fortes (replacing her maiden name, Gagliardi).

John comes from a large Roman Catholic family, with five brothers and four sisters; he is the youngest of the children.

Although English is the primary language used by the family, John notes that he retains the ability to speak Italian.
After completing his primary education, he attends high school for four years.

On September 22, 1942, in Port Arthur, John enlists for active service in the Canadian Army. His occupation is recorded as ‘carpenter’, though he had most recently been working as a warehouseman for Western Grocers Ltd. in Port Arthur.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, carpenters in Canada faced extreme economic hardship and a severe lack of employment. Out of necessity, thousands of men took whatever work they could find to earn a living; for many, military service became an option.

Like every recruit, John must see the doctors. The report indicates that he has no significant medical history. His physical details were recorded as follows: 5’8” tall; weight 153 lbs; brown eyes and black hair. Pockmarks on his left arm are noted as a distinguishing physical feature for potential identification purposes.
With an "A1" classification, John is declared fit for all types of military service.

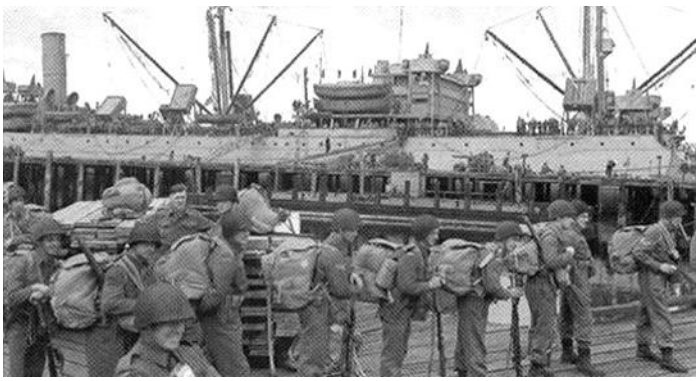
The district depot in Port Arthur initially grants John a week of leave, unpaid.
When he reports back on September 29, 1942, his transfer papers are already waiting for him.
Via Winnipeg he is transferred to Fort William, Ontario, for his basic training.
Two months later, John is transferred again. It appears that his previous technical skills had initially been overlooked, as he is reassigned to Chilliwack, British Columbia—the training facility for the Canadian Engineers.

In early January 1943, John ends up in the hospital there with a severe case of the flu. His training for the Royal Canadian Engineers (RCE) continues, and throughout March and April of 1943, he completes an additional course in Victoria, British Columbia (BC), at No. 11 VTS (Vocational Training School).

During 1943, Canadian military personnel—including members of the Royal Canadian Engineers—were sent to these vocational schools to receive specialized technical training. Documents show, for instance, that personnel were sent to 'No. 11 VTS' in Victoria to obtain essential technical military qualifications—such as map drawing, technical drafting, *carpentry, or surveying—prior to their deployment or assignment to engineer units.*

Upon completing the course, John is replaced to Nanaimo, British Columbia, where he is posted to the 1st Battalion of the Rocky Mountain Rangers (RMR).
The next entry in John's file, dated July 1943, needs further explanation:
'On special Duty to Kiska – Alaska'

The 1st Battalion of the Rocky Mountain Rangers played a crucial role in 'Operation Cottage,' the recapture of the Japanese-occupied island of Kiska (part of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska). During the first half of 1943, the battalion—then part of the 13th Canadian Infantry Brigade—sailed from Vancouver Island to the U.S. Army base on the island of Adak.
There, the men underwent intensive, specialized training for an amphibious landing in arctic conditions. The Rocky Mountain Rangers formed the core of the 16th Canadian Combat Team. Together with American forces, they prepared to liberate the strategically located island of Kiska.
The invasion force departed from Adak on August 13, 1943, and the landing on Kiska took place on August 15, 1943.
By that time, the Japanese had already departed following heavy American bombardment.
Although no enemy remained, the battalion still suffered casualties. Due to extreme weather conditions (very dense fog), booby traps left behind by the Japanese, and 'friendly fire' incidents—in which American and Canadian troops mistook one another for the enemy—an officer and several enlisted men lost their lives.



Canadians with US equipment

In early November 1943, John is a week under the care of the 25th Field Ambulance due to an unspecified illness.

By the end of January 1944, the Canadian troops—John included—have returned and are granted thirty days of leave. He remains assigned to the RMR (Royal Montreal Regiment) and stays in British Columbia until the spring of 1944.
Plans were already made for his deployment to the United Kingdom (UK).

Following a week of pre-embarkation leave, John departs for the UK aboard a troopship on May 25, 1944, arriving in the UK on June 2, 1944.
Initially, he is administratively attached to the headquarters of the 13th Canadian Infantry Brigade.
Later in 1944, his RMR unit was absorbed into the 1st Canadian Infantry Training Battalion. John subsequently crosses over to Normandy, landing on Juno Beach on September 8, 1944.
He is then assigned to the Algonquin Regiment.
By the end of November 1944, he is serving as a corporal. Although not explicitly documented in his file, John must have already taken part in numerous operations with the Algonquins across France, Belgium, and the southwestern Netherlands.

One note stands out: 'posted to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division Training School (4 CAD TRG School).'
This requires some explanation, as a large part of the southern Netherlands has already been liberated from German forces by that time.

Once the front line in North Brabant had stabilized, several training schools were established in the rear areas. The 4th Canadian Armoured Division's school was set up at 'Huize Sint Felix' in Udenhout—a massive building where the Sisters of Charity from Tilburg provided education to girls and cared for the sick and elderly.
The Canadians took over the premises on December 7, 1944.
Three days after the facility opened, the first trainees arrived and classes began. The curriculum included practical elements—such as weapons training (conducted in the dunes near Loon and Drunen) —as well as tactical exercises and theoretical instruction, including lessons on the German army. The course lasted two weeks. While the original intention was to further enhance the soldiers' efficiency, in practice, the school ultimately served primarily as a refresher course.



Sint Felix

Having completed the course, John is placed on the general reserve list.
In mid-March 1945, his name appears on a list of reinforcements for the Algonquin Regiment. The only subsequent entries are: 'wounded on April 27' and 'died of his wounds on May 2, 1945.'
The war diary of the Algonquins provides some clarity regarding the months of March, April, and May 1945.
From late February to mid-March 1945, the regiment takes part in the fighting during the final phase of the Rhineland Offensive, Operation Blockbuster.
On February 26 and 27, 1945, the regiment spearheads the attack on the so-called 'Hochwald Gap' (the area between the Hochwald and the Balberger Wald).

Here, they encounter fierce resistance and suffer heavy losses, particularly around the towns of Uedem and Veen in Germany.



Algonquin Regiment moving forward near the Hochwald Forest, Udem, Germany, March 1st, 1945.

Photo by Jack H. Smith. Department of National Defence / National Archives of Canada, PA-192879.

John appears to have come through this fighting relatively unscathed; there are no notes in his file to suggest otherwise.
On March 31, 1945, the regiment crosses the Rhine.

Subsequently, the Algonquins move into Dutch territory.
Passing through places such as Millingen and Lochem, they head toward Bornerbroek (April 4, 1945). The battle for the liberation of Wierden is intense.
Once again, luck seems to be on John's side.

The advance continues onto German soil. Esterwegen is reached on April 11, 1945.
The Küstenkanal (Coastal Canal) is reconnoitered, and the regiment's next task—following the crossing of the canal—is to secure the route toward Edewecht and Friesoythe.
During the crossing and the establishment of a bridgehead on the north side of the canal, the Algonquins suffer significant casualties.

In the early hours of April 17, 1945, the north bank is reached and a bridgehead is established. By the afternoon, the unit faces counterattacks.

Once the bridgehead is secured and a bridge has been laid across the Küstenkanal, the regiment's advance continues toward Edewecht and Bad Zwischenahn.
Near Edewecht, the regiment is tasked with clearing a wooded area on either side of the main road.
Although the resistance is not exceptionally fierce, the unit still sustains wounded. Among them is Corporal John Robert Léon Fortes. Suffering from a gunshot wound to the lung, he is transported to a hospital, unfortunately, he cannot be saved.
On May 2, 1945, John succumbs to his injuries.

He is initially laid to rest in a temporary grave near Friesoythe.
On March 9, 1946, John gets his final resting place at the CWGC Canadian War Cemetery in Holten. His grave reference: Plot 11, Row A, Grave 16.

He is awarded:
the 1939–1945 Star, the France and Germany Star, the War Medal 1939–1945 and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp.

His headstone reads:
In God we trust
our Son and Brother
Though far away
Forever in our Hearts.



Sources:
www.cwgc.org; www.ancestry.com;
www.canada.ca/library-archives; wikipedia, wartimesproject.com; War Diary Algonquin Regiment.