

# DOLPHIN GURU

## MAJOR ALBERT DESBRISAY CARTER, DSO 19 SQUADRON RFC – PART 2

by Stewart K. Taylor

More than anything else, it was those two fixed synchronised Vickers guns and the option of the upper wing mounted Lewis that really fired Major Carter's passion for the Sopwith Dolphin. 'Art' Fairclough was of the belief that the often belligerent Carter would have endorsed the use of a truck, had it a set of wings and multiple armament to do the job. Carter's riggers and fitters, always ready to jump at his beck and call, were tripping all over themselves to try and instil some reliability into the 200hp Hispano-Suiza and its ancillary systems, which would soon prove to be most unreliable, almost from the New Year's Day 1918 moment when three Dolphins were flown in via Marquise and Bailleul. With three more arrivals on the morrow, Major Carter's disposition went into a much higher gear – pity the poor mechanics who could not accommodate his rash of requests for all those little modifications that only an uncompromising man like Carter was certain to demand.

The working loose of a propeller incurred his ire on 7 January 1918 and then having the same Dolphin's oil tank burst within the same week sent mild tremors throughout the Flight. Other, more accommodating pilots, experienced their own versions of the aircraft's seemingly bottomless pit of teething troubles, yet few complained, unlike Carter.

With much of January 1918 devoted to formation practices, the routine little different from that employed when the squadron flew SPADs, and with the early February continuation of the same; the older, more seasoned pilots were all vying for a chance to be the first to cross the lines in their new machines. It was no secret that those betting on Major Carter would most likely win a bundle. His engine cut out while attempting a 5 February Line Patrol. When the cause proved to be the petrol level in the carburettor being wrong, flooding the result, his demands to rectify the problem probably induced tremors in the hands of his chief fitter, but when readjustment eliminated the problem, as it did, the Canadian army major could be a model of tepid gratitude.

A faulty magneto eliminated a chance to rumble with four EA seen north east of Commines on 16 February 1918. Carter's frustrations were now of such seismic proportion he let emotions control his and the squadron's destiny on this cloudless morning with wind blowing straight out of the east. His chance of waylaying German two-seaters, venturing over Allied lines, was not of idle consideration. Identified in the squadron record book as only a 'practice flight', a misnomer

example of favouritism by the Recording Officer, Major Carter switched mental gears once in the air and made for a spot in the skyscape frequented by opposition two-seaters. At different times he turned to attack three of them at long range and another three from a much shorter distance. Both Vickers responded, only at this moment it was not the fault

of either engine or weaponry that foiled success, but a broken gun sight. Now the armament officer would be subjected to an earful of Canadian east coast vocal ventilating. The next day, his Dolphin only five minutes into an afternoon test flight, the Lewis gun came free of its mounting, the handle striking him in the face!

However, earlier on the 17th, Carter's own blood pressure probably sky rocketed. Leading Lts Reid, Walker and Blythe, he caught sight of three opponents; fired at one from below at long range, then saw another 4000ft below. He dived at this, a more vulnerable choice, put on the brakes, came up from underneath and was within twenty feet of this EA when the Hispano-Suiza gave a dry cough and then, due to lack of pressure, failed completely.

A litany of troubles, the most repetitive being inadequate oil pressure; dirt in petrol filter and carburettor; leaking

oil tank; sticking contact breakers; CC gear malfunctioning; broken ring sights etc, began to haunt the pilots. They were now almost fully operational – both high and low reserve patrols involving three machine 'vees', the order of formation in late February 1918 – and with combat opportunities increasing; yet only a single triplane was claimed out of control, the surge of success would not be anything close to a certainty until the arrival of a timely 24 February to 12 March 1918 leave to England. This really set Major Carter up for some heated contests that would soon follow the first operation undertaken by the B Flight commander. These were conducted in such a manner that Dolphins representing Capt Pat Huskinson's A Flight and Capt John Leacroft's C Flight formations of from three to five machines were flown together with Major Carter's boys above.

The sweet smell of success involving up to eleven Dolphins SE of Halluin in the late 15 March morning sun, after they completely routed two large EA formations, which the returning 19 Squadron pilots claimed were 'poor performers', quite rightly gave a lift to those doing the fighting. Major Carter was back on track continuing his stretch of combat tribulations, the details of which, I also understand from 'Art'



*Sometimes retouched studio photos can be deceiving. Coming across as gentle, contented and compassionate, Major Carter had this photo portrait taken in England while on leave.  
: National Archives, Ottawa*