

# UNCOMPROMISING & EFFICIENT

## CAPTAIN HAROLD ANTHONY OAKS DFC, A FLT 48 SQN RAF

PART 1

by Stewart K. Taylor

TOWARD THE TURN of the last century Dr Anthony Oaks set up a medical practice in the village of Preston, Ontario and soon became a well-respected country doctor, willing to travel miles out of his way to treat and comfort ailing patients. Near the town of Hespeler, where the doctor and his wife Rose May resided, a son later christened Harold Anthony was born on 12 November 1896. Dr Oaks tried to encourage young Harold to study for a career in medicine but such a course of pursuit was not what he wanted. *I wasn't interested in patching people up and the sight of blood turned my stomach*, Harold Oaks curtly stated in 1965. Mechanical devices grabbed his imagination. He learned quickly to drive his father's auto, one of the first in the Preston area, while attending Public School in the village. Fanciful thoughts of the internal combustion gasoline burning engine (his father also owned a steam driven automobile) remained quiescent while the course of education took him to Galt Collegiate Institute and at the insistence of his parents from there to the University of Toronto where he enrolled at Victoria College in a general arts course.

The war in Europe was more than a year old when Harold entered university. Military concerns soon overshadowed his academic studies. 136 students from the U of T left for overseas with the Second Division CEF at the beginning of March 1915.

Calls for more recruits echoed throughout the halls of learning where many of the students, like Harold Oaks, belonged to the University's COTC and who in May 1915 attended camp for twelve days at Niagara on the Lake. *A worthless experience*, he, and many of the 709 that were there with him, thought.

### ENLISTMENT AND TRANSFER TO THE RFC

The urge to enlist soon became overwhelming and on 1 September 1915 while still an undergraduate, he made the decision to join as a sapper in the First Division Signaling Company of the Canadian Engineers. His draft sailed for England December 1915. Three months later Sapper Oaks was just one of 50000 Canadian troops in the field holding a six mile bit of the Western Front just south of the Ypres Salient. He experienced St Eloi, Mount Sorrel and the Somme where in September his rank was upgraded to corporal (No 500705).

By 23 April 1917 the Battle of Vimy Ridge was already history. Corporal Oaks was in the line with Major General Currie's

First Division on this date when his eyes looked upward. What he saw he later entered into a diary: ... *Arras was easily seen to the south. One of Fritz' balloons broke away and came floating over our lines. It disappeared travelling west ... also had a fine view of a fight in the air. A number of German planes attacked a patrol of ours. They brought down two of our planes and then ran when a number of our planes appeared. Both of our machines landed safely.*

What Oaks had seen was an uneven fight between twelve HA and two Nieuport Scouts from 29 Squadron RFC. Both RFC single seaters came down at Roclincourt for forced landings at 16.45. One pilot, 2Lt W.P.T. Watts was wounded.

Canadian troops witnessed many aerial combats right over their heads as the German airmen in their superior Albatros D.III's often pressed home attacks on the Allied side of the lines. Many a Canadian soldier debated his own future in the trenches after watching spectacles such as the one described. One of them was Corporal Oaks. His brown eyes stole a skyward gaze every time he heard the soft 'purr' of aircraft. His mind was made up on the night of 4 May 1917.

*Fritz came over last night and bombed and machine gunned us. He did some damage. Tried it again tonight but was sat on. Machine guns from everywhere were turned on him. We even got rid of a few rounds from our revolvers. He*

*must have seen us shooting at him for he turned around and went home.*

Oaks wanted more than just a revolver to fire back at the German airmen. On 15 May he wrote again: *Just as soon as I'm able I will get an application form and fill it in for the RFC.*

Corporal Oaks saw the RFC Interviewing Officer on 5 July and was told to wait for another week. His patience was under siege but the RFC was crying out for volunteers after their April crucifixion. Few obstacles were placed in the path of those like Oaks by their Canadian Army superiors.

In two days his papers were all signed. A celebration on the evening of 19 July culminated the wait he and two other fellows from the same unit had had. They received indoctrination instructions at RFC Headquarters, Hesdin on 21 July, returned to England 23 July, reported to the RFC Cadet Section at Farnborough, were given a fortnight's leave, left Farnborough for Winchester and sweated through three hours of squad drill on 17 August.



H.A. Oaks at 2 SMA Oxford.  
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