

THE CHINGFORD 'SHAKEDOWN'

on to Eastchurch, then 3 Wing RNAS
From the diary of FSL John Harvey Keens

Stewart K. Taylor



FSL J.H. Keens in the cockpit of a Standard-built Sopwith Pup apparently named 'Baby'. Although J.H. Keens wrote the date August 1916 on the back of the print, it is likely, in view of the armament and the date at which Pups were transferred to a training role, that this picture of him was taken later, when he became an instructor at Manston War School.

:Mrs J.B. White via S K Taylor

PER CAPITA, TORONTO enlisted more pilots into the RNAS, RFC and RAF than any other city in the British Empire. This is the story of one of them.

A graduate of the Toronto public education system, just one private school (UCC) for him, John Harvey Keens would have to begin his working life in 1912, at age 16, as a salesman with the Simpson Company, a large department store – long extinct – in downtown Toronto, as a sales clerk; that one year of employment sufficient for the young son to join his father's clothes manufacturing firm as a material cutter.

Two years of this working on the shop floor and as a sergeant in the Queen's Own Rifles militia, was all the teenager could take and, hoping to realise his dream as a pilot, applied for and was accepted in August 1915 as a Curtiss boat pupil, his 199 mins off the water enough to convince the RNAS recruitment folks in Ottawa to sign him up on 1 December 1915 as a 'freshman' PFSL.

This raw recruit, dressed in civvies, much of the suit made in his father's own Toronto factory, was given claims, travelling expenses, railway tickets for passage to New York on 29 November 1915 and would depart NY at 14.30 on the liner *Baltic* two days later. Ten days were needed to cross the Atlantic: but Keens and the two brothers with him had been told by the Admiralty they would be required to have their naval uniforms in four days. Under the date 14 December 1915, PFSL Keens would write: *nineteen years old today*. Nineteen Canadians 'packed' the Hotel London, Summer Street, the same troop proceeding to the Admiralty without

greatcoats the next morning – damn damp and cold. Keens was informed that he, with three others as company, would start training at Hendon, the rest being divided between Chingford and Eastbourne.

Hendon's CO, under the impression these four Canadians already had their 'tickets', made them mark time for a week. Certainly not impressed with the place, Keens had this to say:

Hendon: – this is one awful school or training camp. No discipline, routine or anything ... slept in some North Pole garb last night ... more watching. Give anything to carry on training.

Keens' training and active service were recounted in his diary. **28th December 1915:** *Reported to Chingford this afternoon. Three crashes on Maurice Farmans, one BE and one Avro. Not a bad day's work. Only about \$30,000 (Canadian) damage!* [trained as a bookkeeper, PFSL Keens knew the value of a dollar].

29th December (Chingford): *This station is a long way ahead of Hendon in every respect.*

2nd – 8th January 1916: *Lectures, drill.*

10th January: *Leach crashed an Avro. 'He was a skunk'. Leslie, Grange, Van Allen, Nelles left for Dover.*

11th January: *Lectures. Mostly engines.*

13th January: *Lectures, Navigation.*

14th – 15th January: *Orderly Officer.*

17th – 18th January: *Leave to Folkestone.*

19th January: *Met four new Canadian 'quirks' today in Canadian Club. Part of the fourth batch.*

21st January: *Passed quite a quiet evening, only we had to*