

115 SQUADRON'S CANADIAN CURSE

by Stewart K. Taylor

SOME VETERANS WERE BORN TO TALK; others just too bored to dredge up the past. I had met several of the latter and an equal number of the former and one in particular stood out the most. **George Ambrose Firby** began his trip down 'memory lane' soon after I arrived at his 14 Alder Road home on the night of 20 September 1976. In the span of three hours, I had gleaned just about everything his mind had in store for this visit. He was awfully keen to give me his life story, which focussed on the RNAS intervention into the young man's life.

George's father, a railroad man, worked for the Canada Atlantic Railway Co, whose line ran from Ottawa to Cornwall, via Hawkesbury, and on to the southernmost terminal in Swanton, Vermont. Born in London, Ontario, on 10 November 1896 (a brother came later) he attended First Avenue Public School, Ottawa until the family moved to Vermont then Hawkesbury, Parry Sound and Toronto in 1910. An adventurous boy, he climbed rocks at Depot Harbour and the Grain Boats, worked on farms and had the inherent ability to retain an image of his location and relationship to the immediate surroundings. Consequently, or so he claimed, he was never disoriented and always in command of his direction.

After just one year of high school, at Toronto's Riverdales Collegiate, he enlisted. Originally, he tried to join the RNAS but his request was rejected; the reason being that too many Canadians had been accepted at that time. Given an option to transfer to the RFC, he decided, on 22 April 1917, to give it a try. The following day, he left and, with 54 other Canadian RFC candidates, travelled via rail to Halifax and was accommodated in the naval barracks there. Once aboard ship, a rumour of measles circulated. Everyone was confined to their cabins but nothing broke out and on 2 May, outside Liverpool, the ship was free of such an illness.

George Firby, like the others in his group, was given two weeks' leave, before reporting to Wantage Hall, Reading on 25 May 1917. They left for Catterick on 7 July, only to sit on their hands for another two weeks, due to a shortage of instructors. Once redirected to Grantham, the story was quite different. He completed the prerequisite two hours dual on a MF 'Shorthorn' and then came the first solo. It was not very impressive. In an initial landing attempt, he bounced the pusher 15ft in the air.



Lt George Ambrose Firby at Castle Bromwich, August 1918; shortly before flying to France with 115 Squadron on 29 August 1918. :G.A. Firby via S.K. Taylor

There was a repeat performance on the second attempt. The third ended in a mild disaster. The Shorthorn's undercarriage collapsed immediately after touch down. Once 2Lt Firby reached five hours solo it was 'wings' time.

At Beverley, he received a psychological setback hence a chink in the armour of his confidence. Firby thought he made a perfect take-off and landing on his initial flight. Then Capt Prior, his instructor, changed that misconception the moment he criticised both take off and landing techniques while proceeding to show the Canadian just how it should be done correctly. It was a favour well worth responding to.

A shortage of aircraft at Lincoln would not allow any flying. Here, he had been asked if he wished to do night flying. This request was an acceptable one, and he was earmarked for Home Defence duty. At East Retford, a night flying course predominated. It was tough, as Firby had no previous instruction in this novel form of flying. A number of FE2bs were modified as single-seaters at this station, which was good preparation for 51 Squadron, based in Norfolk and South Lincolnshire and primarily equipped with FE2bs, on which the pilots were required to fly 100 mile reconnaissance flights, with only the aid of moonlight.

Sent to France as a 'FEE' pilot, he lasted five days at the Pilots' Pool only to be officially backtracked to Stonehenge. The reason given for his services not being required was, he was told, that FE2bs were gradually being phased out.

Stonehenge opened the Handley Page's nocturnal world to him. The blustery looking 'big bird', a dominant structure on the ground or when crowding the sky, gave him a feeling of power, even majesty; for a little guy, Firby could really flex an ardent muscle when at the controls.

Lt Firby's posting to 115 Squadron at Castle Bromwich found everything there to be in 'hurray, hurray' mode. Only fourteen days prior to the date set for an overseas departure was the squadron's full establishment of Handley Pages completed. On about 17 August 1918, the first flight commander arrived – he came with a fistful of Canadian pilots; five in total and not a single one would remain on strength by 22 October 1918.

The first of this disparate band of warriors to arrive, on 18 August, was 23 year old **Lt Ernest Graham Gallagher**. A RNAS appointed PFO, as of 7 January 1918, he was born on 13