

# 'Such a topping chap'

## 2Lt Morden Maxwell Mowat

23 Sqn RFC A Flt & 11 Sqn RFC B Flt, 1916

by Stewart K. Taylor

**M**ORDEN MAXWELL MOWAT was full of optimism and adventure, a combination he honestly inherited from his family's paternal side, a proud lot of Scottish heredity with close ties to the military well before his grandfather emigrated to Canada in the mid-1800s. Morden, the eldest of four brothers, who were all to serve in WWI, was born in New Westminster BC on 6 December 1891, attended both public and high school there and, once he graduated, jumped at the chance to go and seek a living, maybe a lucrative one, while employed with a mining company in Cobalt, Ontario. He had already tried his hand, seeking those elusive gold deposits in the Yukon, but the time for that was already passed before he tried his hand at panning for those nuggets.

War in Europe soon thrust his ambition in a far different direction. One brother already wore khaki and was about to embark for England with the 24th Battalion CEF when Morden applied for flying lessons at the Curtiss Flying School, Long Branch, Ontario. He used his own money, almost all of it, to pay the \$400 (Canadian) fee, the entire total refundable should he receive his RAeC certificate. There was no mistake. Morden, to absolutely no-one's surprise, taking into account the Mowat's prior connection to the British Army, chose to go with the RFC in preference to the RNAS, which in 1915 offered a more 'luxurious' flying future to that proposed by the War Office. On that 11 November 1915, when Morden obtained RAeC Certificate No.2064, as did four others at the Toronto Curtiss School, it should be noted that all five were destined to pay the supreme sacrifice.

Given first class accommodation aboard White Star liner SS *Lapland*, which departed Halifax harbour on 28 November 1915, he and the twenty other RFC candidates, unlike the CEF soldiers also on board and who already had been in uniform for several months, were relatively new to military life.

On the previous Saturday, as a group, they were each inducted into the RFC during a brief swearing in ceremony at 56 Church Street, the RFC's Canadian headquarters in Toronto, since they represented Capt Ross Hume's personal selection of the first Canadian RFC candidates to sail overseas with the freshly created rank of second lieutenant. Over 75% had attended, or were graduates, of either McGill or Toronto universities and came from privileged backgrounds. A couple, like Morden Mowat, were not members of such an elite background and it showed. Along with future RFC ace 'Gerry' Knight, who had acquired the reputation of being a 'wimp' while attending Upper Canada College, Morden was 'stigmatized' for his lack of grace, education and 'hungry for those gold deposits' attitude. An outdoorsman at heart,



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:RAeC 2064

other than flying, he shared almost nothing in common with the others. They struggled with the vagaries of flight, even though each flight instructor assisted their short hops around the aerodrome in, first the 'Longhorn' then 'Shorthorn', Maurice Farmans,

Once they reported to RFC headquarters in London, they were given a six day leave before destined for RFC flying schools at Shoreham or Castle Bromwich and, as hotel rooms in wartime London were at a premium, especially in the weeks prior to Christmas and New Year, some unauthorized 'double bunking' occurred at the Piccadilly Hotel where they were billeted. Compared to the extended, tedious hours consumed by lectures on a variety of aviation related topics, their actual flying time at Shoreham was insignificant. Moving forward, the bulk of these provisional Second Lieutenants continued their episodic challenges at Gosport. These included Mowat, as 23 Squadron was his next posting and, stationed at that aerodrome, had just begun receiving their first FE2bs, with which they were on order to have a complete complement when required to join the Expeditionary Force in six weeks' time.

London was almost too much of a luxury for the high spirited Canadians, twelve of whom reported to 3 Reserve Squadron, Shoreham by Sea, much the worse for wear. One of the group's self-proclaimed spokesman actually resented his posting to a primary flying school and, in a letter home, bemoaned his ill fortune; not quite typical as this attitude did not prevail among most others. Whatever the challenges were in learning to pilot this pusher, 2Lt Mowat obviously met them and, when the squadron's ten FE2bs left for France, he was one of the pilots to make the 16 March 1916 Cross-Channel flight. Moving to Le Hameau after a couple of days at Fienvillers, 23 Squadron was posted to the 13th Army Wing newly formed for the III Brigade and working with the Third British Army. They held the front near Gommecourt, a locale *destined* (so wrote the squadron historian) *to become famous as the area of the Somme Offensive in 1916.*

Without any delay, this latest FE2b equipped squadron to arrive in France was put to work and ordered to maintain a constant patrol of two machines along the line Bienvillers-Berles-Bailleulmont, from 18 March 1916, just two days following their landing on French soil.

Due to the lack of squadron records and the loss of Morden Mowat's logbook, there is no way to assess the exact number of operational flights he may or may not have carried out as a 23 Squadron pilot. However, in a letter dated 15 April 1916