

SHEER GRIT AND FORTITUDE

FSL OLIVER JOSEPH GAGNIER, 6 SQUADRON RNAS 1917

by Stewart K. Taylor

WHATEVER HE ACCOMPLISHED it was done with true gallant, Gallic flair. Oliver Gagnier's ancestors came from France in 1825 and settled near Markham, Ontario. The great, great grandfather married an Irish colleen and manufactured church bells. All the children, including his grandfather, were anglicised and only spoke English. Later, in France, this turned out to be an embarrassment. His father, a born salesperson, excelled at his job for the Genron Toymakers in Montreal and as of 2007 that firm still remained in the same business.

The eldest of three boys Oliver was born on 10 January 1896 in Sault Ste Marie, Michigan, USA. His mother had gone to temporarily live with a sister, in order to have her first child. True to their Roman Catholic adherence, young Oliver attended De La Salle Collegiate in Toronto and Catholic High School, Montreal where the family lived. An amazing student, blessed with learning skills quite beyond the capacity of most children his own age or older, he took his entire high school education in one year, attending classes six days a week. But, at just fifteen years of age, Oliver was not allowed to enter McGill University so he waited a year to enrol on their engineering course and obtain a civil engineering degree, even though he had yet to finish when he decided to seek flight training at the Toronto based Curtiss Flying School.

FLYING TRAINING

Lessons began on 5 June 1916 and by 15 August he had passed all required tests. This allowed Gagnier's name to be entered as a provisional flight sub lieutenant in the RNAS. He sailed



Probationary Flight Sub Lieutenant Oliver Joseph Gagnier, October 1916. The original portrait was sent by him to his parents in Montreal as a Christmas present: Aileen K. Gagnier (widow) via S.K. Taylor

on 31 August, from Montreal aboard the *Ausonia*, and within the next six months completed the required steps to reach fruition as a RNAS scout pilot. His various postings had included:

Crystal Palace: 17.9.1916 to 14.10.1916
Cranwell: 14.10.1916 to 18.1.1917
Frieston: 22.1.1917 to 7.2.1917
Dover: 9.2.1917 to 19.2.1917
6 Naval Squadron: 24.2.1917

In a single lengthy letter written to one of his Curtiss School instructors on the eve of leaving to join a naval squadron in France, FSL Gagnier summoned up his training and other related aspects with some very quaint remarks, so typical of this unique character.

Well, old top, I guess I'll be in France inside the next three weeks - either there or on some foreign service.

I have just been recommended for fast scout machines so I guess that means fighting for me. I will be flying Nieuports next week. They go about 100 miles per hour. Not so slow, eh? After that I'll be up for exams. It seems I never get clear of exams.

We had six days leave for Christmas. Ross Johnson, Roy Allan and I went up to Scotland. We saw some old castles and other places up there. All real old ones too, 1068 and 1700 were the dates on some of them. The Scotch people are the quaintest lot you'd ever expect to meet. Slow and easy going, even their accent is captivating. Sometime in the future I hope to make a trip away back in the highlands and study the characters there.

When I got back it wasn't long before I was back at the old grind again. I was in the air for three and a half hours continuously the other day in a high wind. Went on a cross country flight. Had a hard time making headway but got to

Curtiss School, Long Branch, Ontario, July 1916. Several of these students later served with distinction in the RNAS, a few with the RFC. Seventh from the left, back row, Oliver Gagnier began the course on 31 May 1916. His first instructor was a fellow from the US, Webber his name, standing in the back row extreme left. Gagnier finished his flying there on 15 August 1916, having flown 460 minutes an hour beyond what the school originally bargained for. According to a contract they had with RNAS, the Admiralty would pay for those extra minutes should Gagnier be accepted by them.
:D.A. Nelles via S.K. Taylor

