

THE LAST OF MANY

Lt Harold Benjamin 'Doc' Oldham 29 Squadron RAF

by Stewart K. Taylor

UNTIL THE 1950s, the only jobs available in the eastern Ontario village of Yarker were tied to the timber industry. Logs from the surrounding woods pulled, literally, by one horsepower were the local inhabitants' main source of income. To take care of the ills that so often were associated with these tireless loggers, Dr W.M. Oldham, the village's residential family doctor, looked after the medical requirements needed to sustain the timber men's hard, outdoor physical life and also the needs of their wives and families. Both the doctor and his wife came from Oldham, Kent in England – once home to many 'Oldhams' – and looked like characters right out of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. They lived in a two storey grey stone house in the village centre atop a hill and once a year, often at Christmas time, the locals were invited to a Dickens' (Christmas-like) carol! The doctor imported fine French wines, his ruddy, plump face indicative of such embrace; his wife the most expensive of chinaware from the top factories in England. Spacious as it was, the house appeared overcrowded with figurines and knick-knacks of every description. They had two sons, both tall with fair complexions. Local gossipers considered the Mrs must have had a 'secret lover', just maybe one of the village's loggers?

Neither boy, Harold Benjamin, born 1894 at home in Yarker, or John, the elder, were allowed to touch any furniture or 'roughhouse' in the home, which was run like a Victorian institution; heavily disciplined – no frolicking, except at Christmas. Dr Oldham insisted that his sons became doctors; an impossibility as neither showed the slightest interest in the profession. Unknown to his parents, Harold located a key to the wine cellar and after over indulging was remembered by a couple of old timers, interviewed in the 1960s by the author, to sit atop a high stone wall that set apart the 'Oldham estate' from the hilly street and repeatedly lament over and over *I just can't wait to be a doctor!*

When old enough, he clerked at the only bank in the village, loved to tinker with the buggy his father used to get around in while making house calls and, after the doctor purchased the first automobile seen anywhere around Yarker, Harold, soon to be called just plain 'Doc', couldn't wait to make its acquaintance. He learned to drive even before his old man and soon acted as the doctor's private chauffeur, as did the older son for a short while until he enlisted in the 72nd CFA and went off to war. With the 32nd Field Artillery, he took part in the Battle of Passchendaele but after six months



RFC Cadet AM3 Harold Benjamin 'Doc' Oldham on 9 August 1917, the day he graduated with Course 9A at Toronto. Not a natural pilot, it took him longer than others to complete his training on JN4s. However, sheer perseverance finally paid off.

:E.V. Jacques via S.K.T.

of Western Front fighting Sgt John Oldham was stricken with pleurisy. Unable to resume his position in the breach, he returned to Canada. His disappointment never abated. John Oldham died only a few years after the war – a dejected veteran.

A terrific natural at the piano, 'Doc' rejected his classical training – another parent dictum – jazzed tunes up and become a much sought-after local entertainer. Doc always said the reason why the RFC accepted him was his piano playing – not his flying sense. He enlisted in Kingston, Ontario with an Army Supply Unit, found two years in this 'dead end' of military service far from rewarding and submitted his application papers to the RFC early in 1917. At the height of a recruiting campaign, graduated on 2 August 1917 with the rest of Course 9A in Toronto and soon learned that his flight training would not be a 'fast study' at 80 CTS, Camp Mohawk, Deseronto, Ontario. It started in late August and not until December 1917, long after many Course 9A graduates were already in England, had he finally completed his Aerial Gunnery

Training, all of which he received in Texas. Along with a few hundred RFC cadets, Doc returned to RFC Headquarters, Toronto, received his temporary commission as 2Lt, left for England on 25 January 1918; from Halifax, aboard the *Tunisian*, along with 78 others. Most of this 11th RFC draft from Canada were selected to continue their UK training at 4 TDS, Hooton Park; the extra demand for future Sopwith Dolphin pilots made this a necessity.

Those chosen were quartered in a vintage castle on a fine old estate. Flying began on 12 March on Avros, and most advanced to fly C Flight Pups by 14 April. Towards the end of the month, those ready for Dolphins were not that impressed. One pilot in Oldham's group had the starting magazine fall off and short circuit on the rudder bar. While accidents were kept to a minimum, the apparent ambling gait of Doc, along with a laid-back temperament and a perceived look of no interest, rankled his instructors. Poor grades in wireless tests were not becoming to a future fighter pilot and they failed to disturb Oldham, who traded Dolphins for the SE5as at 94 Squadron, Harling Road.

He left for Ayr on 30 April, then moved to Turnberry on 2 May. Here he came down, ironically, with what doctors determined to be pleurisy, a hereditary weakness, the same diagnosis as his brother earlier in the war. The two months recuperating from the chest pains were to send him back to the Avro/Pup training combination. Summer 1918 had