

IN GOOD COMPANY

Lieutenant James Archibald McGinnis: Observer,
27 Squadron RFC/RAF and his Canadian colleagues

BY STEWART K. TAYLOR

AS SEPTEMBER 1917 DREW TO A CLOSE and, correspondingly, the Ypres battles continued to consume the lives of young men on both sides in ever increasing numbers, the call for better more advanced weaponry to turn the tide in favour of the Allies reverberated throughout the entire structure of Britain's military. Several RFC squadrons had experienced improvements and upgrades in the aircraft they flew and rarely were the pilots nostalgic over the types of machines that were replaced. The one or two exceptions concerned the exchange of Triplanes for Camels in 10 Naval and, while only a handful of pilots overtly complained that they would rather continue on with the 'devil they knew', the 'Tinsyde' 27 Squadron pilots made no real objection, the news their beloved Martinsyde 'Elephants' would be replaced by DH4s hardly received endorsement. The 27 September arrival of DH4 A7677, a 200-hp BHP engine machine built by the parent company was first flown by Major W.D. Beatty, the CO, on a short test flight. Sgt C.V. Clinch, far and away the squadron's best pilot, and then 2Lt S.J. Stewart, a sturdy, jaunty Scot, followed with positive appraisals of their own.

As more DH4s arrived at Clairmarais North – A7640 made a 30 September appearance – the Martinsyde pilots knew for sure that the story about re-equipment was not for some a 'nightmare' but a becoming reality once the squadron moved to Serny, a more accommodating location to practice from. A squadron tender delivered the initial batch of observers on 16 October. Three of the five were Canadians and they were not made to feel at home. *We were pretty much ignored, 'Archie' McGinnis remembered, and had to amuse ourselves for several days while the pilots learned to fly the DH4 two-seaters.*

Engine failure on his first time up was no confidence builder for 2Lt Raymond George Foley, a tough, little ex CEF trooper from Ottawa. The most auspicious of the five, 2Lt J. G. Proger and 2Lt Ken Mappin, both Englishmen, were not bothered by the 'teething troubles' the pilots were having with the unfamiliar BHP engine and Foley, on one of his initial flights, most with the major, had it interrupted by an incorrectly adjusted petrol pump, while yet another Canadian, Lt Fred Webster Best, experienced some anxious moments while his pilot, the redoubtable Sgt Clinch, had to struggle with an



His face already showing the results of exposure to the winter elements, Lt James Archibald 'Archie' McGinnis posed for this February 1918 photo, taken at Serny by the tail section of DH4 A7622. Up to this time he had already completed ten missions, all but two of them with 2Lt Eric Waterlow – 'Waterlogged' to his friends – and the last four in this machine which had white-painted port elevator and ailerons.

: J.A. McGinnis via SKT

ailing right magneto. But if any pilot could nurse an aircraft engine in need of mechanical attention, he was the pilot most qualified to do it.

Dividing their flying time between the Martinsyde and DH4 meant the remaining 'Elephants' were not receiving the attention they once enjoyed; the throaty roar of the 160-hp Beardmore had become less common, the cacophony of cylinder produced roars now the product of sharper, more metallic reverberations courtesy of the BHP. As if to thumb their noses at the new intruders, the Beardmores became more ill-tempered; forced landings around Serny's vast perimeter not an unusual sight.

With the 9th (Headquarters) Wing's upper echelon leaning on him to bring his squadron back to full operational status in less than a month, Major Beatty, a very conscientious CO, knew he would be hard pressed to meet such a commitment. He, as well as anyone, spent as much time as possible in the DH4's cockpit, continually testing for possible weaknesses in the engine and petrol systems. Leaking radiators were among the main problems – bursting manifolds another.

For nearly two weeks, Lt McGinnis – 'Archie' to his friends – had to nurse a nasty cold. The CO forbade him to fly until the infection passed. He used his 'grounded time' to commiserate with a tall, lean Englishman, a quiet type who, although born in the Hyde Park area of London and educated in that vast UK metropolis, had been living in Regina, Saskatchewan, and working as a rancher on the outskirts of that prairie city for a couple of years before the war. Each found they had something in common. Not quite a son of that province's soil, Archie had more of an urban upbringing, his Scots/Irish parents were living in the town of Moosamin situated north of the Qu'Appelle Valley amid grain fields as far as the eye could see. At the time of his 22 October 1896 birthday there was not much else to recommend this outpost other than what meagre proceeds came from the grain crops and, as his parents were merchants who operated a general store on a shoestring budget, the McGinnis family, devout roman Catholics, hoped for better things should young Archie, an only son, demonstrate ambitions far beyond the limited scope of life in a town of no more than a thousand inhabitants, albeit one of the provinces oldest communities that had sprung up when the railroad came through in 1882.