

# STRAFING IN LATE 1918

## Lt Edwin Woods Mills, 209 Squadron

by Stewart K. Taylor

DECIDEDLY PAROCHIAL IN NATURE the 'headmaster' of the Mills family residents of Hamilton, Ontario's small but influential business elite, made no excuses to other members of the extended family, aunts, uncles etc. He insisted his only son, Edwin Woods Mills, born 18 January 1899 in Hamilton, attend Ridley College, St Catherines, Ontario and, a must, spend at least one year at Royal Military College.

Coming from a home of pseudo intellectual parents 'Ted', a name he soon acquired, developed a real zest for life, read anything of a current or historical nature and when he wasn't stroking a tennis racket, a book was the next best thing.

From RMC, former cadet No.1270 received a Royal Field Artillery commission, but then considered the RFC to be a better deal. In a series of bi-weekly letters, insisted upon by his father and complied to by his teenage son, a better than average correspondent, we learn of nearly every twist in the road for RFC Cadet E.W. Mills. The following extracts help to provide insight to the workings of a most facile mind:

### **Montreal, 31 August 1917**

*We sail this evening and so far about fifteen have showed up. I went over to watch an anti-conscription meeting this morning. It is the first brave thing I have done in uniform. Perhaps I never did a braver one in civvies and may not do a better one in my present garb. Nobody said anything to me, but they talked a lot under their breath that I couldn't understand. I know they weren't throwing compliments at me. I was inquisitive but most of the cadets (RMC) thought I was a damn fool.*

### **SS Megantic, 2 September 1917**

*.... The boat is all painted cock eyed to make it look queer. It does! As we are the only artillery men on board and there is a six-inch gun with a gun crew of 3 Naval men and as six of us are qualified layers, we are looking forward to the suggestion made to us by, or at least through, the senior officer on board.*

*Do you know that all of Leighton Ferries's class, except himself, had been wounded.? I guess the artillery is getting it pretty hot.*

*The ship that sailed alongside of us all the way, was sunk just fifty miles from land and nearly everything was lost. I can remember very distinctly how she looked, crowded to the very fullest and then dropped behind and kept about a mile from us the rest of the day. Evidently a sub followed her all the day and then came up under the cover of dusk.*

### **Grosvenor Hotel, London, Sunday 16 September 1917**

*We report at the War Office tomorrow morning and I'll likely get shot to some camp in Scotland.*



2Lt E.W. Mills, London November 1918.

:E.W. Mills via S.K.T.

*Reported to the War Office last Monday and got leave until further notice. Then I received word to report for an MO exam. By George, that was the stiffest test I have ever gone through in my brief experience. Took a whole day starting at 9 o'clock and ending at 6. Ten of us were taken together, six of them being from RMC. I think four, possibly five were passed as fit; two or three of the others passed as fit for observers and the rest were rejected, three of them being RMC cadets too. I tell you, it is not easy to pass the test for pilots over here. Earning your certificate in England means a lot more than earning it in Canada. All Canadian qualified pilots have to take a course over here anyway. Just now the call for pilots is not as great as that for observers. I don't know whether to take the last or not. I should imagine it would be similar to sitting in the back seat of a motor car. Besides, it is easier*

*than a pilot's job and if you can pass the harder test why take the easy job. The fellows who were rejected will have to go artillery or infantry. That amuses me, it must be better to have a flying certificate because one has to pass a higher proficiency standard. Wish to goodness we would get our notice though. Here we are fooling away time, seeing London when we might be at work.*

### **The Royal Overseas Officers' Club at the RAC Pall Mall, London 23 September 1917**

*The cadets who are going in the artillery leave today. Most of them are going to Salisbury Plains. They have to take a course all over again just the same as what they went through at Petawawa. The six in the flying don't know yet what is going to be done with them. Three of us are to have a month's leave and then go direct to France and because of our previous artillery training, no other course is necessary, and they go straight to the front as observers. We may have to go with the others as observers until Christmas and then, if we prove any good, we may be brought back to some French flying school.*

*Met several ex cadets at the RAC and they advised us to come here. It is much better than a hotel.*

### **Mavfair Villa, 997 London Road, Reading, 11 October 1917**

*I am here quite a while now ... am billeted in the town and have to go about town to take different lectures.*

*Found out that Leighton Ferrie went over to France on the finest kind of machine, also the hardest to fly. Trust Leighton to take nothing but the best. He was a peach that fellow.*

*Had dinner with Lister Waddell or at least I had him up to dinner. He was convalescent at the Prince of Wales Hospital. Nice chap that.*

*One of the men in the class was a Hamilton Spectator reporter. He came over with the first contingent but returned*