

# THE TWO BOHUNKS



FSL Alexander Richard 'Noisy' Knight and  
FSL Roderick 'Rod' McDonald  
B Flight, Naval 8, 1917

*By Stewart K. Taylor*

**I**t is funny how words spoken by World War 1 veteran Alex Knight stuck both in my father's and my own memory for years afterwards. As I introduced this real oddball – a genuine character – to an *Over The Front* gathering some 17 years ago, I will also repeat the words I used then to present him again, along with his 'bohunk' buddy, FSL Rod McDonald, to a fresh membership audience.

Alex Knight stood erect and smiled like a Cheshire cat. Alex had flown Sopwith Triplanes with Naval 8 in the First World War, but this was a Saturday in May 1941. He had just received his new RCAF uniform and like a kid wanted to show it off to his friends by parading around the poor man's Alexandra Yacht Club, one block west of Bathurst Street on the Toronto waterfront. The Toronto Maple Leaf baseball team in the old International League was playing a Saturday (afternoon) double-header and Alex, never one for punctuality, had free tickets for the games and was also in no hurry to leave his yacht club cronies.

In the days of prohibition, Alex did a little rum running across Lake Ontario. The long, sleek, black-painted, wooden-hulled motor launch in which he carried out that illicit business, its cockpit covered by a dirty khaki coloured tarpaulin, swung silently at a mooring just inside the breakwater of the western gap, along with a school of other sail boats, row boats, motor launches and, yes, another former rum-runner like his own.

My father was a friend of Knight. He knew Alex had been a World War One fighter pilot. Whenever he could, he sapped the veteran for stories about flying in the Great War.

I was with my father at the yacht club. "Let's see if Mr Knight will talk to us about the Triplanes?" Dad said to me as he, more or less, stepped right in front of Flying Officer Knight. Alex happily complied. What he had to say went something like this:

"I was about the size of a six-foot grasshopper in those days... the [Sopwith] Triplane had a cramped cockpit but there was still enough room for me to rattle around in chasing after that famous German ace Richthofen!"

At the mere mention of that name, my ample-sized 11-year-old ears reacted like a couple of radar antennae, picking up every breath, every sentence, every nuance.

"We had a lot of fun in those days, told lots of lies and cared less about what we wrote in our logbooks!"

He continued to reminisce for about 10 minutes making equally prophetic statements, which dad and I had long forgotten, before looking at his watch, saying goodbye and walking smartly off to the first game of the double-header already in progress.

A better selection of words should have read 'remarkable' instead of 'prophetic'.

**Bohunk:** initially a slang expression for an East European labourer, the term came to be used in North America to describe an oafish or loutish person.

**A**lexander Richard Knight lived a 'fast life' and from a young age acquired the gift of persuasion. His mother happened to be the first white woman born in Collingwood, Ontario, the daughter of Dr R.A. Stephens, the first white 'medical man' in the area who treated the indigenous Indian population with the due respect they deserved, earning for himself an equal response from his native patients. Equally adept at the use of finances, the good doctor from 1910 onwards acted as the town treasurer, only it was his daughter, 'Noisy' Knight's mother, who the native population looked upon as some kind of divine messenger – her pure white skin emblematic as some kind of gift from the spirits – and grew into an autocratic domineering woman with a Victorian temperament to match. She would become regent of the Admiral Collingwood branch of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) in the First World War and an older son, Todd, her first born, in order to escape his mother's inordinate discipline – the neighbours quite freely used the term 'matron' in reference to her – joined the Canadian army while under age, served in the Boer War and was killed in the next war.

Both Alex Knight's parents were years older than the average at the time of the birth of a son on 16 January 1893 in Collingwood, his mother well into her forties, the father sixty-plus. Allowed to do pretty much as he pleased, the birth of yet another brother, christened Forester Knight, all attention then focused on him, allowing Alex to really cut loose. He sought attention, which he never received, in various ways. His most bizarre method was the construction of a home-built glider. Using his already mature cogent initiative he talked one of the few automobile owners in Collingwood at the time (1913) to tow it and when the attempt was made, which attracted a good portion of the town's more curious, the glider left the ground and its occupant, a young local lad by the name of Connolly who was a friend of Alex's, stretched out on the flying contraption's fuselage. Alex had coerced him into controlling the glider's flight and he managed to keep it in the air for a short stretch, until the entire structure collapsed. The Connolly boy was killed, and Alex instantly became an unwelcome town celebrity.

Keeping his nose clean and out of the spotlight proved more than he could bear. His mother was furious at the death and