



Twinkle Toes

**Capt. Jack Victor Sorsoleil, MC
A Flight, 84 Squadron RFC/RAF**

Part 1, by Stewart K. Taylor

There is a substantive argument to be made relative to the fact that 'Twinkle Toes' Sorsoleil, all 4 feet 11 inches of him, missed 84 Squadron's costly learning curve during those initial weeks of BEF service with 9th Wing in September and October 1917, a period more aptly described as the squadron's 'early graveyard'. In his 1963 personal memoirs publication *Years of Combat* Sholto Douglas, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, expounded upon the reasons for this, concluding in such retrospects, his own pilots' lack of maturity other than the hand-picked flight commanders, but most of all, the tactical methods employed when single, or at most, double strength formations, which more often than not, refused to remain cohesive in combat, thereby allowing the opposition to pounce on the separated individuals and comfortably add to their growing list of victims. Only when the searing heat of battle was turned down, towards the conclusion of October 1917 and only a matter of days in advance of Passchendaele's capture, and 84 Squadron's transfer to the RFC's 13th (Army) Wing on 12 November 1917, a move that aligned them with the fourth British Army at Izel-lès-Hameau. This allowed a more tepid aerial combat situation to gracefully settle the pilots and improve their fighting skills and, compared to the utter devastation they received over the Ypres salient, a relaxed climate.

Once the process of moving was completed the first replacement SE5a pilot to arrive was Lt Jack Victor Sorsoleil, Mr 'Twinkle Toes' himself.

Descendants of French Huguenots, the Sorsoleil family was able to trace the protestant lineage back to the seventeenth century, more recently to England and then Canada. Jack, the second son of a model school principal, was born on 2 June

1899 in Colborne, Ontario and educated in that southern Ontario town on the north shore of Lake Ontario then, from 1913 to 1916, at the University of Toronto. He had no special goals set in life, other than wooing the young ladies, dressing 'to the nines'. He was a natural spiff, never a hair out of place, or wrinkled collar, shirt, jacket and trousers immaculate, tie exceedingly conservative and, most of all, his shoes polished to a glowing shine. That's why all his school friends, father and mother also, referred to Jack as 'Twinkle Toes', but his brother, jealous of all the attention Jack received, preferred to ignore him.

Training in Canada and England

Noticeably influenced by the younger females, his limited size, flashing brown eyes and wicked smile, attracted them in droves. From the moment RFC in Canada first opened up their Toronto based, university-centred cadet training establishment, No.4 SMA, young Jack was among the initial swarm of eager-to-fly young men who forwarded their applications. He was accepted as of 14 April 1917 and placed among those in A Flight Canadian Cadet Wing, No.1 Squadron, 1917 as an AM3 and provided with the RFC/Canada regimental number 70161.

Flight training for the RFC's latest 'fashion plate' began at 84 CTS, Camp Mohawk, Deseronto, Ontario, at 17.40 on 29 May 1917 in JN4A C550. The five-minute flight at 1,000ft provided by 2Lt J.M. 'Met' Purcell only wetted Cadet Sorsoleil's thirsty appetite for more. All told, the same instructor gave him nearly five hours dual covering a period extending from 30 May to 16 June 1917, a total of nine individual flights, and never, 'in a million years', thought that the tiny little fellow, who could only just, with the addition of two pillows, see above the JN-4's

At Camp Mohawk, Deseronto, Ontario in late May/early August 1917, AM3 RFC Cadet J.V. Sorsoleil made seven instructional flights in sister JN-4s C550, C552, C553, C554 similar to the 84 CTS machines featured in this June 1917 photo taken beside his training squadron's hangars. :PND

