

THE SPIKE & JIM SHOW

Lt. John Alfred Sully and 2Lt James Gordon Crang

A Flight 1½ Strutter Team, 70 Squadron, RFC 1917

By Stewart K. Taylor

No. 70 Squadron crews learned some hard lessons during early 1917. The first signs of their near naked vulnerability were exposed as the month of March 1917 with its ever-increasing daylight, was added to by the unwanted appearance of faster and better armed scouts, now flown by Jasta pilots further accustomed to their Albatros D.III Scouts. 70 Squadron's problems were compounded by the 9th (HQ) Wing's demand for long-distance reconnaissance missions, placing the load squarely on the 1½ Strutter aircrews. Among the crews was observer 'Spike' Sully, christened John Alfred by his rural farming parents in Metcalfe, Ontario, where he was born 19 November 1892. Sully grew up to have a hard-nosed demeanour, aptly recognized by his peers; at school in Metcalfe his classmates soon referred to him as 'Spike the Big Guy'. He simply revelled in the label. No one was ever going to put something over or above him.

Urged by an 'inner voice' to try his hand at achieving some sort of satisfaction much further west in Alberta, he first looked for a wife. He found the willing mate, Blodie Marguerite Mills in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and married her on 28 September 1912. Their relationship blossomed. When not rolling up his sleeves for manual farm work, Spike spent his leisure time as OC of the local cadets, a post he held only for one year. Answering the call, he left his Youngestown, Alberta Militia Unit, the 21st Hussars, on 6 March 1916 and pledged to carry on, if and when, into battle with the 175 Battalion. As a lieutenant, he went overseas on 3 October 1916, sailing on *Saxonia* which embarked from Halifax. The battalion, raised in Medicine Hat, Alberta, would not go to the front, but would be stationed in England to act as a source of replacements for other battalions of the Canadian Corp fighting in France. The posting offered little for Sully. When his wife, now residing with her parents in Ottawa, heard that Spike was going to seek a secondment to the RFC, all Blodie could do, as she would for the next 52 years, was to pacify herself into accepting what her life partner decided to do.

The RFC needed observers in order to fulfil its offensive policy. There were questions regarding the transfer of



Titled 'Smiles, not for the Hun'. Boisdillingham April 1917. On the left 2Lt James Gordon 'Jim' Crang, pilot, and Lt John Alfred 'Spike' Sully his observer. They were 'teamed' almost at once and flew together until 70 Squadron discarded their 1½ Strutters mid July 1917. All the photos credited to 'Spike' Sully were taken by him or 'Jim' Crang and surreptitiously printed and developed by the wing photographer. He had taken another roll of Sully's to have them printed in England, promising to return the films and a copy but was killed in an aircraft crash.

:J.A. Sully via S.K.T.

commissioned officers such as Sully from the CEF – would they continue to be paid by the Canadian Government and what would their RFC rank be? Not that 'Spike' mired himself in the military politics or the impact on his finances.

The moment he was officially seconded from the 21st Reserve Battalion along with Capt George Barrett Davies, the two had thought earnestly about a future in the RFC not long after he was returned to Canada in 1916 with the task of recruiting another battalion in Medicine Hat. Capt Davies, a trench veteran with the 3rd Canadian Mounted Rifles had seen first-hand the work of the primitive RFC in France, was impressed and it would be he who helped incubate the idea the two of them attempt a change in forces while together with the 21st Alberta Hussars at Seaford.

Lasting within the allotted time of six weeks plus, the observers' course in early 1917 could only be described, when compared to the equivalent, a year and a half later, as barely functional. The basics were taught but the limited use of a weapon in the air at Hythe would never really prepare pupils for the real grim reality of what aerial combat had developed into.

For those at Hythe in March/April 1917 the word on most lips was survival – *just how long am I going to last?* Word of mouth, from those who knew the situation in France gave the answer *not long!* There were no guarantees of survival, absolutely none.

With this knowledge, he was posted to 70 Squadron. To further unsettle the nerves, Jasta 5 had hammered a 70 Squadron reconnaissance between Douai and Cambrai at about 08.00 on 24 March and repeated the aerial slaughter the next morning, depleting 70 Squadron even further – another five 1½ Strutters were lost. The total for both days was 10 aircraft and their crews. White as a sheet, almost numbed into silence, a little bit of a chap in stature and the only Canadian survivor in the squadron from the 23 March near massacre, Capt George Crawford Easton introduced himself to Sully, and provided him with what had happened – then there was silence. This moroseness lingered for days. Understandably, in the face of it all, 9th HQ Wing strongly urged these deep