

# A Little Bit of Heaven ... A Little Bit of Hell Part 2



## Canadian Sopwith Triplane Pilots of Naval One

by Stewart K. Taylor

E.W. DESBARATS

In Montreal, some years after WWI, Robert McMillan met Ed Desbarats. They discussed the 'old days'. No one was better qualified than Edward William Desbarats. He could tell, if and when the situation demanded, detailed, and often humorous, recollections, all of which had been set down in his privately written, unpublished and un-titled personal account of his flying service in WWI.

*As far as I know I was the only Canadian of a bilingual Quebec family who actually fought as a Royal Naval Air Service pilot in France.*

*My father was pure French/Canadian, in the direct line since 1670. My mother was the daughter of Dr Duncan MacCallum and Mademoiselle Guy, also a completely French/Canadian family. Father was a VRC officer and 1890 member of the Bisley team.*

*So, when war came in 1914 I was all set to enlist in the VRC (Victoria Rifles) which was forming the 14th Battalion for overseas service.*

*That year, 1914, was the second since having left Loyola College (with a scholarship for the last two years of Arts). The reason for this: the doctors had told my father his heart could give out at any moment. (He lived for forty years after that and died of old age). So I felt I should start to work in the Desbarats Advertising Agency.*

*Anyhow, he gave me a job of soliciting advertisements for the McGill Daily. To do this it was necessary that I be registered as a McGill student. I took a part time course in chemistry – which turned out both useful, interesting and most instructive.*

*But the work of selling space to reluctant shopkeepers was very wearing in the hot summer of 1914. I came down with what was probably heat prostration. So, it was easy for my father to block my enlistment – I was turned down as suffering from heart trouble caused by excessive smoking – at that time I had never even tried a cigarette or pipe.*

*However, in the autumn of 1914 McGill University COTC started accepting recruits. I joined up, soon learned the drill, made some good friends and specialized in signals.*

*In 1915 I got a good certificate from the COTC, was accepted as a VRC lieutenant. The colonel set me to work organizing and training a signal section.*

*The VRC mess was very agreeable. One of the most useful things I learnt there was how to play bridge.*

*... by the time the 148th Battalion was formed by Col McGee early in 1916 I realized I would never get overseas unless I did something stronger than simply volunteering for the forming of battalions.*

*Ever since the Wright Brothers I had been burning with the desire to fly. Early in 1916 this seemed impossible. The RNAS was accepting only candidates who already had their flying certificates and were able to pay their way in order to join up in England. No money available for me to do that ... However,*

*suddenly there was good news. Admiral Sir Charles Edmund Kingsmill came to Ottawa and announced the RNAS would accept a number of approved candidates, transport them to England and give them their RNAS flight training – pay them from the date of their embarkation. The rate of pay for probationary flying officers – 10s per diem, a full \$25 (Canadian) in those days.*

*I immediately put in my application and on 19th December 1916 was summoned to an interview by the Department of Naval Service in Ottawa, all expenses paid.*

*The interview went well and on 22nd December a letter from the department notified me my application had been approved and I would become a PFO per the date of my Canadian departure – in about three months' time.*

*A further letter on 8th January 1917 let me know the Militia Department had no objections to my transfer to the RNAS. However, Col McRobie was quite sore at losing his signals officer.*

*January, February, March 1917 passed in a whirl. On 22nd February a letter from the Naval Recruiting Secretary told me to report to Ottawa – with two photos of myself – for passage to England. From now to the commencement of flight training I kept a diary from which I now transcribe:*

*15th March: Reported at Ottawa. Told to wait till the 24th and report at Halifax.*

*20th March: Left Montreal for Bonaventure Station with mom and dad. Everybody saw us off.*

*21st March: Still travelling. Arrived Halifax 11.45 pm. Johnston and I slept in the parlor at Halifax hotel.*

*23rd March: Lecture at 10.30 on compass and other subjects. Slight pretence at drill.*

*Wearing life jackets, which had little appeal, a group of those Canadians appointed PFOs in the RNAS at Ottawa were caught by the camera of PFO N.G. Frier, one of their number, mingling on the main deck of SS Southland on 30 March 1917, 'a beautiful day' PFO Desbarats recorded in his diary.*

:Norman Fraser Collection via S.K. Taylor

