

IMPATIENT ACE

Captain Charles Roberts Reeves Hickey DFC*

by Stewart K. Taylor

SCRAPPY PILOTS with that extra verve, viscosity and vitality, have always intrigued most WWI aviation historians. Captain Charles Robert Reeves Hickey had all those qualities – and more. Simply put, the Parksville, Vancouver Island native son was a handful, first for his parents and when you add self-centredness and conceit to the mix you are speaking about a bundle of double trouble.

The Nanaimo, BC, 10 September 1897 born son of Major Robert Hume Fryer Hickey, who, along with his wife, referred to their elder lad, almost ten years older than his brother John and younger than two sisters, as ‘Charlie,’ was raised in Parksville, although he attended high school in Nanaimo.

Almost from his birth, the mother dreamed of the medical profession for her Charlie. All he wanted was to play ‘Cowboys and Indians’ with his school pals, insisting on always winning - shooting the most Indians, but, once WWI fanned the flames of military mobilisation in Canada, his father insisted that Charlie, a student at the Nanaimo General Hospital; in reality a junior caretaker who also did chores around the family farm, join his unit the 11th CMRS of which he was in charge. No other option in the major’s mind would suffice. The 5ft 11in, dark complexioned Charles Robert Reeves Hickey signed up on 17 March 1916, gave his Oath of Allegiance to his Majesty King George V at Victoria BC and within four months Pte No.11675 arrived in England with the 11th CMRS aboard the SS *Laplant*. The indignity of contracting the measles, while still in passage, and admittance to 1st General West Hospital, Fazakerly (Liverpool), on 27 July 1916, then a transfer on 20 August 1916 to Canadian Convalescent Hospital, Hillingdon Home, Nackbridge, his hospital discharge not effective until 25 August 1916, followed by, essentially, four months of foot slogging, marking time to any army beat at Bramshott Camp, played heavily on the mind of this baby faced private. He wanted nothing more than to be unshackled and allowed to seek a commission in the RNAS. The transfer of his military affections to the RNAS was surprisingly condoned by his father and signed as official by the CO of the 24th Reserve Battalion, also stationed at Bramshott; this allowed the honest, sober, trustworthy and intelligent Charles, a foot in the door



*Lt C.R.R. 'Charlie' Hickey, photographed on 21 July 1918 at Teteghem. A religious pipe smoker, his choice of tobacco had not the sweetest of aromas, according to Ron Keirstead, who often had to walk away from the smell.
:The Gumming Family via S.K. Taylor*

and a chance to show his father that the decision to train as a pilot, preferably a fighter pilot, was not a hasty one.

He soon made the acquaintance of a score or more fellow countrymen: a great percentage were university graduates, or having had a few years of post-secondary education, a little humbling for Charlie with an ego ready to expand – ‘big time’.

At Crystal Palace his ruminations of fame in the skies was born and bred. He could keep in step with the best, make circles around the normal and ignored the less inclined. Like everyone else, the RNAS pay scale aroused his attention: \$2.50 a day (Canadian) to start with and once under flight instruction \$3.50 per day and, should he qualify, \$4.50.

Enough to keep him out of trouble – Charles was no gambler – and seek out a steady girl, which was almost number one or

two on his foresight agenda. He would meet the gal, a wee slip of a thing, ‘Billie’ her name, and this would be the moniker applied to all but one of the machines he would fly in France.

Notification that he would be headed south to Vendôme, France, really lifted the spirits. Born on Canada’s west coast, where wintry blasts were the exception, not the rule, Charlie anticipated a good run in the sun only to find this was not quite ‘April in Paris’. He also learned, contrary to what he had heard, that he and the other lads, so designated, would learn to behave as ‘Quirks’ in the cockpits of some rustic ‘old timers’ like Maurice Farman Se..7 ‘Longhorns’ N5049, N5047, and N5046, all English built ‘birds of a feather’. They were reliable and not prone to much bad handling, the Chief Instructor, Lt Edwards, saw to that.

On three days in late April, PFO Hickey made five flights, all right hand circuits of no more than 18 minutes each, but was only twice allowed to touch the controls of these 80hp Renault pushers.

Caudron G.III tractors were next in line. He began with a repeat of the RH circuits, quickly turning to the left hand brand and, like most novices, found that landings were a much larger hurdle to overcome, a common flight ailment which provided an immediate motivation to improve. His four minute solo on 9 May 1917 was given a ‘pass’, *good take off*,