

# CAMERA SHY

## Lt Joseph Percy McRae, A FLIGHT 64 SQUADRON RFC



by Stewart K. Taylor

**M**ODEST BY ROSEDALE STANDARDS, the Tudor styled home at 39 Castle Frank Road in Toronto's affluent community north of Bloor Street East was not exactly what I expected, but something more grandiose – like a castle!

Before this 12 January 1977 early afternoon, I had imagined meeting a somewhat doddering 88 year old WWI veteran; instead, the occupant was wearing a dark blue blazer complete with RFC tie and light grey slacks, groomed almost to formal dress code perfection. I was led into a rather imposing study/library straight out of the 1700s, complete with two standing well polished suits of armour; exquisitely custom made oak bookcases built right into the walls, marble inlaid flooring with a deep pile, Royal Blue, tastefully patterned area rug that could have been a gift from a British monarch and above, my wondering inquisitive eyes made out an impressive geometrically patterned arrangement of oak beams. Collectively, they gave the impression of secluded comfort; just what Joseph Peray McRae wanted as he proudly sat behind a matching oak desk. He described the room as having been *his real office* all throughout WWII, when he reigned supreme over an engineering equipment company that he had started in 1930 and which reaped the benefits of a lucrative Canadian Navy contract.

Once ushered to a high back thinly upholstered chair with few redeeming features – like comfort – jammed against a wall strewn with gilt edged heavily framed pictures, many of them oil painted portraits of his family, himself and God knows who else, I sat cross legged like an English public school boy awaiting council with the headmaster.

Looking pleasantly relaxed, ready to offer his soul, should I ask, the elderly veteran sat back, smiled broadly and assuredly addressed me: *Now, young fella (I was 45) ask me any questions you like about my WWI flying days, I will do my best to remember.*

Well, within the time it took him

to finish his first sentence, I knew right then and there that this senior citizen had a phenomenal memory, just as if the events of sixty years earlier were today's news. My battery of questions, honed over 15 winters of an evolving process asked in natural order of birth date, place, education, pre WWI occupation (if applicable) etc, brought forth these facts:

Born: 7 February 1889, Ottawa, Canada.

Education: Public School, Ottawa; Model School, Elgin Street, Ottawa, in conjunction with the normal school; McGill University, graduating with a BAsC after a 4 year course.

Occupation: Worked with brother as a construction engineer in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Married.

Military Service: In Militia (5th Dragoon Guards), Enlisted August 1915 with the Mechanical Transport in Ottawa. Given a commission. Sent overseas January 1916 with the Field

Workshop. While in England sent to Hythe and Bramshott with the 4th Division, CEF. Mobilized. To France with the 4th Column Supply Shop. In late 1916 transferred to the 4th Ammunition Sub Park in France.

During the winter of 1916 General Haig published orders that all able bodied junior officers who wanted to be allowed to join the RFC.

Once the discussion turned to the RFC my note taking had to furiously increase in tempo. Thankfully, he soon realised this and slowed down as if speaking to a secretary who had no training in shorthand.

In 1977, I had yet to acquire from the Canadian archives any copies of the beautifully hand scripted, file folder sized personnel records, courtesy of the Air Ministry 1919–1920, when they finally sent, after many urgent requests from Ottawa to do so, the postings of all Canadians seconded to the RFC and RAF. Without them, I had to rely on a copy of the abbreviated 64 Squadron history provided to C&C by Frank W. 'Bill' Bailey and long deceased O.A. Sater, along with Reverend W.C. Daniel's article *Recollections of a World War One Flyer* published in

*The 'I am not photogenic' Lt Joseph Percy McRae, at Kriegsgefangen, Karlstrune, December 1917. Snow in the background confirms the date of this photo which clearly emphasises his close cropped hair accentuating what he described as an egg shaped flat top face, an appearance the slightly vain 5ft 7in stockily built Ottawa native was never very proud about.*

:D.A.G. Gruban via S.K. Taylor

