

BROTHERS OF THE AIR

Toronto's Sisley family sends three sons to fly with the RFC

by David Fuller

COMBAT IN THE AIR was a novelty when Canada went to war in August 1914, but, by early 1915, the Royal Naval Air Service was given permission to recruit Canadians who were eager to join the war effort as pilots and it wasn't long before the Royal Flying Corps also came calling. The Imperial air services were looking for men who could fly, or who were educated and had the requisite qualities to learn how. In these early days, if they didn't already have a pilot's certificate, suitable candidates were expected to be from the gentlemanly class and able to afford the \$400 fee to acquire one from a private school, such as Toronto's Curtiss School of Flying at Long Branch, Canada's first military aerodrome. Later, Canada entered into an agreement with the British government to host an air training plan and the Imperial Royal Flying Corps was established in 1917 to recruit hundreds of men a month, with standards set high enough that only a third of those who applied were chosen. As the demand for pilots grew, standards were relaxed and more men of ability were selected, but they were still high enough that not all who applied were taken. Class and education still mattered and so it was that the three Sisley brothers of Toronto all found their way into the new air arm. 'Max', 'Bud' and Don Sisley were from a well off family and, eventually, all met the criteria for what was seen as the more glamorous service.

Their father, Dr Opie Sisley, was the medical officer of health for Scarborough Township, a jurisdiction to the east of Toronto (named after the English town in 1795) where all three sons were born, and served in this rural area for 17 years before moving his practice, in 1912, to the big house at the corner of Main Street and Kingston Road in Toronto's affluent Beach community. Dr Sisley remained there for the next 40 years, eventually becoming an active Liberal politician. He and his wife Sarah were well known to society in the area. The two younger boys, 'Bud' and Don, attended nearby Malvern Collegiate Institute and they were all members of the congregation at nearby Emmanuel Presbyterian Church. The eldest, Malcolm Millard 'Max' Sisley, was an avid horseman and the youngest, Donovan Laurier Sisley attended the prestigious University of Toronto School where he studied with other young men of quality.

ENLISTMENT

Although he was younger than 'Max' by two years, Arthur Jackson Smith 'Bud' Sisley was the first to enlist when he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force as an artilleryman with the 14th Battery in January 1915. Although the extent of his interest in flying isn't known, there was one good reason why he didn't become an airman from the beginning: He had failed his high school matriculation three years earlier and was working as a travelling salesman when war came. The Royal Flying Corps would eventually relax its standards for recruits, allowing 'Bud' to sign up, but in 1915 he did what many men of his station did and joined the army. By May,



'Max' eldest of the Sisley brothers, at 1 SMA, Reading, in January 1916.
:via author

he was on his way to England and training at Westenhanger, Kent, just a matter of weeks before his older brother entered the Curtiss Flying School, located eight miles east of Toronto on the northern shore of Lake Ontario. 'Max' was among the first volunteers for air service and sought to become a flyer before Imperial recruitment schemes had really begun in earnest. In these early days, preference was given to men with pilot's certificates and the Curtiss school had been set up to qualify interested parties. The training course, using three Curtiss Flying Boats, was four months (500 hours) after which recruits were sent to England for officer's training before joining a flying training squadron.

As 'Max' was learning to fly in Toronto, brother 'Bud' was in Wales with his artillery unit, preparing to ship over to the Western Front, and he arrived in Flanders in September. It would be two more months before 'Max' left for England and a posting to 1 School of Military Aeronautics at Reading in January 1916. Youngest brother Don was still in school at Malvern. As the first brother to see action, 'Bud' was lucky to be with the 14th Battery, which had suffered few casualties although it saw continuous service throughout the winter. In March however, he was sent to the field hospital at Camiers, suffering from an abscess in his neck. He was returned to England for treatment, where the cause of his abscess was discovered: he had tonsillitis and surgery was promptly performed at the Duchess of Connaught Canadian Red Cross Hospital, Cliveden. In those days before antibiotics, he spent several months convalescing, at Hillingdon House Military Hospital in London and the Canadian Convalescent Hospital in Monks Horton, Kent, where he remained until July. After so much time out of action, a medical board determined 'Bud' would need four weeks' physical training before he was fit enough to return to the front and he was sent to the Canadian reserves at Shornecliffe. In November, he applied for six weeks' furlough and was sent home to Canada on escort duty, but by this time he had other plans for his military career.

MAX WITH THE RFC

While his brother was recuperating, 'Max' Sisley completed his time at Reading and went on to continue his flying training at 6 Reserve Squadron at Catterick, Yorkshire, from April 1916 until he was sent to 36 (Home Defence) Squadron at Cramlington, Northumberland, in May, to train on aircraft such as the BE2c and BE12. When that squadron was reorganized, he was transferred to 58 Squadron upon receiving his appointment as Flying Officer on July 10. There was to be no gradual introduction to operational flying, however, as within a week 'Max' was assigned to the BEF and 10 Squadron, stationed at the Ulmar family's Chateau de Werppe near Choques, France, to take part in the Battle of the Somme. During that time, 'Max' flew the BE2 series on day and night bombing missions, particularly against railway junctions, billets and dumps along the railways