

Guelph's fallen air servicemen from the First World War

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Editor's note: The following profile is part of an ongoing series produced by Ed Butts examining the story and war story behind individuals named as First World War dead on the Guelph cenotaph in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the start of the war this year.

GUELPH — Among the 220 names on the part of the Guelph cenotaph dedicated to the dead of the First World War, three are of men whose service differed somewhat from the rest. Christopher Salmon Macpherson, Paul Thomas Grant and Victor McQuillan were all with the Royal Air Force (RAF) at the time of their deaths. The RAF was formed on April 1, 1918, with the merger of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).

Everything about war in the air was entirely new in 1914. It had been little more than a decade since the Wright brothers had made the first successful manned flight in a motor-driven, winged aircraft in 1903. The airplanes of the First World War were vast improvements over the Wrights' flying machine, but they were still flimsy contraptions of wood and fabric held together by piano wire. Just flying one was dangerous, even without the added hazard of combat. Pilots sat in open cockpits and wore leather helmets, goggles, boots and warm coats for protection from the high-altitude cold. British Empire pilots didn't have parachutes, because senior officers thought that in an emergency they would be tempted to bail out too quickly instead of trying to save the plane.

As the opposing armies struggled to break the gruelling deadlock of trench warfare, aircraft were brought into use for reconnaissance purposes. They could fly over enemy territory and photograph defensive works, artillery installations and troop concentrations. This vital information-gathering would be of far greater military value than the aircraft's limited capability as a bomber or a flying machine-gun platform for strafing enemy trenches.

In the early months of the war, Allied and German planes passed each other without incident on their way to spy on each other's armies. Then the pilots began taking potshots at each other with pistols and rifles. Soon, the planes were being armed with machine guns. The world's first aerial arms race had begun.

Engineers on both sides worked on developing faster and more manoeuvrable airplanes with more deadly firepower. Lone reconnaissance planes gave way to patrols of fighter squadrons whose purpose was not only to spy, but also to seek out and shoot down enemy aircraft. Opposing squadrons clashed in dogfights, the dramatic battles in the clouds in which planes looped, dived and darted above the war-torn countryside in a dance of death.

Four of the top 20 air aces from both sides were Canadians: Billy Bishop, Raymond Collishaw, Donald McLaren and William Barker. Another Canadian, Roy Brown, was credited with shooting down Germany's greatest ace, Manfred von Richthofen, the famous Red Baron. The pilots called their successes "air victories," not kills. Forcing an enemy plane to the ground was considered an air victory just the same as shooting one down.

Over the course of the war, more than 23,000 Canadians served as pilots, air crews, and ground crews in the British air forces. Nearly 1,400 of them died. Another 1,130 were injured or wounded, and 337 became prisoners of war. Not all the casualties occurred in combat. Plane crashes were frequent, especially during training. Aviation was so new that many instructors didn't have much more experience than the cadets. A pilot who died in a noncombat related plane crash was still listed as "Killed in action."

Christopher Macpherson was born in Halifax in 1896. His parents were the Reverend and Mrs. (Eleanor) Macpherson of Guelph. Christopher's grandfather, Mr. Justice Patterson, sat on the bench of the Supreme Court of Canada. At the time he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in Toronto on July 12, 1915, Macpherson was a student at St. Andrew's College, where he was a member of the cadet corps. Like so many other future pilots, including Bishop and von Richthofen, Macpherson's first experience of the war was on the ground.

In France, Macpherson became a member of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and was promoted to corporal. He was wounded in action on April 17, 1916. He recovered and served with the Royal Canadian Regiment and the Canadian Field Ambulance. Macpherson then joined the RAF with the rank of lieutenant. He was killed in a plane crash in England on Sept. 18, 1918, at the age of 21.

Paul Grant was born in Guelph in 1896. When the war broke out, he was living with his parents, Thomas and Elizabeth Grant at 15 Hewitt St., and was employed at George Savage's jewelry store as a watchmaker. He enlisted in the CEF on July 29, 1916, and at some point transferred to the RAF.

After the Armistice of Nov. 11, 1918, Allied forces in Europe remained on standby while representatives of the belligerent nations argued over the terms of a peace treaty. On Jan. 27, 1919, a telegram arrived at 15 Hewitt St. informing the family that 2nd Lieutenant Paul Grant of the RAF 65th Squadron had been killed in an aerial accident in France. By eerie coincidence, on the same day that the telegram came, Paul's family received a letter from him dated Jan. 1.

"Dear Bunch: Wishing you all a very happy and prosperous year in all things. Also wishing that before many months of this year pass, that I'll be with you again."

The letter was published in the Guelph Mercury for Grant's many friends in Guelph.

This was the second time the war had brought grief to the Grant household. Paul's brother Kenneth, two years older, had joined the CEF on Oct. 6, 1915, and became a bombardier in the Canadian Field Artillery. He'd been killed at Courcelette on Oct. 30, 1916, when his dugout took a direct hit from a German shell while he and a comrade were having supper. Kenneth's name is inscribed above Paul's on the cenotaph.

Attestation papers that would provide background information about Victor McQuillan haven't been found. The CEF Roll of Honour states that he was a corporal in the RAF who died of disease on Oct. 17, 1918, at the age of 22. RAF pilots all had officer ranking, so Cpl. McQuillan most likely served with ground crew. They were the mechanics, fitters, riggers and armourers upon whom the pilots depended to keep their planes and guns in top condition. Billy Bishop and the other leading aces of the world's first air war received many honours, and books have been written about their exploits. For the unsung heroes like Victor McQuillan and so many others, there is only a name on a monument in their hometown.