

THE LAST OF THE GREAT WAR CANADIAN FIGHTER ACES

Lieutenant Gerald A Birks, MC and Bar

by Wayne Ralph

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Introduction

On 2 April 1991, I had the privilege of meeting in Toronto, Gerald Alfred Birks, a former World War One fighter pilot of 66 Squadron, Royal Air Force, but that's a story for later. At that time I did not know the full extent of his achievements during World War One, but spent an enchanting afternoon recapturing that era. Birks was, in fact, the last surviving World War One Canadian fighter ace (or more precisely, 'scout ace', as they were called back then).

Early Days

Gerald Birks was born on 30 October 1894, and grew up in a family of seven children on Stanley Street in Montreal. The second-born child of William Massey Birks and Miriam Childs Gifford, Gerry was one of the grandsons of Harriet Phillips Walker and Henry Birks, founder of Henry Birks & Sons, the well known jewellery and silver business.

He attended Montreal High School (Junior Section) and Lower Canada College, and in the fall and winter of 1914-1915 was enrolled as a partial student at McGill University in the Department of Architecture. Gerry was a good athlete and represented McGill at the first intercollegiate ski meet held in North America, at Dartmouth College, placing second in cross-country and ski-jumping, and third in slalom.

In the summer of 1915, he enlisted in the 73rd Battalion of the Black Watch, the Royal Highlanders of Canada, but was not taken on strength until graduating from the Infantry Officers' Training Course held at the Citadel in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He and one other fellow were the two youngest officers of the Battalion, and were left behind when the 73rd Battalion sailed to England. Undaunted, Gerry petitioned his uncle, Gerald Walker Birks, head of the Young Mens' Christian Association (YMCA) in Canada, and also active with the YMCA in England. Gerry made his own way overseas and was employed as a driver by the YMCA in Folkestone, until recalled by the commanding officer of his battalion in August 1916.

The 73rd spent some time in the Ypres Salient of Belgium before being sent south to the Somme front. Birks was wounded in late November 1916 by sniper fire. Having received a 'Blighty,' Gerry was sent to hospital in London. After a month of convalescence and a pending discharge back to the front lines, he asked, more in hope than expectation, for sick leave in Montreal. Leave was granted.

While in France, Birks had talked to the regimental medical officer about a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps. The doctor did not fancy his chances since Gerry suffered from astigmatism. Nevertheless, in February 1917, the RFC recruiters in Montreal were looking for a few good men, and Gerry applied.

He was advised that he would have to relinquish his infantry commission and join the RFC as a cadet (rated as a second class mechanic). After passing the physical, he was sent for the dreaded eye test, conducted by a zealous corporal. His vision acuity was 20-20, and no further eye tests were done. Astigmatism or no, Birks became one of the deadliest shots in the Royal Flying Corps. After finishing groundschool in Toronto, he was shipped east to Deseronto.



Studio portrait of Gerald Birks as an officer of the 73rd Battalion Black Watch Canadian Regiment, 1915.

Basic Flying Training - Camp Mohawk, Deseronto

On the first 15-minute dual-training flight on 9 May 1917, Lt Maclean did not allow Gerry to touch the controls of the Curtiss JN4 (serial number C552), but simply introduced him to the aerodrome, the Bay of Quinte, the town of Deseronto, and the railway tracks. After nine dual trips totalling two hours and 20 minutes, all but one instructed by Lt Maclean, Gerry was sent solo once around the aerodrome in the JN4 (C550), on the morning of 21 May – his time airborne was a brief three minutes.

He flew a second solo of 40 minutes that afternoon, recording seven landings, and a couple of days later was airborne at 04.40 for his first solo flight to higher altitude, 4000 feet, followed by two landings, and the cryptic notation in the log book 'Remarks' column - 'long glide & turn over.' He logged a total of eight hours and 30 minutes between