

# Lieutenant Jens Frederick 'Swede' Larson: the Waltham Massachusetts Fighter Pilot

by James J Hudson

Jens Frederick Larson was born in Waltham, Massachusetts on 10 August 1891. His parents were living in Stockholm, Sweden, when he enlisted in the 1st Canadian Overseas Contingent in February 1915. Shortly thereafter, he went to France as a member of the Canadian infantry force. Larson was commissioned as a Lieutenant in August 1916 and was assigned to a Canadian artillery regiment a few months later. During his tour of duty with the infantry and the artillery, he became fascinated with the combat aircraft performing overhead and in October 1916 he joined the 'Preliminary School' for air training at Oxford. In May 1917, he began his elementary flight training at Netheravon and a few weeks later was assigned to 34 Squadron's advanced training at Ternhill. At this location he flew Avro aircraft, Morane Parasols, Sopwith Pups and SE5a machines. His date of graduation was listed as 12 July 1917.<sup>1</sup>

On 21 September 1917, he was posted to 84 Squadron then based at Estrées Blanche on the British end of the battlefield. Lt Larson was assigned to Captain J.M. Child's C Flight but was to do his first war flying, a line patrol, with Capt K.M. Leaske's A Flt on 12 October 1917.<sup>2</sup> Major Sholto Douglas, who would be a Marshal of the Royal Air Force in WW2, was then commanding 84 Sqn. Major Douglas, who had flown two-seaters the previous year, was very impressed with the squadron's SE5a single-seaters as was everyone else in the unit.<sup>3</sup> Larson had fallen in love with the SE5 while in his final stages of advanced flight training.

On 22 November 1917 Lt Larson was transferred to Captain E.R. Pennell's B Flt and was made deputy leader. Early in the morning four days later while leading a patrol at 8000ft between Cambrai and St Quentin, Larson spotted two enemy single-seaters about 500 feet below. The Massachusetts man dived on the highest German machine and got a burst from both guns into him. In Larson's report he stated 'He dived under me, passing under Lt Brown who then opened fire on him. I then continued my dive on the second machine, setting well on his tail, giving him a long burst from both guns. He dived vertically with engine full on, probably out of control'. Larson and Brown were now over two enemy aerodromes at 6000ft and started to attack the German machines on the ground, but saw a large number of enemy planes climbing up to cut off the two SE5s. The 84 Squadron pair then dived toward the west and

their home airfield. Major Sholto Douglas listed Larson's victim as a decisive 'down out of control' kill.<sup>4</sup>

The month of December 1917 was basically plagued with bad weather and most fighter squadrons on both the British and German side were able to get in very little air combat. Nonetheless, squadrons attached to the 22nd Wing of the RFC endeavoured to keep the whole army front clear of enemy aircraft up to the line Lesdain-Villers-Outreaux-Beaurevoir-Ramecourt-Sequehart. 'All machines were to work in pairs. From dawn to 10.30hr 54 Sqn (Sopwith Camels) were to patrol; from 10.30 to 12.30, 48 Sqn (Bristol Fighter); and from 12.30 to dusk 84 Sqn (SE5)'. In accordance with these orders three pairs of SE5s left their aerodrome on offensive patrol at 12.30 on 3 January 1918. Three other pairs went up at approximately 14.00. Five of these patrols proved more or less uneventful. 'One, however, proved fruitful'. It consisted of Lt J.F. Larson and 2Lt A.W. Beauchamp Proctor and, at about 15.00 they spotted two enemy two-seaters coming from the east.<sup>5</sup> In Larson's report he stated 'I was in the sun, so charged one of them head on, both guns going. I fired till within 20 yards of EA, then zoomed up and "Immelmanned" back onto EA tail, and got in another burst. The (enemy aircraft) burst into flames and spun down.' Larson then saw 2Lt Beauchamp Proctor shoot down the second German plane.<sup>6</sup> Larson's kill would mark his second victory since joining 84 Sqn.

The weather during January 1918 turned out to be rather poor for high altitude flying. Nonetheless, 84 Sqn remained rather active in low level strafing and bombing. On 28 January, Lt Larson led his first full size B Flt patrol over the lines. Not being able to find targets in the air he turned his attention to the ground and 'brought back a report of railway movements behind the enemy lines which proved of great value'.<sup>7</sup>

At 10.20hr on 16 February Lt Larson's formation saw four large V-Strutters over the town of La Fère and immediately dived on them. Larson 'turned in under them, chose one, got well under his tail, pulled down the Lewis gun and put a drum into him. It seemed as if the pilot was hit as he stalled, fell over on his back, and then went into a vertical nose-dive'. Larson then attacked several other enemy machines and circled underneath giving them short bursts with his Lewis gun, but without effect. Shortly thereafter, he 'saw a large two-seater being archied over our side of the lines.

*SE5as of 84 Squadron, with C6457 nearest.*

*:JMB/GSL*

