



# Ahead of the Game

65 Squadron's First Ace: Capt. Harry Lutz Symons

By Stewart K. Taylor

Sitting up in his bed, the blanket covered in a random array of papers, some crumpled, a few notebooks that were well worn and had missing pages, Harry Lutz Symonds stared straight towards me. His dark, fixated eyes, along with a half-hearted smile and an attempt to give a handshake, were of some importance. This was my introduction to the frail man, once 65 Squadron's most demanding and capable fighter pilot.

Attempting to write his memoirs in novel form, despite failing health and a sentence of just months to live, the 68-year-old had, under his bed, along with a pile of books, some of them copies of his own *Friendship* published 1944, *Ojibway Melody* 1945, and *Three ships West* 1947, plus numerous articles, their pages hurriedly stuffed into undersized folders, this cagey father of six had stashed, among a couple of newspapers, his own supply of scotch. He drank the stuff straight from a shot glass, no extra ice – no nothing. *Keeps me on the straight and narrow!* he quipped. *The matron,....* referring to the former Dorothy Perkins Bull who he had met, courted and married after a short WWI courtship, bore him all those children – he now used the term as 'encumbered' with them. .... *keeps a close watch on me – I hate it – but what can I do?*

'Dottie' the name given to Harry Symonds' wife, was a bit strange. She carefully opened the front door of their 45 South Drive, Rosedale, Toronto home, gave me a scrutinizing eye, told me I could spend no more than an hour with her husband and carefully followed me up the winding staircase leading from the living room to his master bedroom and stood outside the door left carefully ajar by her so she could keep a check on us both. *Sit a little more to the right of me,* Harry asked, *so she can only see your back and then I can recharge my batteries when I feel like it.* Harry very matter of factly continued with *I don't want you to take any notes, you'll find the answers to your questions in this manuscript.* The manuscript lay on the pillow beside him.

We talked. I mean he talked – I listened – for nearly two hours! Dottie was most irrate. She had one of her sons help usher me out of the house. Not a problem. Harry had handed me the almost finished manuscript now carefully stored in my briefcase.

On the way home, driving up the recently opened Mount Pleasant extension, with a steady rain beating against the driver's windshield of my 1961 Nash Ambassador, I had sugar plum fairies dancing in my head with just the thought of those 65 Squadron memories in my possession – if only temporarily – which made the trip home much shorter, but it has taken another fifty years to find a final home for them!

From his 15 April 1893 birth in Toronto, to a reasonably successful architect father William Limbery Symons, and Georgina Esther Lutz, a university graduate, Harry Lutz Symonds, an only child, was never going to be tall. He topped

out at 5ft 4in and that was it. Neither parent was of a nurturing nature and Harry had his happiest days at Toronto's Model School and certainly Trinity College School, Port Hope, where he could intermingle with the other lads, play soldiers – he joined the Governor General's Body Guard 1912 in Toronto the same year he entered the University of Toronto's Arts course only to have the military capture more of his soul. When given a commission in the 4th CMRS (Canadian Mounted Rifles) in January 1915, he could really order the underlings in rank around. He and a horse were a natural bond and, having the gift of a highly developed imagination, he could easily perceive going into battle atop a highly motivated white steed. Having to deal with the reality created no undue worry either.

The 4th CMRS shipped out for England on 17 July 1915, nearly two months after his Toronto enlistment, and it took another three months to qualify as a 3rd Division signaller for service in France. Early in 1916, and for the next nine inglorious months, life in the Ypres Salient could hardly be seen as worthy of repetition. His was a typical example. Captivated by the sight of aircraft in the heavenly blue, sometimes in an aerial dual, and tired of standing in water up to his knees while attempting to signal other outposts as to conditions facing the Canadian troops holding that portion of the line, Lt Symons had his requests for a transfer heard, left the French coast by mail boat on 27 July 1916 and was struck off strength at CTD (Canadian Training Depot) Shorncliffe. The next date of 12 October 1916 was an important one signifying he was *taken on strength from overseas and posted to general list for training as pilot RFC.*

It took on average a month for the necessary paperwork – official documentation – to catch up to the actual factual date. His theoretical training at Oxford began on 3 August 1916.

*I won my wings on Hendon aerodrome on 22 September 1916. Learning to fly at Hendon was routine ... a dull taxiing business... only short, straight, low flying.*

From now on all the quoted passages, unless attributed to another pilot, are extracted from his 'personal memoirs' not one of the names are changed – Harry wanted none of that, preferring to ignore the possibility of some former members of the RFC/RAF suing him for 'defamation of character', adamant that what he wrote was true in the full sense of the word.

Continuing with Hendon: *the advanced stuff. High up circuits, figure of eights, cross country .... They came later.*

Description of Hendon Aerodrome: ... *east side: Four track railway line from St Pancras station, London. Northend: Nicely, prettily wooded.... South end: flat roofed factories. West side: Workshops, hangars, hutments, billets and messes of civilian flying school, plus pilots' quarters.*

*Instructors: Sized up pupils. Recommended to the squadron*