

Beyond the Sunset #3

By George Fuller

On Remembrance Day, I was reminded of what many consider to be the best novel written about aviation in World War I. "Winged Victory" by Victor M. Yeates was published in 1934 and reprinted in 1961. It was based on the author's experiences as a Sopwith Camel fighter pilot with 46 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, later Royal Air Force. Lieutenant Yeates was involved in the destruction of five enemy aircraft, four of these victories shared with other pilots from his unit.

His first victory, on May 3rd, 1918, was shared with Ottawa-born Donald MacLaren who, in the relatively short period from March 6th to October 9th, 1918, was to be credited with 54 victories. Three other 46 Squadron pilots shared in Victor Yeates' fourth victory. On May 22nd they shot down a German two-seater reconnaissance biplane west of Estaires, about 5 km east of the front line and 37 km north of the Squadron's base at Le Hameau in northern France.

One of the victors was Lieutenant J.A. Robert Côté whose father lived at Charny, Québec. Before joining the army in 1915 he had been an employee of the Bank of Montreal. While serving overseas he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and completed pilot training in England. He was posted to 46 Squadron in France which was equipped with Sopwith Camels in November, 1917. The unit had been heavily involved in dangerous ground attack work helping the British Third Army to stop the German offensive of March, 1918. It shared Le Hameau airfield with two other British squadrons; No.64 flying S.E.5a fighters and No.102 with F.E.2b two seater night bombers.



Earlier in May, on a morning offensive patrol in Camel B5585, Robert Côté had his aircraft badly shot up and damaged over Chocques, which was 5 km west of the front line and about 25 km north of Le Hameau. He managed to make a forced landing without injury to himself. The location suggests that he may have had an altercation with a German reconnaissance aircraft.

For the information of model builders, his Camel would probably have been in the standard colours for the time with horizontal white bars painted on the bottom and sides of rear fuselage which visually identified his squadron.

The Québec newspaper LE SOLEIL on Monday, November 18th, 1918 carried the sad report that 24 year old Lieutenant Robert Côté had died overseas of Spanish influenza. It had a fine photo-portrait of the young fighter pilot in his Royal Flying Corps uniform. His comrade Victor Yeates, whose health had been badly affected by his war service, died of tuberculosis at the age of 37 in the year of publication of "Winged Victory". Major Donald MacLaren was executive assistant to the president of Trans-Canada Air Lines when he retired in 1958. He died in his 97th year in 1989.

We will remember them.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George Fuller".

Sources:

Henshaw, Trevor, "The Sky Their Battlefield"

Jones, H.A., "The War in the Air", Vol. IV

Shores, C., N. Franks and R. Guest, "Above the Trenches"