

First World War Pilot Training at Camp Rathbun and Camp Mohawk

By 1916, the First World War was claiming the lives of Royal Flying Corps pilots faster than new pilots could be trained in Great Britain. New recruits and training grounds were needed, and the British War Office looked to Canada to fill the deficit. A unique program was established, with the agreement of the Canadian government, by which the Royal Flying Corps would establish training camps here, and arrange for the manufacture of aircraft for the training squadrons.

The Imperial Munitions Board identified suitable locations for the training camps in Southern Ontario, organized the building of barracks, and aircraft hangars, and established the Canadian Aeroplanes Ltd. Company to build the training aircraft that would be needed for the program.

In January 1917, the Deseronto area was chosen for two camps, while others were established at Borden, Leaside, Armour Heights and Beamsville in the same year. Deseronto was an ideal centre for pilot training. The Rathbun Company's industrial heyday had passed, leaving useful office and warehouse spaces in the town itself. The former head office of the Rathbun Company, at Mill and Water Streets in Deseronto, became the headquarters building for the Deseronto Wing of the Royal Flying Corps in May 1917. Rented sheds in the town were used for repairing aircraft engines, and the Rathbun family's former home on Main Street was converted to become a hospital for the camps.

Rathbun House used as hospital
for training camp.



Sites on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory to the west of the town, and on the Rathbuns' Bay View Ranche farm to the north, were suitable for conversion into pilot training airfields. The first became Camp Mohawk, the second, Camp Rathbun. Construction started on the sites in April 1917, and the first flights at Camp Rathbun got off the ground on May 1st.

Camp Rathbun was home to two squadrons, and had accommodation for 53 officers, 246 cadets and 330 other ranks. It straddled the Boundary Road at the eastern end of town, with hangars and the airfield on the western side of the road, and barracks on the eastern side. The hangars had sliding doors at both ends for ease of access and exit by the aircraft. Tall windows along the side walls allowed plenty of daylight into the structures, in an era when electric light was less prevalent (and very expensive). One of the hangar buildings survives at 100 Prince Street, Deseronto, where it is currently in use as a storage facility for the Town of Deseronto's Public Works Department.



100 Prince Street, Deseronto

The training aircraft used at Camps Rathbun and Mohawk was the Curtiss JN-4 (known as the Jenny). This machine was manufactured by Canadian Aeroplanes Limited in Toronto. The company had been established by the Imperial Munitions Board in December 1916, and it took over the

operations of the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, including their factory on Strachan Avenue. The JN-4 was a re-design of the Curtiss JN-3. It was a two-seater biplane with an eight-cylinder OX-5 engine which delivered 90 horse power. Over 1,260 JN-4s were produced during the war, at a cost of \$7,625.00 each (or about \$150,000.00 in today's money). They had a maximum speed of 75mph and were built mainly of light-weight wood (spruce, for its flexibility and ash, for its strength).

Over 1,300 pilots from across Canada and the US were trained at Camp Rathbun during its period of operation and nearer 2,000 at Camp Mohawk. The influx of such a large number of cadets, trainers and support staff had a considerable impact on the town of Deseronto and surrounding areas. Some local families treated the airfields as a free source of entertainment in the summer, bringing a picnic and settling down to watch the airmen train. The camps were also an important provider of work, with 230 local women employed at them, mainly as mechanics.

Learning to fly could be hazardous. More than fifty men lost their lives while they were attached to the Deseronto Wing's five training squadrons during the war. Forty of these were as the result of flying accidents, while ten men died during the Spanish Flu epidemic of October 1918. Crashes were a regular occurrence in training, as the aircraft of the time were primitive by today's standards. Out of 14,000 Royal Flying Corps men who died during the First World War, 8,000 were killed in accidents during training. Seven of the men who died at Camps Mohawk and Rathbun are buried in Deseronto Cemetery.

One of the men who lost their lives in a flying accident was Captain Vernon Castle, a Broadway dance star who had travelled to England to enlist in 1916. He was an instructor at Camp Mohawk and was involved in the first fatal air accident to happen locally. On May 30th, 1917, Castle was in the rear seat of a Curtiss JN-4 training aircraft with a young cadet, Allan Walton Fraser in the front seat. Fraser lost control of the aircraft and it crashed into one of the hangars, bursting into flames. Fraser was burned to death in the

accident and Castle received burns to his face. After this experience, he insisted on taking the front seat when training cadets.

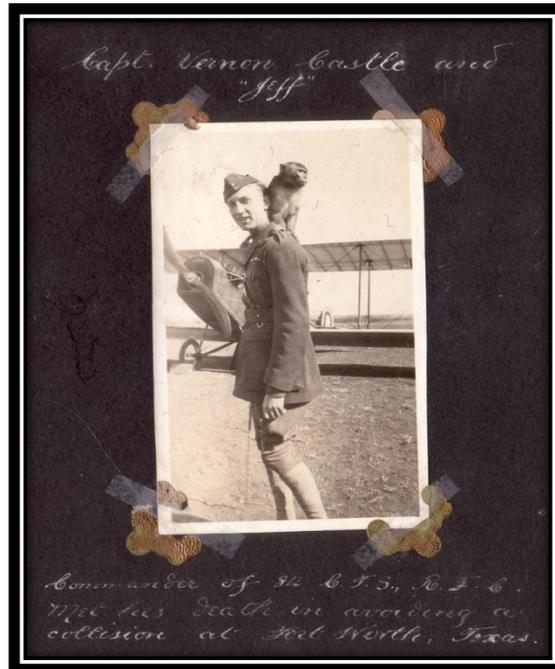
In the winter of 1917/18 the Borden and Deseronto training wings were relocated by train to new camps in Texas, to take advantage of the warmer climate and the support of the United States, which had officially entered the war in April 1917. It was while the Deseronto squadrons were in Texas that Vernon Castle lost his life. On February 15th, 1918 he was in the front seat when his aircraft stalled on a turn, trying to avoid a collision with another machine. It crashed to the ground, crushing Castle on impact. The cadet who was in the rear seat (R. O. Peters) escaped the crash with bruised legs.

The training squadrons returned to Deseronto in April 1918 and training continued at both camps until the Armistice was declared at the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, of the eleventh month, 1918. On November 15th the *Napanee Guide* noted that:

One result of the signing of the armistice will be the immediate close of the two aviation camps at Deseronto, Camp Mohawk and Camp Rathbun...

The aviation camps have been popular resorts for sight seers the past two years, and the planes have been a frequent spectacle manoeuvring over our town. The men also have been welcome visitors to the town on many occasions. They were of a superior class, always well conducted and gentlemanly. Their departure will mean a social and sentimental, as well as a real business loss to the merchants of Deseronto.

While Camp Mohawk continues to house the aviation school run by First Nations Technical Institute, little remains to be seen of Camp Rathbun, although its location is marked on Boundary Road by an Ontario Heritage Trust plaque.



Vernon Castle



Camp Rathbun

***Edited and printed with permission from the Deseronto Archives and Archivist,
Amanda Hill. Thank you Amanda!***

For more information on Camp Rathbun, please contact the Deseronto Archives, open
Wednesdays 10am to 4pm.

An "Intro to Camp Mohawk" by MBQ Research was printed in the October 2014
newsletter. For a copy, please see the MBQ website, under administration, under
Research.

Honouring Those Who Volunteered in March 1915

As part of our on-going commemorations of World War One, we would like to provide more information about those who signed up to serve in March, 1915.

Joseph Bernard Hill, who signed up in Kingston on the 31st of March 1915, was previously featured in the article from November, 2013.

Louis Sherman Bardy signed up on the 11th of March 1915.

Louis Sherman Bardy

Louis was the son of Alexander & Margaret (Brant) Bardy. He was born the 12th of February, 1895, according to his baptismal. His attestation paper states he was born 12th of February, 1894. On his attestation paper, the address of his next of kin was given as "Marysville". The name of his next of kin was his mother "Mrs. Bardy".

We learn from his military personnel file that:

- When he signed up, he already had 3 months military experience with the 13th Regiment.
- He was a labourer before he signed up.
- His attestation paper states he first served with the "26th Battery, 7th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery".
- He went through many transfers between batteries and brigades during his military stretch before being deployed to France in March, 1916.
- In June, 1916 he was posted to the 7th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.
- Sometime after, he was transferred to the 6th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.
- In April, 1917, he was transferred to the 4th Brigade "on reorganization"
- He was awarded a Good Conduct Badge in July, 1917.

- He was sent to England in April, 1919 while still with the 4th Brigade.
- He was then transferred to the 27th Battery in May, 1919.
- He began his return voyage to Canada in June, 1919.
- He was discharged on 3rd of July, 1919 with the rank of “Driver” and was awarded the Military Medal on the 12th of August, 1919

Tragically, just over a year later, he died in an industrial accident on the 24th of August, 1920. The death notice in the Daily Intelligencer (Wednesday, August 25th, 1920) stated that it happened at the cement plant in Point Ann. He fell from a ladder and struck his head on a concrete floor. The cause of death was a fractured skull and compression of the brain. *[AO Death Registration MS935 Reel 265]*

He was buried at Christ Church Cemetery where there is still a headstone there marking his grave.