

# Canada's Lone Eagle

by Major Mike Minnich, CD



*Shot under poor conditions somewhere in France, this is the only known photo of Henry Botterell at the controls of a Sopwith Camel.*

**T**hey were mostly young, certainly daring, and volunteered for the new field of military aviation by the tens of thousands back in 1914-1918. The aircraft engines were pitifully unreliable by later standards, aviators virtually froze and suffered from oxygen deprivation at patrol altitudes that often exceeded 16,000 feet, and there was no parachute if one suffered a structural failure or engine fire in combat.

And yet still they came, eager to “just try something new and different,” as one of those early flyers told me years ago.

Among the throngs of young Canadians who enlisted in a quest for wings and adventure in late 1916 – just months after an older brother had died in action in France with Toronto’s 48th Highlanders – was Henry J.L. Botterell, an Ottawa native who had just turned 20 and had previously worked for the Bank of British North America. Recruited by the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), he actually had to travel to England as a civilian and was only sworn in to begin training once overseas.

“My sister worked as a secretary for an Admiral Kingsmill, Royal Navy, in Ottawa in the early years of the war,” Botterell recalled, sitting resplendent in a blue blazer in the sun-splashed cafeteria of the veterans wing of Toronto’s Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, where he currently resides; alert and mobile just weeks before his 102nd birthday. “She was the one who suggested I try for the RNAS.”

Although the many years have understandably dimmed and intermingled some of his memories, having his son Edward as well as both of his original flying logbooks close at hand allows the gaps

*The gritty, trailblazing aviators of World War One seem almost mystical phantoms from the perspective of late 1998 as we mark the 80th anniversary of the end of that war. A dwindling number of WW I vets remain, but – as near as can be determined – only one man is still alive who can recall his days flying Sopwith Camels over the Western Front. Let’s spend some time with Henry Botterell, one-time flight lieutenant, RAF – believed to be the last living WW I fighter pilot of the British Commonwealth.*

to be filled in as we re-trace a fascinating saga.

For one thing, Henry Botterell’s military aviation career nearly ended in disaster shortly after it began!

After earning his pilot’s rating during the summer of 1917 at RNAS Stn Chingford, Cranwell (later to become the famed home of the RAF College), and Freiston, the first week of September found Botterell – with a total of just 40 solo flying hours, plus seven with an instructor – posted to an airfield called Petite Synthe in France, close to the Channel coast at Dunkirk. Here he joined Naval Squadron Eight and, after a few local familiarization flights, would be expected to begin flying in combat.

“It was on one of those local training hops in a Sopwith Pup that I crashed, just after take-off,” he relates. “I wasn’t too high, only about 200 feet, but stalled and spun and hit pretty hard. I broke a leg, lost some teeth, and got a bad gash on my forehead.” What caused the engine failure shortly after lift-off – then, as now, the worst-possible time to lose power – is not recorded, but Botterell’s subsequent logbook entry from the morning of 18 Sept 1917 indicates he then tried to turn from his line of flight... and fell victim to the classic stall/spin/crash sequence that has claimed so many neophyte aviators.

Taken to the Queen Alexandra Hospital in nearby Dunkirk, his leg later had to be re-broken to let it set properly. Subsequently invalidated back to the U.K. for a six-month convalescence, and with a medical discharge contemplated, it looked like his flying days were over.

But Henry Botterell had signed up to fly combat,

and fly combat he would. While using one of the travel warrants granted him from the naval hospital in Scotland, he encountered some fellow pilots with whom he'd trained. Thanks to the right suggestion passed to an appropriate, sympathetic ear – April 1918 found Henry Botterell re-accepted for service, but required to re-qualify for flying.

*"First flight since Sept. 18, 1917,"* Botterell's logbook entry for 7 April 1918 reads, as it reveals a 10-minute dual hop at the airfield at Manston, Kent, followed by 22 minutes solo in Avro number 9880. *"Did not feel strange. Took control in air. Lt Gray climbed out and said OK for solo. Kept engine running and had no difficulty."*

Once getting his hand back in on a training aircraft, the young Canadian quickly moved on to a single-seater, taking up a Sopwith Pup fighter twice later that same day for a total of one hour, three minutes additional flying.

The spring of 1918 saw heavy fighting in France and Belgium, and the newly created Royal Air Force – established when the RNAS was merged with the British Army's Royal Flying Corps effective 1 April 1918 – needed combat pilots as quickly as possible. Botterell's re-qualification training at Manston lasted just three weeks, during which time he progressed from Pups to the newer and higher-performance Sopwith Camel. Nicknamed by some who flew it as "the gyroscope with wings," the famed Camel was notoriously difficult to fly for inexperienced pilots, and many died in stall-spin accidents. Once mastered, however, most pilots loved its incredible manoeuvrability, especially a propeller-torque-induced capacity to turn to the right faster than anything else in the sky.

"We used to shoot at the wrecks of training planes that they'd lay out on the ground," Botterell

recalls. "They'd just have the wings and fuselages there, and we'd fly over and machine-gun them for target practice."

And there was no lack of newly wrecked aircraft to put to that use. A laconic logbook entry for 20 April 1918 reads: *"Formation leader crashed taking off. [My] throttle closed by vibration, but hung on to poor formation of three."*

After a total of just 10 hours of refresher training, Botterell was signed off as fully operational, and shortly was on his way to France. There, at a small airfield called Serny, he re-joined his old outfit, which was now designated 208 Sqn RAF, rather than "Naval Eight," and on 14 May 1918, undertook his first flight over the lines. As was routine, this was a carefully planned sortie, escorted by some of the squadron's older hands, that was simply meant to familiarize the newcomer with what the surrounding terrain looked like. Any engagement with the enemy was studiously avoided.

On 10:30 a.m. on the morning of 19 May, however, as part of a six-Camel-strong effort by the squadron's "C" Flight, Henry Botterell participated in his first genuine "offensive patrol," as they were called. Flying at a lung-punishing 18,000 feet over the vicinities of Arras, Lens, and Bethune, the flight returned to base after 90 minutes, and the mission was logged as "uneventful," which basically meant there were no overt engagements with the enemy. At 4:30 p.m. that afternoon, off they went to do it again, at 16,000 feet this time.

Still a "new kid on the block" and under orders from his flight commander to keep out of any dog-fights that might arise, Botterell's log entry for the morning patrol on 22 May noted: *"Flight attacked enemy two-seater. Remained slightly above and joined "B" Flight after scrap."*



Taken on 27 Oct 1918, this classic shot shows Henry Botterell, seated, with five squadron mates in front of the Sopwith Camel flown by Capt J.B. White. (White, the officer standing in the middle of the row, scored 12 victories during the war and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross). Unknown to these aviators at the time, the war would end in just another 15 days.

And so it went on, week after week. A typical pilot in a pursuit squadron would fly on virtually every day of the month where the weather permitted operations – and sometimes two patrols a day. Efforts were made to regularly allow periods off for much needed rest and recreation – but the needs of the unit came first. As an example, according to Henry Botterell's logbook, he flew 91 combat sorties in the months of June, July and Aug 1918 on 60 different days. In fact, on a few occasions, he flew three combat missions on the same day.

"You only had gas for two-and-a-half hours, or something like that," he recalls. "So most of our patrols lasted two hours or less. I had my fuel tank or lines punctured by bullets several times. That meant you'd have to rely on gravity feed to the engine to get home, and that wasn't as reliable."

of bombs a variety of targets – some briefed in advance, and others chosen as targets of opportunity – during his six months of combat flying. Sometimes the bombs were released as low as 2,000 feet... giving enemy ground gunners and infantry riflemen lots of opportunity to put holes in his Camel.

The terse but compelling remarks noted in his logbook reveal the dangerous reality of every day that Henry Botterell flew combat. Here are just a few of them (with clarification added in brackets by the author):

– 10 July 1918: Saw E.A. [enemy aircraft] and hid in clouds. Dived straight down at E.A. and fired short burst from 50 yards. Guns jammed. Pulled away about 20 feet from Hun. Over Estaires at 4,000 to 5,000 feet, so returned to lines. Enemy observer believed killed.

– 31 July 1918: Engine trouble. Had to leave formation, who had scrap with 10 E.A.

– 08 Aug 1918: Forced landing at Anwin. [engine] Seize-up. Landed in standing corn outside No. 23 C.C.S. [casualty clearing station]. OK.

– 16 Aug 1918: Dived on DFW [a make of German aircraft, primarily used for reconnaissance] over Pont-a-Vendin. Fired several bursts from long range and E.A. went down in spirals east of Pont-a-Vendin. Got to 3,000 feet and was badly archied [‘archie’ was slang for enemy anti-aircraft fire] to our lines.

– 22 Aug 1918: Bombed Gondcort ‘drome with squadron, in conjunction with SE-5s and Bristols [British fighters]. Got to about 500 feet over drome and observed and heard bombs hit hangars. [My] Engine dud and giving 1050 revs. Crossed No Man's Land under 500 feet. Got safely back to drome, [engine] missing badly.

– 26 Aug 1918, 4:00 p.m.: Low bombing. Dropped four bombs on lorries on Douai Road near Brebieres. Fired 150 rounds into trench on outskirts of Brebieres. Bullet hit pressure tank and air pipe. Returned on gravity [fuel feed].

– 26 Aug 1918, 7:00 p.m.: Low bombing. Dropped four bombs on Jigsaw Wood. Bullet hit and broke trailing edge of left bottom plane [i.e., wing section], penetrated cowl and cracked windshield. Engine missing."

"Most of those German airplanes were painted very colourfully," Botterell confirms today. "And many of them had special markings so that their squadron mates would know exactly who they were when they were up in the air. They were a lot more colourful than we were!"

Date and Hour	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Passenger for instructions in Company and Training	Time in Air	Height	Course	Remarks
23 <sup>rd</sup> Aug. 12:00 AM		NEW MACHINE		20	5000	NEW MACHINE FROM RELY.	HAINING
24 <sup>th</sup> Aug. 7:55 AM		DUQUOZ SOLO		70	12000	LOW BOMBING.	FIRE 400 ROUNDS INTO BALLOON OVER BRAYELLE. SAW OBSERVER IN PARACHUTE ABOVE FOUA DOME. COVERED HIM WITH BALLOON GRADUALLY CAPTURED UP AND WENT DOWN.
29 <sup>th</sup> Aug. PM 22				105	10000	LOW BOMBING	DROPPED 4 BOMBS NEAR NEMIN. LATER FIRED 100 ROUNDS ON GROUND TARGETS.
30 <sup>th</sup> Aug. 6:25 AM				75	7000	LOW BOMBING.	DROPPED 4 BOMBS AND FIRED 150 ROUNDS INTO CITY.
5 <sup>th</sup> Sept. AM 7:30		W		15	3000	LOCAL.	TEST.
16 <sup>th</sup> Sept. AM 11:50		W		10	3000	FLYING NEW MACHINE FROM AB AT RELY.	UNEVENTFUL.
17 <sup>th</sup> Sept. AM 9:00				120	18500	OP.	SO
18 <sup>th</sup> Sept. AM 2:30				100	16000	OP.	
18 <sup>th</sup> Sept. AM 7:00				105	8000	BOMBING.	DROPPED 4 BOMBS AND FIRED 200 ROUNDS INTO FONTAIN.
19 <sup>th</sup> Sept. AM 7:55				75	9000	WIRELESS PATROL THE GROUND SIGNALS WERE LEFT OUT TO (DAG)	LANDED AT NIGHT SE FEEL AND TURNED OVER ON BACK BY WIND.
22 <sup>nd</sup> Sept. 8:30				50	7000	TEST.	MAK FLIGHTS WITH NIGHTMAN AND CV.

A page of Henry Botterell's logbook for Aug and Sept 1918.

A key concern hanging over the head of every Allied pilot on the Western Front was based on a simple fact of meteorology: the prevailing winds came out of the west most days, so it was easy to get blown east while in a dogfight – finding yourself not only far behind the German lines, but faced with a headwind that slowed you down while trying to get back over friendly territory and provided an added benefit to any enemy aircraft attempting to intercept.

Although the average WW I buff would envision the Sopwith Camel as strictly a fighter plane, it also could be equipped with four light (usually 25-lb) bombs under the fuselage for use against enemy supply dumps, transportation lines, or troop concentrations. A significant proportion of Henry Botterell's combat missions involved dropping such a quartet



*F/L Henry Botterell is seen seated second from right, with fellow 208 Sqn pilots taking a break between combat missions sometime in 1918.*

Notwithstanding his innumerable other adventures, it was an action on the early morning of 29 Aug 1918 that has immortalized Henry Botterell's wartime career in the form of a recently produced oil painting and subsequent limited-edition art print – by famed British aviation artist Robert Taylor (please see cover painting).

Taking off at 7:55 a.m. in Sopwith Camel D-9402, Henry Botterell proceeded on his assigned mission: to bomb a railway station at Vitry, about 50 miles distant from his airfield at Tramecourt. Once that task had been completed, he turned his attention to a tethered German observation balloon that he'd earlier noticed near the town of Arras.

As he dived on a strafing run at a likely 130 mph or so (the Camel's cruise speed in level flight was only 108 mph), Botterell saw the balloon's ground-crew feverishly winching-down the vulnerable hydrogen-filled artillery observation platform. Even though these oblong balloons – nicknamed "sausages" – were routinely surrounded by extensive anti-aircraft gun installations, Botterell pressed on and fired 400 rounds into the gas bag. The balloon began to crumple and burst into flame as the German observer in the basket underneath took to his parachute at an altitude of only 1,000 feet.

Banking steeply and coming back around, Botterell gave the petrified aeronaut a brisk wave of greeting and then turned and headed back to friendly lines. This was Botterell's only confirmed victory of the war (these tethered balloons counted the same as aircraft, which reflected both their military value for artillery-spotting and the risk involved in braving the cannons and machine-guns that so often ringed their locations).

When the fact that Henry Botterell may well be the last surviving Commonwealth fighter pilot of

WW I – some researchers think he may be the last living fighter pilot of that war of *any* nationality – was brought to the attention of Robert Taylor's agent, arrangements were made to have Botterell pre-sign the margins of 750 blank lithograph sheets that would subsequently be printed with a high-quality reproduction of Taylor's original oil painting which depicts Henry Botterell's action that day. For more information about these prints, please contact: The Military Gallery, 821 East Ojai Avenue, Ojai, CA 93023-2902, tel: (805) 640-0057.

The remainder of Henry Botterell's war passed in much the same way as the first four months had: a steady regime of bombing missions and offensive patrols. On at least three occasions that fall, his log-book records varying numbers of bullet holes found in his wings upon landing – primarily due to ground-fire as he and his squadron mates undertook low-level strafing of enemy-occupied areas. On 19 Sept, he crashed on landing and overturned due to bad winds and erroneous ground-panel indicators at his home airfield. Fortunately, he walked away from that one.

At mid-day on 9 Nov 1918 – unbeknownst to him at the time – Botterell flew his last combat mission, a bombing and reconnaissance sortie (location unrecorded). On 10 November he flew two practice flights to further familiarize himself with the Sopwith Snipe fighter that had only recently started to be issued to 208 Sqn. For the next day – on which an armistice was proclaimed for 11:00 a.m., 11 Nov 1918, to end the bloodiest war the world had seen to date – Botterell's log-book records no flying at all.

Tallying six months of combat flying from the pages of that well-worn logbook and studying every entry under "Remarks," the following facts were

uncovered: F/L Henry Botterell flew 150 combat sorties between 14 May and 9 Nov 1918, on 101 different days (he flew operationally twice in a day on 40 occasions, and flew three combat missions on the same day on four separate occasions). On 28 of these missions he dropped bombs, on 10 of them he actively engaged enemy aircraft, and on seven sorties he returned with bullet holes or flak damage in his Camel.

Botterell accumulated a total of 215.2 hours of combat flying, in addition to 108.9 hours of training and/or general-duties flying, for a total of 324.1 hours logged in his entire military career (June 1917 to March 1919).

Although the hostilities had ended, it was officially only an "armistice" in effect until a proper peace treaty could be concluded, and so the Allies felt obligated to maintain a military presence near the German border. As a result, Botterell's squadron moved to Donstiennes, Belgium, in early December – and fully armed patrols continued over the new cease-fire lines.

With the pressure of combat removed, there was opportunity for the occasional unofficial jaunt – and it was on one of these (in fact the third-last military flight the young officer would ever log) that Henry Botterell might well have died.

It was mid-morning on 1 March 1919, and Botterell was flying in a Snipe to another airdrome near Brussels to visit a friend. Unfamiliar with the terrain, he stayed low to follow a road and rail line. As he compared the scene below him with the map on his lap, and then briefly looked down to fold the chart and tuck it back in his flying boot, he didn't notice that higher ground was looming ahead of him.

"I got distracted putting my map away, and didn't see the road rising in time to pull up," he related afterwards. "My lower-left wing hit a section of fence, and I returned to base with a piece of fence post embedded there. I managed to land OK. I kept that post and brought it home with me after the war, and ultimately presented it to the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa!" Henry Botterell also pulled off a coup that many another pilot would have sorely envied.

"Well, I got my mechanic to remove the propeller from the last Snipe I flew, and cut it in three sections so I could ship it home,"

he relates with a twinkle in his eye today. "That was a nice, 'even' prop, with not so much twist to it. They were made out of Honduras mahogany and walnut, laminated together.

"The mechanic drilled holes in the ends where the cuts were, and rigged dowel pins so the whole thing could be put back together again after I got it home, with brass straps to cover the lines of the cuts."

Botterell also recalls that a squadron on active service went through a lot of propellers back then.

"It was easy for the ends or the whole blades to get shattered if you landed wrong and the prop hit the ground," he says. "Also, it was possible to shoot your own propeller off in combat, if something happened to the synchronization system that let your guns fire through the arc of the prop."

Today, the elegant nine-and-a-half-foot-long propeller resides in the office of Botterell's son Ed, who runs a sail-making business in Mississauga, Ont.

Discharged from the RAF in the spring of 1919, Henry Botterell returned to the Bank of Montreal (formerly the Bank of British North America) in Ottawa, and later moved to Montreal. Marrying in 1929, he and his wife Maud had a son and a daughter. Retiring from the bank in 1961, he then worked another five years with the Montreal Clearing House.

Always an avid athlete, Henry Botterell loved to play tennis, swim, ski, bicycle, and sail, among other pursuits. He also played the violin in local orchestras, and sang tenor in his church choir for many years. After the death of his wife, he still lived in the family home in Montreal until 1985, and then at a seniors' residence in that city until 1995, when he moved to Sunnybrook where he resides today and still carries on his love of music.

Notwithstanding his devotion and perseverance as an aviator in the war, Henry Botterell never acquired a civilian pilot's licence or felt the need to fly again. His only subsequent affiliation with military aviation came during WW II when he served as CO of an air cadet squadron at Lachine, Que.

To have the privilege to meet and spend some time with Henry John Lawrence Botterell is to be in the presence of a true gentleman and a gallant patriot who has consistently been a credit to his country – and who today represents a rare and fascinating repository of living history. ☺

*(Ed note: Maj Mike Minnich of Toronto is the senior public affairs officer for the Air Reserve. In civilian life he serves as managing editor of a business magazine. He held a commercial pilot's licence for 20 years.)*

*During a Veterans Affairs-sponsored pilgrimage to France in November to commemorate the end of WW I, Henry Botterell was one of 14 Canadian veterans to be made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour by the French government. While on the trip, Botterell celebrated his 102nd birthday.*

