

**Obituary**

# Jim MacDonald was a First World War pilot

One of Canada's few surviving First World War fighter pilots is dead. Retired RCAF Squadron Leader James Murdo MacDonald died Saturday, April 14 after a brief illness in Bennett Health Centre at Georgetown Memorial Hospital, Halton Hills, where he had resided for several years. He would have celebrated his 90th birthday April 17. He was a long-time resident of Thistleton (now Metro Toronto's Rexdale).

Almost as many trainees and pilots were killed by the shortcomings of their primitive aircraft as were lost to enemy airmen, MacDonald claimed in his two-volume diary. Fatal crashes dot the diary's pages as his training proceeded from Canada's first military airfield at Long Branch, Ont., then on to Texas, England and France. Some of the gorier mishaps of men and machines occurred in Texas where MacDonald trained for a while under Vernon Castle of the famous Irene and Vernon Castle entertainment team.

In combat at last and then a lieutenant with the Royal Flying Corps, he described his view of the battle zone between Arras and Douai: "one of the war's most hellish moments." He said "the ground was shaking continually. No part of it is left in the form that nature and man had put it; only the devil himself could fashion it."

Then comes his personal close-up of Oct. 27, 1918: "This is a red-letter day for me. We mixed with the Huns and the sky is black with them, and early in the scrap I got shrapnel and a bullet in the wrist. The Hun who was after me was only about 30 yards away. I could see his white teeth as he seemed to say 'I've got you.' In my attempt to evade him, I lost my leader. It seemed for a time that I was the only Dolphin flyer up there and that there were hundreds of Huns after me. I did some stunts those few moments that I never before had considered myself capable of doing ... and probably never will

again."

Jim MacDonald convalesced in Mentone, southern France, in a beautiful private mansion. There he fell in love with a volunteer nursing aide. She was Marguerite (Margot) Simonau, daughter of a prominent, cultured Frenchman and a woman of titled Anglo-Irish extraction. In their whirlwind Mediterranean courtship, Jim took up the violin in an effort to impress this daughter of distinguished and creative Europeans. His own Horatio Alger-like youth excluded the arts.



**Jim MacDonald**

At war's end, MacDonald and his French bride went homesteading on the Alberta prairie near Hardisty. Later he became principal of the school there. World War Two found him back in the service, this time with the RCAF which he joined in June, 1940. With the rank of squadron leader, he was commanding officer of a number of recruiting centres. With the

Department of Veterans Affairs after the war he was in charge of staff training at various locations including Sunnybrook.

Of Highland Scottish ancestry, his parents could read and speak Gaelic, MacDonald was born in Portland, Maine, where the family had migrated from the Maritimes in search of employment. Jim worked his way through Dartmouth College by waiting on tables at the college cafeteria and at Mount Washington Hotel and caddying. He remembers a 10-cent tip from tycoon Andrew Carnegie. He emigrated to Canada to join the RFC, broaden his education and see the world.

Long-time friend, retired newspaperman Bill Doole, describes Jim MacDonald as a "courtly, very erudite gentleman of the old school, an encouraging force when I was a young man."

"I recently had the privilege of reviewing his wartime diary," Doole said. "I found it is one of the more graphic and more moving close-ups of Canada's pioneer days in aerial warfare."

He said Jim, a former neighbor, used to hold him spell-bound with the flyer's recall of the days when primitive aerial bombing consisted of dropping stones from the air by the basket-

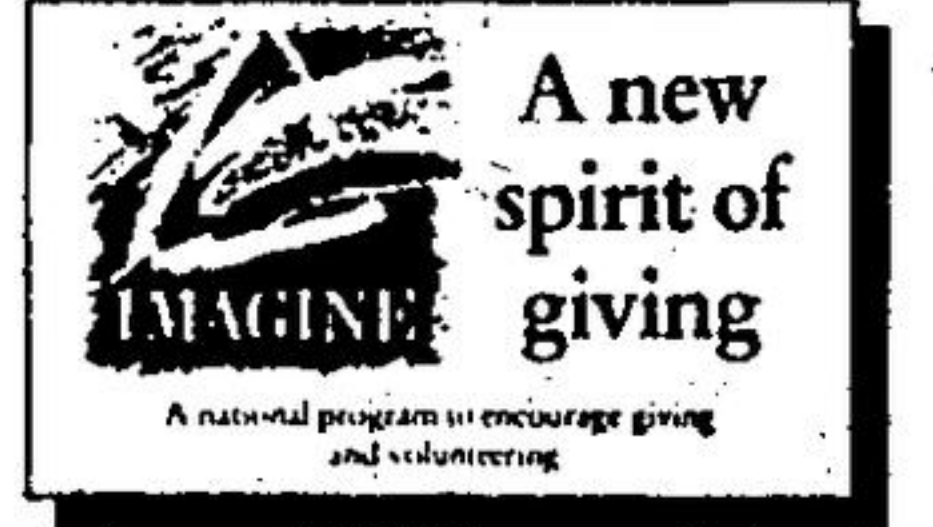
ful. There were instances, too, of airborne combatants firing pistols at one another. Most gruesome was the all-too frequent destruction of propellers by a plane's own machine gun when it slipped out of "sync."

MacDonald's wife Margot predeceased him in 1969. Their son Rorie, who served with the RCAF in the Second World War, lives with his wife Louise in Guelph; their daughter, Joan, lives with husband Jack Metcalfe near Rockwood. Jack was a firefighter with the RCAF in the Second World War.

There are four grandchildren, Scott MacDonald, Toronto, his sister Susan (Mrs. Doug Connor) of Oakville; Peter Metcalfe of

Holyrood, Ont., and Paul Metcalfe, Milton district. There are also six great-grandchildren. He is also survived by "a dear friend of many years," Doris Buck of Toronto.

Memorial tribute is private. Mr. MacDonald bequeathed his remains to the University of Toronto's medical-research department.



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