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Within the Archives

# Hector Fraser Dougall, RFC

## A Pilot's Account of the Great War

Timothy Dubé

The First World War is a "second-hand" experience; its veterans, with very few exceptions, are dead. To experience that war we are required to turn to published memoirs or to the many untold personal accounts in archives. From the holdings of the National Archives of Canada, I wish to share with you the untold First World War personal experiences of one Canadian, Hector Fraser Dougall. It is a story of courage, daring and determination.

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Several years ago a bundle of documents was forwarded by an anonymous donor to the National Archives of Canada. The bundle – the contents of a closed safety-deposit box – related to a Canadian airman from Winnipeg, Hector Fraser Dougall, and to his activities during the First World War and the immediate postwar period. Attempts to return the documents to the family failed, with the result that the records were accepted by the National Archives in 1992 and temporarily attached to the military personnel file of H.F. Dougall held by the Personnel Records Unit of the National Archives of Canada. (The Personnel Records Unit is responsible for the care of service records of all former Canadian military and public service employees.) In April 1996, care of this bundle of records – a diary, several wartime letters, and some postwar military pension and employment records – was transferred to the Manuscript Division and to my attention as the



responsible archivist. Here they were catalogued as the Hector Fraser Dougall fonds (MG 30, E 571).

The Attestation and Service Records of Hector Fraser Dougall show that he joined the

221st Canadian Infantry Battalion during March 1916 and served in Canada for 14 months before joining the Royal Flying Corps at Toronto in May 1917. Beginning his flying training at Deseronto on 12 May, he quickly advanced to Camp Borden and later Camp Rathburn, receiving his wings on 19 August 1917.

His diary begins on 28 November 1917, after further training in England. It records meetings with other Winnipeg boys as well as the usual tourist rounds in London; the Regent Palace and the stage shows *Zig-Zag*, *Chu-Chin-Chou* and *Maid of the Mountain*. He left England for Boulogne on 30 November 1917, describing the voyage as an "awful rough passage, very sick."

Dougall was posted to 46 Squadron, flying Clerget-powered Sopwith Camels, on 2 December 1917. Two weeks later he was wounded or injured in a crash; details of the event are not recorded in the diary. But apparently his injuries or wounds were not serious and his diary records that he quickly grew "awfully fed up with Hospital; too many fellows going around with legs or arms off to suit me" (Diary, 4 January 1918).

Forfeiting convalescent leave, Dougall obtained a posting to 54 Squadron, another

Sopwith Camel unit, on 22 January 1918. The squadron was located at Guizancourt on the Somme Front, "seven miles from the line and about eight miles from St. Quentin, four miles south of the Amiens-St. Quentin Road" (26 January 1918). His initial flights with the squadron provided him with an idea of the line and surroundings and "a good look at the Somme Battlefield" (28 January 1918).

Dougall's diary over the next several weeks provides only hints to his actions during offensive patrols with "A" Flight of 54 Squadron: 29 January, "patrol had a few good fights"; 16 February, "went eight miles into Hunland after a two seater...three bullet holes thru my machine"; 18 February, "ran into seven D5's"; and 19 February, "we met a few Art[illery] Obs[ervation] machines and chased them away." These are contrasted by his diary entry of 26 February 1918 which records in much fuller detail what would prove to be Dougall's last operational flight and the beginning of at least nine months as a prisoner of war:

...left [the] Aerodrome at 10:30 a.m. with a Squadron formation to do a sweep. Flying inside left of bottom formation with instructions to straff any 'Kite.' Went south and crossed the line just over La Fer [La Fère]. No E.A. [Enemy Aircraft] in sky but lots of Archie. We cut across to Laon where I saw two 'kites.' Went down on one as they started to pull it down and just as I got one end in flames, zunk an 'archie' caught me square under the engine blowing off one cylinder and tearing the fabric. One piece [of shrapnel] entering my leg below the knee, the cowling flew off my machine hitting me on the head. In a few seconds I came to. My machine was out of control and my eyes were full of blood from my cut face and nose. Fell about a thousand feet and tried to straighten out again. Just as I got flat [I] fainted again and that's all I remember until I woke up in the Citadel in Laon with good old George Logan bathing my head with cold coffee. Oh what a head.

Later, another prisoner in the Citadel, a French sergeant, "got the shrapnel out of my leg with his knife and bathed my eyes" (28 February 1918). But it would be several days before Dougall would receive proper medical attention. In the interim, he was "pumped for information" and threatened with "court martial for shooting at the Kite Balloon Observer" by several different German Intelligence Officers. But "nothing doing" as Dougall recorded in his diary.

On 5 March 1918, Dougall and several other prisoners were moved to a prison camp about twenty miles back from the lines, "and such a filthy hole you can't possibly imagine. Lousy and stinken is the mildest way of putting it." After several days they were moved again, travelling by train to Karlsruhe. Initially held in a 'Hotel' at Karlsruhe, Dougall was placed in "a large room with eight other fellow creatures...all R.F.C. merchants" (11 March 1918).

At Karlsruhe, Dougall was introduced to Lieutenant S.G. Williams, whom Dougall described in his diary as "very keen on escaping." Williams had been taken prisoner on 21 February 1918, his aircraft having gone down because of engine problems. After spending 14 days at Courtrai, he had been moved to Karlsruhe. As William would later write, he and Dougall were both very "fed up" with life and agreed that they would try to "hop" it on the first opportunity. Over the next several days, they would spend much of their time "trying to plan out a way to escape." Williams and Dougall were both then serving three days in the clink, the result for "using insulting language to the German Army" in letters home.

The 'first opportunity' presented itself when their draft was being moved to its permanent camp at Landstuhl. About 4:30 a.m. on the morning of 19 March 1918, Dougall, Williams and an unnamed Australian jumped from the train transporting them to Landstuhl and started to make for the Swiss border. Although Dougall's diary ends, details of this escape attempt are included in a long letter Williams wrote to Dougall's sister in July 1918.

While Williams had a compass,

...we had no map with us so it was rather a difficult task to accomplish. We did not have much food with us so we had to be very sparing with it. We were of course amateurs at the game, so you can bet we had plenty of 'wind up.' We hid by day in woods & walked by night. On the 2nd night Dougall went into a farmyard & pinched a duck....On the third night the Australian gave up....Dougall & I carried on as best we could....Most of the time we followed a railway line...On the 5th day...a railway worker...discovered us....We were then taken to a guardroom....We discovered to our regret that we were only 15 or so miles from the frontier.

But Dougall and Williams had not accepted their fate. Williams, perhaps half-jokingly, continues in his letter,

When we were in the guardroom we tried hard to hop it again. We lifted the floor boards up & started to burrow a way through the brick building. Had we been there another hour I am certain we would have got 'free' again but unfortunately the guard came in & we were taken by train to the camp we were supposed to have gone to.

On arriving at Landstuhl, Dougall and Williams were separated and put in a civil prison. There, over a period of three days, they were interrogated and searched for escape materials; nothing was found. [According to Williams, the compass was with Dougall at the time and when he was examined he placed it in his mouth.] Allowed to rejoin the other RFC POWs, they spent four days in the main camp before being removed to solitary confinement, "to do a further 8 days punishment for escaping."

At the end of April 1918, Dougall, Williams and several others were selected for transfer to Holzminden in Prussia. Holzminden was a camp for serious troublemakers and persistent escapers. Described as "a bad lot" by the Camp Commandant, the officer in charge had special instructions to watch them carefully. In an effort to prevent their escape, Dougall and Williams were forced to take off their boots upon entering the train. On the morning of second day, they changed trains. Learning from their earlier escape attempt, Dougall on entering the railway carriage managed to grab the railway map from the door. Later that morning, having recovered their boots during the earlier transfer, Dougall and Williams jumped from the moving train. Williams reported: "We were too quick for the guard, so he had not time to fire on us."

Rolling down an embankment and making for the nearest bit of cover, Dougall and Williams hid there for the day. As Williams later wrote to Dougall's sister: "We did not know where we were till we looked at the map. We were very much surprised to see that we had 300 miles to walk before reaching Holland... However we decided to make a shot at it & do our best."

Dressed in their khaki, Dougall and Williams could not chance travelling through the day. With

little food in their possession, they were also forced to break into farms for their supplies. Williams reported that: "This house breaking took place regularly once nightly & we thoroughly enjoyed it!... We also used to pinch pots & pans in which we cooked our food in." They were caught in the act three times and on one occasion had to swim a river to avoid capture. To the great annoyance of their pursuers, Williams reported that: "directly we got [to] the other side we waved our hands at them!" On another occasion, "Dougall jumped a 6ft. fence with 1/2 doz. eggs, basin of milk, jam, large pot of honey & many other articles. Everything was intact."

After walking seventeen days, Dougall and Williams were recaptured when they ran right into a German sentry near the frontier. While being marched into the guardroom, Williams bolted. To "prevent the point blank," Dougall attacked the sentry, thus enabling Williams to escape again. After getting away, Williams did two more days of travelling before crossing into Holland. He arrived in England on 24 May 1918.

After recapture, Dougall was sent to Holzminden. Here he made a third determined attempt to escape early in October 1918. A note signed by Captain T. Gilford Holley in August 1919 briefly records details of this attempt:

Lt. Dougall picked locks, obtained two ladders from attic of building in which he and other officers were housed, bound ladders together with ropes taken from flagstaves on roof and when about to be projected on end of ladder from second story window over barbed wire fence surrounding camp, was surprised by sentries.

From the few remaining documents in the bundle we know that Hector Fraser Dougall returned to the Winnipeg area following the war. An undated press clipping records that he played football for the Winnipeg Victorias in their challenge against the Edmonton Eskimos for the championship of the Western Canada Rugby Football Union. But little else is known of Hector Fraser Dougall. A copy of the death certificate appended to the personnel service file records only that Hector Fraser Dougall died on 4 October 1960 on the Trans-Canada Highway about 40 miles east of Kenora.

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The diary, letters and related items of Hector Fraser Dougall are typical of the many personal collections of the First World War held by the National Archives of Canada. Together with the official records of the Government of Canada, these serve to constitute our collective national memory of that war.

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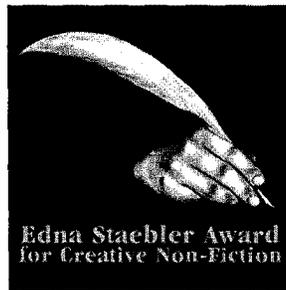
Since originally drafting this note, further research and a bit of good luck have resulted in the successful tracing of the next of kin of Hector Fraser Dougall. The brief excerpts from

Hector Fraser Dougall's diary appear with the kind permission of his son H. Fraser Dougall of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The family of Lieutenant S.G. Williams remains unlocated.

Timothy Dubé is the Military Archivist of the Manuscript Division, National Archives of Canada. He is the compiler of *Canada at War, 1939-1945: A Survey of the Archival Records of the Second World War at the National Archives of Canada* published by the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies in 1996.

## The Guns of Normandy Wins 1996 Edna Staebler Award

Wilfrid Laurier University is pleased to announce that *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View, France 1944* by George Blackburn (McClelland & Stewart) has won the 1996 Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction. Blackburn's gripping first-hand account of the Canadians at war was considered by this year's panel of judges to be an outstanding example of the genre.



In *The Guns of Normandy* George Blackburn puts the reader in the frontlines of this horrific battle. In the most graphic and authentic detail, he brings to life every aspect of a soldier's existence, from the mortal terror of impending destruction, to the unending fatigue, to the giddy exhilaration at finding oneself still, inexplicably, alive.

George Blackburn was a young journalist when he joined the Canadian army. After the war he began compiling a history based on his own experiences, the notes and diaries of others, official war diaries and dozens of interviews. *The Guns of Normandy* (and its sequel, *The Guns of Victory*, to be published this fall) are the result.

*Canadian Military History* wishes to congratulate Mr. Blackburn for his fine work. An excerpt from *The Guns of Normandy* was carried in the Spring 1996 issue of *CMH*. Please look for an excerpt from *The Guns of Victory* in an upcoming issue.

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The Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction is a unique award – the only one of its kind in Canada, quite possibly the only one of its kind anywhere. The \$3,000 annual award was established by the writer and journalist Edna Staebler in 1991 to recognize the works of creative non-fiction, a genre she believes had been much neglected by the literary establishment. The award also seeks to support the work of a new Canadian writer – a first or second book – set in Canada or with a particular Canadian significance.

Writers of creative non-fiction use strong, sometimes idiosyncratic voices and their approach is literary rather than journalistic. Often they have worked and reworked their material, sometimes employing the devices of fiction, in an attempt not to convey information, but to share experiences with their readers. From the earliest days of Canadian non-fiction writers have been recording their experiences in imaginative ways and the genre has firm roots in Canada in the works of such authors as Susanna Moodie, Farley Mowat, Pierre Burton, Marian Fowler and Edna Staebler herself.

