

Aero Space Museum honours heroic pilots

Valerie Fortney, Calgary Herald - August 7, 2014

"Dear Mrs. Dowler: I am sorry to have to tell you that your son, Second Lieutenant G. E. Dowler ..."

Alice Dowler didn't have to read much past the first sentence to know that her 25-year-old son wouldn't be coming home. She probably didn't even have to open the envelope, or read the letter inside dated Nov. 11, 1918, to know that the young pilot assigned to 46 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, was among the 1,563 Canadian airmen who lost their lives in the First World War.

Ninety-six years after that letter was shipped to the Dowler family home in Veteran, a small Alberta village 200 kilometres due east of Red Deer, the ink on the handwriting by Maj. Gerald Allen still looks fresh. Resting under glass and beside a photograph of the handsome young Dowler in his military uniform, it is one of the last reminders of a Canadian long forgotten.

"You can't find much on him at all," Herb Grieder says of the man described in one military online resource as a Calgary schoolteacher prior to his military duty. "And I really don't know why."

It's understandable why Grieder, events co-ordinator at the Aero Space Museum of Calgary (www.asmac.ab.ca), would be perplexed over the lack of information on Dowler.

When his Sopwith Camel collided with that of his squadronmate Bill Coulhurst during the squadron's last strafing run on the Western Front, Dowler became the last Canadian airman killed in the Great War, mere hours before the Armistice declaring the war's end was signed. "He's someone who deserves to be remembered in our military history," says Grieder, as he shows me the display of Dowler's mother's letter, his uniform and other artifacts, part of the museum's new exhibit commemorating the centennial of Britain and her allies' entry into the First World War, which on Monday was marked in memorial services around the world.

Along with Dowler - posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1919 - the exhibit also pays homage to two Canadian aces, Alfred William (Nick) Carter and Raymond Collishaw. Carter, from the Fish Creek area, had a total of 17 victories flying his Sopwith Pup and Triplane. Collishaw, a native of Nanaimo, B.C., was famed for taking command in 1917 of the No. 10 Naval Squadron, which consisted entirely of Canadians. The second-highest Canadian ace, he would later go on to help such military legends as Billy Bishop in laying the foundation of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

For Anne Lindsay, it is only fitting that in this centennial year, the Aero Space Museum of Calgary includes a commemoration of the 23,000 Canadians who served within the air services in the First World War.

"So many of them went on to be leaders in business and in civil aviation," says Lindsay, the museum's executive director, as she stands near a late model reproduction of a 1916 Sopwith Triplane, just one of more than 30 aircraft on permanent display. "But there are men like Dowler, too, who people don't know about, but should."

Lindsay says that among the museum's artifacts - many that "have never seen the light of day" but that she hopes to increasingly share with visitors - are several letters Dowler wrote to family while serving in that brutal conflict.

"One was written two weeks before he died," she says. "He said that if he didn't come back, he wanted his mother to know that he loved her."

Then there is the letter penned by Maj. Allen to a grieving mother, one of the few references that exist documenting the final moments of a life that should be part of Canadian history. In the letter, Allen describes the low bombing attack Dowler and his fellow airmen went on, along with how several pilots said they saw two machines collide in the air "while attacking this Hun transport." Along with delivering the terrible news, Allen also takes the time to tell Mrs. Dowler of her son's good character and importance to the squadron, how he was "the most reliable and conscientious pilot."

Later in the day, I spend time searching various databases for information on George Emerson Dowler. I find only a handful of references to him, including a 1990 Herald article that mentions a Dowler family plot in Banff. In that plot, according to historian Nancy Millar, there is a plaque commemorating their lost family member.

"Sleeps in Flanders Fields" is what it reads.

While history may have forgotten the last Canadian airman to die in the First World War, his memory clearly lived on in the hearts of people such as Alice Dowler, whose world shattered on the day she received the letter that now sits as part of a small local exhibit that nevertheless packs a big historic punch.

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