

Chapter 1

August 1916

The war did not end at Christmas. Robert's letters indicated that he had finally seen action and, based on the newspapers, we guessed that his division had been at Ypres in April of 1915, where the enemy first used chlorine gas. Mother and Father were greatly worried until his next letter arrived to say that all was well.

His letters home, spotty though they were — and many of them censored — spoke of some of the same hideous details we got from the radio or the newspapers. His words about the agony of the soldiers who were gassed by the Germans, and the horror of learning that the *Lusitania* had been sunk by a U-boat in May of 1915, were difficult to read. My hands shook when I read about the devastating bombardments at Mount Sorrel in June of 1916. But the setbacks only seemed to spur Robert on.

Time went by agonizingly slowly on the farm while Robert remained determined to do his bit and help England win the war. Father had asked

that I stay through the haying season when I turned eighteen, and without Robert around, I had honoured his request, even though the determination in Robert's letters was contagious. Mother nervously watched me as my nineteenth birthday approached. But it was something far different from anything my parents could have guessed that made me decide how I would join Robert in the war. And it happened in the same month as my birthday.

Father and I were loading haystacks into the wagon on a blistering August day. Suddenly something burst into view and split the silence of the summer. It was in the sky and coming low over the trees. I did not know what it was until it was within 50 feet of us. It was an airplane, a sleek-winged wonder that roared above our heads. From the stunned look on my father's face, I knew he was just as surprised as I was. Like a knight fighting a dragon, he raised his pitchfork to ward off the monster.

But the airplane was no monster to me. It was as graceful as a bird. The pilot dipped his wings and waved. I waved back. From that moment I knew what part I wanted to play in The Great War.

Another year went by and, much to my mother's dismay, on my nineteenth birthday, in August,

1916, I decided to leave for Ontario to join the Royal Naval Air Service. My timing wasn't the best: only one month earlier, almost a whole regiment from Newfoundland had been lost in just one battle. My father shook my hand and told me he was proud. "Say your prayers every night, son," he said. "We'll do the same for you here."

Leaving the farm was one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made. And Robert was not there to shake me from my indecision.

Sarah didn't help either. She cried and held on to me at the train station. I gave her a bear hug and promised to write her often. "You won't," she accused me through her tears.

I tweaked her nose. "Didn't I just say that I would? And I'll draw you pictures of flying machines and of France!" In the end I stepped on to the train and for the first time stepped out of the bubble and into the world beyond our town.

The Royal Naval Air Service immediately sent a group of us to the Curtiss Aviation School in Toronto for flight training. The train ride was long and there seemed no end of fields and forests. As we approached the Great Lakes I was stunned at how big they were and wondered if the ocean might look the same.

On the train I met Billy Miller and we struck

up a friendship immediately. Although only a year older than me, he already had a full moustache. He winked at me when I said I was unable to grow either a beard or a moustache. Then he gave the ends a twirl and said, "Hurrah!" It was a phrase that stuck and he used it quite frequently from then on.

When I asked him why he chose the RNAS, Billy said, "I lost a brother in the trenches. Didn't seem like a decent way to die. Besides, I saw a flying machine at the Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition in 1914 and it struck me that the pilot was a man in control of his own destiny. That's how I want to fight. Not caught like a rat in a stinking trench."

Billy told me that we ought to consider ourselves lucky. The lads that had come to the flying school a few months earlier had had to pay their own tuition and as much as four hundred dollars! He also said that hundreds of them had been turned down and had to join the regular army. There simply weren't enough planes or experienced pilots to train the large numbers of men enlisting.

There was much excitement when the wood and canvas buildings that housed the planes of the Curtiss Aviation School came into view. Our enthusiasm did not lessen, not even when we saw

that our huts were small and contained only beds and a stove. I didn't care. My attention was held by something on the dirt field that stretched out for a half mile beyond the huts.

There, in all its glory, was a flying machine, touching down in a cloud of dust and showing off for our arrival. Two men in overalls hurried out from the hangar and ran alongside the plane, holding onto the tail.

The plane bumped along the field and came to a stop not far from the first huts. It had two sets of wings — a biplane — and was so much sleeker than the plane my father and I had witnessed above our farm. I recognized the shape. It had two cockpits, one for the pilot and one for the trainee. I felt a rush of excitement that this might be the plane used for our own training.

The moment the train stopped, Billy and I grabbed our bags and raced onto the field towards the plane. “What a beauty!” Billy shouted.

The pilot stepped down, raised his goggles and removed his leather flying gloves. Then he stretched his legs and arms.

“Hello, boys,” he greeted us. I wasn't surprised by his American accent. We had been told that most of our training pilots were American and so were our planes. On the train, I'd read everything they gave

me at the recruiting office, and had already begun to sketch the planes from the briefing papers.

“She’s gorgeous,” Billy said, running his hand over the canvas of the wing.

“She’s a Curtiss Jenny,” I said quietly. “A JN-3.”

“Hurrah,” said Billy, and he twirled his moustache at me.

The pilot nodded and slapped me on the shoulder. “What’s your name?”

“Paul Townend, sir.”

“Well, Paul Townend. My name is Fred Martin. It seems you’ve got a jump on your mates here. I think you’ll be the first one in the air with me. I’ve never had a student who could name the Jenny on first sight.”

I looked up eagerly. “Right now, sir?”

He laughed. “I’ve just flown from New York State, my boy. My feet are numb and I need coffee.” He nodded towards the plane. “This is your trainer. We’ll start in the morning, all right?”

Mr. Martin stamped some life back into his feet and then headed for one of the huts. Billy gave me a shove and called me a show-off. I crashed into two others and a wrestling match broke out. I ended up on the bottom of the pile, laughing. Mr. Martin stopped and watched us from a distance.

I could not eat supper that night. All I could

think about was flying the Curtiss Jenny in the morning. “Here’s to wee Paul,” Billy said as he raised his glass. “The first flyer among us.”

In my bunk that night, after I’d said my prayers, I whispered down to Billy, “Did you see the way Fred pushed his goggles up so smartly and tucked his gloves under his arm? A real pilot!”

“Shut up, Paul,” was the only reply.