

Dancing in the Sky: The Royal Flying Corps in Canada By C.W. Hunt

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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*Dancing in the Sky:
The Royal Flying Corps in Canada*

By C.W. Hunt

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009. 358 pages. \$28.99 softcover.

ISBN 978-1-55002-864-5 (www.dundurn.com)

Many readers will know of the presence and function of the Royal Flying Corps in Canada during the First World War, and some will be familiar with the long term effects of its flying training which lasted such a short time but which achieved so much. Few, though, will know the story in the depth and detail provided by C.W. Hunt in *Dancing in the Sky*, an item of Canadian history that deserves to be much better appreciated.

Hunt sets out to tell of a plan formulated during World War I in Britain to train airmen in Canada, and briefly in the United States, for service in the aerial battles taking place in Europe. He provides a detailed account of how the plan was established and how it developed—almost exclusively in southern Ontario—during the three years of its existence. Hunt tells how the co-operation between the three countries led to the close alliance which has existed ever since and which contrasts sharply with attitudes which existed prior to World War I.

Dancing in the Sky is primarily the story of the remarkable accomplishments of the people who ran this scheme, particularly of its commanding officer, Brigadier-General C.G. Hoare. His dedication and hard work, together with his circumvention of regulations, enabled the scheme to be operational in a remarkably short time and to produce large numbers of competent airmen. Nor



does Hunt ignore the stories of the lesser players: instructors, cadets, mechanics and others who made the training possible.

Hunt easily achieves his objectives in the book of twenty-five chapters together with an introduction and an epilogue. *Dancing in the Sky* is comprehensive, thoroughly researched, logically laid out, clearly written

and very readable. Much information is contained in the various appendices, including such subjects as rates of pay and the meals offered to recruits. Particularly useful is the list of abbreviations without which the reader would often be seeking to find those pages on which the full versions appear. The text includes occasional typographical errors and a few obscure statements. The chronological sequence of events could have been made a little clearer, as could information on the change of title from Royal Flying Corps to Royal Air Force. Fortunately, none of these minor matters detract from the overall effectiveness of the book.

In his introduction Hunt lists a few of the well-known people who were connected in one way or another with the RFC training in Canada. Toronto-born Lester ("Mike") Pearson (Prime Minister of Canada, 1963-1968) is mentioned, as is Roland Michener (Governor General, 1967-1974). Mitchell Hepburn of St Thomas was a cadet and later served as Premier of Ontario. Hunt also introduces William Faulkner, Nobel prize-winning author, and states that he "learned to fly with the RAF in Canada." (p. 13) In fact, Faulkner did not learn to fly in Canada. He was a late entry into the Royal Air Force (as it was called from April 1918 onwards), reporting for duty as a cadet in July 1918. Faulkner received his basic training at Long Branch camp in what is now Mississauga, and was only part way through his ground school at the University of Toronto campus when the war ended in November 1918; he was discharged. However on his return to the United States, Faulkner was frequently seen wearing the uniform and wings of an officer and pilot in the Royal Flying Corps and he told numerous fictitious tales about his experiences of flying against the enemy in Europe. As a

result several reference books, among them *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* and *The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Biography*, contain erroneous statements regarding Faulkner's status during World War I. Truly, the Faulkner inaccuracy cannot be blamed entirely on Hunt.

Of particular interest is "The Legacy of the RAF in Canada," a chapter in which Hunt explains the effects of the training scheme on the subsequent history of Canada. The scheme was responsible for training more than 3,000 pilots and a ground crew of almost 7,500 skilled mechanics for service in the RFC/RAF. In addition, several hundred women were employed as civilian auxiliaries after being taught various aspects of aircraft servicing and repair. When the war ended, the availability of aircraft at a reasonable cost led to the setting up of numerous small enterprises hauling freight and supplies into the remotest corners of the country, helping to open up Canada's north, and greatly aiding exploration and exploitation of a variety of mineral resources. The pool of skilled mechanics facilitated the establishment of Canada's aviation industry, while the donation of aircraft to universities and vocational colleges ensured that engineering students could receive training in aeronautical engineering. A longer reaching positive outcome from the First World War training was the inevitable selection of Canada as the location of a somewhat similar Commonwealth Air Training Plan between 1939 and 1945 for the Second World War.

Dancing in the Sky is eminently readable and it will make a fine addition to the libraries of students and enthusiasts of Canadian aviation.

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