



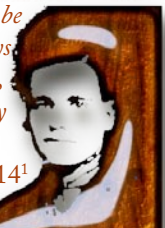
By Major Andrew B. Godefroy, CD, MA, Ph.D.

# From Gentleman Cadet To No Known Grave

The Life and Death of  
Lieutenant (Observer/Gunner)  
Franklin Sharp Rankin  
1894-1916

*"As a friend, Frank would be hard to equal. He is always the same, never presuming, never forgetting, and ready for anything ..."*

The Stone Frigate, 1914<sup>1</sup>



Even though all sides quickly acknowledged the value of air power during the First World War, finding qualified pilots and aircrew to maintain fledgling air forces proved to be a tremendous challenge. For the British, most of its newly formed Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was recruited from the ranks of the army, and despite the dangers of flying these new “contraptions” many willingly applied. If for no other reason than to escape the daily horrors of the trenches, a large number of Canadians were also among those who joined the ranks of the RFC, and several eventually took to the air to fight new battles in the sky.

Franklin Sharp Rankin was typical of those Canadian Army officers turned flyers. Born in Woodstock, New Brunswick, on 31 July 1894, Rankin at an early age chose to pursue a military education and professional training as a soldier. He was a graduate of the Royal

Military College

(RMC) class of May

1914, a qualified

civil engineer,

and served first

as a militia

cavalry officer

before joining the

Canadian Expeditionary

Force (CEF)

when the war began.

As an officer with

the 1<sup>st</sup> Field



Company, Canadian Engineers, Lieutenant Rankin fought on the western front throughout 1915. Disgruntled with the dismal life and potentially gruesome death of an army officer on land, Rankin transferred to the RFC in 1916, hoping if anything to escape the trenches. Unfortunately the apparent safety of the sky was but an illusion, and Rankin did not avoid an early death at the hands of his enemies later that year.

## Gentleman Cadet No.939

When Franklin Sharp Rankin arrived at RMC in 1911 seeking a soldier's life, he reported for duty at the guardhouse and began a journey from which he would never return. Though neither Rankin nor his peers ever expected a military career without any hardship, active service at the time was accepted with a reserved sense of optimism and opportunity for getting one's name mentioned in the London Gazette. Graduates then passing out of RMC when Rankin arrived for his studies, for example, were heading off to the distant stations of the British Empire. There they took part in a broad range of activities encompassing everything from peacetime military engagement to small wars and counterinsurgency. No one, Rankin included, anticipated the horrors of total warfare that loomed dangerously before him and his classmates, or the tremendous cost it would exact from the ranks of his class before the last shot was fired.

Rankin's military apprenticeship at RMC was much less colourful than those of his classmates. Characterized as a very average cadet, he did not join any of the college sports teams nor did he ever win any of the several trophies awarded for various shooting and athletic competitions held throughout the school year. Rankin had some skill as a horseman and rider having spent his free semester with the 28<sup>th</sup> New Brunswick Dragoons, but the only time he was mentioned in the *Royal Military College Club Proceedings* was when he participated in the apple and bucket competition during the annual Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (RCHA) point-to-point races in

September 1913. Rankin's task was to ride as fast as he could to a spot where water buckets were laid out, take an apple out of the water with his mouth, and mount and ride to the winning post without losing the apple or touching it with his hands. Despite his making a very good show of it, in the end the prize went to Captain W.G. Hagarty of the RCHA, a more experienced apple and bucket racer than the young Rankin.

The only other achievement Rankin is noted for during his third year was a promotion to lance-corporal, the highest rank he attained while at the college.<sup>2</sup> Though apparently quiet and nonchalant, Rankin was still considered a hard worker, astute in mathematics, and always looking to learn something new. Above all, he was known for his friendliness and willingness to help his classmates. He was also known to be a sociable young gentleman. "In town," his graduating biography stated, "[Frank] is what might be described as well settled."<sup>3</sup>

Well rounded yet not outstanding, Franklin Sharp Rankin graduated in the middle of his class in May 1914 with second thoughts about his chosen career. Finally deciding that active service was not for him, Rankin returned home to New Brunswick over the summer to begin a new career as a civil engineer while maintaining his reserve commission with the Dragoons. His planned future as a part time soldier was short-lived, however, when war intervened that autumn.

When the call to arms arrived in August 1914, Rankin immediately terminated his employment with the civil service and joined the other officers from his militia regiment preparing to make their way to Camp Valcartier, Quebec. He was soon reunited with fellow classmates, almost all of whom had, like Rankin, immediately reported for active duty. At first, Rankin was expecting to join one of the cavalry units, but it soon became apparent that these officer slots were beyond his reach. Instead, his engineering degree and experience led him to attesting for

overseas service as an officer with the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Company, Canadian Engineers (CE), then under command of Major W.W. Melville.

It was with this unit that the young Rankin headed overseas. Upon arriving in England, however, Rankin was ordered away from his unit and sent to Shornecliffe where he was taken on strength at the Canadian Engineer Training Depot (CETD). There he trained and trained others until 17 May 1915, when he volunteered to go to France as a reinforcement officer after the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was mauled at the Second Battle of Ypres.

### To France and Flanders

Having just come out of the line, 1<sup>st</sup> Field Company, CE had suffered at Ypres in April 1915 along with the rest of its fellow units, and desperately needed new officers and men to replenish its depleted ranks.<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant Rankin was ordered to Belgium as a replacement, but, oddly, had served in the line for only 12 days when orders arrived for him to immediately return to the CETD. Rankin reluctantly obeyed, and made his way back to England for another month of training, preparation, and instructional duties. He finally returned to the front on 27 June 1915, and on 10 July he rejoined 1<sup>st</sup> Field Company CE, then stationed in reserve at Nieppe.<sup>5</sup>

In early July, the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Company had moved to its new location at the front. The engineers were in support of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and Seely's dismounted cavalry detachment, which were at the time occupying a new section of the front line approximately 1,200 yards in length. Later increased to 2,200 yards, Lieutenant Rankin and his sappers were kept busy improving the forward positions and ensuring that the brigade had all the engineer support it needed.<sup>6</sup> During the next few weeks there was little movement by either the Germans or the Canadians, both exhausted after the battles of Festubert and Givenchy that had taken place in May. However, engineer tasks continued to increase during this period, as both sides were fully occupied in

improving their respective defences. Suffering the constant daily random harassment from artillery, work never ceased on repairing and maintaining the front line positions.

As the Canadians worked on their own lines, the Germans could be spotted in the distance hard at work on Messines Ridge. Among other tasks, Lieutenant Rankin tried to keep the trenches in his area from deteriorating despite the constant damage inflicted upon them. It was often a thankless task, and as time wore on Rankin became increasingly disillusioned by the ceaseless work before him.

Rankin served with his unit throughout the fall and winter of 1915-1916. He found his existence as an army officer somewhat depressing, to say nothing of being downright dangerous. Random casualties from artillery and machine gun fire were a continuous reminder of the dangers of his army life, and as an engineer he was constantly exposed to enemy fire while attempting to improve the lot of his own fellow soldiers. He also found that there was very little achievement or excitement to be had as a ground soldier, and eventually Rankin sought out new career possibilities to escape from what he was sure would become an unrewarding and random death. On 23 May 1916, he submitted a request to be transferred from the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Company CE to the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Troops Company CE. The request was approved, but it was to be his last posting on the ground. Less than three weeks later, Lieutenant Rankin left the Canadian Engineers altogether for a new career with the nascent Royal Flying Corps.

## Soldier Turned Flyer

The dramatic buildup of the French and British armies in 1916 in preparation for a major assault to break the Germans in the west put increased demands on the Entente's military aviation. To meet the challenges of the upcoming summer offensive, the officer



Side view of a FE.2b

commanding the RFC in the field, Brigadier-General (later Chief of the Air Staff) Hugh Trenchard, with Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's support, expanded and reorganized the RFC so that each British army would have an entire air brigade to support it in future land battles.

On the western front an RFC air brigade consisted of a headquarters, an aircraft park, a balloon wing, an army wing of two to four squadrons, and a corps wing of three to five squadrons. This essentially provided one squadron for each corps of the army.<sup>7</sup> The force establishment for each army squadron was 18 aircraft, though units seldom had more than 12 operational machines during 1916. As well, any new aircraft arriving at the front were given first to those squadrons allocated to the upcoming Somme offensive.<sup>8</sup> That meant that recently introduced aircraft such as the new FE2b "pusher" was allocated to the lead attack squadrons, whereas other squadrons had to make do with older airframes. If lucky enough, however, these other squadrons might have received a couple of Martinsyde Scouts or popular DH2s as compensation. The whole process of building up the air brigades was completed by the end of March 1916, just in time for the planned attack at the Somme on 1 July.

In meeting the manpower requirements of the buildup, the RFC increased the establishment of observers in two-seater aircraft squadrons from seven to twelve, and most of these new airmen were selected from army units already in France. Many of the early volunteers came from CEF units. Lieutenant Rankin was among the first draft



Side view of a DH2



of new intakes, arriving at his assignment with No.18 Squadron on 7 June 1916. Formed in



*A Royal Flying Corps Vickers FB5 Gumbus*

May 1915 at Northolt, England, the squadron served first as a training

unit before being posted to France at the end of the year. Originally, No.18 squadron was equipped with Vickers FB5s and a few DH2s, but by April 1916 these had been replaced with the FE2b. The squadron was responsible for a variety of missions; however, in September 1916 it was withdrawn from the front to undertake cooperation missions with the cavalry.<sup>9</sup> The following year No.18 squadron was transferred from a fighting squadron to a bomber squadron, receiving new DH4s to replace the FE2bs.<sup>10</sup>

Rankin soon realized his indoctrination into the RFC would be decidedly short. He received little formal flight training beyond what was imparted at the squadron level, and he attended no formal flight schooling. Rankin had to learn Morse code communications on his own, though he received some formal instruction on how to operate a wireless set and a camera from the squadron ground crew. Rankin, who also had little previous experience with the handling of a Lewis gun, now had to not just learn to operate it, but also to master it against swift moving targets in the air. He knew the only real way to successfully do so was in combat. Finally, along with all the new intakes, Lieutenant Rankin was told he had to “acquire, as rapidly as possible, a detailed familiarity with their squadron’s ‘beat’ at the front.”<sup>11</sup> It was a lot to overcome in a very short time, but failure to do so would mean an early death in the air.

Lieutenant Rankin was destined to fly as an observer flying officer in one of the new British “two-seater” FE2b aircraft then entering service. Overall, the FE2b was a slow yet strong and versatile aircraft, capable of several different mission roles including air-to-air combat, reconnaissance, and bombing operations. The plane quickly became the workhorse

of all the army squadrons in 1916, replacing the older and less effective Vickers FB5 airframe then in use. Still, it was an odd-looking flyer being designed as a “pusher” plane; this meant that instead of the propeller pulling the aircraft along through the air, it instead faced rearwards “pushing” the aircraft from behind. The distinguished design also sidestepped the British failure to date to develop a proper propeller interrupter gear for forward firing weapons, allowing the gunners to engage enemy targets easily and without fear of shooting their own propellers to pieces in the process.

The FE2b aircraft was also designed so that both the pilot and the observer sat forward of the wings. One downside to this arrangement was the fact that the observer, who sat farthest forward in the aircraft, had very little cover or protection. Despite the aircraft’s maneuverability it had a maximum speed of only 73 miles per hour. Engineers compensated for this by heavily arming the aircraft with two Lewis machine guns capable of an exceptionally wide arc of fire.<sup>12</sup> It must have seemed small compensation indeed when enemy aircraft were rapidly bearing down on the man sitting in the front seat, but a talented gunner could effectively keep most predators at bay with his menacing twin guns and their rapid non-obscured rate of fire.

Those taken in as observers were put on a probationary period during which their skills and ability were tested. As a rookie, Lieutenant Rankin’s first assignment was as the probationary observer for Second Lieutenant F. L. Barnard, RFC, who flew an FE2b (aircraft No.4929). After his first couple of sorties, Rankin quickly learned that combat flyers were no less exposed to danger than men on the ground. He was wounded on his fifth sortie on 5 September 1916 during an engagement with enemy fighters, but it was minor enough to allow him to remain on duty with his squadron, in the field.

Enemy air activity had increased significantly in Rankin’s area in the fall of 1916; therefore,

No.18 Squadron flew combat missions daily and thus needed all aircrew they had. Despite his wound, Lieutenant Rankin chose to remain with his original pilot, for if he chose not to fly for medical reasons it meant one of his squadron's planes could not fly against the Germans. Two and a half weeks after his first incident, Rankin's probationary posting became permanent, and he was officially gazetted as an observer/gunner in the RFC on 18 September 1916. He did not know at the time that his new military career would not last even a month.

British air superiority on the western front began to wane in the autumn of 1916. In August-September, the German High Command formed units whose specific role was to engage the enemy in air-to-air combat. These new units, called *Jagdstaffeln* (*Jastas*), were slightly smaller than RFC squadrons, having an establishment of only 14 aircraft.<sup>13</sup> These German squadrons also employed new and greatly improved aircraft, such as the Albatross D-II and Roland, both of which were faster, more manoeuvrable, and better armed than their British counterparts.

Lieutenant Rankin was slightly wounded a second time on 27 September 1916 while engaged against enemy fighters over the Somme. Again, he remained on duty with his squadron and continued to fly with his pilot against the increasing German air opposition. Throughout the remainder of the month allied air casualties mounted as the Germans slowly gained the upper hand in air-to-air engagements. Rankin had two further close calls, plenty of action, and all the excitement he could have hoped for. However, he soon realized the danger as well. Perhaps none of his military training at RMC had prepared him for this

new form of warfare. When Lieutenant Rankin was still a gentleman cadet in



*Albatross D-II*



*Photo demonstrating the observer's firing positions in the Royal Aircraft Factory FE2d. The observer's cockpit was fitted with three guns, one fixed forward-firing for the pilot to aim, one moveable forward-firing and one moveable rear-firing mounted on a pole over the upper wing. The observer had to stand on his seat in order to use the rear-firing gun.*

*Imperial War Museum catalogue number Q 69650*

Kingston, flying machines were novelties, not deadly weapons.

## Death in the Skies

On 20 October 1916, Lieutenants Barnard and Rankin were flying a combat patrol near Le Sars when several German fighters ambushed their aircraft. Barnard had no choice but to engage the enemy, and four German flyers came after him and Rankin. A very shaken Barnard later described the hostile machines as "White biplanes, very fast. Looked like Rolands."<sup>14</sup> The group got tangled in a vicious dogfight that began at 10,000 feet and eventually dropped down to 2,000 feet. During the chase Rankin made a kill. When one of the enemy aircraft pursued the pair too closely, Rankin unloaded a whole drum from his Lewis gun into it and, "it was observed to descend steeply and crash in a shell hole."<sup>15</sup> The remaining enemy gave up the fight, and returned to their base minus one plane. It was a lucky escape for Barnard and Rankin as they could easily have been overwhelmed.

Yet despite such close calls there was little



*Roland D-II*

time for rest. Lieutenants Barnard and Rankin were out flying again on 22 October 1916, this time

escorting a photo-reconnaissance mission flying over Bapaume. During the course of the afternoon the pair were caught up in a series of engagements with German aircraft, the last of which was to prove deadly. Lieutenant Barnard later described the fateful patrol in his air combat report (ACR) to No.18 Squadron headquarters:

*“When escorting a camera machine over Bapaume we attacked one of several H[ostile] A[ircraft] which were in the neighbourhood of the camera machine...Shortly after two more appeared above us...When these had been driven off we turned for home...but found three more HA on our tail... [Rankin] put one drum into one which was passing straight over our heads at very close range, and this machine immediately became out of control, the tail and back of fuselage being on fire. It went down in a spin. The remaining two HA were now firing from behind and [Rankin] stood up to get a shot at them...one more HA was seen to go down in a*

*nose dive with smoke from its engine...[Rankin] was still firing when he was hit in the head and fell sideways over the side of the nacelle. I managed to catch his coat as he was falling, and by getting in the front seat pulled him back. I then got back in the pilot's seat. The engine and most of the controls had been shot but I managed to get the machine over our lines and landed 200 yards behind our front line...”<sup>16</sup>*

In order to allow Rankin to get a better shot at the last two planes, Barnard had tilted the aircraft up into a stall while Rankin stood up and fired over the top of the plane. Unfortunately this left Rankin very exposed to enemy fire, the FE2b nacelle being little more than a low aerodynamic skirt.<sup>17</sup> From Barnard's report it would appear that the second German aircraft killed Rankin while he was busily dispatching the first enemy plane.



Having lost his gunner and rapidly losing control of his aircraft, Lieutenant Barnard dove for the ground in an effort to shake loose his remaining adversary. Wrestling hard with the controls, Barnard managed to bring the plane down just behind friendly lines. Tragically, Rankin was already dead; the headshot had been fatal. Barnard was recovered by friendly ground forces and taken to a dressing station in the rear, while Rankin's body was prepared for a local burial. He was interred in a temporary grave near the site where Barnard brought the plane down, but unfortunately Rankin would have no permanent resting place.<sup>18</sup> As the war washed over the ground where he lay, his body and grave marker were lost. To this day, Rankin is listed as having no known grave. His name is commemorated on the Arras memorial as well as the great Memorial Arch at RMC, the only acknowledgements of the young, quiet and studious man originally from Woodstock, New Brunswick.<sup>19</sup>

Franklin Sharp Rankin never pined for active military service, but when war came he forfeited the company of his family, the comforts of home, his civilian career and came forth immediately to serve his country. He fought both on the ground and in the air. A pleasant, polite, and unassuming young man, he made the sky his battlefield and fought and died like a Canadian soldier. Though he was never found, his life and his contribution to Canadian aviation history is important, and his story needs to be told. ■

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## Notes

1. Royal Military College of Canada, *The Stone Frigate: The Class of 1914*, (Kingston: RMC Club Press, 1914), 131.
2. During its early years, young men entering RMC were not immediately associated with being officers but instead only gained that affiliation upon graduation. Each entrant was initially assigned the rank of Gentleman Cadet. From this base they could be promoted lance-corporal, corporal, sergeant, and finally to company and perhaps even battalion sergeant major. Commissions were applied for only at graduation.
3. RMC, *Stone Frigate*, 131.
4. By the end of May 1915, the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Engineer units had suffered 4 officers and 125 other ranks killed, wounded, or missing in action. For statistics see Col A.F. Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919: Appendix I*, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1938).
5. Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Record Group [RG] 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8095-52.
6. Col. A.J. Kerry and Col. W.A. McDill, *The History of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers, Volume 1: 1749-1939*, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 95.
7. S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*, Volume One, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 359.
8. *Ibid.*, 359.
9. Public Record Office [PRO] Kew, United Kingdom. PRO Air 1/916/204/5/871. Notes between Trenchard and Henderson, dated September 1916.
10. Chris Shores, Norman Franks and Russell Guest, *Above the Trenches: A Complete Record of the Fighter Aces and Units of the British Empire Air Forces, 1915-1920*, (London: Fortress Publications Inc, 1990).
11. E. M. Roberts, *A Flying Fighter*, (New York: Private Publication, 1918), 97-146. See also S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, 365.
12. *Wise.*, 361.

### List of Abbreviations

ACR	air combat report
CE	Canadian Engineers
CEF	Canadian Expeditionary Force
CETD	Canadian Engineer Training Depot
HA	hostile aircraft
PRO	Public Record Office
RCHA	Royal Canadian Horse Artillery
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RMC	Royal Military College

13. *Ibid.*, 384.
14. PRO Air 1/2248/209/43/15 No.18 Squadron Air Combat Report (ACR), 20 October 1916.
15. *Ibid.*, No.18 Sqn ACR, 20 October 1916.
16. *Ibid.*, No.18 Sqn ACR, 22 October 1916.
17. Trevor Henshaw, *The Sky Their Battlefield*, (London: 1995), 120. See also C. Hobson, *Airmen Died in the Great War, 1914-1918*, (London: Grub Street Press, 1995), 85; and C. Cole, ed., *RFC Communiques: Royal Flying Corps 1915-1916*, (London: Grub Street, 1969), 294.
18. No.18 Sqn ACR, 22 October 1916 indicates that Lieutenant Rankin was initially buried near the wreckage of his aircraft. A map reference identified as WoL M.23.b.9.9 is noted.
19. See C. Cole, ed. *RFC Communiques*, and PRO ACR for No.18 Sqn Royal Air Force. Barnard's report is also mentioned in Henshaw and Wise histories.

