



Egerton Boyer Denison

1887 - 1971

“Green eggs and grass soup”

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Foreword

The following story is about a young man born into a prominent Toronto family and who - perhaps feeling pressured to follow his famous father's example - answered the call to serve king and country.

Britain declared war on Germany on September 4th, 1914. Tensions between the two empires had been festering for some time. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie on June 28th, 1914 by a Bosnian Serb student while being driven through Sarajevo proved to be the spark which ignited the most destructive truly global war to date. Egerton's personal story in this conflict, though relatively small - is rooted in his love of flying and photography.

At the time, Canada was a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, but it did not control its own foreign affairs so was obliged to follow suit and declare war. She entered the conflict almost immediately despite being woefully unprepared, with only a small army, no air-force and virtually no navy.

What she did have was a large pool of young men, a mature manufacturing infrastructure, abundant farmland, strong sense of patriotic attachment to the "Old Country" and of course an ocean away from German attacks from the air.

Some 619,000 Canadians enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force for service overseas representing approximately seven percent of a pre-war population of eight million. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Canadians (largely women) worked on the home front in support of the war effort.

Egerton had to travel to England for flight training but by war's end, a Canadian aviation industry was firmly established and flight training programs were turning out hundreds of pilots.

I am truly humbled and feel particularly honoured to have been able to interview the daughter of a WWI fighter pilot who survived aerial combat and incarceration as a prisoner of war.

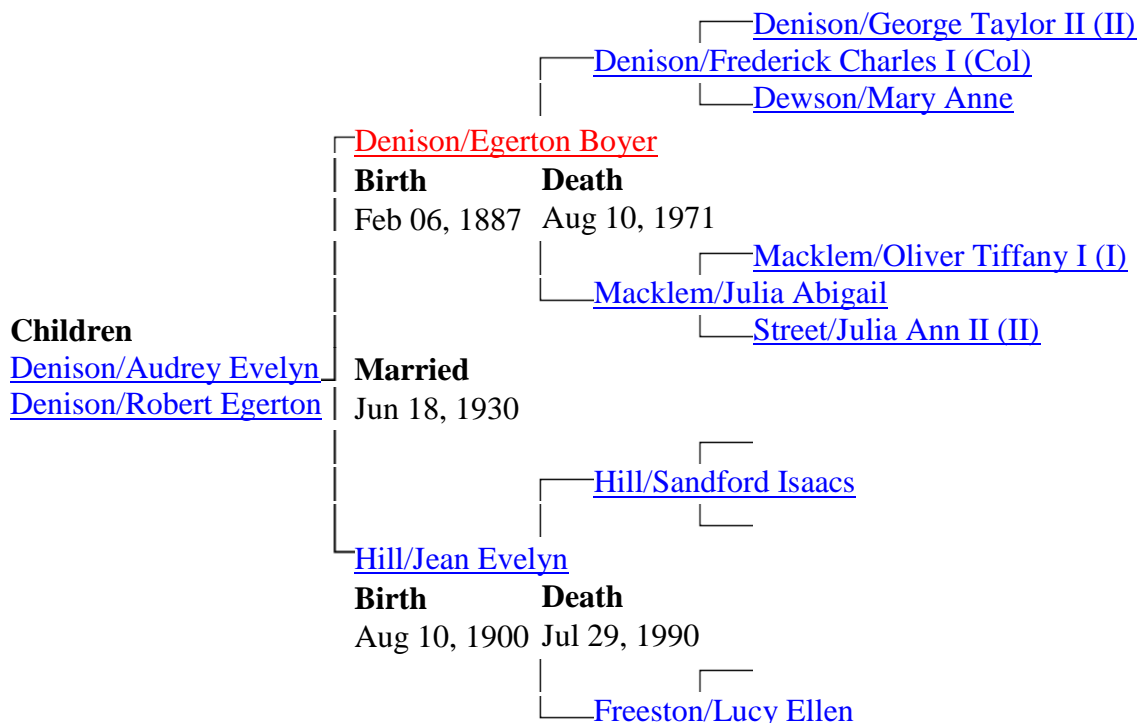
About Egerton Boyer Denison

Born on February 6th, 1887 at the family home of Rusholme in Toronto, he was the youngest of eight children of Col. Frederick Charles Denison and Julia Abigail Macklem.

He led a privileged life, but one overshadowed by a household of siblings all born in rapid succession and the exploits of his famous father.

Egerton married Jean Evelyn Hill in 1930 and had two children. Son Robert lived until 1999 and at time of writing daughter Audrey is still alive.

The “Fighting Denisons” were a prominent social and military family in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many are buried in St John’s Cemetery on the Humber in Weston – an early village, now part of Toronto.



Egerton was not a famous member of society in the pre-war years so his life is not well documented. I have had to rely on memories of surviving family members and war-time records. Special thanks go to Cindy and Allan Tomlinson for their assistance and collection of family photographs and to Audrey Evelyn Moody for patiently answering all my research questions about her father.

The Early Years



Egerton is seen standing beside his father, Frederick Charles Denison (seated) at Rusholme



Born just two years after the return of his father from the Nile Expedition and subsequent race for a seat in the House of Commons for Toronto West, Egerton lost his father in 1896 to stomach cancer. Egerton was then only nine years old!

Following family tradition, Egerton was privately educated and attended Upper Canada College in 1898. His time at UCC was not particularly well spent so with parental agreement he left the college in 1905. The school building shown here was located in central Toronto. It was later determined to be unsafe, torn down and replaced in the mid 1950's.



The 1901 Canadian census listed mother Julia, Egerton and four of his younger siblings as living in Toronto ward 6 (presumably at Rusholme).

Egerton participated in family events at Rusholme and seemed to spend most time with his brother Gordon seen here playing croquet in 1909.

Egerton and the War



Egerton's Sopwith Camel #B3775

formed at Gosport the previous March. His military identification number was W/O 339/73284.

At some point after graduating from UCC, Egerton must have obtained a basic flying certificate and because Canada did not have an air force he travelled to England in hopes of being selected for service with the newly formed Royal Flying Corps.

After further training at Upavon field, he was commissioned on October 23, 1916 as a 2nd lieutenant scout pilot with the 45th squadron which had only been



Egerton demonstrating the aerial camera at Upavon

The squadron had been equipped with the iconic Sopwith Camel bi-planes later nick-named the "Flying Camels" by King Edward VIII. Egerton's role was scouting and aerial photography with plane #B3775.

Later in October 1916, the squadron was transferred to the Western Front in France and participated in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and at Ypres in 1917.

The Sopwith Camel accounted for more aerial victories than any other allied aircraft during World War I and is credited with destroying 1,294 enemy aircraft. However flying in the early years was extremely dangerous.

For example, parachutes were not issued to the crews of Allied "heavier-than-air" aircraft, since it was thought that if a pilot had a parachute he would jump from the plane when hit rather than trying to save the aircraft. In addition, because planes had limited load capacity, carrying a parachute impeded performance and reduced fuel efficiencies.

The Camel also proved to be difficult to land in cross-winds due to its design and light weight resulting in crash landings and pilot deaths.

During the war 413 pilots died in combat and 385 pilots died from non-combat related causes while flying the Sopwith Camel. Of these, the 45th squadron lost 66 pilots.



Egerton in Alexandria,
Egypt

In late 1914, a small Royal Flying Corps presence had been deployed to the Middle East to observe and engage with the Ottoman Empire forces.

By July 1, 1916 this force had grown sufficiently to be raised to brigade level and was known as **The Middle East Brigade**.

At some point late in 1916 or early in 1917 Egerton was assigned to this brigade where his aerial photography skills were utilized. He must not have been there long as he was transferred back to France sometime after this photograph was taken on March 30, 1917.

On September 11th 1917 at 10:30 in the morning, Egerton's aeroplane was last seen flying over enemy territory in France and was recorded in squadron records as missing. It was also noted that the aeroplane was a write-off. Family lore suggests that he was involved in a dog-fight and was slightly injured with a bullet in his ankle but managed to land safely because we know that he was taken prisoner.

Upon landing he was surrounded by German soldiers and was unable to follow RFC orders to destroy his own aeroplane. Egerton saved the bullet as a souvenir for many years after the war. It has since been lost.

Two months after Egerton's capture, the squadron was transferred by rail to the Austro-Italian front after the Rapallo Conference in Italy and was engaged in ground attacks and offensive patrols until September 1918, when it returned to France.

Egerton as a POW

As a pilot officer, Egerton was sent to the Schweidnitz prisoner of war camp near Schlesien in Germany. (Baron Manfred von Richthofen's home town who is more commonly known as The Red Baron).



Schweidnitz POW camp (in red)

Egerton was housed with many other captured pilots from the RFC and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) for the remainder of the war.

The two services comprising British and Commonwealth pilots, mechanics and ground crews were later combined to form the Royal Air Force.

While interred, it seems that the men were treated generally well by their captors. Some, including Egerton had cameras and took photographs of everyday living, plays and musical concerts put on by the prisoners. These photos are currently in the possession of Egerton's grand-daughter Cindy Tomlinson.



Egerton's map



The prisoners also printed a satirical magazine called "The Barb". Copies of which still survive in private collections today.

As the war worsened for Germany, the food at the camp deteriorated. Years later, Egerton told his daughter Audrey about the green eggs, grass soup and black bread rations.

Egerton often wrote his mother Julia for cigarettes and chocolates but he quit smoking and traded the cigarettes for other small comforts.

Poor food rations combined with daily boredom may have led to a great escape in 1918. Egerton was not involved and the escape ultimately failed.

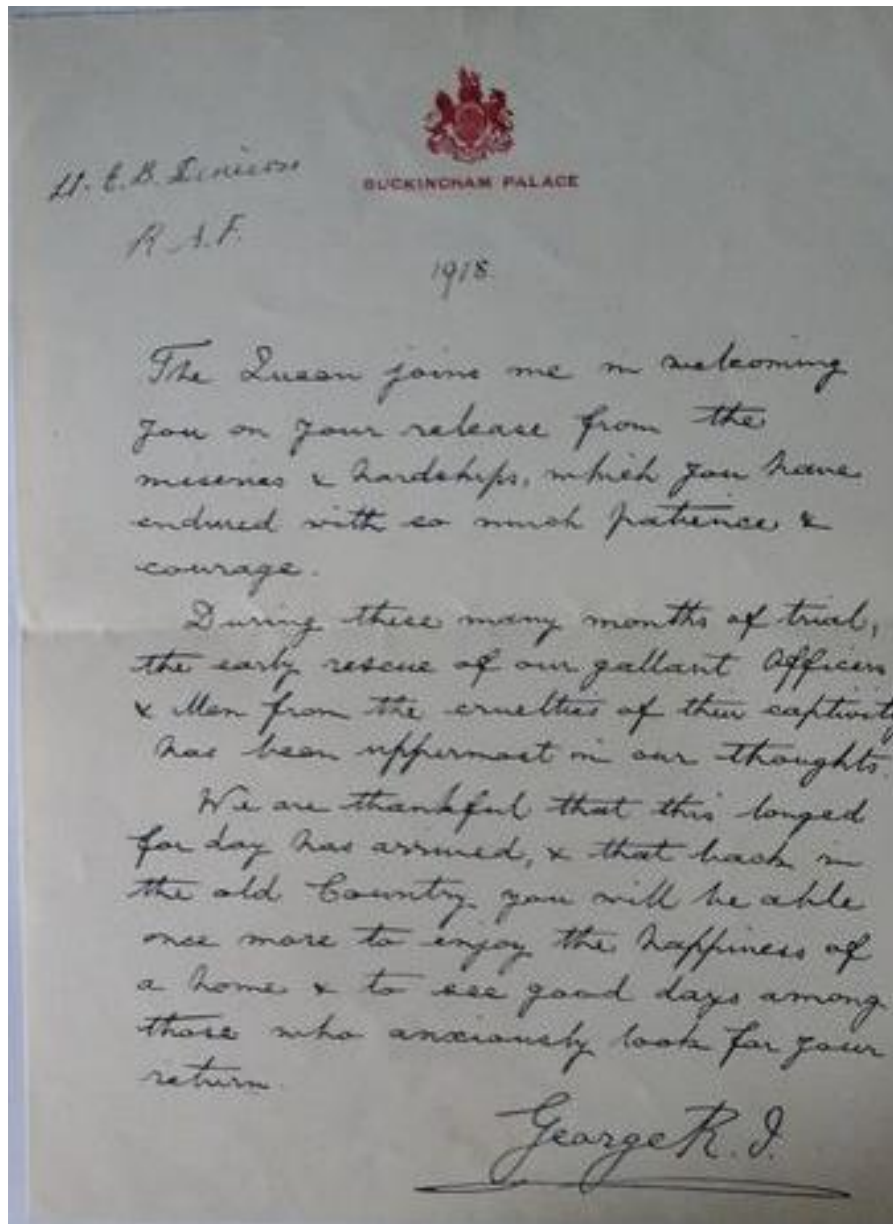
POWs were duty-bound to attempt an escape and return to their service units. Egerton was no exception. Note his hand writing on the top of the map indicating his desire to leave the camp.

At last the war came to an end with an Armistice on November 11th, 1918. Terms of the agreement dictated that POW's be released as soon as possible and returned to their respective units in the field.

The repatriation of 267,813 Canadian soldiers and some dependents was an enormous logistical challenge. Limited space on departure vessels, bad winter weather, strikes by dock workers, police officers, and railway employees in Great Britain hampered these efforts. Canadian ports and railways could only handle the influx of 25,000 returnees per month as Saint John and Halifax were the only large, ice-free Canadian ports available.

Despite all this, Egerton who was released January 3, 1919 was eventually repatriated back to Canada on July 9th, 1919.

Where possible, all British and Commonwealth servicemen who had been incarcerated in POW camps received what appears to be a personal welcome-home note from King George V. In truth, due to the large number of prisoners returning home, the letters were mechanically produced featuring the King's handwriting. This letter was received by Egerton.



After the War

After the war Egerton; who was single, kept himself busy selling insurance with his brother Gordon. He appears to have maintained his connection with the military and continued flying and taking aerial photographs.



Reflecting his social standing and love of flying, Egerton was listed in the “1921 Torontonians Society Blue Book and Club Lists” as being a member of the Rusholme Lawn Tennis Club and of the Aero Club of Canada.

The 1921 Canadian Census listed mother Julia, Gordon, Egerton and a maid living in Toronto at 1400 Dundas Street West. Due to development in the area and re-numbering of properties, it is not clear if this was the official address of the old estate or the gatekeeper’s gabled cottage which marked the starting point of the winding carriage-drive up to the estate house and was

located at the corner of modern-day Dundas Street and Rusholme Road.

On June 18th 1930 Egerton married Jean Evelyn Hill R.N., who was working at the Toronto Grace Hospital and also looking after his mother Julia at the estate house. He was 43 and Jean was 30 years old. They had two children. Daughter Audrey was born in June 1935 and son Robert in September of 1939. The family lived for many years at 70 St. Annes Road in Toronto near the old estate house.



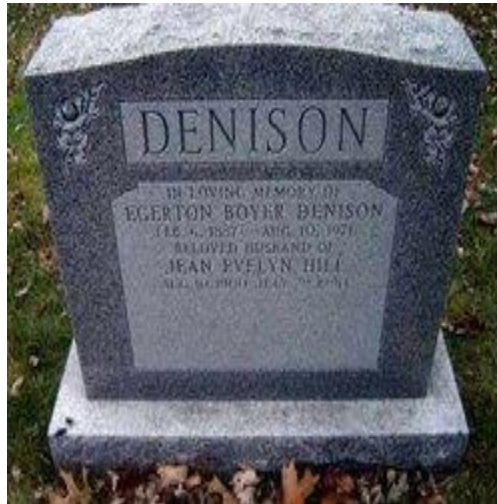
Family photo taken in Muskoka c 1948

For a number of years the family would pack up supplies and take the train to Lake Muskoka spending two weeks vacationing at Beachgrove Island and ultimately bought a cottage on Rankin Island nearby.

After the second world war, Egerton worked in the admissions office of the Christie Street Orthopedic Hospital which was old and overcrowded with veterans from both World Wars, the Boer War, and the Fenian Raids of 1866. He was involved with the transfer of veteran medical records to the newly constructed Sunnybrook Hospital also located in Toronto.

Once the records were transferred he also worked in Sunnybrook's admissions office. Sunnybrook accepted its' first patient in 1946.

Egerton Boyer Denison died on August 10th, 1971 at Sunnybrook hospital and is buried in St. John's Cemetery on the Humber in Weston, Ontario. His wife Jean died of cancer in 1990 and is buried with him. Son Robert died in 1999 and daughter Audrey lives in Barrie, Ontario at time of writing.



Epilogue

The Upavon airfield in Britain where Egerton trained still exists and has undergone many changes since the war. As an active airfield it was closed in 1993, transferred to the British Army and renamed "Trenchard Lines".

The Schweidnitz prisoner of war camp buildings still exist and are now located in Poland. The facility was used during WW2 by the Germans and more recently to house demonstrators from the Polish Solidarity movement.

The 45th squadron of the Royal Flying Corps was merged with the Royal Navy Air Service on April 1, 1918 to become a squadron of the RAF. It returned to England in February 1919 and was disbanded in December 1919. It was later re-formed for service in Egypt.

On December 21, 1916, the decision was made to establish a flying training operation in Canada and the Royal Flying Corps Canada (RFCC) was opened at Camp Borden and other locations in southern Ontario in late January 1917 to recruit and train Canadian pilots for war-time service.

The Rusholme estate was mostly sub-divided into building lots in 1883 and the mansion finally demolished in 1953. Local street names bear witness to the famous house and family name.

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Acknowledgements

- Allan and Cindy Tomlinson
- Audrey Evelyn Moody
- Sarah Montgomery
- www.Wikipedia.ca
- www.WarMuseum.ca
- Imperial War Museum, London
- 1901 & 1921 Census of Canada
- 1921 Torontonians Society Blue Book and Club Lists
- Upper Canada College War Book

