



DND Photo RE14469

Billy Bishop with his Nieuport 17.

## BILLY BISHOP – BRAVE FLYER, BOLD LIAR

by Brereton Greenhous

**W**e all of us tell little lies. They are the lubricants of society. But only a few of us tell lies as big as those told by Billy Bishop. Even fewer of us tell them as frequently as he did, and those that do, usually tell them to entertain our friends and acquaintances rather than to advance our careers. He was an inveterate liar; and no one but Bishop ever told one to get himself a Victoria Cross!

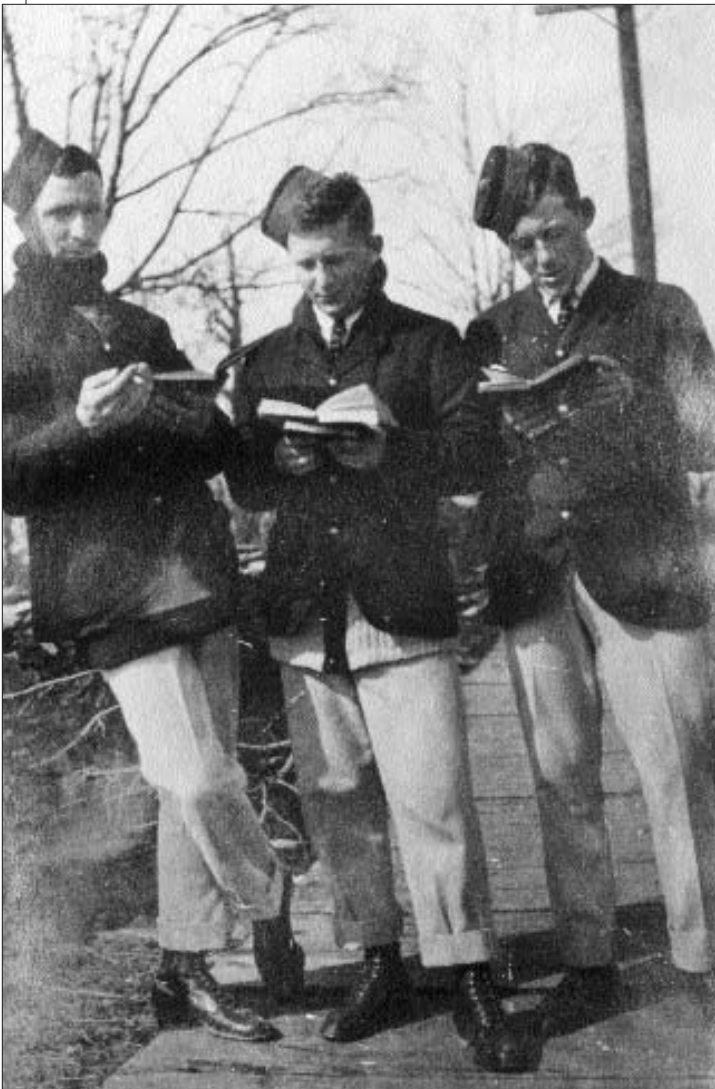
Even so, Bishop was as brave as they come. It is a common, but quite false, assumption that because a man is a proven and consistent liar he must also be a coward, or, alternatively, because he is honest he must be brave. The human spirit is more complicated than that, and all sorts of strange and contrary qualities may co-exist. Whatever else Bishop may or may not have done, during his first tour at the front between March and August 1917, he flew, mostly unaccompanied, in a Nieuport 17 fighter, a plane that was distinctly inferior in speed and firepower to the Albatros D-III's flown by German fighter pilots at the time. And the Germans flew in bunches — *Ketten* or *Staffeln*! No parachute, and a machine constructed of wood and 'doped' fabric that would burn like tinder if a spark from the engine or an incendiary bullet touched it. Towards the end of his tour he flew a faster SE 5, a better machine that still lacked the firepower of an Albatros D-III. I believe he deserved most of his medals, but not for doing the things he claimed to have done, and was credited with. Rather, he deserved his decorations for flying alone, deep in German airspace, in a fragile butterfly of an aircraft.

Did he tell tall tales all his life? We don't know. We do know that he was 'rusticated' — set back a year — at RMC for some unspecified cheating in his first year examinations. And at some point in his career (probably between the world wars, when he had already been awarded a great array of decorations and his tunic was ablaze with ribbons), he granted himself the 1914-1915 Star — you can see it on his tunic at the Canadian War Museum to this day. You can also see, in the National Archives of Canada, a document which, on behalf of both the British and Canadian governments, specifically denies his entitlement to it. (Read my book *The Making of Billy Bishop* if you want precise citations, on this matter or any other in this account.)

However, the lying seems to have been in high gear when he reached France as an observer. He claimed to have injured his knee in a crash and wrote of a 'strained heart,' but his medical documents make no mention of either. They do record an infected tooth putting him in hospital for a week and, on another occasion, varicose veins in his legs for a somewhat longer stay — both rather less romantic problems, unbecoming an embryonic hero.

Once he got to be a pilot with 37 Squadron, RFC, he briefly engaged on anti-Zeppelin duties over the Thames estuary and began to get into his stride. His first imaginary combat — the first of many — came on 7 January 1917 while fly-

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RMC Archives

Billy Bishop (centre) while a cadet at Royal Military College, 1914.

ing a BE 12a, when he claimed (in a letter home) to have had a “terrific scrap” with an enemy seaplane. “I must have hit him over and over again but didn’t finish him. He hit my machine 6 times — 3 times, funny to say, in the propeller.” But a check of his logbook reveals no account of any such combat. Six joyrides for mechanics are recorded during the day, together with one ten-minute flight for unspecified reasons — probably some kind of flight test. Of course, we all try to impress our friends and relatives with exaggerations at some time or another, and Bishop could be forgiven that one. At least he didn’t claim to have shot his enemy down. But worse was yet to come.

Off to France and 60 Squadron, RFC. In the course of 184 sorties he claimed 47 victories, but only three of them were properly witnessed, three more were certainly false, and probably two-thirds of the remainder were extremely doubtful. During his time with 60 Squadron, he was credited with seventeen victories while flying in company (thirty while alone), and at least one of his biographers, in a quasi-historical study (as opposed to the more numerous, purely laughable ones), has assumed that all his victories claimed while flying in company were witnessed by one or more of his fellow-pilots. But that is not how it was done, as his first two claims illustrate. The fact that a man was flying in company meant

nothing in itself; for a claim to be confirmed it was customary for the name of a witness, or witnesses, to be included in the combat report. Only three of his claims were indisputably corroborated in that fashion — those first two and his thirty-third, witnessed by an Australian from another squadron. As for the thirty claims made while flying alone, obviously there could be no corroboration.

The three that were certainly false were those claimed in connection with the entirely fictitious dawn raid on a German airfield that brought him his Victoria Cross. Most German air records were destroyed in Second World War bombing, but some survived and, unfortunately for Bishop, among them was the Weekly Activity Report of the Second Army air commander, *Kommandeur der Flieger, Armee 2*, for the week in question. *KoFl.2* being the man over whose sector of the Western Front Bishop claimed to have flown that day, 2 June 1917, while admitting he was unable to identify the field he said he had attacked.

*KoFl.2*’s report for the week ending 6 June goes into considerable detail about “enemy [i.e., British] air activity.” At night, “a new tactic noted was the firing of a few rounds of small-calibre ammunition into the illuminated area; this practice was noted on 4 June .... The airfield of *Jagdstaffel Boelcke* was bombed during the night of 3/4 and 5/6 June; no damage was inflicted.” But not a word does it have to say about a daylight attack on any of his airfields. Yet it would have been very important that all his subordinates and fellow army air commanders be made aware of such a raid, had it occurred. After all, it might be their turn next, and damage could be minimized if they were forewarned of this new tactic.

His report also lists, by name and unit, all German air battle casualties in the *2 Armee* zone, day-by-day. On 2 June, Bishop claimed to have shot down one machine “just above the ground” that crashed on the airfield, another one “just off the ground” that crashed into a tree from a low height, and a third that fell a thousand feet before “crashing to the ground where it lay in a field, a few hundred yards from the aerodrome.” It is surely inconceivable that none of the three pilots was even injured, but *KoFl.2* does not list any casualty on that day. Nor is it possible to argue that there was some delay in reporting losses, for on 3 June the only casualty was an observer of *Flieger Abteilung (Artillerie) 269*, “killed in aerial combat.” And whatever Bishop zealots may claim, German record keeping was meticulous.

Finally, we might note that when the RAF Museum in England put out a first-day cover with a stamp celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the alleged raid, three of his four surviving comrades from those halcyon days declined to sign it. Being gentlemen of the old school (unlike your humble author), they also declined to give their reasons, but the reader is at liberty to guess what they may have been.

I could continue listing lies that Bishop told — there were a lot of them — but more interesting (at least to me) is wondering how he not only got away with them, but also managed to accumulate a VC, two DSOs, a DFC and an MC in the process. Most particularly the VC, since the award of a VC has always been, except in this one unique case, based on irreproachable evidence from two or more witnesses. The answer is to be found partly in good luck — he was in the right place at the right time, had the right commanding offi-

cer in France and the right patroness in London, and the political background was favourable — and partly in his good looks, good manners and charming personality, when he chose to exercise them.

When he arrived in France the Royal Flying Corps was in desperate straits. In April 1917 — “Bloody April” it was subsequently christened — losses were running at a rate of 600 percent per year, which translated to an average of only two month’s effective service from each airman — less in the case of fighter pilots. German aircraft were better, German tactics were better, and Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen was becoming a legend on both sides of the front. The RFC badly needed a hero to compete with him, as well as set an example for all those novice pilots being pushed too fast through the training schools to replace the fearsome losses, only to be lost themselves in a matter of weeks. “Our casualties mounted alarmingly,” wrote one undistinguished participant, Oliver Stewart, in his *Words and Music for a Mechanical Man*.

There was a hardly an evening when the same people gathered in the mess. It was here that a certain amount of frank and free comment on our casualty rate could be heard ... our commanding officer discouraged it; but it continued ....

This feeling, although officially looked on as defeatist, was prevalent among operational pilots .... Officers of the higher command, from Major General Hugh Trenchard, as he was then, down to the commanders of wings, according to the critics were throwing away aircraft and lives for no discernable purpose.

The first one chosen to rival the Red Baron was 21-year-old Albert Ball, who had been credited with thirty-one victories during his first tour at the front — he, like Bishop, often flew alone and many of his claims may well be questionable — and was quickly increasing his tally in the course of a second tour. But it would be as well to have a back-up candidate, and Bishop’s first two (confirmed) victories put him in line for that position. His commanding officer in 60 Squadron was Major A. J. L. (Jack) Scott, crippled in a flying accident but still flying, although he could only walk with the aid of two sticks.

... a man of character and presence, a barrister, Sussex squire and fox-hunting man with a host of friends, many in high places. He was obviously ambitious and determined that the squadron should be the best in France. He was the first commanding officer I [Lieutenant W.M. Fry] had served under who was what today would be described as public-relations minded.... He was determined that his squadron’s and his pilots’ deeds should be known by all and sundry, and he was generous in recommending for honours pilots who did well.

Bishop had impressed Scott with his first two unquestionable victories and, from that point on, the latter was increasingly generous in assigning credit to his *protégé*. Bishop’s next report was probably truthful — a balloon that he left “smoking” on the ground and a guardian fighter that he reported “dived away steeply” after an exchange of fire. Scott, however, chose to categorize the balloon as destroyed

and the enemy fighter as “driven down out of control” — this latter being a category that only the British recognized. It brought Billy his first decoration, the Military Cross. Two days later, he reported last seeing an enemy machine in a “nose dive 500 ft from the ground,” and Scott promptly rated it as destroyed. On the same sortie another enemy aircraft disappeared with its “nose well down,” and a third was last seen (still only by Bishop) in a “spinning nose dive.” Scott categorized both as “driven down out of control,” and all of these so-called victories were confirmed by his good friends Lieutenant-Colonel George Pretyman, the wing commander, and brigade commander Colonel J. F. A. Higgins. Scott was also well-known to, and favoured by, General Trenchard. There was little likelihood that any of his conclusions would be questioned by higher authority, especially given the tenor of the time.

Bishop was not slow to catch on. If the RFC needed another hero, he was ready and willing. His combat reports become much more decisive — no need of Scott’s assistance any more. Now the enemy “burst into flames,” or he “saw him crash.” Soon he was in hot pursuit of Albert Ball, a pursuit that came to an end with Ball’s death on 7 May, when the latter had been credited with forty-four victories and Bishop’s score was just nineteen (which brought him his first DSO). With Ball gone (he got a posthumous VC, which made him of limited value as a role model), Billy became the RFC’s official personification of a rival to Von Richthofen, and, unhampered by the need for witnesses, his score mounted steadily. On 15 August he surpassed Ball’s total, if only in his imagination, and the next day he was credited with two more before being posted home to collect his VC, his first DSO and his MC from King George V.

Which brings us to the fascinating question of a VC awarded without *any* corroborative evidence, and since all the documentation for VCs awarded between 1915 and 1918 was apparently destroyed by the Public Record Office after the Second World War (only a conspiracy theorist might connect that unfortunate event with Bishop’s award), the conclusion from what follows must be hypothetical.

While Bishop had been in hospital, allegedly recuperating from a ‘strained heart’ and/or an injured knee, he had been visited by an elderly London socialite, Lady Mary St. Helier, busy doing her national service by succouring the sick and wounded. She had been much taken by the charming young Canadian, virtually adopting him, her own son having died of typhoid in India many years earlier at the same age that Bishop was now. St. Helier, a wealthy widow, was probably the most influential hostess in London at a time when (in C.S. Forrester’s words) “half the policy of England was settled at dinner parties and social gatherings.” Among her good friends were Lord Hugh Cecil, leader of the parliamentary ‘ginger’ group commonly referred to as ‘the Hughligans’ (in a word-play on ‘hooligans’) who had, by happenstance, recruited Billy into the Royal Flying Corps; the young Winston Churchill, out of office for the moment — she had introduced him to his wife, the former Clementine Hozier, who was her great-niece; and F.E. Smith, the brilliant jurist, currently attorney-general in the Lloyd George administration and the future Lord Birkenhead. All three were also good friends of Jack Scott.

As to the general society that gathered in her house, it can only be summed up in the word ‘everybody’.

Bishops and Ambassadors (especially American), Cabinet Ministers and Opposition. Judges and lawyers in abundance ... editors, journalists, historians, women pretty or clever or both — all were there and all were glad to come again.

With the recommendation a matter for society gossip, yet another factor may have come into play. Sir Richard Turner, commanding Canada's overseas forces, and Sir George Perley, the Cabinet's Overseas Minister (one of St. Helier's 'Bishops and Ambassadors'?) had begun fostering the idea of a Canadian air force, a concept that was anathema in Whitehall. Between a quarter and a third of the aircrew in the British flying services were Canadians: were they all to be brought together in a Canadian air force, what would happen to the RFC and the RNAS? A really major re-organization would be necessary at a time in the war when every airman and every machine was vital; but the rejection of a VC for Billy after all the rumours that were now floating about London (and Ottawa) could only be interpreted as a snub to the colonies and increase the pressure for an independent Canadian air force. So what if there were no witnesses? More important things were at stake than a mere VC!

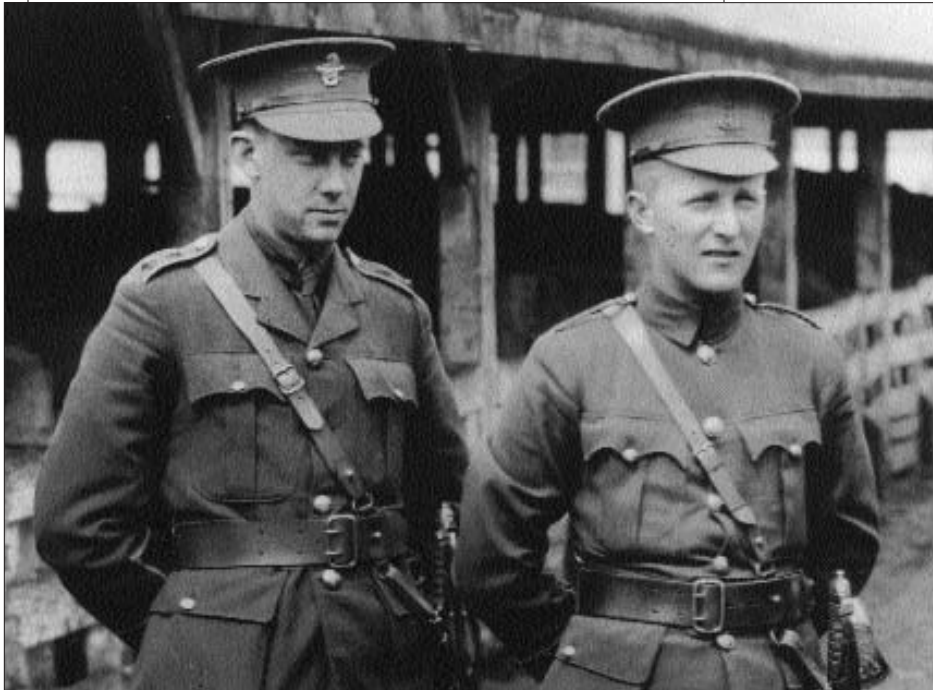
Case explained? Not conclusively, I fear. But it is the only tenable hypothesis.

In the early summer of 1918 Bishop was back in France, in command of his own squadron, so that he could now confirm his own claims, and flying an SE 5a — a much superior machine, faster than

anything the Germans had. Even so, the figures were inconceivable — Bishop, I suspect, was after a Bar to his VC! Twenty-four victories in 23 sorties flown over 22 days, with only one of them confirmed by an independent witness.

And nearly all can be shown to be false. The final volume of the German official history of the First World War included a chart detailing every one of their air losses between March and September 1918, constructed before the Second World War from all that German air material destroyed in the bombing. By correlating it with Billy's claims and those of other British flyers, it is possible to dispose of most of them. Two of the less complex examples: on 4 June, he credited himself with two kills near the North Sea coast, but *4 Armee*, the German formation closest to the coast, lost only one machine that day and two Australians shared in the destruction of that. Then, on 19 June, his last day at the front, he claimed *five* on one sortie, but the three northernmost German armies lost only one machine between them on that day, and it fell to the guns of a Bristol two-seater from 22 Squadron.

Meanwhile, Turner and Perley had met with only limited success in their efforts to create a purely Canadian air force. The British had agreed to a nominal CAF of two squadrons, and Billy, to his great annoyance, was recalled to play a major role in establishing it. It was the end of his combat flying. He would have to be content with 72 credited victories instead of the 22 to 27 he was truly entitled to, and there would be no Bar to his VC. Poor Billy Bishop, VC, DSO and Bar, DFC, MC ... 1914-1915 Star ... etc., etc. Thwarted at last.



DND Photo RE22064

Billy Bishop (right) while a member of the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles, England, 1915.

Among them was Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, the Canadian-born newspaper magnate who was making it his business to record Canadian successes in the war, and who seems to have made a point of 'pushing' Bishop. And not the least of her friends was Princess Marie Louise, the daughter of self-exiled Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein (whose claims on that province had been effectively extinguished when it fell into Prussian hands via the Peace of Vienna in 1864), and Queen Victoria's third daughter, Princess Helena — a relationship that made her a first cousin of both King George and Queen Mary. In her autobiography, Marie Louise recorded that:

During the 1914-1918 War we were in very close touch with him [George V] and, of course, Queen Mary. During the summer months of those eventful years they were usually in residence at Windsor, and my parents and we two sisters were at Cumberland Lodge [a 'grace and favour' residence in Windsor Great Park]. In consequence, there was a constant coming and going between the Castle and our home. To lunch on Sunday at the Castle was an established fact.

When Marie Louise was not lunching at Windsor, she was calling on her cousins at Buckingham Palace, her visits regularly recorded in *The Times'* Court Circular. Then again, she often dined with Bishop at 'Granny' St. Helier's whenever he was in London, and surely the king got to hear all about her new friend, this debonair young Canadian who already wore the ribbons of the DSO and MC. Recommendations were supposed to be confidential, but Scott, "public relations-minded" as he was, no doubt made sure that all his London friends knew all about it as soon as the War Office did.

