

SBV2-2



# HUGH HALLIDAY

CURATOR OF WAR ART  
CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

## G/C

## WILLIAM ROY

## IRWIN

## MBE, DFC and BAR

Many a veteran of the First World War stepped forward again to serve in the RCAF during the Second World War. Most of these held administrative posts, but some were admitted to the General List and permitted to fly regularly. One such person was William Roy "Sambo" Irwin, whose record in both conflicts was distinguished, though his work differed greatly from one war to the next.

Irwin was born on 7 June 1898 at Ripley, a town in Bruce County, Ontario. He was too young for active service when the Great War began, but eventually he was able to join the University of Toronto Overseas Training Company, which was preparing youths in Canada for overseas military duty when they reached the appropriate age.

By late 1916, however, he had caught the flying bug and turned to the Royal Naval Air Service, which had been actively recruiting in Canada for many months. On 14 March 1917 he was accepted by that force and was despatched to the United Kingdom. By the time he got there he was having second thoughts about the RNAS. Fearing that he might end up on dull coastal patrols, he applied for a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps. That was approved, effective 11 April 1917, when he was given a probationary commission as a Second Lieutenant and posted to Reading for initial training.

Irwin received his primary flying training at the Ruffy-Baumann Flying School, a private company which had a contract with the Royal Flying Corps. Founded at Hendon in 1915 by a Swiss and an Italian, the school was then at Acton, West London, operating Caudrons with 50-horsepower Gnome rotaries. In later years, when people wondered at his surviving in "old crates", he would protest, pointing out that the SE.5a and Camel were excellent machines—reliable, well-designed, and sturdy, the peak of contemporary aero engineering. The Caudron, however, was a different story; its unusual appearance, low horsepower, and amazing flying characteristics relegated it, in his opinion, to the category of "crate".(1)

At one point his training was interrupted by an accident. While crossing a steep railway embankment which separated the airfield from the mess he caught his foot under a rail and fell over the embankment, suffering a fractured leg. Six weeks later he was back in training.

From there he went to Upavon for advanced flying training on Avro 504s. One of his instructors was Captain R. Balcombe-Brown

MC, a New Zealander with a flaming temper and a tongue to match. During the course of an interview in August 1964, Irwin recalled that he was always running afoul of Balcombe-Brown, and when he wrote off an Avro the New Zealander berated him long and loudly.(2)

One day Irwin and another student were ordered to fly when the wind was rising. The latter turned back almost immediately. Irwin, determined to prove his skills, persisted, was caught in a downdraft, and force-landed miles from his field. It was a day or two before the weather settled and he was able to fly back to Upavon. On his return Balcombe-Brown demanded an explanation. Irwin recounted what had happened. Unexpectedly the gruff instructor grinned and said, "Well, at least you had more sand than that (expletive deleted) who turned right round and came home immediately."

In spite of Balcombe-Brown's dire predictions, the young Canadian won his wings and was graded as a qualified military pilot on 22 November 1917. For several weeks he was held in England on air-firing and other courses, but at last he was told that he would be going to France to join an SE.5 squadron. By then he knew that his former nemesis was leading such a unit. He asked what squadron was commanded by Balcombe-Brown and was told that it was No.56. "Then", said Irwin firmly, "send me anywhere you want, except No. 56 Squadron."

A day or two later he was advised that he was being posted to No. 56 Squadron. When he asked why that particular unit, the reply was simply, "Major Balcombe-Brown asked for you."

Lieutenant Irwin reported to his unit at Baizieux on 29 January 1918. He was in the company of many illustrious pilots, most notably Captain J. T. B. McCudden, DSO, MC, MM, who was Irwin's first flight commander. He would shortly be succeeded in that role by C. M. Crowe, who came to No.56 early in March. A brilliant pilot, Crowe was so often in hot water with authorities that he reputedly had two tunics—one with a captain's "pips", one with a major's crown—to be worn according to his standing on any particular day.

Like most British squadrons, No.56 had a noticeable sprinkling of Canadians. One was Lieutenant K. W. Junor, a Torontonian who had been with the unit since 15 December 1917. On 16 February they were joined by another Toronto flier, Lieutenant H. J. Burden.

Irwin did not fly his first patrol until 1 March, the same day that