

People of...

ONTARIO

by Cheryl MacDonald



Ontario's
Bicentennial:
1784-1984

BILLY BISHOP

If one breed of man typified the romantic hero of World War I, it was the fighter pilot, the "ace" whose exploits captured the imagination of millions.

Manfred von Richthofen, Germany's Red Baron, and American Eddie Rickenbacker were two of the legendary figures of the era. For Canadians, however, one fighter stood head and shoulders above the rest — Billy Bishop of Owen Sound.

He was probably the unlikeliest hero the war produced. A charming ladies' man who spoke with a lisp, Billy was constantly getting into fistfights. As a student, his record was abysmal. In fact, the Royal Military College was about to throw him out for cheating when World War I intervened.

Almost immediately Billy joined the Mississauga Horse. It was a logical move, given his qualifications, for he was a fine rider. He was also a crack shot. His father had given him a .22 rifle for Christmas one year, then offered him a quarter for every squirrel he killed. The practice he got in the woods around Owen Sound would serve Billy well in the war.

But it would be some time before he saw any action at all. When his regiment left Canada, it was without Billy. He was hospitalized with pneumonia and a mysterious ailment, possibly an allergy. When he finally recovered, he transferred to the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles. Although he was only 21, he was put in charge of the machine gun section.

That was possibly the nicest thing that happened to Billy during the early stages of the war. Certainly he was disgusted with conditions at England's Shornecliffe military camp, "an incredible mass of mud, muck and mire with the special added unpleasantness that only horses in large quantity can contribute."

Never one to suffer in silence, Billy decided the solution to the unpleasantness was a transfer, this time to the Royal Flying Corps. Only he would have to wait six months to train as a fighter pilot, so he accepted a posting as an observer.

In due time, he got his pilot's training and went to France in 1917. As he returned from his first patrol, he crash landed so close to the brigade commander that he was sent back to flying school (actually, the crash landing wasn't unusual for Billy, who considered any landing he walked away from a good one.)

Still, if Billy lacked skills as a pilot, he more than made up for it with his marksmanship. Often he would take on enemy planes singlehanded, and he frequently downed them in a single burst of gunfire.

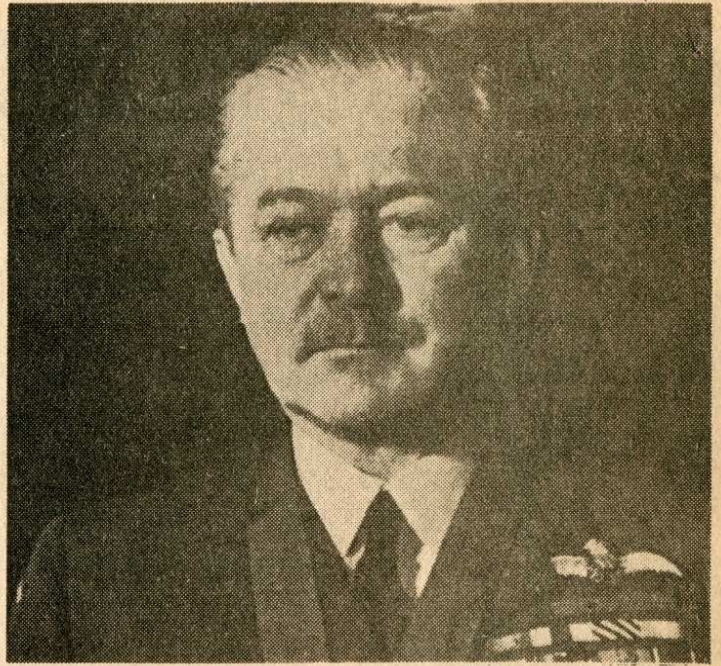


Photo courtesy Archives of Ontario

On June 2, 1917, he shot down three enemy planes, severely damaged others on the ground and virtually paralyzed a German aerodrome. For that action, he won the Victoria Cross, the first Canadian airman to do so. And that was only one of several expeditions.

His skills as a fighter soon became legendary, and was sent back to Britain as an instructor. While in Britain he was promoted to major, then sent to Canada to help with recruiting. He also found time to marry his fiancée, Margaret Burden, a granddaughter of Timothy Eaton.

Billy returned to France for a short time then was told to go back to England to form a Canadian flying corps. He was so angry when he heard the news that he went out and shot down three planes in 30 minutes.

By June 1918, when Billy Bishop flew his last mission, he had two Distinguished Service Orders, a Military Cross, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Legion of Honor and Croix de Guerre with palm. The British war office listed his total kills at 72, third highest in the empire, but admitted that the score might actually be as high as one hundred.

When the war ended, Billy set out on a lecture tour, but collapsed with appendicitis. By the time he was well enough to return to the circuit, war heroes were no longer drawing audiences.

When a brief career in commercial aviation ended disastrously, Billy joined McColl-Frontenac Oil Company, where he was vice-president for 23 years.

Still, it wasn't the end of Billy's military career. During World War II, he was honorary air marshal and head of the Air Advisory committee. One of his characteristic accomplishments was bringing U.S.-made planes into Canada without violating American neutrality. His plan was simple: the planes were left "unattended" at the border where Canadians lassoed them and pulled them into Canada.

World War II provided Billy Bishop's last taste of the limelight. Soon after the war ended he retired. In September 1956 he died following a lengthy illness.

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