

Billy Bishop: Hero or Fraud?

History 103

The Billy Bishop Controversy

- background
- exploits in the First World War
- effect on morale and propaganda
- Bishop's place in history
- role that memory and historical writing have to play in the legacy of a Canadian icon

Biographical Background

- born on 9 Feb. 1894 in Owen Sound
- preferred individual sports
- excellent rider and shooter
- excelled at dancing

Royal Military College

- not a very good student
- caught cheating on an exam

1914: Canada Goes to War

- British Empire at war
- men stampede to the Colours to fight for "King and Country"
- September 1914: Billy joins the Canadian military
- Misery Overseas
- Disease rampant...the sights and smell of death everywhere...cold, wet...fear and boredom

How to break the deadlock?

- Military aviation growing
- Bishop was amazed by aviation
- "The greatest game in the world"
- The dangers of flying: aircraft apt to crash due to engine or structural failure; one accidental death for every 90 hours flying training; Bishop sustains several serious injuries

Royal Flying Corps: Air Observer

- Avoids the Somme / meets Lady St. Helier

In France as a Fighter Pilot

- Commanding Officer (Major Jack Scott) keen to build up his squadron's reputation as an elite unit
- Billy Bishop: fighter; aggressive; flew with complete abandon and rare tactical sense; expert at the deflection shot; skill and drive + relentless courage (constantly sought combat)

25 March 1917: Bishop's first aerial victory

War is Hell: The dangers of aerial combat

Bishop's four main qualities:

- 1) Superb vision;
- 2) Situational awareness
- 3) Accurate shooting skills
- 4) Willingness to push his aircraft past its limits

Bishop's roving commission:

- flew as far as 40 miles behind enemy lines
- nobody to confirm his claims

Bishop becomes an ace (five kills) on 8 April 1917

- hatred for "the Hun"
- the only good enemy was a dead enemy: "There is only one way to bring down an enemy... hit the man with a concentrated fire in some vital spot."

"Bloody April" 1917: Germans inflicting high casualties

- Manfred von Richthofen, the "Red Baron" across the lines from Bishop
- Need for a British hero to rival the Red Baron
 - o Albert Ball killed in May 1917
 - o Who would fill the void? Captain Billy Bishop!

2 June 1917: Courage in the Early Morning?

- o find a German airfield near the front lines
- o catch the enemy unawares
- o destroy enemy aircraft before they could get in the air
- o Bishop asked Fry to join him, but he passed

What happened? Two versions.

- Version #1: he successfully carried out the attack
 - o three enemy aircraft shot down
- Version #2: Bishop did not carry out the attack
 - o never got near the German airfield
 - o followed the front lines south
 - o turned west; landed in a field behind French lines
 - o shot up his own aircraft
 - o discarded the gun; abandoned it
 - o flew home

Bishop awarded Victoria Cross for his attack

- o highest award for valour
- o rarest of all decorations awarded for acts of valour
- o usually required one or almost always two witnesses
- Why was Bishop awarded a VC?
 - o Squadron members knew Bishop well enough to believe them
 - o Appease Canadians for their contributions in the war and avoid the creation of a Canadian air force
 - o Morale and propaganda value – that Bishop had the courage to fly deep into enemy territory alone boosted morale (an *individual* pilot, achieved free *movement*, focus on *offensive*, operational *gains*)

- Trench Warfare vs. Aerial Warfare: Knights of the Air
 - Jonathan Vance: Billy Bishop was “the ultimate individualist during the Great War.”

August 1917: Bishop is taken out of operational flying

- Public need for a hero
- Impact of his raid on morale and propaganda

LCol Billy Bishop, Squadron Commander

- Rush to enlist in his squadron
- set a good example for courage, but poor leader:
 - couldn't shake his individuality
 - obsessed with further victories so neglected his subordinates
 - left formation to chase prey
 - Bishop's score climbs dramatically
 - as commander of 85 Squadron, he could confirm his own claims
 - 25 victories in 23 days

Total of 72 aerial victories - the most in the British Commonwealth

Taken out of Action - Creating a Canadian Air Force

The Inter-War Period: the CNE (1920); Bishop-Barker Company (1922)

- Bishop and the development of an “air-mindedness” in Canada
- Bishop's warnings: “CANADIANS' BEST BET TO HEAD FOR COUNTRY IF AIR BOMBS RAINED” (*Toronto Daily Star*, 29 September 1938)
 - vulnerability of Canadians to aerial attack
 - “Aviation has, I believe, created the most fundamental change ever made in war...”

WWII: Air Marshal Billy Bishop and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan

- utilize his many connections and high prestige to advance the BCATP

Billy Bishop in the post-war era: battle with the bottle; denied permission to serve in Korea; died in Florida, 1956

Billy Bishop in Canadian Memory and History

- “Billy Bishop Goes to War,” by John Gray (1969)
- “The Kid Who Couldn't Miss” (NFB film written by Paul Cowan)
 - suggests that much of Billy Bishop's combat record was faked
 - Reaction: official Senate Inquiry; re-labelled as “docu-drama”
- The Debate continues...

Heroes: memory and/vs. history

- Do Canadians need heroes?
- Are our heroes untouchable?
- How do we pick our heroes?
- Charlotte Grey: fierce individualism and driving determination are not Canadian qualities; “Canada is not a militaristic nation.”
 - do you agree?