

William Avery (Billy) Bishop Jr, Canadian Flying Ace (1894-1956)



Billy Bishop is known for more than just being the name of one of Toronto's airports. He was Canada and the British Empire's top flying ace in World War I, having been credited with shooting down 72 enemy aircraft in a profession where pilots were known to have extremely short and deadly careers. During World War II Bishop played a critical role in recruiting new pilots to the Royal Canadian Air Force and in promoting the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, a program which taught Commonwealth aircrews throughout the war, and was a major contributor to the air superiority the Allied Forces experienced over Nazi Germany throughout the war.

Billy Bishop was born in Owen Sound in 1894 to William Bishop Sr, a lawyer, and Margaret Greene, and had two older brothers and a younger sister. His older brother Kilbourn passed away in 1892, two years before Billy was born. As a youth Billy Bishop was an avid outdoorsman, and enjoyed riding horses, shooting, and swimming. He had a clear interest in flying even as a young boy, which became evident when he "built" a flying machine out of an orange crate with bedsheets for wings. He attempted to fly his invention from the roof of the house, and notably ruined his mother's rose bushes while escaping serious injury.

Bishop attended school in his hometown of Owen Sound before enrolling at Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario, in 1911 at 17 years of age after completing high school. In his senior year, 1914, the First World War broke out and Billy Bishop enlisted in the army along with many of his classmates. Due to his experience horseback riding and his excellent shooting skills, he was given an officer's rank of Lieutenant and assigned to the cavalry as a member of the Mississauga Horse Regiment.

In August 1914, the Mississauga Horse Regiment was preparing to set sail for England on October 1st of the same year. Bishop was unable to make the journey, however, as he caught pneumonia and was too sick to travel. Bishop was released from the hospital and was reassigned to the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles in London, Ontario, and set sail to England with his division on June 8, 1915.

One month later, at the Shorncliffe military camp in England, Bishop saw a plane land in a nearby field only to take off a short time later, and he stated that it was this sight that compelled him to take to the skies rather than fighting on the ground. Specifically, Bishop attributed his hatred of trudging through the mud and witnessing the effortlessness at which airplanes could leave the mucky battle below to the 'summer sunshine' as his reason for wanting to become a pilot.

Following this life-changing event, Bishop applied for a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps and became an observer on a plane by September 1915. He applied to be an observer because training to be a pilot would take six months and he wanted to bypass this training. By January 1916 he was stationed with a Squadron on the front lines that flew missions deep into Axis territory.

Bishop received his wings in November 1916 and in March 1917 he was sent to the front lines in France. On March 25 he entered his first real air fight, shooting down his first German airplane and barely making it back to base alive. By the end of May Bishop had already racked up 22 casualties.

Bishop's most famous air exploit took place in the early morning of June 1917. According to him, he flew across enemy lines and shot down three German planes and made it back to his squadron by stealthily flying under his enemies. In August 1917, Bishop was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, the Military Cross, and the

Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace. One month later his Distinguished Service Order was upgraded, making him one of the most highly decorated participants of World War I.

Billy Bishop took leave in September 1917 to become a successful author, writing a book about his air exploits called *Winged Warfare*. One month later he married his sweetheart, Margaret Burden. In early 1918 he returned to England to command a new squadron nicknamed the Flying Foxes. With this squadron, Bishop accumulated the remainder of his 72 downed enemy aircraft. When he returned to England in August 1918, Lieutenant Colonel Bishop was made the commander of the Canadian Wing of the Royal Air Force.

Following the War, Billy Bishop returned to Canada and gave a lecture tour across North America, speaking mainly about his wartime adventures and exploits. He also was a successful businessman until the Great Depression wiped out much of his wealth in 1929.

In 1934, Bishop took pilot training to be recertified his flying license, and was made an Honourary Air Vice Marshal by Prime Minister King, where he advocated for an expansion of the RCAF. When Canada declared war against Nazi Germany in September 1939, the Canadian government agreed to a proposal whereby Canada became the training centre for the *British Commonwealth Air Training Plan*, and Billy Bishop became head of recruiting for the RCAF in January 1940.

This role took a toll on Bishop, and in 1942 he was hospitalized with pancreas issues that required surgery. He returned to recruiting in March 1943 and completed a second popular book called *Winged Peace* in 1944. Following the war Bishop moved to Montreal and entered into the oil business in a semi-retired capacity. He enjoyed spending hours reading in his private library and became an avid ice, soap, and wood carver.

When the Korean War began in 1950, Bishop volunteered to serve as a pilot at 56 years old, but was politely declined. In 1952 he began spending his winters in Florida, and he died peacefully in his sleep at his Florida home in 1956. 25,000 people attended his funeral in Toronto.

Despite his heroic status in Canadian history, Billy Bishop's legacy is not without controversy. Throughout the years many have challenged his claims of heroic feats, and even Bishop himself admitted that he embellished some of his flying exploits for his books. In particular, due to gaps in British and German records, and the destruction of some in WWII, not all of Bishop's 72 kills could be confirmed, and it is unlikely that they ever will be.