

WILLIAM AVERY BISHOP, A CANADIAN HERO

During the First World War, Captain William Avery Bishop was a Canadian hero; Air Marshal W.A. Bishop was an inspiration to young Canadian airmen in the Second World War; Billy Bishop remains a legend.

He was born at Owen Sound, Ontario, in 1894, the son of Will Bishop, Registrar of Grey County, and is remembered from his earliest years as a loner and a rebel against authority. Lacking in academic ability, he preferred to develop his physical talents and became proficient in shooting and as a horseman. In the fall of 1911, following the example of his elder brother, Worth, he entered the Royal Military College, just scraping through the entrance examination. He failed his first year after being rusticated for an offence which was evidently related to using "improper means of obtaining information relative to an examination". He did not fail again, and at the start of his final year was appointed cadet lance-corporal and promoted to corporal a week later. In spite of his poor academic standing, he was evidently deemed worthy of trust. Bishop withdrew from RMC on 30 September 1914 "at his parents' request", his commission in the 9th Mississauga Horse being of the same date. Due to an illness he was transferred to the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles, and went overseas with them on 9 June 1915. However, life in Shorncliffe Camp did not appeal to him, and in August he applied for transfer to the Royal Flying Corps and was accepted.

On 1 September 1915 Bishop reported to 21 Squadron for instruction as an observer. The squadron moved to Boisdingham, France, on 1 January 1916 and had received all its new RE7 aircraft by the time Bishop arrived on the 18th. He was just too late to qualify for the 1914-15 Star, but he wore it anyway with his other medals later. He took part in all operational activities and sustained a knee injury in a crash landing. Going on leave on 2 May, he was admitted to hospital and later sent home to Canada for convalescence. On his return he applied for pilot training, was accepted, and on 1 October reported to Brasenose College, Oxford, for initial training.

Pilot training began in November, when he moved to the Central Flying School at Uphaven. Later he was posted to 11 Squadron, Hendon, for night flying training, which he appears to have enjoyed, and was awarded his wings. Attachment to 37 (Home Defence) Squadron, Sutton's Farm, followed, but he did not have the luck to encounter a Zeppelin.



Captain Bishop standing in front of his Nieuport 17C B 1566, 60 Squadron, Filescamps Farm, 4 August 1917. At this time Bishop, commanding C Flight, was credited with 38 victories, and had already been awarded the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order. The Victoria Cross followed a week later on 11 August. He last flew B1566 on 24 July 1917, after which he flew SE5 aircraft, mainly A8936, until he left the squadron in [mid-August](#). [NA AH504](#)

Transferred to France, Bishop reported to 60 Squadron, Filescamps Farm, on 9 March 1917. The Nieuport 17C suited him well and he was quickly in the thick of fighting, claiming his first victory on 25 March. By 7 May, when he went on leave, he had been credited with 19 victories, awarded the Military Cross and Distinguished Service Order, was a captain and was commanding C Flight. On his return on 22 May, his personal aircraft, B 1566(C5), had been repainted with a blue engine cowling and spinner. Bishop continued to score, and on 2 June reported the solo aerodrome attack for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross. There were no witnesses to this action, and the aerodrome which he attacked has never been identified. German records do not substantiate his claim of three Albatros aircraft destroyed, and his VC is the only one ever awarded on the sole testimony of the recipient. In August, when he left 60 Squadron, Bishop was credited with 47 victories. A Bar to his DSO and a Mention in Dispatches were awarded later in the year.

Bishop was evidently a competent if not brilliant pilot. He was the victim of a number of engine failures, but was able to make reasonable forced landings. There is no record of any of his aircraft

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Air Marshal William Avery Bishop, VC, DSO, MC, DFC, Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre, in the library of his home in Ottawa, 24 May 1940. On the wall can be seen a propeller with the blue spinner from his Nieuport, B 1566. Below that are two pictures by the American pilot/artist Clayton Knight, rudder fabric and a wing-tip, believed to come from Manfred von Richthofen's Fokker DR.I, 425/17. Below this is a Nieuport windscreen, and on top of the bookcase, a Maxim MG08 (Spandau) machine gun.

John Phillips, **Life Magazine**.

being written off as a result of pilot error. All his operational aircraft survived his use; for example B 1566 was still operational in Palestine in 1918, and the SE5as (C1904 and C6490), which he flew in 85 Squadron, can be seen in photographs taken after his departure.

Following a long leave, during which he returned to Canada, married Margaret Burden and participated in a number of recruiting drives, he was appointed to command 85 Squadron. Between 27 May 1918 and 19 June he was credited with a further 25 victories, for which he was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Bishop left the service in 1919 and later that year formed Bishop-Barker Aeroplanes with his fellow Canadian airman and VC winner, William George Barker. This venture was not a success, but subsequent activities proved more successful and Bishop and his family lived comfortably through the nineteen twenties and thirties.

In 1940 Honorary Air Marshal Bishop was appointed Director of Recruiting for the RCAF, travelling, inspecting, speaking and presenting innumerable wings to graduating aircrew. His reputation and his presence, wearing his "fighting row" of ribbons, were an inspiration to thousands of young men, and his contribution to the air forces of the Commonwealth was recognized, on his retirement in 1944, with his appointment as a Companion of the Order of the Bath.

Although only 50 years old when he retired, Bishop was a sick man and he spent the remainder of his life in semi-retirement. He died in Florida in 1956.

There is no definitive biography of this remarkable man, although there has been much emotional argument concerning his fighting record. This is to be expected, since valiant deeds have always been subject both to embellishment and to question. Let his official record speak for itself.



Air Marshal Bishop visits 402 Squadron, RCAF, at Kenley on 16 September 1942. The aircraft is a Vickers-Armstrongs Supermarine Spitfire Mk.IX, and the officer standing at the wing-root is Squadron Leader D.G. Malloy, the squadron commander. At this time 402 was employed on fighter sweeps over Europe as part of the Kenley Wing.

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