

## CANADA'S VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS

### MAJ. WILLIAM GEORGE BARKER, VC, MC\*\*, DSO\*

*Researched and Written by: Capt. (N) M. Braham (Ret'd)*

**Victoria Cross Background:** The Victoria Cross (VC), instituted 1856 by Queen Victoria, is the Commonwealth's highest military decoration for valour. It is awarded in recognition of the most exceptional bravery displayed in the presence of the enemy, although in rare instances the decoration has been given to mark other courageous acts. Since its inception during the Crimean War, the VC has been awarded 1,358 times. Depending on which of a variety of sources is cited and on the selection criteria applied, somewhere between 94 and 98 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Canadians or to others serving with the Canadian Forces. A distinctly Canadian version of the medal was introduced in 1993. To date no one has been awarded the Canadian medal.



**Maj. William George Barker:** Born on 3 November 1894 on a family farm in Dauphin, Manitoba, "Will" Barker grew up on the frontier of the Great Plains, riding horses, shooting, and working as youngster on his father's farm and sawmill. He was an exceptional shot, using a lever-action Winchester that he had modified with his own peep sight. He was particularly adept at shooting on the move, even while on horseback. One biographer has suggested that he could have been a trick shooter in a circus. He was physically poised, emotionally

intense, with wide-ranging interests, and had an innate flair for the dramatic act. He was a very good student in school, but had frequent absences due to farm and sawmill life; he was the hunter providing food for the sawmill workers while still a young teenager, and missed classes because of this obligation.

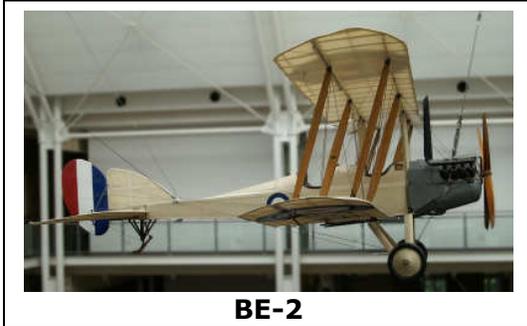


Barker fell in love with aviation after watching pioneer aviators flying Curtiss and Wright Flyer aircraft at farm exhibitions between 1910 and 1914. He was a Boy Scout at Russell, Manitoba, and a member of the 32nd Light Horse, a Non-Permanent Active Militia unit based at Roblin, Manitoba. He was in Grade 11 at Dauphin Collegiate Institute in the fall of 1914, just before his enlistment.

In December 1914, soon after the outbreak of the First World War, Barker enlisted as No 106074 Trooper William G. Barker in the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles. The regiment went to England in June 1915 and then to France on September 22 of that year. Barker was a Colt machine gunner with the Machine Gun Section until late February/early March 1916, when he transferred as a probationary observer to

**CANADA'S VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS**  
**MAJ. WILLIAM GEORGE BARKER, VC, MC\*\*, DSO\***

9 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, flying in the BE-2.



**BE-2**

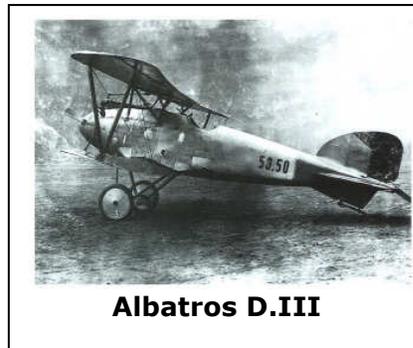
He was commissioned as a second-lieutenant in April and was initially assigned to 4 Squadron but on 7 July was transferred to 15 Squadron, still flying the BE-2. On 21 July Barker claimed a Roland scout 'driven down' with his Observer's gun, and in August claimed a second Roland. He was Mentioned in Despatches around this time. He officially qualified as an observer on 27 August and on 15 September he worked for the first time with Canadian troops, including his old regiment. On 15 November Barker and his pilot, flying very low over the Ancre River, spotted a large concentration of German troops massing for a counter-attack on Beaumont Hamel. The crew sent an emergency call which brought to bear all available artillery fire onto the specified target. The force of some 4,000 German infantry was effectively broken up. He was awarded the Military Cross for this action in the concluding stages of the Battle of the Somme.

In January 1917, after spending Christmas on leave in London, he commenced pilot training, soloing after 55 minutes of dual instruction.

On 24 February 1917 he returned to serve a second tour on Corps Co-operation machines as a pilot flying BE-2s and RE-8s with No.15 Squadron. On 25 March Barker

claimed another scout 'driven down'. On 25 April 1917 during the Arras Offensive, Barker, flying an RE 8 with observer Lt. Goodfellow, spotted over 1,000 German troops sheltering in support trenches. The duo directed artillery fire into the positions, thereby avoiding a counter attack.

After being awarded a bar to his MC in July, Barker was wounded in the head by anti-aircraft fire in August 1917. After a short spell in the UK as an instructor, Barker's continual requests for front line service resulted in him being given command of C Flight in the newly formed 28 Squadron flying the Sopwith Camel.



**Albatros D.III**

Although Barker was reportedly not a highly skilled pilot - suffering several flying accidents

during his career- he compensated for this deficiency with aggressiveness and highly accurate marksmanship.

The unit moved to France on 8 October 1917, and he downed an Albatros DV on his first patrol, though Barker did not claim it as the patrol was unofficial. He claimed an Albatros of *Jasta*<sup>1</sup> 2 on 20 October, and two more, of *Jasta 18*, on 27 October.

<sup>1</sup> Jasta is a short version for Jagdstaffeln or fighter squadron. Three of four Jastas made up a Jagdgruppe or Fighter Group.

## CANADA'S VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS MAJ. WILLIAM GEORGE BARKER, VC, MC\*\*, DSO\*

On 7 November, No. 28 Squadron was transferred to Italy and most of the unit, with Barker temporarily in command, travelled by train to Milan. On 29 November he downed an Austrian Albatros D.III. A *Jasta 39* pilot was shot down and killed and a balloon of *BK 10* destroyed on 3 December.

One of his most successful and also most controversial raids, fictionalized by Ernest Hemingway in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, was on 25 December 1917. Catching the Germans off guard, he and Lt. Harold Hudson, his wingman, shot up the airfield of *Fliegerabteilung (A) 204*, setting fire to one hangar and damaging four German aircraft before dropping a placard wishing their opponents a "Happy Christmas."

Lt Lang of *Jasta 1* was killed by Barker on 1 January 1918, and two balloons, two Albatros fighters and a pair of two-seaters fell to Barker during February. Awarded the DSO, in March he claimed three more Albatros and an observation balloon.

Owing to his tendency to ignore orders by flying many unofficial patrols, Barker was passed over when the post of Commanding Officer of No. 28 Squadron became vacant. Dissatisfied, he applied for a posting and joined No. 66 Squadron in April 1918, where he claimed a further 16 kills by mid-July.

On 17 April, he shot down an Albatros D.III over Vittorio. He then became Squadron commander of 139 Squadron, flying the Bristol Fighter. Barker however, took his Sopwith Camel with him and continued to fly fighter operations. He carried out an unusual sortie on the night of 9 August when he flew a Savoia Polilia SP-4 bomber to land a spy behind enemy lines.



By this time, Barker's personal Sopwith Camel (serial no. B6313) had become the most successful fighter aircraft in the history of the RAF, having been used to shoot down 46 aircraft and balloons from September 1917 to September 1918, for a total of 404 operational flying hours. It was dismantled in October 1918, Barker keeping the clock as a memento - although he was asked to return it the following day. During this time Barker trialed a series of modifications to B6313, in order to improve its combat performance. The Clerget rotary engine's cooling efficiency was poorer in the hotter Italian climate, so several supplementary cooling slots were cut into the cowling. The poor upward visibility of the Camel resulted in Barker cutting away progressively larger portions of the centre-section fabric. He also had a rifle-type, notch and bead gun-sight arrangement replace the standard gun sight fitting.

Having flown more than 900 combat hours in two and one half years, Barker was transferred back to the UK in September 1918 to command the fighter training school at Hounslow. Barker ended his Italian service with 33 airplanes claimed destroyed and 9 observation balloons downed individually or with other pilots.

**CANADA'S VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS**  
**MAJ. WILLIAM GEORGE BARKER, VC, MC\*\*, DSO\***

In London at RAF HQ, he persuaded his superiors he needed to get up to date on the latest combat techniques in France and he was granted a 10-day roving commission in France, wherein he selected the Sopwith Snipe as his personal machine and attached himself to No. 201 Squadron RAF, whose Squadron commander, Major Cyril Leman, was a pal from his days as a Corps Co-operation airman.



**Barker's Sopwith 7F.1 Snipe**

**VC Action:** He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions on day 10, Sunday, 27 October 1918.

While returning his Snipe to an aircraft depot, he crossed enemy lines at 21,000 feet above the Forêt de Mormal. He attacked an enemy Rumpler two-seater which broke up, its crew escaping by parachute.<sup>2</sup> By his own admission, he was careless and was bounced by a

<sup>2</sup> German aircrew were issued with parachutes, but Allied fixed wing aircrew were not, on the grounds that it was "bad for morale" and liable to encourage them to bail out unnecessarily!! Allied balloon observer crews were, however, issued parachutes.

formation of Fokker D.VIIIs of *Jagdgruppe 12*, consisting of Jasta 24 and Jasta 44. In a descending battle against 15 or more enemy machines, Barker was wounded three times in the legs, then his left elbow was blown away, yet he managed to control his Snipe and shoot down or drive down three more enemy aircraft. The dogfight took place immediately above the lines of the Canadian Corps. Severely wounded and bleeding profusely, Barker force landed inside Allied lines, his life being saved by the men of an RAF Kite Balloon Section, who transported him to a field dressing station.

At a hospital in Rouen, France, Barker clung to life until mid-January 1919, and then was transported back to England. He was not fit enough to walk the necessary few paces for the VC investiture at Buckingham Palace until 1 March 1919.

He is officially credited with one captured, two (and seven shared) balloons destroyed, 33 (and two shared) aircraft destroyed, and five aircraft "out of control;" the highest "destroyed" ratio for any RAF, RFC or RNAS pilot during the conflict.

**Citation:** *"On the morning of the 27 October 1918, this officer observed an enemy two-seater over the Forêt de Mormal. He attacked this machine and after a short burst it broke up in the air. At the same time a Fokker biplane attacked him, and he was wounded in the right thigh, but managed, despite this, to shoot down the enemy aeroplane in flames.*

*He then found himself in the middle of a large formation of Fokkers who attacked him from all directions, and was again severely wounded in the left thigh, but succeeded in driving down two of the enemy in a spin.*

## CANADA'S VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS

### MAJ. WILLIAM GEORGE BARKER, VC, MC\*\*, DSO\*

*He lost consciousness after that, and his machine fell out of control. On recovery, he found himself being again attacked heavily by a large formation, and singling out one machine he deliberately charged and drove it down in flames.*

*During this fight his left elbow was shattered and he again fainted, and on regaining consciousness he found himself still being attacked, but notwithstanding that he was now severely wounded in both legs and his left arm shattered, he dived on the nearest machine and shot it down in flames.*

*Being greatly exhausted, he dived out of the fight to regain our lines, but was met by another formation, which attacked and endeavored to cut him off, but after a hard fight he succeeded in breaking up this formation and reached our lines, where he crashed on landing.*

*This combat, in which Major Barker destroyed four enemy machines (three of them in flames), brought his total successes to fifty enemy machines destroyed, and is a notable example of the exceptional bravery and disregard of danger which this very gallant officer has always displayed throughout his distinguished career."*

*The London Gazette, November 30, 1918*

**Postwar:** Barker returned to Canada in May 1919 as the most decorated Canadian of the war, with the Victoria Cross, the Distinguished Service Order and Bar, the Military Cross and two Bars, the French Croix de Guerre and two Italian Silver Medals for Valour. He was also mentioned in dispatches three times.

Barker formed a business partnership, Bishop-Barker Aeroplanes Limited, with fellow Victoria Cross recipient and Canadian ace Billy Bishop which lasted for about three years. In 1922 he rejoined the fledgling Canadian Air Force in the rank of Wing Commander. Barker was

appointed acting Director of the RCAF in early 1924 and he graduated from RAF Staff College, Andover, in 1926. One of his achievements in the RCAF was the introduction of parachutes. After leaving the RCAF he became the first president of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey club, and involved in tobacco growing farms in southwestern Ontario.

He continued to suffer from the physical effects of his 1918 wounds, his legs were permanently damaged and he suffered severely limited movement in his left arm. He also struggled with alcoholism in the last few years of his life. He died on 12 March 1930 when he lost control of his Fairchild KR-21 biplane trainer during a demonstration flight for the RCAF, at Air Station Rockcliffe, near Ottawa, Ontario. Barker, aged 35, was at the time the President and General Manager of Fairchild Aircraft in Montreal.

**Gravesite:** William Barker is interred in his wife's family crypt in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto.

**Medal Location:** Major Barker's Victoria Cross is on display in the Canadian War Museum.



**Major Barker's Medal Set**

**Postscript:** Barker is one of three Canadian airmen<sup>3</sup> to win the VC in World War I.

<sup>3</sup> The others are Capt. W. Bishop and Lt. A. McLeod

**CANADA'S VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS**  
**MAJ. WILLIAM GEORGE BARKER, VC, MC\*\*, DSO\***

**References:**

1. Wikipedia – William George Barker  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_George\\_Barker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_George_Barker)
2. Veterans Affairs Canada –  
<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/firstwar/vcwinners/william-barker>
3. Billy Bishop Net -  
<http://www.billybishop.net/barker.html>
4. 410 RCAF -  
<http://www.410wing.cyberus.ca/barkerbio.html>
5. Manitoba Historical Society -  
[http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/nationalhistoric/barker\\_wg.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/nationalhistoric/barker_wg.shtml)
6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parachute>
7. Victoriacross.org,  
<http://www.victoriacross.org.uk/wcangps.htm>
8. [http://www.battlefleet.com/pw/his/Luftwaffe\\_History\\_WW1\\_WW2\\_Cold\\_%20war.htm](http://www.battlefleet.com/pw/his/Luftwaffe_History_WW1_WW2_Cold_%20war.htm)
9. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sopwith\\_Snipe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sopwith_Snipe)
10. Swettenham, John, *Canada and the First World War*, Canadian War Museum
11. Braham, Michael, *Chronicles of Courage*, FCWM Research Paper, 2010

**Captain (N) (Ret'd) M. Braham, CD**



Mike Braham is a graduate of the Royal Military College (1965) and a former naval officer and senior official with DND. He has an abiding interest in military history.