

September 21, 2011

Canada's most-decorated war hero finally gets his due

By MICHAEL POSNER
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

Pilot William Barker is being honoured after largely being forgotten since the war

Billy Bishop - please, step aside.

Canada's most celebrated fighter pilot is about to share the podium with another, much less heralded First World War hero - Lieutenant-Colonel William G. Barker, VC.

According to the wording on a plaque being unveiled Thursday in Toronto's Mount Pleasant Cemetery, it is Mr. Barker, not Mr. Bishop, who stands as "most decorated war hero in the history of Canada, the British Empire, and the Commonwealth of Nations."

"This man was the ace of all the aces," says Ipsos pollster John Wright. "He shot down 50 planes, was decorated 12 times for bravery, won the Victoria Cross while single-handedly fighting off 15 enemy aircraft in the final aerial battle of the war, and was wounded three times.

"Later, he started the first commercial airline service in Canada, delivered the first piece of airmail in human history, was the first director of the Royal Canadian Air Force, the first president of the Toronto Maple Leafs, and the first to make a transcontinental flight, from Toronto's Leaside to New York City."

Yet, astonishingly, other than an elementary school named for him in his native Dauphin, Man., and a biography by historian Wayne Ralph, William Barker's heroics have been largely forgotten and unrecognized.

Indeed, since his death in a flying accident in 1930 at the age of 35 - at the time, it occasioned the largest funeral in Toronto's history - even his gravesite has been unmarked. Mr. Barker's remains lie in his wife's family mausoleum in Mount Pleasant, under the name of Smith.

It was Mr. Wright, a keen student of military history, who tracked down Mr. Barker's descendants and successfully lobbied Ontario Lieutenant-Governor David Onley to revivify Mr. Barker's name.

The public commemoration in Mount Pleasant, complete with a new monument, is the result of those efforts. It will be attended by Lt.-Gov Onley, Mr. Wright, Mr. Barker's three grandsons,

Alec, Ian and David Mackenzie, the children of Mr. Barker's daughter, Jean Antoinette; and by two granddaughters, Elizabeth Ede and Janice Gruneberg. They are the daughters of William Barker Ede, who is thought to have been the product of a brief relationship Mr. Barker enjoyed during a furlough in England in 1917.

Part of the event will include a ceremonial fly-past of vintage First World War airplanes, including a SE5a single-seat fighter flown by Jerry Fotheringham, and a Sopwith Strutter two-seat fighter/bomber flown by Kees Van Berkel. The latter is similar to the Sopwith Camel.

The son of a poor blacksmith in rural Manitoba, Mr. Barker joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force in November, 1914, and endured what he called the "rodent life" in the trenches near Ypres and Flanders. But he made a successful transfer to the Royal Flying Corps in February, 1916, and, rare for the war, was promoted to flight commander status even before he had flown as a wingman.

According to Mr. Ralph, the biographer, pilots under his command "adored him. He was indefatigable." Modest and unassuming on the ground, he became a charismatic leader in the air. Under his command, not a single pilot or plane was lost in battle. Fellow ace Billy Bishop VC called him "the deadliest air fighter who ever lived."

At times, Mr. Barker was reckless. When the then-Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) visited the Italian front in 1918, Mr. Barker disobeyed orders and flew him behind enemy lines. On Christmas Day, 1917, again in violation of orders, he is said to have strafed an enemy airfield, dropping a Merry Christmas card on the destruction below.

That story, perhaps apocrypha, was later appropriated by Ernest Hemingway in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, where a character named Barker returns from a Yuletide bombing run on an enemy train. Hemingway apparently didn't approve. In the short story, Barker is called "a bloody murderous bastard."

And when, before the war ended, he was summoned back to London to become a flight instructor, Mr. Barker protested the reassignment vehemently - by buzzing Piccadilly Circus. They soon sent him back to the front.

It was while returning to England from France in November, 1918, that again, alone and on impulse, he decided to take a final run at the Germans.

Outgunned by more than a dozen enemy aircraft in the skies over Valenciennes, he crash-landed his Sopwith Snipe. Medics found him with a shattered left arm, and bleeding profusely from bullets in both legs. He barely survived. He had downed six German Fokkers and was later awarded the Victoria Cross, the military's highest decoration for valour.

But Mr. Barker paid heavily for his bravado. "He knew he shouldn't have taken them on," says Mr. Ralph. "He knew he had screwed up. He never discussed the dogfight and he later wrote to a friend that he'd happily give up all his medals just to have his health."

He returned to Canada a war hero. Billy Bishop introduced him to his cousin, Jean Kilbourn Smith, the attractive daughter of industrialist Horace Smith. They married in 1921 - over the protests of her parents, who, despite his war record, regarded him, says Mr. Ralph, "as a penniless opportunist."

The postwar transition to civilian life proved difficult. In chronic arthritic pain from his injuries, his left arm useless, Mr. Barker began to drink heavily. His commercial aviation venture with Mr. Bishop collapsed. After a stint with the military in England, he became a vice-president of Fairchild Aircraft, which aimed to sell the new KR-21 to the Canadian government.

Although the biplane had already been demonstrated by other pilots, Mr. Barker was eager to showcase its virtues personally. He'd never flown it before, but when he said he wanted to take it up, no one was likely to challenge him.

At about 250 feet, it went into a stall from which it never recovered. Mr. Barker lost control and hit the frozen surface of the Ottawa River - dead on impact.

Later, there was speculation that he might have committed suicide - depressed by his drinking, the strains in his marriage, and his business failures. But most experts think his death was simply an accident.

"Our grandmother told us stories about him," recalls Mr. Barker's grandson, Ian Mackenzie, now 50. "A framed military portrait of him hung in her living room, with a row of medals. The newspaper accounts said he encountered as many as 60 planes in that final dogfight. Those stories are embellished. It doesn't matter. Even if it was only 15 or five, the odds against him were overwhelming."

But Mr. Mackenzie says his grandmother resented all the glory that was draped on Billy Bishop, while her own husband's reputation faded. She also challenged the veracity of Mr. Bishop's alleged war-time exploits. "My grandmother resented it. She'd grown up with Bishop in Owen Sound and took relish in reminding us that, back there, he was known as 'Billy Liar.' "

Mr. Wright says he eventually hopes to persuade Canada's War Museum to erect a statue in Mr. Barker's honour, perhaps in time for the centenary of the First World War.

"But we have done what needed to be done," says Ian Mackenzie, who, with his brothers, incurred the cost of the new monument in Toronto. "It's what they should have done when he died in 1930."