

FEW ARE CHOSEN

Canada's Airmen V.C.s

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THE place: France. The time: 1917.

Just after dawn on the morning of June 2nd, a lone Nieuport scout cruised over a German aerodrome ten miles behind the front lines. The young Canadian pilot at the controls was searching for the enemy on their own doorstep. Finding no signs of activity, he flew to another aerodrome about three miles away, where seven enemy machines, some with their engines running, were on the ground. From a height of 50 feet, he raked the parked aircraft with machine-gun fire. The German pilots raced for their machines. The first enemy 'plane was just getting airborne when a short burst from the Nieuport sent it crashing to the ground. The second German to take off climbed only slightly higher before 30 rounds fired from close range sent it into a tree. Two more of the enemy rose to attack. The Canadian quickly shot down the first of these, and then emptied his remaining drum of ammunition into the other. His 'plane out of ammunition and riddled by machine gun fire from the ground, the Allied flyer headed for home, dodging enemy patrol aircraft on the way.

Thus "Billy" Bishop, later to serve his country in another World War as Air Marshal Bishop, V.C., D.S.O., and Bar, M.C., D.F.C., Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, and Croix de Guerre with Palm, became the first Canadian airman to win the coveted Victoria Cross His amazing total of 72 enemy aircraft destroyed was the largest of any British pilot.

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This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Victoria Cross, and Her Majesty the Queen has invited Commonwealth and Empire winners to London in June to attend centenary ceremonies to commemorate the occasion. There have been two previous gatherings, also in London, of Victoria Cross winners. In 1929 the Prince of Wales, now the Duke of Windsor, held a special dinner which was attended by 22 Canadian V.C.s; at the Coronation parade in 1953, a stand for winners of the award was erected outside Buckingham palace.

In 1855 Queen Victoria, her attention focussed on the many deeds of valour that had occurred in the Crimean War, recognized the need for an award that could be given for outstanding gallantry in action against the enemy; an award that could be given to all ranks, male or female, whatever their colour, race or creed, on the merits of bravery alone. On 29 January 1856, the Royal Warrant was signed which brought the Cross into existence, making its award retroactive to include 62 acts of bravery performed during the Crimean War.

Since that time it has been awarded to 1,380 persons, all men. Three officers (two Englishmen and one New Zealander) have had the unique distinction of winning a Bar to the V.C. It has been awarded to 94 Canadians, the first of whom was Lieutenant A. R. Dunn during the Battle of Balaclava in 1854, while he was serving with the British Army's 11th Hussars. Of the Canadian winners, seven were airmen, but of these seven only Air Marshal Bishop can attend the ceremonies in London this year. He is the only survivor.

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In the summer of 1913 Alan McLeod was 14 years old and already looking forward to a military career. Coming into Winnipeg from his birthplace in Stonewall, Manitoba, he persuaded the C.O. of the 34th Fort Garry Horse Regiment to accept him as a recruit; and he went for summer training. On the outbreak of war in the following year, however, his attempts to enlist met with failure. He was too young: the minimum age for enlistment was eighteen. On his eighteenth birthday, 20 April 1917, McLeod left to join the Royal Flying Corps.

Arriving in France in November 1917, McLeod quickly proved himself to be a cool and skilful pilot. Flying in reconnaissance aircraft, which carried an observer in the rear, he would often get out of a tight situation by sheer nerve and brilliant flying, and then turn around to his observer and laugh out loud with exuberance.

On the 27 March 1918, he and Lieutenant Hammond, his observer, were attacked while on a bombing sortie by a formation of Fokker tri-plane fighters. By superb manoeuvring, he enabled Hammond to fire at the enemy 'planes in turn until three were shot down, although the observer was wounded six times and McLeod himself five times. Finally a German incendiary bullet penetrated the gas-tank, setting the aircraft on fire. Fighting the flames and smoke, McLeod stepped out of his cockpit on to the bottom plane and leaned over to grasp the control stick. In that position he side-slipped from 5,000 feet to the ground, the wind pressure of the slip blowing the flames away from Hammond who continued firing until McLeod made a crash-landing in "No-Man's Land". Then, in spite of his wounds, he dragged his observer from the burning wreckage, being further wounded by a falling bomb in the process, until they were in comparative safety. He then collapsed from exhaustion and loss of blood.

This gallant action earned Lt. McLeod the Victoria Cross and Lt. Hammond a Bar to his Military Cross. But Alan McLeod never recovered from his wounds. After a long siege in hospital, he returned to Canada in September 1918. Here, his lungs weakened by smoke and flames, he died of influenza two months later.

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The First World War was almost over on 27 October 1918, when Major W. G. Barker, having shot down 50 enemy aircraft and having been awarded the D.S.O., M.C. and two Bars, set out in his Sopwith *Snipe* with orders to return to England. This cross-country flight culminated in one of the most sensational fights of the war, for which Barker was awarded the Victoria Cross. Only rarely does an official citation describe in detail the action involved:

"On the morning of the 27th October, 1918, this officer observed an enemy two-seater over the Foret 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, which attacked him from all directions, and he was again severely wounded in the left thigh, but succeeded in driving down two of the enemy in a spin.

"He lost consciousness after this 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 gravely exhausted, he dived out of the fight to regain our lines, but was met by another formation which attacked and endeavoured 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."

Major Barker recovered from his wounds and returned to civilian life in Canada in 1919. Attracted by the Service, he was commissioned as a Wing Commander in the C.A.F. in 1922, remaining in the Air Force until 1926, when he again returned to civil life to join the Fairchild Aviation Company. But fate then dealt him a cruel blow. On 12 March 1930, he crashed to death over Rockcliffe aerodrome while demonstrating a new aircraft. A stalled engine did what the combined skill of many enemy pilots had failed to accomplish.

Thus at the end of the First World War three Canadian airmen were entitled to place the initials V.C. after their names, and to a lifetime pension of £10 a year—not an inconsequential sum in 1856.

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During the Second World War many acts of outstanding heroism necessarily went unnoticed and unrecognized. The sudden and violent end of an aircraft, with its complete crew, often left without record deeds which deserved the award of the Victoria Cross. Many were worthy, few were chosen; and it seemed to some that, after almost five years of war, Canadian airmen were being denied the highest award for bravery. Then suddenly, over a period of seven weeks, the actions of three Canadian flyers resulted in the award of V.C.s. A fourth followed a year later. Unfortunately, all were posthumous.

David Hornell joined the R.C.A.F. in January 1940. He was 30 years old, and, had he delayed joining for three weeks more, he would have been too old for aircrew under the regulations then in existence. A native of Toronto, he was keenly interested in the young people of the community and taught in Sunday School at the Wesley United Church in Mimico. He was always a strong favourite with the children, who nicknamed him "Bud".

More than four years later, on 24 June 1944, Flt. Lt. Hornell was captain of a *Canso* aircraft flying on anti-submarine operations from Iceland. A U-boat was sighted — fully surfaced and travelling at high speed. At once Hornell turned to attack. The U-boat's captain decided to fight on the surface, and opened up with fierce and accurate anti-aircraft fire. The *Canso* was hard hit. Big holes were torn in the wing and the fuselage, and the starboard engine caught fire. Hornell pressed home the attack, bringing the aircraft down very low and releasing the depth charges in a perfect straddle. The bows of the U-boat rose out of the water, toppling some of its crew overboard before plunging beneath the surface.

By this time the *Canso* was in a desperate state. The burning starboard engine vibrated off and fell into the sea. The captain turned into wind and landed safely in a heavy swell, but the burning aircraft quickly sank. With only one serviceable dinghy, the crew of eight took turns going into the icy water to ease the strain. Hornell's inspiring courage and leadership helped keep alive their spirits during the long hours of darkness. After 21 hours in the sea, during which time both engineers died from exposure, they were picked up by a rescue launch. Hornell, blind and suffering greatly from exhaustion, died shortly after being rescued.

For this display of "valour and devotion to duty of the highest order", Flt. Lt. David Hornell was justly awarded the Victoria Cross— the first such award to a Canadian airman in the Second World War.

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On the night of 4 August 1944, the *Lancaster* pathfinder force marking the target at Trossay St. Maxim, came under heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire. With several aircraft lost, including the deputy master-bomber, the success of the attack by the main force depended upon the master-bomber, Sqn. Ldr. Ian Bazalgette. Nearing the target, his *Lancaster* was hit severely; both starboard engines were put out of action, serious fires broke out in the fuselage and the starboard mainplane, and the bomb-aimer was badly wounded.

Despite the appalling conditions in the burning aircraft, Bazalgette pressed on to the target, marking and bombing it accurately. The *Lancaster* then dived out of control. By expert airmanship he regained control although the port inner engine failed and the starboard mainplane became a mass of flames. The mid-upper gunner was overcome by fumes. Ordering those of his crew who could do so to leave by parachute, Bazalgette fought to land the crippled and blazing aircraft and save the lives of the bomb-aimer and air-gunner. Skilfully avoiding a small French village, he landed the aircraft safely. It then exploded, killing him and both his comrades.

Born in Calgary in 1918, Ian Bazalgette moved with his family to England at the age of nine, where he lived in New Maldon, Surrey. A quiet, studious person, his hobbies were books, photography, and classical music. He wrote many essays on the latter, although he played no musical instrument. His courage arose from personal character, a quality of heart and mind which set the lives of his crew above his own, a quality rewarded by a posthumous Victoria Cross.

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Canadian airmen fought the enemy in all parts of the world as members of almost every Service that flew aircraft. Among some two hundred serving with the Royal Navy's air arm was Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray of Nelson, British Columbia. He entered the R.C.N.V.R. in 1940 directly after graduation from U.B.C., where he had been an extremely popular and active student.

In April 1945, the British aircraft carrier H.M.S. *Formidable* joined the Pacific Fleet, and her airmen were soon in the thick of the battle. By July they were striking at Japan itself, Lt. Gray leading his flight with cool precision and courage. His inspired fighting during July resulted in the recommendation and subsequent award of the D.S.C., which was actually gazetted on 18 August. But on the morning of 9 August, six days before the end of the war against Japan, as he led his section away from the *Formidable*, he had no knowledge of the recommendation or of the forthcoming award.

As the pilots approached the naval base at Onagawa Bay, they could see five Japanese warships lying at anchor. The combined anti-aircraft barrage from the ships and shore batteries steadily increased in intensity and accuracy. Selecting a destroyer, Gray dived into the barrage. His plane was hit again and again. Weaving and ablaze, he held steadily to his course and bore down to within fifty yards of the ship before releasing his bombs. They struck amidships and the destroyer sank almost immediately, but, before it disappeared, Gray's riddled *Corsair* had dived into the waters of the bay.

"Hammy" Gray was a warm and friendly person, popular among his shipmates. Deceptively youthful in appearance, he was mature enough to be an inspired leader and to set his principles above life itself. His was the only Victoria Cross awarded to the R.C.N. during this war.

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When the war ended and the prisoners of war were liberated, some outstanding acts of bravery previously unknown were revealed. Among them was one which brought a posthumous V.C. to Pilot Officer Andrew Charles Mynarski.

On the night of 12 June 1944, *Lancaster* "A-Able" took off from Middleton St. George to make a low-level attack on the marshalling-yards at Cambrai. Attacked by an enemy night-fighter, both port engines were put out of action and fires broke out in the port wing and in the mid-upper turret where Mynarski was the gunner. The flames soon became fierce and the captain ordered the crew to abandon the aircraft.

Making his way to the rear escape-hatch, Mynarski saw that the rear gunner was trapped in his turret, which was immovable. Without hesitation he made his way through the flames in an endeavour to release his friend. While he was doing so, his parachute and clothing were set on fire. His efforts were in vain, and the trapped gunner eventually indicated that nothing more could be done. Reluctantly going back through the flames, Mynarski stood in the escape hatch and, as a last gesture of farewell, stood to attention in his flaming clothing and saluted before jumping. He was seen descending, and was eventually found, by French people on the ground; but he was so severely burned that he died from his injuries. The gunner miraculously survived the crash to tell the story of what had happened.

An average Canadian boy whose hobbies were woodworking and painting, Mynarski was born in Winnipeg on 14 October 1916. After graduating from high school, he was a leather-worker for four years before joining the R.C.A.F.

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Such are the stories of the seven Canadian airmen who have been awarded the Victoria Cross. Their valour was not the result of any special military training or the discipline imposed by any particular background. They came from all walks of life, from varying social strata. Within the age-limits of aircrew, they were both young and old. All that they had in common was the courage that won for them the Commonwealth's most honoured decoration.

In the words of the Royal Warrant: "Neither rank, nor long service, nor wounds, nor any other circumstances or condition whatsoever save merit of conspicuous bravery shall be held to be a sufficient claim for the honour."