

Gwynne Dyer: The Great War in the Air

Gwynne Dyer, Special to National Post - August 7, 2014



A German Hannover CL III shot down on 4 October 1918 by American machine gunners in the Argonne.
Wikicommons

The one aspect of the war that still retained some glamour for Canadians by 1917 was the war in the air. Once aerial warfare really got into high gear in 1916 and the British air services began to expand at a breakneck rate, Canadians flocked to join. Many young men already overseas wanted to escape the impersonal slaughter of the trenches, even if it just meant a lonelier death in a burning airplane a few months later, and many in Canada simply joined for the adventure. They were all slightly crazy.

Ten of the top 27 seven aces in the British forces were Canadians, and they included four of the 12 leading aces in the entire war. This extraordinarily high Canadian quotient was partly a reflection of the Canadians' remarkable enthusiasm for flying: By the time the various British air services were amalgamated into the Royal Air Force on April 1, 1918, there were 22,000 Canadians serving in them. (Indeed, the main reason that a separate Canadian Air Force was not created until the closing months of the war was the British concern that having the Canadians off would decimate their own squadrons. "Thirty-five per cent of our total strength in pilots is Canadian," remonstrated a British officer, Lieutenant Colonel R.C.M. Pink, in May 1918. "Under the Air Force Act every one of these can walk out of the door tomorrow and return to the Canadian service unless this service is definitely part of the Royal Air Force.") But the pilots themselves mostly didn't care what flag they saluted: they lived in an intense, closed world where the only thing that counted was the respect of their peers.

In late 1918 Major William Barker of Dauphin, Manitoba, was already one of the leading aces of the war, with 46 confirmed victories accumulated in two and a half years of fighting over the Western Front and in Italy. (The Austrian Air Force sensibly kept its leading aces on the ground during the daily bombing of Godega airfield despite Barker's generous invitation.) But Barker was also, at the age of 23, a man living on borrowed time, for even very good pilots rarely survived as long as he had in combat.

By late 1918, the Allied authorities well understood the propaganda value of live aces in boosting their populations' flagging morale, so Barker was eventually posted to command an air-fighting school in England in order to keep him alive. His protests were unsuccessful, but he did manage to get himself appointed to a squadron in France for ten days on the way home, on the grounds that German aerial tactics over the Western Front were now different from those he had become familiar with in his more recent experience against the Austrian Air Force over Italy. He had still seen no enemy aircraft when he took off alone for England on October 27 at the end of his 10 days' stay in

France, however, so he decided to take one last peek over the front.

He was in luck, sort of. As his Snipe fighter climbed to 21,000 feet over the Forêt de Mormal, he spotted a Rumpler two-seat observation aircraft on a reconnaissance flight high above the British lines. But as he concentrated on the Rumpler he failed to notice the entire "flying circus" of 60 Fokker D-VIIs, the latest and fastest type of German fighter, that was flying beneath him stacked up in three or four echelons. As the Rumpler broke up before Barker's guns, one of the German fighters, climbing in a near stall, raked his plane from below with machine-gun fire and shattered his right thigh with an explosive bullet. Barker threw the Snipe into a spin and levelled out several thousand feet below, only to find himself in the midst of 15 more Fokker D-VIIs. He got in quick bursts at three of them, setting one on fire at 10 yards' range, but then he was wounded in the other thigh and fainted.

Barker spun down to 15,000 feet before he recovered consciousness and pulled his fighter out of its dive once more — only to find himself in the middle of a lower echelon of the same German formation. By sheer instinct, he got on the tail of one of them, but by the time it burst into flames his own aircraft was being riddled with bullets from behind; one bullet shattered his left elbow and he passed out again, dropping to 12,000 feet before he came to amidst the lower echelon of the flying circus. As the German fighters milled around his smoking machine, taking turns to attack from every point of the compass, it was clear to the thousands of British and Canadian troops watching from the trenches below that Barker was finished.

He must have thought so too, because he aimed his tattered Snipe at one of the D-VIIs and flew straight toward it as if to ram, firing as he went. But at the last instant it disintegrated and Barker hurtled through the wreckage; in the clear for a moment, he dove for the British trenches and crossed them at treetop height, finally crashing into the barbed-wire entanglements around a British balloon site just behind the lines.

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"The hoarse shout, or rather the prolonged roar, which greeted the triumph of the British fighter, and which echoed across the battle front, was never matched ... on any other occasion," recalled Colonel Andy McNaughton, a militia officer who had risen to command the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery and watched the fight from his advanced headquarters near Valenciennes. (McNaughton became commander of the entire Canadian army in the next war.)

Billy Barker's lonely last fight, in which he added four more aircraft to his score, won him the Victoria Cross and failed to dampen his ebullience even slightly. "By Jove, I was a foolish boy, but anyhow I taught them a lesson," he told the newspapers from his hospital bed near Rouen ten days later. Although his leg wounds never properly healed and he had to walk with canes for the rest of his life, Barker stayed in aviation after the war, founding Canada's first (spectacularly unsuccessful) commercial airline in collaboration with another Canadian ace and Victoria Cross winner Billy Bishop, briefly becoming director of the new Royal Canadian Air Force, and continuing to fly personally until he was killed in a crash at Ottawa's Uplands Airport in 1930.

The exploits of Barker and men like him, in a kind of combat that seemed to retain some of the honour and glory that had traditionally been associated with warfare, provided Canadians with virtually the only relief from the bitter news arriving daily from the trenches.

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