

William George Barker, ace extraordinaire

Katie Daubs, The Toronto Star - August 15, 2014



Col. William Barker returned to Toronto after the war with multiple gunshot wounds and a shattered left arm.

Toronto Star archives

Although he started the war in the trenches, Lt.-Col. William George Barker became one of the most successful fighter pilots of the war.

The Manitoba student — who had always been a good shot with excellent eyesight — left high school to enlist with the Canadian Mounted Rifles in December 1914, and was transferred, at his own request, to the Royal Flying Corps in April 1916. By war's end, he was credited with 50 victories, becoming one of Canada's top flying aces.

The most famous of his exploits occurred in the final weeks of the war. On Oct. 27, 1918, Barker was flying solo back to England when he saw a German two-seater plane over the Forêt de Mormal in France. He attacked the plane, and it broke up "in the air."

In reprisal, a German biplane attacked Barker, wounding him in his right thigh. He shot back, the enemy biplane went down in flames, and a large formation of German planes (by some accounts, as many as 60) continued to attack from all directions. He was hit again — this time in the left thigh, but still succeeded in driving away the enemy.

The wounds in his legs leaving him faint, he started to lose control of the plane, which was still under continual attack. In and out of consciousness, he charged two planes

and shot them down.

"Being greatly 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," read his citation on Nov. 30, 1918, when he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

During the war, Barker was decorated a dozen times for bravery, including the Military Cross (three times) the Distinguished Service Order (twice) and the Victoria Cross. The injuries he sustained in the attack would stay with him for the rest of his short life.

When he returned to Canada, he married Billy Bishop's cousin, and Barker and Bishop started a commercial airline, which failed.

Barker was a key member of the newly formed Royal Canadian Air Force, the first president of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the vice-president of Fairchild Aircraft. While demonstrating one of the Fairchild planes in 1930 in Ottawa, he lost control and was killed when the plane crashed.

"Earlier today while the city slept a great warrior was brought home dead," the Star reported of his death. "The empire gasped at the news."

Six wartime planes dropped rose petals on the crowd of 50,000 who lined the streets of Toronto for his state funeral. A memorial at Mount Pleasant Cemetery, where he is buried, was unveiled in 2011. It identifies Barker as the "most decorated war hero in the history of Canada, the British Empire, and the Commonwealth of Nations."

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