

## May 6, 2018 Tenth Annual CAHS Toronto Chapter Dinner Meeting



Speaker Diana Bishop  
Photo Credit - John Bertram

Topic: *Living Up to a Legend: My Adventures with Billy Bishop's Ghost*

Special Guest Presenter: Diana Bishop

Reporter: Gord McNulty

The Armour Heights Officers' Mess at the Canadian Forces College provided an ideal setting for our 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Toronto Chapter Dinner meeting. An audience of 31 members and guests enjoyed another delightful and rewarding evening. The head table included Chapter President Sheldon Benner; Treasurer Paul Hayes, Master of Ceremonies; our presenter, Diana Bishop; Past President Howard Malone and his wife, Pat. Howard said grace before we sat down to enjoy a fine meal courtesy of the College and Mess staff. The audience joined Paul in a toast to the Queen before dessert was served. Paul then introduced the Chapter executives in attendance,

including event organizer and Flypast Editor Bob Winson. Sheldon mentioned that Chapter Secretary Neil McGavock expressed regret he was unable to attend while recovering from the vehicle accident he suffered in 2017. We send best wishes to Neil.

Introducing Diana Bishop, Paul said he first learned of Diana while watching TVO's *The Agenda* with Steve Paikin. Diana spent 20 years as a TV news correspondent and independent film producer for CBC, CTV, Global Television and NBC News, telling stories of some of the biggest newsmakers of the day. In 2002, she co-produced a documentary about her famous grandfather, First World War aerial ace Billy Bishop, entitled *A Hero to Me*. Diana now runs a communications and personal branding business called The Success Story Program. She lives in Collingwood and is involved with the Billy Bishop Home & Museum: Archives and National Historic Site, in Owen Sound. She can be reached at [dbishop@successstory.com](mailto:dbishop@successstory.com). Recently, Diana wrote a book entitled *Living Up to a Legend: My Adventures with Billy Bishop's Ghost*. (Dundurn Press, paperback, 216 pages with photos, \$24.99) Paul noted the Bishop family had a tradition of prolific writing, as Billy wrote a book after the First World War entitled *Winged Warfare*. "It is a wonderful history of what he was up against and what he did during those years in France, flying the Sopwith Camel and the Nieuport 17," Paul said. He added that Arthur Bishop, Diana's father, has written 11 books about air combat. Paul has a copy of one of those books --- *Winged Combat: My Story as a Spitfire Pilot in World War II*. Arthur flew Spitfires out of England, then France and Germany with RCAF 401 Squadron. Diana wrote the foreword to that book.

In her fascinating and lively presentation, Diana focused on the family life of the Bishops. She recounted growing up in what she described as "quite a long shadow" cast by her legendary grandfather and her well-known father. "My father used to joke that between him and his father, they shot down 73 German planes," she said. "His father shot down 72 and he shot down one." One of Diana's earliest memories occurred when she was five years old and was in Florida, visiting her grandmother, Margaret. Billy had died and Margaret spent her time between Ottawa and Palm Beach. She remembered flying down and back in a TCA Vickers Vanguard. "It was very exciting, because I loved flying," she recalled. Coming back one night, sitting next to her Dad, she was terrified when they encountered bad turbulence. Diana grabbed his hand. He looked down at her and started explaining how an aircraft flies. "I just felt so safe and so comforted, learning from someone who had been a pilot," she said when people ask Diana what her book is about, she replies "it's about heroes" and the roles they play in our lives. While most people think her first hero was her grandfather, Diana jokingly corrected the record. Her first hero was Steve McQueen! The Great Escape remains her favourite film of all time. Diana loved the whole idea of the rugged, handsome star riding a



Billy Bishop meeting with German WWI pilots in Berlin 1928. Hermann Goering is fourth from the left next to Billy.

motorcycle in daredevil fashion, even if he actually didn't do it in the movie as she learned recently. She kept a poster of Steve McQueen on the bedroom wall and even named a pet fish after him. Once, while cleaning the bowl, she accidentally flushed the fish down the toilet. She didn't realize at the time that McQueen was just a manifestation of her grandfather, who also had piercing blue eyes, was ruggedly handsome, and a daredevil at heart. "I have been looking for a man like that all of my life, which probably tells you why I'm not married," she said with a laugh. "But I had a good time."

The topic of Billy Bishop dominated household conversation while Diana was growing up. Her father, especially, enjoyed a 5 p.m. cocktail of "Scotch on the rocks" and recounting stories about his father. Diana really was too young to appreciate war history at that point. However, she remembers funny stories about her grandfather. Her grandmother told her that her grandfather could never wear a watch. If he did, the hands would start going the opposite way and eventually break. Apparently, some sort of magnetic field that certain people have makes that happen. It was as if her grandfather had a magical appeal to Diana, to the point where she thought she "might see him" if she turned a corner or looked in a bedroom or peeked into a closet. Billy had a ghostly aura to her but it was "a good ghost." Hence, the reference to a ghost in the book title. Another wonderful aspect was that her grandfather was an "animal whisperer" of sorts. He started in a cavalry regiment in 1915 before going to England, where he decided to become a pilot. However, he loved horses and was a really good rider. He also enjoyed dogs, and had a chow chow, the famous, fluffy Chinese breed that looks like a lion. At one time he had 13 of them. He liked to tell the story of a dinner party where he put two of the chow chows in the middle of a long table between the candles. They supposedly sat there for the entire dinner! She recalled plenty of dinner parties. Once, he served an entire dinner backwards. Everyone started drinking. They enjoyed a dessert, then the main course and then a salad. Even the butler came in backwards.

Diana was in Grade 5 when, to complete a "show and tell" history assignment, she became interested in Billy's history. She thought she could get an A+, given Billy's stature as a Victoria Cross recipient. At that time, they kept her grandfather's war medals at their house. They are now nicely displayed at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, all 15 of them. Diana's parents donated the medals to the museum in the late 1960s and they are now insured for several million dollars. If they go anywhere on loan, they



are transported in a Brink's truck with two guards. Diana recalled that her father kept the medals in his underwear drawer, in a rather "sorry state." Diana and her younger brother loved to touch and look at the medals, but they weren't allowed to take them out or examine them if he wasn't alone. Naturally, the kids ignored that completely. They would show the medals to their friends whenever their parents weren't around. Diana, who knew that Billy had shot down 72 enemy aircraft, was most impressed upon learning that was the highest Allied score in the British Empire. She was also impressed that he was among a very rare breed of people who were the first to engage in aerial combat. When she learned the Wright brothers had first flown only in 1903, she knew she had an even better story. But she needed a prop. One morning, when her father had gone to work and her mother was washing the dishes downstairs, she snuck into the drawer and put the medals in a brown paper bag. She snuck out of the house and ran all the way to school. "I was a huge hit that day, especially with the boys in my class. They had not paid that much attention to me before, so I made a mental note in future to be known as Billy Bishop's granddaughter," she recalled. She proudly wore the medals as she displayed them as if that's what it meant to be Billy's granddaughter. She managed to put the medals back in the drawer, but surprisingly was given only a B+ on her project. Diana thinks her teacher was giving her a little message that she couldn't get too caught up in her grandfather's legacy, to the point where it became part of her identity, although unfortunately, it was much too late for that.

Afterward, Diana became obsessed with Billy Bishop as her hero. She wanted to learn as much as possible about her grandfather and grandmother. Billy married Margaret Eaton, Timothy Eaton's granddaughter. They met when they were around 15. "She was wonderful. She adored him," Diana recalled. She was invited to a tea party at Owen Sound, where Billy grew up. He watched Margaret enjoying a tea with the ladies. Someone had paid him \$2, "quite a fortune in those days," to see if he liked her. If he did, he would take her to a dance that night and that's where it started. They became good friends first. When he went off to war in 1915, they were secretly engaged. He lavishly wrote hundreds of letters to her, many of which she kept. In fact, the family now has 356 of these letters in their possession. "They are wonderful reading, a book in itself," Diana said. "He was an incredible romantic and just adored her. She, less so," Diana said with a smile. "But I think there's always one who is more obsessed with the other." Margaret worried that

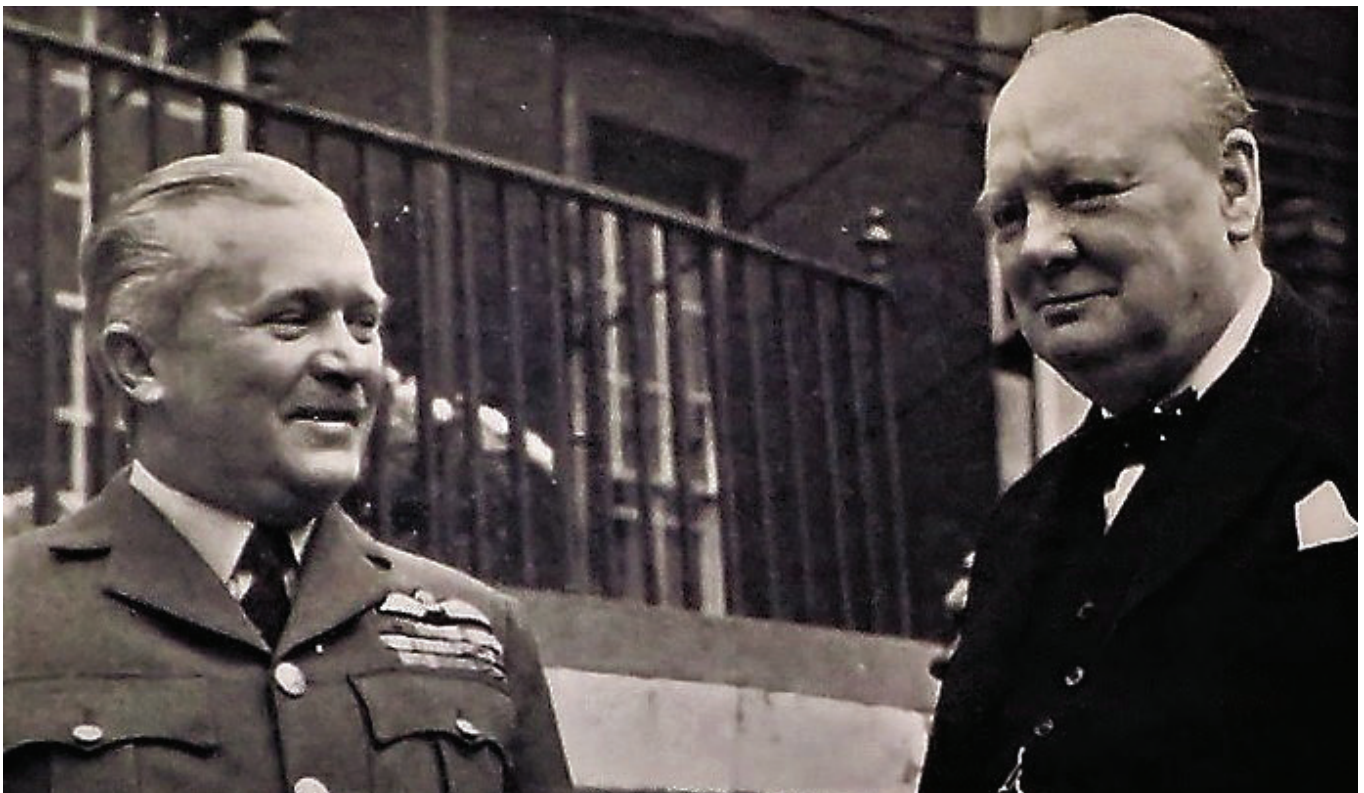


Billy in Hollywood promoting the movie - Captains of the Clouds. Rita Hayworth is at the left.

her father didn't approve of Billy. However, all of that changed when Billy quickly became a heroic fighter pilot by 1917. Billy returned for their wedding at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, where people lined the streets on both sides for about a kilometre. After the war, the couple enjoyed an incredibly glamorous lifestyle. Not only was Billy a leading achiever, he also had a really strong personality. "He embodied what a mythical hero was all about and enjoyed every minute of it," Diana recalled. They lived in London, where Billy had found work in various businesses connected with flying. They hobnobbed with royalty and drank with celebrities like Ernest Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald during the Roaring Twenties.

Diana noted that her grandfather had never given up his love of flying. Looking for work like many pilots, he had teamed up with fellow Victoria Cross recipient Billy Barker. They started a little enterprise, the Bishop-Barker Company, based at the Toronto Island. "They did it more or less to fly their friends to Muskoka for the weekend," Diana said. They flew Curtiss HS-2L flying boats. While the seaplane was designed for only two or three passengers, they would cram as many as five passengers aboard. They had great fun, and managed to get a few contracts. One contract was the CNE air show, which at the time prohibited flying over the land. In the second year, Diana's grandfather felt the crowds wanted more of a show, so he flew over the stands. He zoomed in, as low as he possibly could, to within 50 feet of the spectators. "There was pandemonium," Diana said. "People ran in every direction. Apparently, one woman had a miscarriage. So that wasn't good." The company encountered other problems and was eventually dissolved.

In 1928, Diana's grandfather went to Berlin on business. He went to the cemetery where the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen was buried, to pay his respects. The gatekeeper recognized the famous Canadian pilot and called the German pilots association, so they arranged a lunch the following day. The lunch was attended by none other than Hermann Goering, First World War fighter ace and early member of the Nazi party. Although everyone enjoyed the lunch, Diana said her grandfather found "something absolutely chilling" and "off the charts crazy" about Goering. Diana's grandfather enjoyed a role in the Captains of



Billy with Prime Minister Winston Churchill



the Clouds, the 1942 movie, playing himself as he pinned wings on the pilots. Promoted to Air Marshal in the RCAF in 1939, he was much involved in promoting the movie as a method of encouraging more men to become pilots. He thoroughly enjoyed having his picture taken with Hollywood stars including Rita Hayworth.

One of his best friends at the time was Winston Churchill. They got together quite often. Once, Churchill was staying with Prime Minister Mackenzie King at the PM's residence on Laurier Street in Ottawa. Diana's grandfather was staying just four houses down the street. It was getting late at night and Churchill asked where he could get a drink, as King had been a teetotaler. King replied that the Bishops' home was "the best place to get a drink in Ottawa." It was around 1 a.m. when Churchill arrived at the residence, awakening Diana's grandmother, her grandfather, her father and his sister to greet the prime minister of Great Britain! Churchill sat in one of the two chairs in the house. When her grandmother died, Diana inherited one of the chairs.



Billy Bishop with son Arthur at Rockcliffe Station WWII

Diana then discussed the legacy of Billy Bishop as it affected his son, Arthur. While it was an honour and a thrill to be part of Billy Bishop's family, Arthur was probably the family member who experienced the greatest challenge of the relationship. Arthur, as an only son, adored his father, though he pretty well had to become a fighter pilot in the Second World War. "They looked alike, they talked alike, they walked alike. My father tried to be his father in so many ways," Diana recalled. "It was wonderful for him, but it was also a very big burden. He had his demons for sure. When he returned from the war, it was difficult for him to know what to do with his life. His father interfered quite a bit as he tried to get jobs here and there when "he just needed to find himself." People didn't hear about that as much as they do now. Diana suggested Arthur didn't really have a chance to be his own person and we care more about that now. In any event, Arthur succeeded in expressing himself through writing.

While Arthur wouldn't talk to Diana about the war, he channeled all of that experience into his books about Canadian military history. In fact, Diana learned more about her father by reading his books. Arthur's biography of his father, *The Courage of the Early Morning*, published in 1967, was an instant best seller. His numerous books emphasized Canadians who made heroic contributions, such as the Victoria Cross winners and wartime heroes at sea, and then his own book, *Winged Combat*. He and Diana proposed "Winging It My Way" as the title, but the publisher chose *Winged Combat*. When Diana signed her contract with Dundurn, she had complete control over the title and the cover.

Diana has always been obsessed with the hero theme and looks for it when talking to people. She chose journalism as her call to adventure. She could speak French and began her career in Montreal as a reporter. Those were heady days in Quebec, when Montreal was transitioning to become more traditionally French in character. As a young reporter, she was given 'fluff' stories including a story about three ducks that were stuck on ice and couldn't get free, to the dismay of animal lovers. Determined to be a storyteller no matter what, Diana turned the episode into a three-part series that went national. Once, the national reporter was told to interview Pierre Trudeau, who had just returned to his legal career in Montreal. The reporter felt it was a non-story and suggested Diana and her camera crew do the story. The protocol was that French reporters asked the questions first. When they were done, Trudeau asked if there was an English question. Diana, the only English-speaking reporter there, asked Trudeau about the scorn he expressed for the legal profession in the book, *The Northern Magus*. She suggested he would find law terribly boring. Trudeau started to laugh and replied that maybe he would find it boring. Diana thought the interview went badly. But when the clip was sent to Toronto, CBC anchorman Knowlton Nash was impressed and told Diana to keep up the good work.

Diana went on to Parliament Hill, covering prime ministers as they travelled around the world. Her humorous recollections included meeting Queen Elizabeth in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s with a small group of journalists. Starstruck Diana grabbed Her Majesty's hands and exclaimed, "You look just like my grandmother." Diana was immediately whisked away and put in a little room until the reception was over. The Queen, as Diana recalled, "was not amused at all," but what a memory for Diana. Nelson Mandela, who had "a complete aura around him," impressed Diana more than anyone she met. Betty Friedan and Celine Dion also made a special impression on Diana.

Diana expressed deep appreciation for the way in which her grandfather put his love for aviation and the air force to reinvent himself, at age 23, after achieving fame in the First World War. Billy Bishop was instrumental in the formation of the RCAF and the BCATP. He tirelessly promoted recruitment across the country, writing many letters encouraging young men to fly. He did it to the end and didn't want to retire as age and health caught up to him. For his part, Arthur became a journalist for a time and then, at around age 60, devoted his life entirely to writing. He wrote prolifically between 60 and 75. Diana reinvented herself as well, establishing a new career to help people from all walks of life to start a business, advance their profile or gain more influence. She has found the experience incredibly rewarding, and encourages everyone to write their own story for the next generation. Diana was delighted to learn recently that the Royal Canadian Mint is producing a coin commemorating the aircraft flown by Billy Bishop and other Canadian aces of the First World War. It's an inspirational idea that fits nicely with the inspirational themes that Diana promotes. Our speaker answered a number of questions and signed copies of her compelling book. Paul Hayes thanked Diana for her wide-ranging and thought-provoking talk. He presented her with a photograph of Collingwood Harbour that was taken from a Bishop-Barker aircraft in appreciation of a fine talk.

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