

The German aerial observers, floating in the cloudless skies above, had spotted the chalk and alerted the enemy batteries. In their frail sausage balloons they peered down at the mismash of wriggling trenches, trying to make sense of the dun-coloured world below, seeking other tell-tale clues to pinpoint the date of the offensive they knew was coming. The balloons were under constant attack by the Royal Flying Corps – frustrating and dangerous work for the British and Canadian pilots. The Germans were able to winch their sausages to the ground faster than the airmen could manoeuvre to destroy them. It was a costly business: for every enemy balloon shot to pieces the RFC lost a flying machine.

Young Billy Bishop of No. 60 Squadron, late of Orillia, became an official ace that day and also won his first decoration, the Military Cross. He had been given a specific balloon as a target, but just as he dived on it he heard the rattle of machine-gun fire and found himself in combat with the enemy. Fortunately, the German flew directly in line with Bishop's gun. Bishop shot him down but lost the target, which had been hauled to earth during the combat. Frustrated, he disobeyed orders to keep above one thousand feet, dived at the balloon and attempted to destroy it in its bed, scattering the crew and at the same time doing his best to avoid both the anti-aircraft guns and the balls of rocket fire that the British called "flaming onions."

Now he was in a real pickle: his steep dive had caused his engine to fail. Bishop went into a glide, heading for an open field, sick at heart, knowing that he would shortly be either dead or a prisoner. Like those of others before him, his thoughts turned to home. How his parents would worry when he was reported missing! But like most heroes and all air aces, Bishop was blessed with more than his share of luck. At fifteen feet above the battlefield, his engine kicked in and he streaked for home, so close to the ground that no ack-ack gun could get him and no pilot would dare dive on him. Below him in the Vimy trenches, the startled Germans missed their aim. Behind, the balloon he'd dived on was a mass of flames.

It was a bitter-sweet victory for Billy Bishop. When he got back to base he found that three other pilots from his squadron, all good friends, had been lost in a battle with Manfred von Richthofen's *Jagstaffel II*, giving the German ace his thirty-seventh kill and, coincidentally, a promotion to captain. "Oh, how I hate the Hun," Bishop wrote to his fiancée that night. "They have done in so many of my best friends. I'll make them pay, I swear."

On the ground that evening, the signals section of the Black Watch was ordered to bring up the battalion's rations from the dump on the Quarry Line. For Bill Breckenridge, these last few days had been a nightmare of fetching and carrying. The signallers seemed to be constantly on the move, night and day. And, in those last crowded hours, movement became more difficult. Breckenridge and his carrying party were barred by sentries from using the Grange Subway, now restricted to one-way traffic forward. But no one liked