



CANADA

**Production and Distribution
of the
National Film Board Production
“The Kid Who Couldn’t Miss”**

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**Report of the Standing Senate Committee on
Social Affairs, Science and Technology**

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Membership

The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology

The Honourable Arthur Tremblay, Chairman
The Honourable M. Louis Bhaer, M.D., C.M., Deputy Chairman

The Honourable Senators

Crossin, Ernest G. Manning, Lorne
David, Paul Macdonald, Jack
Gignac, Philippe D. McMillan, John
Harwood, Len McPherson, Yvonne

* 23 Official Members

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David, Paul G. LeBlond, Jean
Gignac, Philippe D. Tremblay, Arthur

* 23 Official Members

The following members also served as members of the Committee

The Honourable
Robson

The following members also participated in the production of the

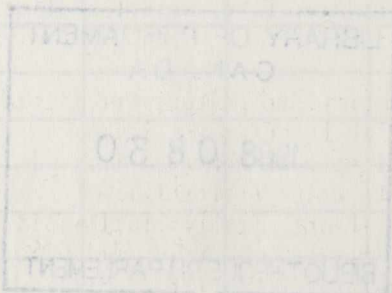
Subcommittee
Elizabeth Bell Gagnon, Robert
Evrett, Roger John, Murray Gordon
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National Film Board Production
"The Kid Who Couldn't Miss"



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Membership

The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology:

The Honourable Arthur Tremblay, *Chairman*

The Honourable M. Lorne Bonnell, M.D., C.M., *Deputy Chairman*

and

The Honourable Senators:

Cottreau, Ernest G.	Marsden, Lorna
David, Paul	Marshall, Jack
Gigantès, Philippe D.	Molgat, Gildas L.
LeMoyne, Jean	Robertson, Brenda M.
* MacEachen, Allan J.	* Roblin, Duff
Marchand, Len	Rousseau, Yvette

* *Ex Officio Members*

The Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs:

The Honourable Jack Marshall, C.D., *Chairman*

The Honourable M. Lorne Bonnell, M.D., C.M., *Deputy Chairman*

and

The Honourable Senators:

David, Paul	LeMoyne, Jean
Gigantès, Philippe D.	* Tremblay, Arthur

* *Ex Officio Member*

The following senators also served as members of the Subcommittee:
The Honourable Senators E.W. Barootes, Robert Muir and Yvette Rousseau.

The following senators also participated in the examination by the Subcommittee: The Honourable Senators James Balfour, Ann Elizabeth Bell, Sidney L. Buckwold, Richard J. Doyle, Douglas D. Everett, Royce Frith, John Morrow Godfrey, Henry D. Hicks, Paul C. Lafond, Daniel A. Lang, Finlay MacDonald (*Halifax*), John M. Macdonald (*Cape Breton*), Charles McElman, Gildas L. Molgat, Hartland de M. Molson, Raymond J. Perrault, Ian Sinclair, D.G. Steuart (*Prince Albert-Duck Lake*) and David Walker.

Orders of Reference

Extract from the *Minutes of Proceedings of the Senate*, Tuesday, October 8, 1985:

"The Order of the Day being read,
With leave of the Senate,

The Honourable Senator Molson resumed the debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Molson, seconded by the Honourable Senator Macdonald (*Cape Breton*):

That the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology be authorized to examine and report upon the activities of the National Film Board with respect to the production and distribution of the film "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss".

After debate, and—
The question being put on the motion, it was—
Resolved in the affirmative, on division."

Charles A. Lussier
Clerk of the Senate

Extract from the *Minutes of Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology*, Tuesday, October 15, 1985:

"The Honourable Senator Rousseau moved,—That the Order of Reference dated Tuesday, October 8, 1985, referred to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology which was authorized to examine and report upon the activities of the National Film Board with respect to the production and distribution of the film "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss", be referred to the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs and that the said Subcommittee shall report to the Committee as needed.

After debate,
The question being put on the motion, it was—
Resolved in the affirmative."

André Reny
Clerk of the Committee

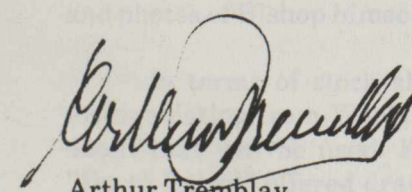
Introduction

The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology was authorized on 8 October 1985 to examine and report upon the production and distribution of "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss", the National Film Board's "biography" of Air Marshal William Avery Bishop, VC, DSO and Bar, MC, DFC. Discharge of the mandate was assigned to the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs which is chaired by the Honourable Senator Jack Marshall.

The hearings of the Subcommittee were followed with interest by a large number of Honourable Senators who are not regular members of this Subcommittee. We wish to express our thanks for their interest and attendance at the meetings relating to this examination.

The subject-matter of our Report, a film which questions the integrity and reputation of one of Canada's foremost veterans and military heroes, has also caused a great deal of public interest. We wish to thank those members of the public who have written to the Subcommittee and particularly those who prepared briefs and gave testimony.

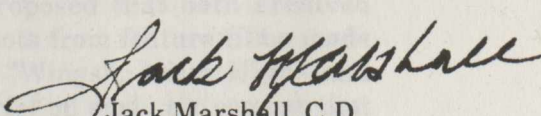
The Committee wishes to thank the members of the Subcommittee for their hard work, and to acknowledge its gratitude for assistance given during the study and preparation of its report by the Clerk of the Subcommittee, Mrs. Diane Deschamps, and Mr. Grant Purves of the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament.



Arthur Tremblay

Chairman

Standing Senate Committee on
Social Affairs, Science and Technology



Jack Marshall, C.D.

Chairman

Subcommittee on
Veterans Affairs

Production and Distribution of the National Film Board Production

"The Kid Who Couldn't Miss"

The NFB film "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" was conceived and executed largely by Mr. Paul Cowan. Mr. Cowan told the Committee that he first got the idea of doing a film about Billy Bishop, Canada's leading and most decorated World War I military pilot, while he was making a film about the performing arts, including the popular play "Billy Bishop Goes to War", segments of which he filmed. He became fascinated both by the play itself and by the story of Billy Bishop the man. Finding that no film had ever been made about the life and exploits of Bishop, he submitted a proposal for a film to the National Film Board.

Mr. Cowan proposed that the film "Billy Bishop" be comprised of three elements: excerpts from the play "Billy Bishop Goes to War", stock shots, and interviews with those who knew Bishop. In his opinion, the play would transpose ideally to the screen, because it was a dramatic one-character narrative of Bishop's life. The chronological and episodic nature of the play would lend itself well to intercutting with the stock shots and interview sequences. Even the actor Eric Peterson, who portrayed Bishop in the play, resembled the stock shots and photos of Bishop himself.

In terms of stock shots Cowan proposed that both archived footage dating from World War I and shots from feature films made about that war be used. Films such as "Wings", "Aces High" and "Dawn Patrol" offered dramatized material on early air combat that in his opinion would be virtually indistinguishable from real stock shots. Finally, Mr. Cowan intended to interview a wide range of people who had known Billy Bishop — surviving members of his family and flyers in Canada and England who had served with him in the 60th and 85th Squadrons. More significantly, Mr. Cowan proposed to interview other people "such as an infantryman who witnessed Bishop's single-handed attack on the German airport."

In the concluding paragraph of his proposal, Mr. Cowan summarized the purpose of the film he wished to make as follows:

Throughout the film, it is our intention to keep the material focused as much as possible on Billy Bishop. We are not so much trying to make a war movie as a film about a man who went to war. In that one flyer there is the metamorphosis of most men who have gone to war — the naive kid gleeful at the prospect of encountering the enemy, the bloodthirsty killer, the man numbed by fear, and the human being finally horrified by the futility of war. It will be the very intimate story of a rather special hero — it will be also the lament of all fighting men.⁽¹⁾

In the winter of 1981 Mr. Cowan made a research trip to Europe to gather stock shot material and to interview people who had known Bishop during his service overseas. During this trip he came across material that in his opinion threw doubt on official and accepted versions of the exploits of Billy Bishop, and in particular on the latter's official record of enemy aircraft shot down and the very *fact* of his single-handed raid on a German aerodrome. Mr. Cowan believed that he was left with three choices: he could drop the film entirely; he could retell yet again the legend which he had come to believe was questionable; or he could make a film which reflected his doubts. It was his decision that "those doubts were too numerous and their sources too credible to ignore" for him to complete the film as originally planned and approved by the National Film Board; to do so would, he felt, have been to lie. But Mr. Cowan denies that his object became to destroy a legend; rather it was to question "the reasons why heroes, especially war heroes, are created and why countries feel they are necessary."⁽²⁾

Your Committee is convinced that in the conception and execution of the film Mr. Cowan acted with personal and professional integrity; he sought to make the film reflect his personal convictions and to express these convictions in his own way. This we accept as a basic urge of all good filmmakers, even though we do not believe that the evidence we have heard supports Mr. Cowan's convictions about the nature of Billy Bishop's record and do not agree with some of the techniques he used to express them. We strongly question, however,

(1) Canada, Senate, The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs, *Proceedings*, 28 November 1985, Appendix "VA-6-A", p.6A:1.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 6:55.

the judgement of the National Film Board in agreeing to the revised concept and objectives of the film.

Appearing before the Committee, Mr. François Macerola, the Government Film Commissioner, stressed that at every stage of production from original concept to release of a film, the film producer, the executive producer and the vice-president responsible for English or French programming are questioned. Before release of the film, the Government Film Commissioner must view and approve it. The original objective of the film was not controversial; the revised concept was bound to cause intense controversy. In these circumstances, common prudence, in the opinion of your Committee, should have raised serious questions about whether making such a film was in the public interest, and if so, what precautions should be taken to ensure historical accuracy, particularly since the film would be released as a documentary.

Several Honourable Senators challenged the idea that it was part of the National Film Board's mandate to question the need for national heroes. The history of men and women of notable achievement provide young and old alike with inspiration and role models. It is a Canadian dilemma that the stories of so many of our heroes serve to underscore our differences — the fact that the European exploration and settlement of the country is inevitably associated with the eclipse of the indigenous civilizations and the rival successes of French and British colonial heroes are just two examples.

Whatever the abstract validity of a film's questioning our need for heroes, members of the Committee and other Honourable Senators who attended our meetings were upset because the elaboration of this theme involved casting doubt, not on a fictional character or characters, but on the personal integrity and service records of an individual veteran and war hero, one of the few whom all Canadians could admire. This concern does not mean that we feel that the NFB should help to create, prop up, or fail to disclose fraudulent heroes. It does mean, however, that we were surprised to discover that no technical experts or professional historians were retained to assist in the production of the film. Mr. Cowan may have had an understandable urge to exercise the fullest possible creative control, but at least when the film took a "revisionist" slant, there was an obligation on the part of the National Film Board to ensure absolute historical accuracy and probability as much about details as about major themes.

Although a "Dominique Parent" is listed on the film credits as being responsible for historical research, this person was not heard

from or referred to by those who appeared before the Committee. On the basis of our hearings, it appears that Mr. Cowan was responsible for doing all or almost all of the research.

Mr. Cowan's professional training was in the field of film and broadcast journalism, rather than historical research. At the time he researched, wrote, produced, directed and co-edited "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss", he was not experienced in making documentaries about historical subjects although he was well-versed in all aspects of filmmaking. When he came to write the script for the film he seems to have relied very heavily on "interviews" for information, as might be expected of someone with a background in journalism. Almost all of those who were actual participants in or witnesses to the events of World War I are now dead. Whether Mr. Cowan interviewed survivors himself, relied on existing taped interviews or on interviews with those who have communicated with 60 Squadron veterans, the result is the same: those interviewed are being asked to recall details of events that had taken place 40-60 years earlier — the condition of an aircraft when it returned from a sensational sortie, when and if rumours of inflated official credit for "kills" began to circulate through the personnel of a squadron, etc.

One can believe in the personal integrity of those conducting the interviews and of those being interviewed, and still be completely skeptical about the relative reliability of at least the details of the information thus received. Material from these interviews may add colour to a narrative and information about what veterans think about events long afterward, but is as likely to confuse as to assist attempts to reconstruct the events of long ago.

Mr. Cowan also relied very heavily on interviews with a few selected individuals who had done research into Billy Bishop's record, and into his attack on a German airport in particular. These individuals do not appear on camera to express their reservations and doubts about Bishop's exploits, nor do their names appear on the credits of the film as an important source of information. Nevertheless, their unpublished musings or conclusions are inserted into the film as authoritative evidence.

On the basis of the film credits, it does not seem that Mr. Cowan consulted important collections of documents relating to the air war and to Bishop's participation in it. The British Public Records Office which contains important documentation is not listed, nor is the Directorate of History, Department of National Defence in Canada, which holds the most voluminous records on Bishop and other

Canadians who served with the Royal Flying Corps.⁽¹⁾ When asked why he had consulted British experts and witnesses to the exclusion of most Canadian sources, Mr. Cowan replied, "I didn't feel that anybody here that I knew of, in any case, had anything to add to it except to say, 'Well, the official history says that he did it.'"⁽²⁾

If the instinct of the professional journalist is to rely heavily on interviews, the instinct of the professional historian is to rely as much as possible on "original sources", that is to say, archival material, published documents, and unpublished material such as diaries, correspondence, etc., whose origins are as close as possible to the events under study. Secondary sources, such as memoirs and the published works of other experts in the field are also consulted as widely as possible. The most critical task is weighing this mass of evidence, testing it for validity, and, assessing it, just as you would in a court of law, before rendering a judgement. This judgement is "bound always to be complex, because historical events are complex."⁽³⁾

The final test of a historian's professional judgement lies in what he or she has published for the scrutiny of other professionals in the field, not in the reservations he or she may be prepared to express in private and in confidence. In the opinion of your Committee, anyone who makes direct use of such material does so at his or her own professional risk, whether as a journalist or as a historian. We believe that the National Film Board should have insisted on far higher standards of research and of the "admissibility of evidence", or the close association of professional historians with the project, before permitting work to continue on the film. We also believe that the proposed format of the film should have been changed to a traditional documentary study to avoid the additional controversy that might be caused by the "avant-garde" techniques and dramatic licence involved in the modern "docu-drama". As Mr. Macerola admitted to the Committee, the "docu-drama" is "a new form, and obviously a risky one."⁽⁴⁾

The film "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" has caused intense controversy since its release in 1982. Some parties to the dispute

(1) *Proceedings*, 7 November 1985, p. 5:5-6.

(2) *Ibid.*, 10 December 1985, p. 8:15.

(3) *Ibid.*, 7 November 1985, p. 5:7-8.

(4) *Ibid.*, 28 November 1985, p. 6:38.

agree that the film itself is first-class entertainment. Its objectives, point-of-view and production quality have been defended through letters-to-the-editor by some prominent members of the cultural community. At the same time, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it has outraged groups and individuals as diverse as veterans' organizations, associations of the graduates of the Royal Military College, historians of the air war, newspaper columnists and ordinary citizens, as well as those who knew Billy Bishop as wartime colleagues, friends and members of his family. Having viewed the film, studied the transcript and heard testimony, your Committee believes there are at least four legitimate grounds for criticizing the film: 1) the historical contentiousness of the suggestion that Billy Bishop's record was substantially fraudulent; 2) the film techniques used to convey and reinforce this suggestion; 3) the existence of many errors of fact and chronology in the film and its transcript, many of which serve to win acceptance of the film's theme; and 4) the description of the film in promotional material as a "full-length documentary". The following is an illustrative discussion of these concerns, rather than an exhaustive one.

Most of the controversy surrounding Billy Bishop's military record is focused on the single-handed attack on a German airfield which he carried out at dawn on 2 June 1917, and for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Bishop's combat report for the action written on his return to his airfield gave the locality as either Esnes aerodrome or Awoingt. His description was brief — the term H.A. refers to "hostile aircraft", the arrows "↓" mean less than —

CONFIDENTIAL

I fired on 7 machines on the aerodrome, some of which had their engines running. One of them took off and I fired 15 rounds at him from close range 60 ft. up and he crashed. A second one taking off, I opened fire and fired 30 rounds at 150 yds, range, he crashed into a tree. Two more were then taking off together. I climbed and engaged one at 1,000 ↓ finishing my drum, and he crashed 300 yds. from the aerodrome. I changed drums and climbed E. A fourth H.A. came after me and I fired one whole drum into him. He flew away and I then flew 1,000 ↓ under 4 scouts at 5,000 ↓ for one mile and turned W. climbing. The aerodrome was armed with one or more machine guns. Machines on the ground were 6 scouts (Albatros type I or II) and one two-seater.

Beneath this description, Bishop's Commanding Officer, Major Jack Scott commented:

Capt. Bishop had been encouraged to catch the H.A. referred to in VII Corps Daily Intelligence Summary No. 151. His method was not quite what I intended. He was several times at a height of 50 ft. over this enemy aerodrome at least 17 miles E. of the lines. His machine is full of holes caused by machine gun fire from the ground.⁽¹⁾

The next day, Major Scott submitted the following confidential report to Headquarters:

Headquarters,
13th Wing, R.F.C.

I wish to make a special report on an extremely brilliant individual attack on a German Aerodrome near CAMBRAI, planned and executed by Capt. W.A. Bishop D.S.O. M.C. on 2/6/17.

He left the ground before day-light and flew intending to attack the aerodrome at NEUVILLE but on arriving there found the hangars closed and no signs of any activity. He then flew S. and E. of CAMBRAI until he arrived at an aerodrome where 7 machines were on the ground, of which 3 or 4 had their engines running. On the first one taking off he fired 15 rounds from very close range and the machine crashed; a second one he similarly engaged and it flew into a tree. Two more were then taking off together, he finished his drum on one of these and it fell 300 yards from the aerodrome. The fourth machine pursued him and he fired a whole drum into it but observed no result. The above took place at heights varying from 40 to 1,000 ft. He then observed 4 scouts at 5,000 ft., climbed to 4,000' underneath them and flew thus for a mile. Finding the scouts were climbing at least as fast as he was himself, he turned West and returned safely.

As a preliminary manoeuvre before any of the machines above had left the ground, he engaged the mechanics who

⁽¹⁾ *Proceedings*, Appendix "VA-1-B", 17 October 1985, p. 3A:3.

were starting the engines and one at least of these was observed to fall. When he returned his machine was full of holes caused by machine guns with which the aerodrome was armed.

(signed) Major Jack Scott
O.C. 60 Squadron, R.F.C. ⁽¹⁾

Major Scott's report does not betray any doubts or misgivings about the accuracy or veracity of Bishop's exploit. Would he have written such a commendation if, as the film suggests, it was already generally known that Bishop's accounts of his actions were inflated to the point of fraudulence and that official acceptance of Bishop's reports was already causing open dissension among members of the squadron? At the same time, the report gives some general indication of the condition of Bishop's plane on his return, noting that it was "full of holes caused by machine guns with which the aerodrome was armed". Further documentary information about the condition of Bishop's plane comes in another confidential report to Headquarters on 30 June 1917, almost four weeks after the attack took place:

Reference our telephone conversation of to-day.
Herewith information as requested:

1. Time left aerodrome 3.57 a.m.
Time arrived at Hostile Aerodrome, 4.25 a.m.
Time arrived back 5.40 a.m.
2. Personal evidence only.
3. Damage done - 17 Bullet holes. Trailing edge of plane shot away in two bays.
4. Distance 30 miles. Aerodrome S. of CAMBRAI. ⁽²⁾

Your Committee finds this document of particular significance for a number of reasons. It was submitted by Captain Caldwell who had temporarily replaced Major Scott as Officer Commanding the 60th Squadron. It underlines the fact that no confirmation for the raid had been found, if indeed it had ever been sought, in the weeks after the raid. It gives more precise information about the condition of Bishop's plane. Since evidence put before the Committee by Mr.

⁽¹⁾ *Ibid.* Appendix "VA-1-C", 17 October 1985, p. 3A:6.

⁽²⁾ Referred to in *Proceedings*, 28 November 1985, p. 6:66.

Cowan indicates that almost 50 years after the event, Caldwell expressed strong doubts in a personal letter to Sqn. Ldr. Warne about Bishop's record and the raid, the report is also significant for what it does not say. It does not allude to the existence of skepticism among Squadron mechanics or Bishop's fellow pilots; it does not draw attention to a suspicious grouping of the bullet holes in the aircraft; it does not draw attention to the fact that the aircraft's machine gun was missing on Bishop's return from the raid. Unlike Major Scott, Captain Caldwell was not a close personal friend of Bishop's. If doubts about the raid had surfaced in the four-week interval, he was in a position to raise them with his superiors and in so doing, perhaps prejudice them against the award of a Victoria Cross for an exploit attested to by "personal evidence only".

The above official documents, in our view, establish that Bishop's aircraft did return from his raid seriously "shot about", but there is nothing in them to suggest that the damage was so serious that it could not have been repaired routinely and in time for Bishop to fly the aircraft later the same day. The *published* memoirs of W.M. Fry, one of the last surviving pilots of 60 Squadron who flew with and served under Bishop, clearly suggest that seriously damaged aircraft could be repaired surprisingly quickly. Referring to two entries in his flight log book he notes that on 25 May: "Right hand bottom wing came off. Landed at 12 Squadron." Nevertheless, the next day his log book shows him flying the same aircraft into an action during which he claimed an enemy aircraft was shot down.⁽¹⁾

Relying on his memory, Fry recounts how Bishop invited him to participate in the raid — the previous evening and before first light the next morning — and how, just after the dawn raid, Bishop came into his room to tell him of it. He notes that he remembers "clearly seeing a group of about five bullet holes in the rear half of his tailplane, the elevator, within a circle of not more than six inches diameter at the most". Concluding his account, he comments:

This must surely be a very unusual case of a Victoria Cross or any high honour being awarded on the word of the recipient only as to his exploit and without any witnesses or participants. Our CO knew Bishop so well as to believe in him implicitly, as did the whole squadron and higher authority.⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ W.M. Fry, M.C., Wing Commander, *Air of Battle*, William Kimber and Co., London, 1974, p. 132.

⁽²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 135-137.

Writing almost 60 years after the event, he remembers that at the time of the raid, the whole Squadron, as well as its Commanding Officer, believed in Bishop "implicitly". Although this statement is based on the memory of a veteran recalling events of 50 to 60 years earlier, your Committee believes it is significant because Mr. Cowan has told the Committee that his interview with Wing Commander Fry was an important source of his doubts about Bishop's military record,⁽¹⁾ and because the film argues that well before the V.C. raid, Bishop's fellow pilots did not believe his claims.

The only identifiable source of the repeated assertion throughout the film that Bishop's credibility was at issue is the taped reminiscences of Sir Archibald Henry James, who did not serve with 60 Squadron, but was stationed nearby. James, who was interviewed decades after World War I as part of an aural history project associated with the Imperial War Museum, briefly referred to Bishop as the "best known and most advertised" pilot and continued: "Unfortunately, Bishop was fraudulent." Asked by the interviewer how he knew Bishop was fraudulent, James replied: "Everybody knew it. It became common knowledge ... common knowledge, unfortunately."

Mr. Cowan made use of James' opinion in an on-camera interview with another pilot, Cecil Knight, who flatly rejected the idea that Bishop was "cheating" on his kills. Nevertheless, Mr. Cowan then reasserts the idea and places an anecdote in the mouth of the actor in the role of Bishop's 60 Squadron mechanic, Walter Bourne. The character Bourne "remembers" a "right row" between a pilot called Carlisle and Bishop over the latter's "unconfirmed victories". Later, Mr. Cowan will again assert through the narrator that "the doubts about Bishop are increasing" and insert another anecdote into the mouth of the actor playing Walter Bourne.

In the opinion of your Committee, if Mr. Cowan had investigated the background of Sir Archibald Henry James' taped reminiscences, he would have discovered that they have been found to be frequently inaccurate and opinionated — in short, a historical source of scant credibility. For example, on the BBC program "Newsnight", Peter Simpkins, official historian of the Imperial War Museum, noted that James had made dubious statements about other military personalities.⁽²⁾ If he had investigated Canadian sources, he

⁽¹⁾ *Proceedings*, 28 November 1985, p. 6:52.

⁽²⁾ "Newsnight" with Ian Smith, 10:45 p.m., 22 January 1986 and *Proceedings*, 5 December 1985, p. 7:16.

might also have interviewed J.B. Crompton, who served with C Flight of 60 Squadron in August 1917. Crompton, who lives in Thornhill, Ontario, has formally stated that during his service with 60 Squadron, "there was never any controversy within the squadron regarding the exploits of my flight commander Billy Bishop."⁽¹⁾

A number of people who have researched the subject of Bishop's military record with 60 Squadron and 85 Squadron have, however, come across rumour, gossip and speculation to the effect that Bishop inflated his battle reports and, in particular, "faked" the raid on a German aerodrome by landing his aircraft, dismounting its machine gun and carefully "shooting his aircraft up", before returning to base. As far as your Committee knows, no reputable historian has ever published such an accusation; rather, the suggestion has been treated with the contempt it almost certainly deserves because there is no evidence to support it. While there is no indication that these rumours were circulating at the time Bishop served overseas, the memorandum prepared by Squadron Leader D.W. Warne, who has made the history of 60 Squadron his hobby since the late 1950s, does contain information about doubts underlying the rumours and is suggestive of the reasons why these doubts arose.⁽²⁾

According to Sqn. Ldr. Warne, Royal Flying Corps records do not help in any way to justify many of Bishop's claims; in addition some early historians who specialized in analysis of German records had difficulty matching Bishop's claims of enemy planes shot down against German war losses in the War Diaries of the units concerned and in the German casualty lists. At the same time, it remained impossible to document from German sources Bishop's Victoria Cross attack on a German airfield. To make matters more difficult, the bulk of the relevant German archives were lost or destroyed either in the 1918 retreat of the Germans from the Western front or during World War II. In his summary of the "Billy Bishop Controversy", Warne justly notes: "The absence of all the facts inevitably leads to conjecture, which is a personal matter."⁽³⁾

The doubts raised in the film about Bishop's attack on an airfield seem to be based very heavily on Mr. Cowan's uncritical acceptance of Sqn. Ldr. Warne's personal conjectures, and in

(1) Note printed by Mr. Crompton and witnessed by Stewart Taylor.

(2) The Billy Bishop controversy as seen by Sqn. Ldr. D.W. Warne, MRACS, RAFRO, *Proceedings*, Appendix "VA-6-A", 28 November 1985, p. 6A:2-6.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 6A:5.

particular, the significance the latter places on the condition of Bishop's aircraft on its return and on its missing machine gun.

Your Committee notes that Sqn. Ldr. Warne has never published anything about his reservations. Indeed, his published work seems to fully accept Bishop's official record and the attack on a German airfield. He goes out of his way to say that he has "no intention of publishing anything derogatory about Billy Bishop or any other member of 60 Sqn ..."⁽¹⁾

During our proceedings we were made aware that while the archives of the German Federal Republic contain little material of relevance to the overseas service of Bishop, some material does exist in the private collections of individuals. One of these collections, at present in the possession of Mr. A.E. Ferko of the United States, has frequently been referred to by Mr. Cowan as evidence that German documents do exist, do support his contention in the film that Bishop overstated his claims, and do fail to offer any evidence that his raid on a German airfield took place.⁽²⁾ Apparently, during the 1930s a small number of German researchers were allowed to personally examine specific documents in the archives, to make handwritten copies, summaries and notes. Some foreign historians were permitted to correspond with them and to seek answers to specific questions. At least part of the notes of one German researcher by the name of Turnuss came into the possession of the American, William Puglisi, who turned over this material to Mr. Ferko, together with his correspondence with other German researchers. Obviously, your Committee is not in a position to offer an opinion on whether this material is authentic, comprehensive and representative of the lost or destroyed German documents. This is another task best left to professional historians.

While Mr. Cowan's sources have expressed their scepticism about Bishop's record and exploits, many other historians who have checked Bishop's claims against as many sources as possible have found that a very high percentage can be confirmed. Stewart Taylor, who appeared before the Committee, and who was appointed official historian by World War I flyers, began studying the careers of Canadian World War I pilots in 1960. Like Sqn. Ldr. Warne, he has attempted to contact and interview — in person or by telephone — as many veterans as possible and to collect as much unpublished

(1) *Proceedings*, 28 November 1985, p. 6A:5.

(2) *Ibid.*, "Statement by A.E. Ferko", 28 November 1985, p. 6A:2 and Appendix VA-6-E, "Errors in Testimony", p. 6A:10.

material, diaries, letters, memoirs, log books as are available. He has also an acquaintance with the contents of the "Turnüss" material now in the possession of Mr. Ferko. On the basis of his research, he believes he can identify by name a substantial percentage of the pilots Bishop shot down, more so than in the case of other pilots.⁽¹⁾

Dr. S.F. Wise is the author of the first volume of the official history of the Royal Canadian Air Force, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, the product of some ten years work by himself and a team of professional historians. On the basis of his research he told the Committee that generally speaking, the scores of all fighter pilots in action on the Western Front should be discounted, probably by one-third.⁽²⁾ This generalization would apply as much to Bishop as to the other pilots, whether British, German or French. Speaking of Bishop's record, he flatly rejected the allegation of fraudulence as being without foundation. A "very high proportion of Bishop's 'kills', so-called were, in fact, verified as the result of corroborative testimony."⁽³⁾

So far as Dr. Wise knows, Bishop's Victoria Cross raid was virtually without parallel among V.C. exploits because there was almost no possibility of corroboration. Bishop could have attacked any one of half a dozen airfields, not just Estourmel as the film suggests. Given the loss or destruction of German records there is today "no possibility ... of proving from German records whether or not Bishop did what he claimed to have done". Faced with such a problem, the historian can only consider the whole combat career of the individual concerned and weigh the relative likelihood of the alternatives.⁽⁴⁾ In his opinion it is "very likely that Bishop carried out the attack"; that is, it was "in keeping with Bishop's whole career and behaviour during the war"⁽⁵⁾.

Your Committee does not believe that there is creditable historical evidence to support the film's allegations that it was generally known in 1917-1918 that many of Bishop's claims were fraudulent or the repeated assertion that these claims caused noticeable friction or dissension in the Squadron. The exceptional

(1) *Proceedings*, 17 October 1985, p. 3:25-26 and Appendix "VA-1-A", p. 3A:1-2.

(2) *Ibid.*, 7 November 1985, p. 5:7.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 5:8.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 5:12.

award of a Victoria Cross on "personal evidence only" might be expected to raise eyebrows, and perhaps provoke jealousy and gossip.

Sometime after the War, however, doubts about Bishop do seem to have begun to circulate privately and were believed by some surviving veterans. These doubts may or may not have had their origins in the failure of early researchers to find confirmation of the Victoria Cross raid in the German archives. That these doubts and speculation exist seems to be quite well-known among those who have investigated the history of the air war.

Considering that the doubts, rumour and speculation did influence the way in which some of Bishop's fellow pilots came to view his record, your Committee does find that Mr. Cowan acted in good faith when he decided that the film would have to raise these doubts. By the same token, we cannot accept the techniques that the film employs to introduce and reinforce these doubts in the minds of the audience.

Most of the doubts and conjecture raised by Mr. Cowan's sources are placed in the mouth of Bishop's 60 Squadron mechanic, Walter Bourne, who is portrayed by an actor against authentic backgrounds such as an aircraft hangar. The technique used is that of an "interview". While the use of a "clapper-board" and off-stage directions may alert the audience to the fact that this is a filmed sequence involving an actor, it does not indicate that there is no reason at all to believe the real Walter Bourne ever had any doubts about Bishop or made any of the remarks that are attributed to him.

Your Committee finds this technique to be the most offensive aspect of the film. It dishonours the memory of Walter Bourne and the very close relationship that existed between pilot and mechanic. A pilot's life depended on the quality of his mechanic's work. Moreover, because the mechanic had to check over the airplane after every sortie and make repairs as necessary, he would be much more likely to notice damage that was "unnatural" or suspicious. Thus the doubts that are put in Walter Bourne's mouth are all the more devastating to Bishop's reputation simply because they are expressed by his mechanic. Some of these interventions have already been referred to; what follows are quotations from the transcript of the film followed by a brief comment indicating their source where known:

Voice
(Walter Bourne)

... the defence patrols have come back ... six or seven machines, they hadn't seen anything — nothing. He goes out a little later, by himself; comes back in a couple of hours, you know, he's firing off his flare guns like it's bleeding Guy Fawkes Day, claiming he shot down one; two; three planes. Well he claimed he shot them down but it was the C.O. who was Major Scott, he's the one that gave it to him.⁽¹⁾

Approaching his base after a successful sortie, Bishop was accustomed to fire a flare. The sense of the comment can be found in Sqn. Ldr. Warne's submission. (6A:3)

Voice
(Walter Bourne)

Everybody knew it (the attack on a German airfield) was coming. I mean we were up to here in brass hats, you know. I mean we were all standing out in the field, you know, waiting for him to come back to see if he had done it, you know. He had everything but a brass band out there, you know. I mean I thought the King was coming.⁽²⁾

The great English Ace, Albert Ball, had approached Bishop and suggested they attack a German airfield. After Ball's death Bishop may have discussed the idea with other pilots. The comment is complete fiction, as is the stock shot of His Majesty touring the airfield. Neither the King nor senior officers were waiting. In fact, Major Scott's comment on Bishop's combat report of the attack (see above) indicates that at least its timing caught him by surprise.

Voice
(Walter Bourne)

I termed he's probably left. He's very quiet and very tense. But when he got back, you know, he was all smiles

(1) "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss", transcript, p. 40. Obvious spelling errors have been corrected.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 48.

and chuckles, you know ... he was right with it, you know. Very pleased with himself.⁽¹⁾

This may be based on the memoirs of W.M. Fry. According to his memoirs Fry was invited by Bishop to take part in the attack and declined; afterwards Bishop visited him in his room and told him about it "in an excited state".⁽²⁾

Voice
(Walter Bourne)

That's a bit of a mystery, isn't it. I mean, it didn't have its Lewis gun, you know. I mean he said he chucked it on the way back, you know, to lighten up the plane for added speed, you see. Well, I mean, I'd like to see somebody take one of those off in the air, you know, while flying, I mean ... I mean I don't know, you know, — I put them on.⁽³⁾

Sqn. Ldr. Warne points out the difficulty of removing the Lewis gun in the air (6A:5). Although it is generally agreed that the machine gun was missing, the fact does not seem to be noted in official documents of the raid reproduced above. Testimony before the Committee has suggested that removal of the machine gun in the air was not unheard of and would not be much more difficult than changing ammunition drums, a manoeuvre Bishop had mastered and could carry out during combat.⁽⁴⁾ Apparently coming from the mouth of his mechanic, this comment is perhaps the most damaging and unfair piece of evidence used to convince the audience that Bishop may have "faked" the raid.

Narrator

In the accounts of the raid, Bishop's plane is described as returning in tatters. This isn't so.

(1) *Ibid.*, p. 50.

(2) Fry (1974), p. 135.

(3) Transcript, p. 51

(4) *Proceedings*, 17 October 1985, p. 3:30-31 and 7 November 1985, p. 5:17.

Voice
(Walter Bourne)

In the tail, there's about seventeen bullet holes, you see ... all in a nice little group like that, you know. And, well I mean I've seen a lot of planes shot up but I mean nobody can shoot a plane like that, you know. No ... no. Quite a mystery.

Neither Bishop's combat report nor the official reports refer to the plane being in "rags". The memoirs of Fry, discussed above, refer to five bullet holes in a six-inch circle. The suggestion that one could identify individual holes of seventeen rounds fired into the 18-24 sq. in. area indicated by the actor playing the role of Bourne stretches the imagination; the idea that such a grouping could be achieved with a dismounted and hand-held machine gun is absurd.

Voice
(Walter Bourne)

They got what they wanted, you know, when they made him a hero. You know when they put the medals on him, gave him the V.C. — they got what they wanted. He was ready to die like the rest of them. He was ambitious, but ... maybe too damn ... damn ambitious, I don't know.

This concluding comment attributed to Walter Bourne may reflect Mr. Cowan's own sentiments on Bishop.

Throughout the film, the chronology of events is hopelessly scrambled. In general, this may be due to dramatic licence, to the effort to give the film greater audience appeal. In one particular instance, however, the film uses a chronological shift to give Bishop a powerful motive for "faking" the attack on a German airfield.

In reality, Bishop carried out the raid toward the middle of his first tour of duty as a pilot in France. When he returned to Canada and married his fiancée, he had already received the Victoria Cross. The film, however, deliberately changes the chronology of events so that the raid appears to take place in the last week of Bishop's front line service. This supplies a false "motive" for faking an attack — it will be his last opportunity to play the "hero" for the "brass hats" the film says are waiting for his return.

There are many more errors of historical fact and chronology in the film, some of them significant, most minor. Details can be found in the Appendices to our proceedings, together with Mr. Cowan's critique of testimony heard before the Committee.⁽¹⁾

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" is a highly dramatized and one-sided account of Billy Bishop's life and his exploits while serving with 60 Squadron during World War I. Research for this film overlooked a wealth of Canadian sources, veterans, and expertise on the subject, and concentrated instead on a few British sources. Through the technique of "interviewing" from time to time an actor in the role of Bishop's mechanic, the film gives a false and misleading authority to what is, in the view of most historians, rumour and unpublished speculation. While Mr. Cowan and the National Film Board have every right to express reservations about Bishop's record, your Committee questions whether the public interest is served, as required by the Act establishing the NFB, by representing these rumours, which seem to have arisen some time after the events described, as based on first-hand, eyewitness evidence.

According to Mr. Macerola and Mr. Cowan, "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" was structured as a "docu-drama" to convey a message "about heroism, about legends, about warfare and about the individuals who fought in those wars, and the chosen few who became symbols of that heroism".⁽²⁾ As mentioned earlier, the docu-drama is a relatively new and experimental film style that can hover between reality and fiction. Thus "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" has won international awards from separate film festivals in both the "documentary" and the "fiction" categories.⁽³⁾

Members of the Committee and of the public have strongly objected to the promotion of the film as a "feature-length documentary". Your Committee's and indeed the public's perception of the term "documentary" inevitably brings to mind the qualities of authoritativeness, accuracy, fairness and even-handedness, within

(1) *Proceedings*, Appendices "VA-2-D" and "VA-2-E", p. 4A:4-78; Appendix "VA-6-E", p. 6A:9-16.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 6:8-11.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 6:16.

the limits of personal objectivity, especially when the National Film Board is involved. These qualities can be present, in our opinion, even in the treatment of historical subjects, where actors must assume the roles of real characters.

Within the film industry, however, the term documentary is used much more broadly. It was pointed out by Mr. Macerola that John Grierson, the founder of the NFB, said that there were many different types of documentary film, beginning with the newsreel and continuing through the dramatic field, where such a film may involve "an attack on the emotions or on the imagination", to the poetic.⁽¹⁾ However broadly defined, the object of a documentary remains to capture "fragments of actuality" and combine them meaningfully.⁽²⁾

Mr. Macerola acknowledged that the description "documentary" might be misleading. He told the Committee that henceforth the film would carry a statement that it is a docu-drama presenting a perspective on the nature of heroism and the legend of Billy Bishop.⁽³⁾ Your Committee regrets any distress that may have been caused to the family of Billy Bishop by this film.

(1) *Proceedings*, 28 November 1985, p. 6:9-10.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 6:10.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 6:13.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee has unanimously adopted the following recommendation:

That after the titles of the film, the following disclaimer be added:

"This film is a docu-drama and combines elements of both reality and fiction. It does not pretend to be an even-handed or chronological biography of Billy Bishop.

Although a Walter Bourne did serve as Bishop's mechanic, the film director has used this character to express his own doubts and reservations about Bishop's exploits. There is no evidence that these were shared by the real Walter Bourne".

Some members feel that this recommendation does not go far enough.

Appendix "A"

List of persons who appeared before the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs, showing the number and date of the issue in which their evidence appear

First Session of the Thirty-third Parliament, 1984-85-86

Name	Issue No.	Date
Bauer, Group Captain A.J. Chairman Billy Bishop Heritage	3, 4 and 7	17 October 1985 30 October 1985 5 December 1985
Cowan, Mr. Paul Director of the film "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" National Film Board	6 and 8	28 November 1985 10 December 1985
Kear, Professor A.R. President Manitoba Branch Royal Military College Club of Canada	4	30 October 1985
Macerola, Mr. François N. Government Film Commissioner National Film Board	6	28 November 1985
Symansky, Mr. Adam Executive Producer of the film "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss" National Film Board	8	10 December 1985
Taylor, Mr. Stewart K. Historian World War I Flyers Air Transportation	3	17 October 1985
Wise, Professor Sydney F. Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research Carleton University	5	7 November 1985

