

# **The Real Case of No. 943**

## **William Avery Bishop**

J. Ross McKenzie  
Curator RMC Museum

The recent re-printing of Brereton Greenhous' article, "The Sad Case of Billy Bishop, VC," in *The Arch* (29 September 89) as well as the recent production of the play, "Billy Bishop Goes To War," in Currie Hall (28 November 89) has once again brought attention to the question of Billy Bishop. This controversy began a few years ago when the National Film Board of Canada released a film by Paul Cowan entitled, "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss". In the film Cowan presented Bishop as a fraud who padded his score of downed enemy aircraft and who ultimately fabricated the incident for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

One thing that all of these (and other) accounts of Bishop have in common is that they all begin with stories of a disgraceful career as an RMC cadet and then; depending on the author's point of view, the account is either used in contrast to his later brilliant exploits (he showed those stuffed shirts a thing or two) or as a prelude to a further military career of dishonesty and fraud.

"I mean I'm on record as the worst cadet RMC ever had ...."

Billy Bishop Goes to War  
John Gray

"When the other cadets are rehearsing for final graduation, Billy Bishop isn't with them. He's cheated on his final exams and is to be expelled."

The Kid Who Couldn't Miss  
Paul Cowan

"How had Billy Bishop, an RMC reject, been able to secure a position of authority in any military unit?"

Billy Bishop Canadian Hero  
Dan McCaffery

"Even his defenders admit that while attending the Royal Military College of Canada in 1914 Bishop was caught cheating in an examination."

The Sad Case of Billy Bishop, VC  
Ben Greenhous

Working from this premise it seems logical, for those so inclined, to go on to challenge the credibility of Bishop's later career. But is the premise credible? Was Bishop as bad a cadet as popular wisdom would have it?

The origin of all of these Billy Bishop RMC stories can be found in The Courage of the Early Morning: The True Story of Canada's Great Flying Hero, Billy Bishop, VC written by his son William Arthur Bishop. Presumably based on tales told by his father, the account has been universally accepted as the final word on No. 943.

As this version is germane to the whole question of Bishop at RMC a summary in point form follows:

- On his seventeen birthday, in February 1911, Bishop decides to apply to RMC for the following reasons:
  - a. Scholastic record mediocre but unlike universities, entrance to RMC was by exam rather than by academic standing. If he worked at it he might pass and get in.
  - b. His brother Worth "had achieved the highest standing of any cadet in the history of RMC and he felt this would reflect to his credit."
  - c. He could ride and he was a good shot.
- Some teachers helped him cram and he passed the entrance exam and was admitted as a recruit.
- "Billy soon learned that there was nothing romantic in being a recruit at RMC. "We are", he wrote home gloomily "the lowest form of military life – of any life for that matter."
- Describes recruiting "an infraction...carried a sharp blow from a swagger stick across the rump. Each first-year was soundly trounced every Friday night." (it goes on, see the book for more).
- "Billy was profoundly depressed by the indignities of his first year, especially since he had been so much his own master until then. At any rate, he failed his examinations"
- That summer his older brother Worth, a government engineer, got him a job where he "swallowed periodic doses of good advice from Worth and promised solemnly to work hard and keep out of mischief when he went back to RMC."
- "He did too – for a full year. There were strong inducements, of course. Although he was accorded provisional second year status, his failure in his first year examinations meant

that he would have to take an extra year to graduate, and a second failure would mean the end of his career. He passed that second year with something to spare.”

- “But a whole year of good behaviour was all that Billy Bishop’s exuberant high spirits could endure. His third year was an epic of rules broken and discipline scorned. His regular sorties – legal and illegal – into Kingston to rendezvous with girls became the talk of the stone frigate.”
- In the spring of 1914 Bishop and a classmate arranged to meet two girls on Cedar Island. They left RMC grounds after dark without leave, they had a bottle of gin and they stole a canoe. Canoe overturned, both got back to college. Other cadet so chilled he reports to infirmary. A staff officer had viewed the incident, the other cadet admits it, Bishop holds out.
- “When he was unceremoniously routed from bed and paraded before Adjutant Charles Perreau he blandly denied the charge. When he was told that the other boy had admitted everything, he felt he was in too deep to change his story and he stoutly proclaimed his innocence. Perreau lost his patience and hurled at the defiant youth the most damning accusation that could be charged against a Gentleman Cadet, “Bishop, you’re a liar!”
- “For this offence Billy was assessed twenty-eight days “restricted leave: - the equivalent of house arrest. It was the longest penalty of its kind ever imposed on a cadet up to that time.”
- “In May 1914, when he sat his examinations, he was caught cheating....he had hidden crib notes up his sleeve and when he turned in his paper he absentmindedly handed in his notes with it.”
- “...Perreau had only a few terse words for the culprit – the punishment would be held in abeyance during the summer holidays. There is little doubt that the adjutant was intensifying the penalty by making Billy worry about it all summer long. It was almost certain that the verdict would be dismissal.”
- “As it turned out Billy did not return to Royal Military College (not as a cadet that is: but three years later, with a breast full of medals, including the Victoria Cross, he was the honoured guest of the staff officers who not long before had described him, with some justification, as “the worst cadet RMC ever had”). Most of the seniors did not return either.”<sup>i</sup>

That, at some length, is the story of Billy Bishop at RMC, or is it? At first it seems plausible enough but even with a casual look at the internal evidence of the story, the account of Bishop’s leaving RMC doesn’t ring true. Arthur Bishop correctly states that at RMC a cadet was allowed only one repeat year; then as now, two strikes and you’re out.<sup>ii</sup> Arthur claims

that Bishop failed his first year. He goes on to say that two years later Bishop is caught cheating and “the punishment would be held in abeyance during the summer holidays...it was almost certain that the verdict would be dismissal.”<sup>iii</sup>

If Bishop had indeed been caught in this predicament the summer adjournment just does not make sense. His exam would have been marked void, and thus having received less than 33% in one subject, he would consequently fail his year.<sup>iv</sup> As this would be his second strike he would be out, an academic failure. There would be no need for the dramatic summer wait; regulations would not permit him to continue.

This discrepancy is apparent on casual reading. Does the rest of the story hold up? The only way to determine that is to go to the RMC records, but unfortunately, not all of the old records remain. Many early RMC files were destroyed in a fire in 1931. Some records do exist however and from them we can piece together part of the story and test Arthur Bishop's account on several key facts.

Perhaps a few words of background are needed to set the scene. In the period in question 1911 to 1914 RMC had a three year programme and the three classes were known from junior to senior as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Class, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class, and 1<sup>st</sup> Class. The Battalion of Gentlemen Cadets was divided into four companies and it was commanded by senior cadets appointed to positions as follows: battalion sergeant-major, company-sergeant-major, sergeant, corporal and lance-corporal. The cadets were all enrolled under terms similar to the current Reserve Entry Training Plan. None had any commitment to regular force service. The Commandant from 1909-1913 was Colonel JHV Crowe, Royal Artillery and from 1913 to December 1914 it was Colonel LR Carleton, Essex Regiment. The Staff Adjutant from 1911 to 1914 was Major CN Perreau, Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Perreau took over as Acting Commandant in 1915, after the departure of Carleton. He was subsequently confirmed in the appointment and promoted. He remained as Commandant until 1919.

Bishop joined RMC on 28 August 1911, having placed 42<sup>nd</sup> out of the 43 who passed the entrance exam. On joining he was 17 year old.<sup>v</sup> So far so good, this information tallies with Arthur's version. Billy Bishop's older brother was No. 565 Regional Worth Bishop, RMC 1900-1903. He did reasonably well, placing 10 out of 26 on graduation but by no means had he “achieved the highest standing of any cadet.”<sup>vi</sup> The idea that the two brothers somehow represent the best and the worst of RMC cadets will not hold up to examination.

At some point in Billy Bishop's first academic year (and it seems to have been during final exams) he was suspended or “rusticated”.<sup>vii</sup> The RMC Regulations of 1912 state the following:

53. The Commandant shall have the power of restriction or temporary removal, and shall immediately report his action together with the evidence in the case for the

covering approval of the Minister of Militia and Defence; also of sentencing a Cadet to lose places in the list of candidates for commissions and to award such less as punishment as may be authorized. When expulsion is necessary the case will be referred to the Governor General in Command through the Minister of Militia and Defence.

66. If a Cadet affords to, or obtains from another Cadet, any assistance during an examination, or if he makes use of any improper means of obtaining information relative to an examination he will, if it be his final examination for graduation, be debarred from receiving a Diploma; if at any annual examination other than his final, or at any intermediate examination, he will be rusticated, and, in addition, lose all the marks given for that particular paper, and will not be re-examined in it.
67. If a Cadet be rusticated, he thereby forfeits all marks which would have accrued to him on account of examinations held during his period of rustication.

From the above it's clear that Billy Bishop was caught using "improper means of obtaining information relative to an examination". He was not expelled; however, he was rusticated. The exact nature of his offence is unknown. Arthur Bishop states that Billy failed his first year. That is true in part but it appears Arthur didn't know the real reason. This may in fact be the actual "cheating" incident that Arthur believed occurred in 1914. The RMC records indicate no other case of "cheating" and Arthur Bishop mentions no other.

Rustification, a punishment short of expulsion, was rarely used. In checking the academic records back to 1902 there is no other case noted. In the same period, however, there were several cadets released (i.e., expelled) under paragraph 40 of RMC Regulations:

40. A Cadet may be removed from the College at any time on the recommendation of the Commandant approved by the Minister of Militia and Defence, for the following reasons:
  - i. Unsatisfactory progress in his studies.
  - ii. Protracted absence, from illness or any other cause.
  - iii. Failing to acquire a sufficient proficiency in Military Exercises and Drills.

Two notables, one in 1906 and another in 1907 were sent on their way with character ratings of "Very Bad". It seems clear then, that the College authorities would not hesitate to expel cadets. Bishop, while his transgression was serious, was obviously deemed worthy of a second chance.

In his repeated 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Year, the academic year 1912-1913, Bishop showed marked improvement, he placed 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 42, a respectable showing. In his next academic year, 1913-

1914, now in 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (his classmates from recruit year are now seniors) Bishop's standing dropped sharply. Arthur states that this was a result of "rules broken and discipline scorned."<sup>viii</sup> That may or may not be the case. No record remains of what Billy was up to that year except an interesting narrative that appeared in the class yearbook, The Stone Frigate 1914. This is the only surviving contemporary narrative describing Billy at RMC. At the risk of boredom it is reprinted below.

### **Bishop**

"Voice from Cadet with telescope peering out of his window: "There's a red coat on Fort Henry Hill. There's an umbrella there too with a couple of people behind it. Wonder who it can be?" Voice from the next room: "Come on, Steve, Bill Bish is out, let's swipe his tobacco."

This conversation shows how much we know about Bill's half-holiday habits. His week day habits are somewhat similar. After lectures he can be seen filling the mail-box with enough correspondence to make the Owen Sound postman hire an apprentice. In fact, he is a regular "tar", with "one" in every port.

Bill has been known to turn up on the football field. When he does he puts in some good hard work. Though a little fellow with very short legs, he made a good "quarter" for the third year team last year.

About a week before the final exams, a great change comes over our William. He no longer dallies with Amaryllis in the shade, but shilly-shallies with maths, into the small hours of the morning. Having made up his mind to pass he usually gets there, as he does with everything when put to it.

When a show comes to town you can always hear Bill auctioneering on the flats. "Does anybody want to buy a tunic? Come on, somebody does, --etc." Strangely enough he still has enough kit to clothe himself, yet he always turns up in the bald-headed row with his "latest."<sup>ix</sup>

This account is of interest for two reasons. Billy's apparent claim to fame was his active pursuit of females – no mention that he was the only cadet in the last decade (possibly even longer) ever to be rusticated! Another point of interest is that Bishop was included in this privately printed yearbook even though he was one year behind and he was not graduating with this group, his original classmates. Billy was still apparently one of the gang. If in fact he was a cut up that year, it may well be that he got away with it because the seniors weren't willing to discipline one of their own.

Arthur Bishop's account of the abortive canoe trip to Cedar Island cannot be verified or denied from the records, but it does sound like a likely escapade. The claim however that criminal law

was violated in the stealing of a canoe seems a bit strong. A college canoe would be used without authority – not stolen. The account of the interview with Major Perreau and his charge “Bishop you’re a liar!” cannot be verified. But in context of what was a prevalent, immature, public school style code of honour among the cadets, such covering up would not be unknown.<sup>x</sup>

Arthur Bishop states that the resulting punishment, twenty-eight days “restricted leave”, was the longest penalty of its kind ever imposed on a cadet up to that time. This suggests that Bishop was awarded an unusually severe punishment and that he therefore stands out. This, again, is simply not true.

The Authorized scale of punishment in 1914 was as follows:

By Commandant	Max.
a. Expulsion	
b. Rustication	
c. Solitary confinement	56 hours
d. Reduction	
e. Close arrest	7 days
f. Confinement to barracks	28 days
g. Restriction of leave	84 days
h. Reprimand or severe reprimand	
i. Extra duty	

By officers of or above rank of Captain

- a. 7 days confined to barracks
- b. 10 days restriction of leave
- c. Reprimand only
- d. Extra duty<sup>xi</sup>

Unfortunately the Commandant’s record of punishment from this period no longer exists; however, that valuable yearbook Stone Frigate 1914 does give one example of a punishment. As part of a class diary recording memorable class events from arrival at RMC 28 August 1911 to graduation 25 June 1914, there is the entry:

“Wednesday 22 January 1913. One of us gets 28 CB today! What for? Why for helping out Prof. Cochrane with a difficult experiment.”<sup>xii</sup>

Someone was awarded the maximum CB (28 days) over a year before Bishop supposedly received 28 days restricted leave. If in fact Billy was awarded restricted leave (and not CB), it was not a particularly onerous punishment. Twenty-eight days R.L. is a mild sentence

considering the maximum 84 days permitted. It would seem that Arthur Bishop has exaggerated when he suggests that Billy was an outstanding criminal.

The next events described by Arthur are the final examinations in the spring of 1914. As mentioned above, the transcripts do not indicate anything unusual. There is absolutely nothing to suggest that a “cheating” incident took place in June 1914.<sup>xiii</sup> Bishop’s marks did drop however. He placed 33<sup>rd</sup> out of 34. Not quite the goat but close. That honour was reserved for one who failed the year.

Arthur Bishop goes on to claim that Billy did not return to RMC as a cadet. That summer, the war intervened, and Arthur suggests this allowed Billy to join the army and to escape the consequences of his transgression. This is not true.

Billy Bishop returned to RMC, 28 August 1914, as did all but one member of the new 1<sup>st</sup> Class. On 24 August 1914 one cadet withdrew, “at parents’ request”. He was subsequently commissioned in Lord Strathcona’s Horse.

On arrival Bishop, now a senior, was appointed a Lance-Corporal; of his other classmates, three received no appointment at all. One week later, on 7 September 1914, he was promoted to Corporal. These appointments were made by the Commandant, “Cadets so entrusted with authority should remember that upon their example and the manner in which their duties are performed, in a great measure, depend the general conduct, gentleman-like, honourable, and moral tone of the cadets....”<sup>xiv</sup> Despite his poor academic showing Bishop was given some rank. He was deemed worthy of trust. Nothing here suggests that he was under a cloud. Some three weeks later, 30 September 1914, he withdrew “at parents’ request!” The term ‘at parents’ request’ although not appearing in regulations seems to have been used in the ledger for every departure from the College except for those resulting from graduation, academic failure, or expulsion.

Bishop’s Discharge Certificate states his conduct whilst a cadet was “Good”. Comments used were Exemplary, Very Good, Good and Bad. (Although somewhat earlier “Fair”, “Indifferent” and of course “Very Bad” had also been used). The last example of a “Bad” character rating before Bishop’s departure (and appearing on the same page as Bishop’s name in the ledger) was in November 1913 for a cadet who was expelled. “Good” conduct was certainly at the lower end of the scale but its use was not uncommon.

What then were the circumstances of Bishop’s departure from RMC in 1914? As we have seen, one classmate didn’t return at all. On 16 September, fifteen classmates left after being given special commissions in the British Army. (Five other special commissions were awarded to members of the class that had just graduated). The same day, 16 September, another cadet withdrew, ultimately to obtain a Canadian commission two months later. Bishop was the next to go on 30 September. The remaining cadets were organized into a special Army class which soon followed. Only two members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Class stayed at RMC until June 1915. The timing of Bishop’s departure from RMC is therefore not at all suspicious.<sup>xv</sup> His low academic standing no

doubt ensured he wasn't given one of the special commissions, but the departure of his friends may well have stirred him to act on his own.<sup>xvi</sup>

One can hypothesize all sorts of criminal or dishonourable scenarios as to why Billy Bishop left RMC but there is nothing to support such speculation. It is more likely that he left RMC motivated by a desire to serve his King and country.

Arthur Bishop no doubt attempted to give an honest account, as he understood the facts, of his father's time at RMC. Much of what he says seems reasonable but on several key points he is wrong. RMC cadet stories, like fish stories, tend to grow with the years and they are often told more for dramatic effect than for complete accuracy.

Whatever Billy Bishop was at RMC he was not an "RMC reject", nor was he "the worst cadet", nor did he leave one step ahead of expulsion. He may have been unhappy at times, he may have run afoul of regulations, he certainly wasn't a good student, and no doubt about it he liked girls – but would that make him so different? There has been a Billy Bishop or two in every class!

### **Commandant's Report 1918**

"Reference to their magnificent record would be incomplete without a special mention of the services of Major W.A. Bishop, VC, DSO, and Bar, MC who left RMC in 1914 and whose work in the Royal Flying Corps has made him famous throughout the Empire. Major Bishop visited the College on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1917, and received an ovation from the Gentlemen Cadets".<sup>xvii</sup>

That is the real case of No. 943 Gentleman Cadet William Avery Bishop. Hopefully, this account will put to rest the RMC-Billy Bishop myth and clear the stage for some historian to write a balanced and definitive account of his later service.

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- i Bishop, William Arthur. The Courage of the Early Morning, McClelland & Stewart (Toronto: reprinted 1981) pp. 15-19.
- ii RMC Regulations of 1912, paragraph 41 ... “If he fails a second time to qualify for class promotion he shall be removed from the college.”
- iii Bishop, op cit, p. 18.
- iv RMC Regulation of 1912, paragraph 58 and paragraph 66.
- v All personal facts about Bishop and other cadets are taken from the RMC Descriptive Roll, a contemporary ledger maintained on all cadets.
- vi Bishop, op cit, p. 16.
- vii The class transcript for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Class 1912 shows that Billy had completed several final exams. The transcript also indicates that he was rusticated.
- viii Bishop, or cit, p. 17.
- ix The Stone Frigate 1914, (privately printed, n.d.) p. 141. “It is with the greatest regret that the staff of the “Stone Frigate” acknowledges the tardiness of the publication thereof. This, however, we must blame on the Kaiser.”
- x The alleged crime might in fact be viewed as one of good initiative, bad execution. The lying or the cover up is more serious but if Bishop is judged in context of the English Public School concept of honour that was prevalent among cadets for some time he would, by this code, be doing the right thing. The problems arising from this attitude of the cadets ultimately lead to serious abuses. See R.A. Preston, Canada’s RMC, U of T Press, (Toronto, 1969), pp. 193-198 and for the later Arnold case, pp. 238-246.
- xi RMC Standing Orders amended to December 1911, paragraph 175. (These were known as the good old days!)
- xii The Stone Frigate 1914, p. 176.
- xiii 2<sup>nd</sup> Class transcripts of 1914 are complete with no apparent alterations or additions to the marks or to the class standings.
- xiv RMC Standing Orders, amended to December 1911, paragraph 120.
- xv Preston, op cit, p. 213 – “As soon as the college opened, many of the cadets, even some of the recruits, asked to be commissioned immediately in the hope of joining the CEF”.
- xvi Bishop’s peers, the classes entering in 1911 and 1912, paid the price of junior officers, 40% and 12.5% fatal casualties respectively. “God send me to see such a company together again when need is.” Lord Howard of Effingham.
- xvii Commandant’s Report 1918. These words were written by Colonel Perreau. I’ve found one other contemporary comment on Bishop’s later success from a classmate, No. 960 Dodwell, RMC 1912-14 (one who was given one of those 1914 Special Commissions) wrote to the Commandant, Col. Perreau in 1918, after his exchange as a prisoner-of war.

“I had five changes of camps in Germany, Neisse and Gundeifrei in Silesia, Gefeld, Strohen near Hanover, and Neunkirchen near Saarbrucken which of course you know is repeatedly bombed by our fliers. By the way, hasn’t little Bishop done well? Though I don’t know why on earth he has started writing books about it. I ran into several ex-cadets in Hunland...” Writing books is deemed to be more unusual than being heroic – something historians should keep in mind!