Billy Bishop: War Hero or Cold-Blooded Killer?

Canada’s top air ace in the First World War was William Avery “Billy” Bishop. He was from Owen Sound, Ontario. His record was impressive. He shot down seventy-two planes, the second-highest number of “kills” in the war. Germany’s Manfred von Richthofen, also widely known as the Red Baron, had eighty.

Bishop was the first Canadian pilot to be awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain’s most prestigious medal for bravery. He became the toast of Canada because of his successes, and he toured to promote the war effort and to help sell Victory Bonds. In the following passage from his diary, Bishop describes some of his daring adventures:

*He dived for about 600 feet (180 metres) and flattened out. I followed him and opened fire at forty to fifty yards (thirty-five to forty metres) range, firing forty to fifty rounds. A group of tracers (“visible bullets”) went into the fuselage and centre section, one begin seen entering immediately behind the pilot’s seat and one seemed to hit himself. The machine then fell out of control in a spinning nose-dive. I dived after him firing…*

*I must say that an enemy going down in flames is a source of great satisfaction. The moment you see the fire break you know that nothing in the world can save the man, or men, in the doomed machine.*

But the life of this Canadian legend was less glamourous than it appeared. In a letter home to his wife, Margaret, he wrote:

*I am thoroughly downcast tonight … Sometimes all of this awful fighting makes you wonder if you have a right to call yourself human. My honey, I am so sick of it all, the killing the war. All I want is home and you.*

In warfare, society’s norms are out on hold, as soldiers are often expected to kill, and in some cases are glorified for their number of kills. Many soldiers, past and present, suffer emotional trauma after experiencing the atrocities of war and have difficulty adjusting when they return home. At the time of the First World War, soldier’s battle stress was called *shell shock*. It is currently identified as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Analysis Questions:

1. Bishop’s diary of his personal account of what happened. His “kill” total has sometimes been questioned because his deeds were not always witnessed. Explain why you think Bishop was given credit for the “kills”. Is the diary a primary source? Evaluate it as a historical source.
2. Using the two sources presented here, identify Bishop’s personal reactions to killing in warfare. What might account for his conflicted feelings?

