

West magazine
Bush pilots – Wop May sidebar
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Edmonton pilot Wop May was just 18 when he disobeyed his squadron leader during a history-making dogfight in the First World War.

It was April 21, 1918. Flying his first combat mission into enemy territory with the 209th Squadron, May was told by squadron leader Captain Roy Brown, a childhood friend, to stay well out of harm's way.

For several minutes, May kept his Sopwith Camel biplane above the action as Allied and German planes exchanged gunfire. But May couldn't resist for long.

He dropped into the fray and shot down his first enemy fighter. Then his air-cooled machine guns jammed, and May turned tail for friendlier territory.

Suddenly, he realized a German Albatross D-5 was chasing him. At the controls was German ace Manfred von Richthofen, better known as The Red Baron. He was determined to make the young Canadian his 81st victim.

May flew low to the ground, dodging and ducking while desperately trying to avoid the German's bullets. Several bullets ventilated May's plane.

Just when the teenager thought he'd had the biscuit, squadron leader Brown appeared from above and peppered Richthofen with lead, killing him and sending the plane crashing to the ground.

The Red Baron's reign of terror was over. May was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and, after the war, returned home a national hero.

He was working as a bush pilot in northern Alberta in 1928, when again he found himself playing a hero's role.

Diphtheria had broken out in the community of Little Red River. Health officials asked May to fly 20 pounds of serum required to vaccinate the residents against the extremely contagious disease.

He and mechanic Vic Horner flew 965 kilometres in an open cockpit Avro Avian bi-plane without a heater. The temperature plummeted to minus 60 Fahrenheit.

To keep the serum from freezing – which would have rendered it useless – May wrapped it in blankets and placed it beside a charcoal heater in the plane's storage area. En route, the blankets caught fire and May was forced to land to extinguish it. He and Horner kept the serum warm inside their clothing for the rest of the trip.

When they finally landed, the pair was dog tired and their faces bleeding from cuts caused by flying ice. Frozen in their seats, they had to be helped out of the plane.

A doctor jumped onto a dog sled and rushed to Little Red River. The manager of the Hudson's Bay Company died, but the serum saved the community.

May and Horner were frostbitten when he returned to Edmonton, but they received a hero's welcome.

Four years later, May hit the news again when he helped the RCMP track down cop killer Albert Johnson, the infamous Mad Trapper from Rat River, Northwest Territories. **(See Backgrounder on Page XX)**

After surviving the Red Baron and the unforgiving North, May was felled by a heart attack while hiking in Utah on June 21, 1952. He was 56.
He was inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame in 1973.