

Cowan in hot seat with Billy Bishop

MONTREAL — The NFB's 1982 production of *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss*, an 80-minute documentary about Canada World War I flying ace Billy Bishop, has become the subject of bitter controversy in the Canadian Senate.

The Senate Sub-Committee on Veteran Affairs has accused the film's director, Paul Cowan, and the NFB of being "liars and cheats." These and similar accusations were directed at NFB chairman François Macerola, and Cowan at a four-hour sub-committee hearing Nov. 28 over the film's honesty. Another hearing was held Dec. 10.

"What is very frustrating is that I have condemned before having been heard," Cowan, 38, told Cinema Canada. "They believe that we set out to make a film that was going to condemn and deface Billy Bishop. Nothing is further from the truth. However, when I started doing research on this Canadian hero, many things didn't coincide with what was considered common knowledge about Bishop."

The Kid Who Couldn't Miss illustrates certain inconsistencies between the actual number of enemy planes Bishop shot down and the number of planes he is reported to have shot down. The film's questioning of the famous solo raid Bishop supposedly conducted on a German airfield stirred up the most controversy for the sub-committee.

"At no point does the film state that Bishop didn't really conduct the famous raid," said Cowan. "What we point out is that there is absolutely no evidence, no witnesses and no record to confirm that the raid ever took place. We also point out that out of 19 Victoria Crosses awarded to fliers during the first World War, Bishop was the only single-action VC with no witnesses or corroborators other than his own word.

"The hearings were very frustrating. They asked me if I felt they had the right to hold this hearing and I said yes, because they do, constitutionally, have that right. But what kind of hearing does not let you bring up witnesses for your defence while the senators had four people come up and back their position? Certainly not a fair one.

"What is even more upsetting is that they missed the whole point of the film," continued Cowan. "Bishop was a means to sell a war that was total nonsense to the people back home. He was in a sense

victimized by the system. But these people have never had their position challenged before and although they admitted that the facts on Bishop can be interpreted in different ways, they do not like our position. They should at least re-

spect it."

The senator most adverse to *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss* was Senator Hartland Molson, an old friend of Billy Bishop. Molson, who described the film as "pigeon droppings on the statue of Billy Bishop", wants to see the film shelved.

Cowan was "slightly encouraged that the second sub-com-

mittee hearing was a lot more civil than the first. But I am not going to speculate on the final verdict. The case still has to go through many levels of government before a final decision is made and I really don't know what to expect. I do, however, hope that the decision is made on what the film really states and not what the Senators say

it states."

The sub-committee's report — which could recommend against further screenings of the film — is expected to be released sometime in February. Cowan's other documentaries include *Democracy On Trial: The Morgenthauer Affair*, as well as episodes of Gwynne Dwyer's acclaimed *War* series.

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