

Profile – Billy Fiske – 601 Squadron – (From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)



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4 June 1911(1911-06-04) – 17 August 1940(1940-08-17) (aged 29)

Pilot Officer W.M.L. Fiske, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.

Birth name William Meade Lindsley Fiske III, Nickname Billy

Place of birth Brooklyn, New York

Place of death Royal West Sussex Hospital, Chichester

Resting place St Mary and St Blaise churchyard in Boxgrove, Sussex

Years of service 23 March 1940 - 17 August 1940

Rank Acting Pilot Officer

Unit No. 601 Squadron RAF

Battles/wars World War II - Battle of Britain

William Meade Lindsley "Billy" Fiske III (4 June 1911 – 17 August 1940) was the 1928 and 1932 Olympic champion bobsled driver and, following Jimmy Davies, was one of the first American pilots killed in action in World War II. At the time Fiske was serving in the Royal Air Force.

Early life

Billy Fiske was born in New York in 1911, the son of Beulah and William Fiske, a New England banking magnate. He attended school in Chicago, and then went to school in France in 1924, where

he discovered the sport of bobsled at the age of 16. Fiske attended Trinity Hall, Cambridge in 1928 where he studied Economics and History.

Fiske then worked at the London office of Dillon, Reed & Co, the New York bankers. On 8 September 1938, Fiske married Rose, Countess of Warwick, in Maidenhead.

Bobsled career

As driver of the first five-man U.S. Bobsled team to win the Olympics, Fiske became the youngest gold medalist in the sport, aged just 16 years at the 1928 Winter Olympics in St. Moritz, Switzerland. His American team-mates were Geoffrey Mason, Nion Tucker, Clifford Grey and Richard Parke.

Fiske competed again at the 1932 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, New York, USA, where he was given the honour of carrying the flag for the United States at the opening ceremony. The format of the race was altered to a four-man team, but again Fiske and his team-mates, Clifford Grey, Eddie Eagan, and Jay O'Brien took gold.

Olympic medal record

Men's bobsleigh Competitor for the United States
Gold 1928 St. Moritz Five-man
Gold 1932 Lake Placid Four-man

He was invited, but declined to lead the bobsled team in the 1936 Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Germany. It is believed by some that this decision was due to his disagreeing with the politics in Germany at the time, which may also explain his later decision to join the War-effort in 1940.

Fiske was also a Cresta Champion, and was well-known for jumps from the Badrutt's Palace Hotel's bar chandelier in St. Moritz.

World War II

Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Fiske was recalled to the New York offices of Dillon, Reed & Co, but on 30 August 1939 he returned to England aboard the Aquitania accompanying a bank colleague who was also a member of No. 601 (County of London) Auxiliary Air Force Squadron. Fiske was one of seven US aircrew personnel who fought in the Battle of Britain, although due to the neutrality of the United States, he pretended to be a Canadian. He joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and was promoted to the rank of Pilot Officer on 23 March 1940. He undertook his flying training at No. 10 Elementary Flying Training School at RAF Yatesbury, Wiltshire before moving to RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, for advanced flying training. He, American citizen, duly pledged his life and loyalty to the king, George VI, and was formally admitted into the RAF. In his diary, a joyous Fiske wrote, "I believe I can lay claim to being the first U.S. citizen to join the RAF in England after the outbreak of hostilities". He joined No. 601 Squadron RAF at RAF Tangmere, West Sussex, the so-called Millionaire's Squadron on the 12 July 1940.

On 16 August 1940, in the midst of the Battle of Britain, No. 601 Squadron RAF were scrambled to intercept a squadron of German dive-bombers. Fiske was flying a Hurricane - code number P3358. The Squadron destroyed eight Stukas, but after just 15 minutes of flight, a German gunner put a bullet through Fiske's fuel tank. With his aircraft badly damaged and his hands and ankles burnt, Instead of bailing out Fiske nursed his Hurricane fighter home, gliding over a hedgerow to the airfield. Although Fiske landed his aircraft safely back at Tangmere, he had to be extracted from the aircraft by ambulance attendants. Shortly after, his fuel tank exploded. Fiske was taken to Royal West Sussex Hospital in Chichester for treatment, but he died 48 hours later from surgical shock. He was 29 years old.

Of Fiske's role in the Battle of Britain, Bill Bond, founder of the Battle of Britain Historical Society, wrote

"...although Billy made several sorties he didn't shoot anything down, so that his impact on the battle

in that respect was negligible, but he is most definitely still very much a hero in our book."

Fiske's Flight Commander, Sir Archibald Hope, added:

"Unquestionably Billy Fiske was the best pilot I've ever known. It was unbelievable how good he was. He picked up so fast it wasn't true. He'd flown a bit before, but he was a natural as a fighter pilot. He was also terribly nice and extraordinarily modest, and fitted into the squadron very well".

William Meade Lindsley "Billy" Fiske III grave Memorials and tributes



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Fiske is buried in St Mary and St Blaise churchyard in Boxgrove, Sussex. The inscription on his gravestone reads simply: He died for England.

A memorial stained glass window was dedicated to him on 17 September 2008 at Boxgrove Priory. At the dedication service, a number of former colleagues of Fiske attended and his green Bentley was on display.

On 4 July 1941, a plaque was unveiled in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral, London. The inscription reads: An American citizen who died that England might live. The decision to unveil this plaque on American Independence Day was probably a political one; the United States had not officially joined the war and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was keen to popularise Fiske's story. The plaque was unveiled by Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary of State for Air. He said at the ceremony:

"Here was a young man for whom life held much. Under no kind of compulsion he came to fight for Britain. He came and he fought and he died". A memorial tablet was dedicated to him in the crypt of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York.

Fiske is listed on the Battle of Britain Monument in London and the Battle of Britain Memorial, Capelle-Ferme.

The United States Bobsled and Skeleton Federation created the Billy Fiske Memorial Trophy as a posthumous tribute to him. The trophy is awarded to the national champion four-man bobsled team each year.

In addition to a 2005 documentary (American Warrior: Billy Fiske), a controversial film about Billy Fiske, *The Few*, was slated for release in 2008.

Red Valley Productions performed a new play based on his life called *Billy Fiske: King of Speed* at the Alexandra Theatre, Bognor Regis from 20–25 July 2010.