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The Mystery of the Missing Hockey Star

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Photograph from
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Fame

In April 1951, in one of the most dramatic moments in hockey history, defenceman Bill Barilko scores the goal that takes the Stanley Cup for the Maple Leafs. Four months later he disappears in the northern Ontario wilderness, and the mystery begins...



In the fading light of a northern night on August 28, 1951, a phantom plane appeared over Timmins, Ontario. Witnesses claimed it was yellow, one wing a slightly different shade, and that as it flew by it gunned its engine as if to send a message. Speculation was that it carried two men. One was a young Canadian legend and the other bore a name of even greater fame. But these men were ghosts- for they had already vanished from life. Two days earlier they had disappeared into the northern wilderness and become part of our nation's history and an enduring mystery.

Bill Barilko was born in this gold-mining town in 1927 to parents of Russian heritage. It was no different than many other northern communities of that era, carved out of endless miles of coniferous trees and rock. The people worked hard, stuck together, and on cold winter

nights gathered at the local arena for some release: in the fast and violent sport of hockey. Not much of a skater but always full of courage, Barilko started as a goaltender. But as his skating skills improved he became a defenceman, a bashing, daring, spirited player who gave every team he ever played for immeasurable spine. Ascending to the local junior team in his teens he was spotted by a scout from the Toronto Maple Leafs, who admired, above all, his evident and shining pluck. Big, blond, and smiling, he stood out like some sort of hero, fated for something extraordinary.

By age eighteen, he was in Hollywood. There he played for the lowest of the Leafs' three farm teams-the Wolves, new members of the Pacific Coast League-in the city of dreams but far from the big time. Barilko quickly made an impression. He loved to knock down any opponent who dared to enter his end of the rink, not just into the boards, but often, it seemed, right through them. When the Leafs convened at St. Catharines, Ontario for their 1946-47 training camp, they were in a rebuilding stage, despite having won the Stanley Cup just two seasons earlier. An astounding six rookies would make the team, among them the speedy, effervescent Howie Meeker and half their defence. Barilko was deemed green, despite an intimidating presence, and was returned to Los Angeles. But the big club kept its eyes on him.

The new year rolled in and the team was doing well until late in January; injuries began to plague them and they stumbled. Soon they were down to three defencemen and fans waited to see which veteran defender would be promoted from their top farm team in Pittsburgh. Then a surprising and inspired choice was made by the Leafs' irascible owner and general manager, Conn Smythe, one he would never regret, but that, in its own way, would always haunt him. He asked for Bill Barilko.

By plane, train, and taxi, he came to save them, almost crossing the continent from southwest to northeast. When he finally arrived, on February 3, 1947, Toronto was blanketed in one of the worst snowstorms in decades. Just nineteen years old, he entered the dressing room for his first practice, glanced at the slumping team and legends like Turk Broda, Syl Apps, and Teeder Kennedy, and boldly announced, "Boys, the sun is shining!" Almost from that moment onward they became champions of unprecedented achievement.

His first game was in Montreal against mighty archenemies the Canadiens. The Leafs were savaged 8-2 on the score sheet, undone by another Rocket Richard attack. But under the surface something else seemed at play. Smythe, upset by his team's recent timidity, was not displeased with what he saw, and especially with his new recruit.

Barilko stood his ground like he would die for the cause. Instead of shying away from the terrorizing Richard, he seemed to seek him out, anxious to flatten him and his team. Big Montreal captain Butch Bouchard, used to having his way with many opponents, collided with Barilko and turned on him as if to destroy the youngster's spirit before it grew. But instantly the teenager was facing him, anxious to do battle. The next day the Toronto papers took note. And so did his teammates.

They won their next game, against Boston, and Barilko scored.

Throughout the rest of the schedule he had his ups and downs, but he never retreated and kept improving his play. The playoffs began, and the Leafs rolled over the Detroit Red Wings and young Gordie Howe into the finals. There they encountered the Canadiens: Richard, Bouchard, Elmer Lach, Toe Blake, and ambidextrous Hall-of-Fame goalie Bill Durnan, he who had exclaimed to the press that he could not fathom how Toronto had even made it to the playoffs. Durnan would eat his words. Storming back from a 6-0 first game loss, the Leafs took the series in six games, winning the Stanley Cup on home ice in front of their adoring fans to become the youngest champions ever.

That season and the three that followed were virtually ruled by the Toronto Maple Leafs. Youthful, swashbuckling, and violent, they were English Canada's team, their games broadcast nationwide by the legendary Foster Hewitt. In 1947-48, Barilko led the league in penalty minutes, scrapped with anyone who tested him, and kept administering those thundering bodychecks. "If he got a piece of you," said a teammate later on, "you hurt for a week. He just tore you up." Enemy Montreal boss Dick Irvin despised him. "I hate that Barilko so much," he once said. "I sure wish we had him with Canadiens."

Off the ice he never seemed to stop smiling and was the team's practical joker. He called himself "the Kid" and exuded confidence. In both good times and bad he told his teammates, "Don't worry about the Kid." The optimism was infectious. Even in the midst of battle his sense of humour was evident. Just before delivering bone-rattling hits he would warn his opponents. "Boop-boop," he would say ... and then flatten them. An early proponent of the slapshot, he could also score goals, usually in key games. In the playoffs, he excelled.

Two more consecutive Stanley Cup victories followed, making the Leafs the first team to win three in a row. In 1949-50 they seemed poised to win a fourth when, in the seventh and deciding game of the semifinals, they lost to Detroit in overtime. A shot from a distance drifted towards the Leaf goal, hit a body, and went in, ending the dynasty. The puck had struck number 5 ... Bill Barilko.

The team rebounded for the 1950-51 season and found themselves in the finals against the Canadiens. It would be French Canada versus English in, arguably, the greatest Stanley Cup final ever. All games went into overtime, something never seen before or since. Richard got one winner, the Leafs' Sid Smith, Kennedy, and Harry Watson the others, as Toronto went ahead three games to one. Another win would mean victory. The nation was gripped by the confrontation. The game had never been played like this. And the stage was set for a moment that will be remembered, said one journalist, "as long as hockey is recalled." On April 21, 1951, Montreal and Toronto were locked in the most titanic struggle of nearly forty years of competition. Maple Leaf Gardens was packed. Going into the final minute, Montreal led 2-1, but with 32 seconds left the Leafs tied the score in dramatic fashion. The crowd, hoarse from a thrilling, tension-filled game, went wild. But the climax was still to come.

The Leafs came out of their dressing rooms on fire and began pressing the Canadiens, trying to finish them. Soon they had them reeling. Meeker,

bursting into the Montreal end on right wing, gathered up a pass from Watson and sailed behind the net and out the other side, trying to jam the puck in from there. But goalie Gerry McNeil made the save and fell. The puck bounced back to Meeker. As big Habs' defenceman Tom Johnson rushed towards him and nailed him up against the end boards, he deftly poked the puck out towards the goal crease. It came right to Watson in front. He shot. McNeil, still getting up, stretched sideways to stop it. But the puck hit the Canadiens' Bouchard and squirted towards uncovered Leaf centre Cal Gardner. He would have a clear shot, and McNeil was out of position. Bouchard couldn't reach him; neither could nearby Rocket Richard. But as Gardner eyed the puck, a sort of apparition appeared on the scene. Two minutes and fifty-three seconds had elapsed in overtime.

This was in the days before hockey was televised, but an old Gardens' film has preserved the moment. As the puck comes towards Gardner, he and six other men are in the frame- Meeker, Johnson, Richard, Bouchard, Watson, and goaltender McNeil. Then a flash begins entering. First a stick, then a big, bold body: "Bashing Bill" Barilko. Against all good sense, he vacates his blueline position and seizes his moment. He takes the puck on his backhand and fires a bullet towards the net, falling as he does. Airborne, he watches the puck dart over the falling McNeil's right shoulder and into the net. Flashbulbs go off; light fills the Gardens for split seconds. One light belongs to Nat Turofsky, the hockey photographer who would record many feats but never one greater than this. His photo of Barilko scoring as he flies through the air is one of the most famous in sports history.

The Gardens erupt as never before. The sound from the crowd is so enormous that a journalist turns to another at his elbow and can't be heard. He scribbles on a scrap of paper: "If the man from Mars were to walk in here, what would he think?"

Barilko is lifted onto the shoulders of his teammates, the Stanley Cup is brought to centre ice, Captain Kennedy proclaims this his greatest thrill in hockey. The crowd keeps roaring, refusing to leave; the band plays "Auld Lang Syne." Across the nation, listeners sit by their radios, enthralled. "Hollywood Bill" Barilko has produced a classic Canadian moment. He is twenty-four years old. He has been in the NHL for four and a half years and won four Stanley Cups.

And he will never play hockey again.

Four months later, on Friday, August 24, he has an argument with his mother Fay in Timmins. As daring in life as his dart from the blueline against the Canadiens, he is always in search of adventure. He is preparing to go fishing on Seal River, where James Bay meets Hudson Bay in near-arctic Quebec, and will fly with a local dentist who is an amateur pilot. But Mrs. Barilko lost her husband on a Friday and the day haunts her. She has a premonition of danger and begs Bill to go another time. Within hours he is gone.

On the morning of August 27, his sister Anne receives a phone call from a friend. Bill and his pilot, expected to have returned the previous evening, are twelve hours overdue. The day lengthens. Worry turns to fear. Several

local pilots take to the air, scouring the vast wilderness below the lost plane's route to the north. Area media get word, and by August 28, the news is spreading nationwide. The next day all the Toronto papers run front-page headlines, photos, and extensive articles. "Barilko Lost in Northern Wilds", says *The Daily Star*. The *Globe and Mail* ominously reports that bad weather is descending upon the James Bay region. And the *Evening Telegram* shouts in big, bold letters "Barilko Alive". The report would prove false.

In Timmins, Fay Barilko is inconsolable. She is found wandering the streets in a heavy downpour, drenched to the skin. By August 28, the Ontario Provincial Police are involved, as is the Royal Canadian Air Force Rescue Coordination Centre in Trenton, Ontario. The formal search begins the next day. Headquarters are set up at the little airport in Kapuskasing, a pulp-and-paper town on Highway 11 in the north. This will be the largest search-and-rescue operation in Canadian history.

Right from the outset the entire story is engulfed in an aura of mystery. Even the names involved seem from a Twilight Zone episode. Blond, twenty-four-year-old Barilko has vanished in a yellow plane called a Fairchild 24. In 1611, Henry Hudson disappeared in the same area, cast adrift by a mutinous crew, floating away into an enduring Canadian mystery. Three hundred and forty years later Barilko's plane is piloted by his friend the dentist, Dr. ... Henry Hudson.

Clues seem endless and reports of sightings are many. A hydro crew working near the Ontario Northland Railway line near Coral Rapids north of Cochrane saw a light in the sky on the evening of August 26, like the light of a small aircraft. The next day a bush pilot spots smoke rising from the same vicinity. But when the RCAF blanket the area "tree by tree" and "inch by inch," they find nothing. Cree people are asked to help search the James Bay coast. Some report having seen the plane just south of Rupert House near the Nottaway River. That area is soon combed, to no avail.

The number of planes made available grows from four, to ten, to seventeen, to twenty. They search north of Timmins, north of Cochrane, northwest of Kapuskasing, above the waters of James Bay, on subarctic islands, and in northwestern Quebec. Nothing. The area covered grows to more than 500,000 square kilometres. The *Globe and Mail* runs six front-page stories in two weeks. All rumours and evidence are thoroughly investigated, the tiniest bush fires are checked, empty canoes and tepees are searched. Nothing.

Authorities begin to piece together what happened before the plane vanished into the night. After two days of fishing, Barilko and Hudson had left Seal River, heading south for home on the morning of Sunday, August 26. They arrived at Fort George and its Hudson's Bay Company depot midway down the eastern coast of James Bay about noon. There they unloaded several items-sleeping bags, a tent, cooking equipment-in an apparent attempt to lighten their load. Then they landed at Rupert House, 260 kilometres farther south, near the Quebec-Ontario border. They refueled. Dan Wheeler, local HBC clerk, warned Hudson of a storm brewing to the south; Hudson replied that they had 120 pounds of fish in their pontoons and were anxious to get home before it spoiled. Barilko

walked quietly along the dock, looking out into the Canadian wilderness.

Moments later, despite Wheeler's warnings, they tried to get airborne off the water. The plane seemed to labour. It looked weighed down by something. It dipped and dived in the air and barely climbed over the trees. A Cree woman commented that it seemed to be doing tricks. The storm, with its gusting headwind, awaited them in Ontario. But what did all of this mean? What did it say about the fate of the men and their plane?

The search went on into a second week and then a third. More plumes of smoke were investigated, a piece of airplane plexiglass was checked in a farmer's field near Kapuskasing, yellow clay on riverbeds (as yellow as the Fairchild 24) produced false hopes, photo reconnaissance came into use, and planes and men became so overused that a Dakota aircraft crashed near the end of a runway and almost produced more tragedy. But the intensity of the search didn't lessen. "We'll fly at 500 feet and allow for only a mile visibility," said Searchmaster G.J. Ruston of a new tactic. "With as much territory as we have to cover, that amounts to looking under every twig."

But looking under every twig proved insufficient. And finally, during the last week of September-after thirty days of searching, 1,354 air-hours, using twenty-eight planes and covering 843,443 square kilometres-the search was called off.

In Toronto the Leafs were heartbroken. Turk Broda, Teeder Kennedy, and Bill's brother Alex had helped raise money for the "Search for Bill Barilko" fund aimed at mounting a ground search party. But as the team gathered for training camp on September 23, hope seemed gone. They cancelled their victory banquet. Barilko's name was placed at the top of the roster list and his equipment was hung in his stall. But he never came.

Conn Smythe, known for being a skinflint, offered a \$10,000 dead-or-alive reward and posted it in the papers. He had been golfing with Kennedy when he heard that Barilko was missing. It had cut him like a knife. As the search proceeded he had spent time watching films of the Leafs' Cup triumph and told the press gathered at camp: "I can't get over the way that Barilko stood out." The young man from the north had been his "bounce boy," the unflagging spirit of the team.

The air of mystery about Barilko's disappearance continued. It grew beyond speculation about where the plane went down or how the men might be surviving, trapped in a muskeg desert, besieged by black flies and mosquitoes. Mystics and mediums were drawn to the case. Some said Barilko was still alive, and there were whispers that he and his pilot had fled somewhere for some secret purpose. Stories like the sighting of the ghost plane over Timmins had fuelled such things.

It had been said that a yellow aircraft had appeared suddenly out of the sky, buzzed down low over the Hudson home, gunned its engine, seemed to stall more than once as if to attract attention, and then turned toward nearby Porcupine Lake, where Hudson frequently landed. It was a single-engine craft with pontoons and one wing a slightly different shade: all fit the description of the lost Fairchild 24. Mrs. Hudson saw the plane and so

did a close friend. She joyfully ran from the house and drove to the lake to pick up her husband and Bill Barilko. But the plane never appeared. Later the sighting was discounted, said by some to have been a Lands and Forests search plane, but a week later "a yellow object on a hill" near Timmins reawakened interest. Days later searches were still being made in the area.

Other circumstances deepened the sense of mystery. Barilko had come from a gold-mining town. He had invested in gold. It had long been said that some miners smuggled bits of gold out of the depths in their pockets. But one had to get it into the right hands to profit from it. Dentists, working with gold fillings, were perfect mules, and Dr. Henry Hudson was a dentist. This melded with accounts of the plane being weighed down by something much heavier than 120 pounds of fish, extensive police involvement in the search, the story of the Timmins ghost plane, and the fact that the crash had eluded a microscopic search of the north. Together these factors provided the background for a great deal of intrigue.

Other stories were even more bizarre. One claimed that Barilko had fled to the Soviet Union and was teaching the Reds how to play defence. In 1951, at the height of the Cold War and Joe McCarthy, rumours, speculation, and conspiracy were all the rage. When a plane flew off the radar screen in the area where North American military were daily tracking the skies for Soviet invasions, such a disappearance was ripe for rumour.

But above all, Barilko's fame may have been behind the romanticizing of his final chapter. He had achieved the ultimate in a Canadian boy's dreams ... and then vanished. In the twentieth century, mystery seemed to go hand in hand with many famous deaths, often media-driven. In Bill Barilko people may have seen their own hoped-for immortality, and they just couldn't let him go.

Something strange happened to the Toronto Maple Leafs after the summer of 1951. They stopped winning. Right from the minute they played their first exhibition for Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip at the Gardens in October, they seemed to lack something. The team that had won four Cups in five years was knocked from contention in four straight games in the spring. Over the next six years, they missed the playoffs three times and once even finished dead last.

No player would be allowed to wear Barilko's number again, and his loss hung over the team like a curse. It was said the Leafs would never regain the Stanley Cup until Barilko was found. But in the spring of 1962, eleven years and one day after he scored his dramatic goal, Punch Imlach marched a new team into Chicago and reclaimed the Cup. The Daily Star announced on its front page that "the jinx" was over.

Five weeks later, Gary Fields, a pilot with Lands and Forests out of Cochrane, was flying a routine flight towards James Bay. About 100 kilometres north and a little west, he looked down and saw something glinting amongst the dense black spruce trees and muskeg below. In seconds it disappeared. He and his colleague returned home thinking they had seen the remnants of a well-marked plane crash. When they told their story to others, jaws dropped. The search was on again. But for a week the

plane eluded pursuers. Finally, on June 6, they found it.

"The mystery surrounding the disappearance of hockey star Bill Barilko 11 years ago has finally been cleared up," said the *Toronto Telegram*. But was it? The aircraft was twisted, half-buried, and camouflaged. It was a yellow Fairchild 24 with CF-FXT on the wing, and there were two skeletons in the cockpit. All that made sense. But others things didn't. The plane was facing north rather than south, its instruments were in a nose-up position and its pontoons, those sealed pontoons that had been so full of fish, or gold, or whatever, were ... empty.

Personal items found on the scene made it obvious who the dead men were. But because there were no dental records to confirm their identities, neither body was officially identified. An inquiry was held into the cause of the crash in Cochrane on October 18, yet despite lingering questions, it was treated as an open-and-shut case. Though the Search and Rescue report blamed the crash on pilot inexperience combined with bad weather, other investigators, most notably the Department of Transport, said there wasn't enough evidence to know for certain. The question of how 120 pounds of fish could have disappeared from the pontoons while in the air between Rupert House and the crash site was never explored.

In *Overtime, Overdue*, the only book written about Barilko, John Melady pursues such issues. A search-and-rescue expert, he feels that many things about the case remain mysterious. The size of the RCAF rescue operation was enormous, unprecedented, and hardly fitting for the loss of two men in a single-engine plane. The number of OPP officers assigned to the search seemed abnormal too. Melady, knowing the size of the plane's gas tanks and that they had been refuelled in Rupert House, says lack of gasoline could not have caused the crash. Like others, he also wondered what happened to the fish. His research revealed that the OPP had ordered that no one touch the plane until they arrived, and when Gary Fields saw it a short while later, he noticed that the pontoons had been sliced open, again raising rumours that the plane was full of gold bullion.

Melady quoted an article in the *Toronto Telegram* the day after the plane was found. In it Peter Worthington called the OPP investigation a "hush-hush assignment." "Although the bush has surrendered the victims," he wrote, "the mystery still lingers."

Bill Barilko has now disappeared into our popular history. In the real world he was replaced on the Leaf defence by Tim Horton, another hard-rock from the north who died violently and became a legend. In song Barilko was memorialized in the 1990s by Canadian rock giants The Tragically Hip. The haunting and elliptical "Fifty Mission Cap," about a man who finds Barilko's story on the reverse side of a hockey card, was often sung at packed Maple Leaf Gardens concerts as sweater number 5 hung from the rafters near the spot where he scored his goal. Late in life Turk Broda was asked to name the greatest defenceman who ever played in front of him. "Bill Barilko," he replied, without hesitation. He would have been a great one, said others, and had only scratched the surface of his potential.

In a tavern north of Toronto in the year 2000, Harry Watson sits down to

reminisce. Seventy-seven years old, with white hair and glasses, he still gets excited when he thinks of his former mate and that moment on April 21, 1951, when, poised on the ice five metres in front of the Montreal goal, he saw Barilko whiz past and time stood still. Eleven years later, he bore his friend's light casket at a Timmins church. When he talks of "the Kid" he turns wistful. "It didn't matter where we went, he'd walk into a room and he'd just seem to light up the room. People loved to be with him. ... It was really something." It's a phrase he uses more than once. The conversation turns to the goal, the roar of the crowd, the plane's disappearance, and rumours of gold smuggling. Bill Barilko's life seems like a fairytale, a mystery, a story that never happened. But it did.

"It was really something," says Harry Watson.

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