

Time capsule

November 2021

## Alan Arnett McLeod VC



One hundred and three years after his death, it is hard to put into perspective the life and death of Alan Arnett McLeod VC. He lived only

a very short time and his only contribution to the world at nineteen was his life. So why is it so important he be remembered?

Alan Arnett McLeod was born on 20 April 1899 in Stonewall, Manitoba, Canada. When the Great War erupted in August 1914, he promptly enlisted until the powers to be realized his age and sent him home. McLeod waited patiently until attaining the minimum age desired for military service and then applied for pilot training with the Royal flying corps.(RFC). He was accepted and enlisted on 23 April 1917, fourteen days after Vimy Ridge. He made his first flight on 4 June 1917 at Long Branch, Toronto and after just three hours dual instruction flew his first solo flight on 9 June. After further training at Camp Borden he was awarded his RFC wings brevet on 31 July 1917.

Alan's first operational unit was 82 Squadron RFC at Waddington, England where he flew the Armstrong Whitworth FK8 two seat bomber.

In November 1917, McLeod was transferred to 51 Home Defence Squadron. Late November found him at St. Omer as a member of the RFC pilots pool and reporting to 2 Squadron at Hesdigneul, France. There he flew the AWFK 8 known as the "Big Ack", a general purpose bomber in an army co-operation role such as recce and bombing with a top speed of 90 mph.

His enthusiasm and real desire to fly a fighter found him using his bomber as a fighter, strafing trenches and artillery gun sites, so much so his CO called him "a young fire-eater".

On 19 December the young pilot and his gunner observer attacked a formation of eight German albatross scouts breaking it up and claiming one kill. Later in January 1918 he engaged a German observation balloon, destroyed it while fighting off protective fighters. For this action he and his observer were mentioned in dispatches.

March, 1918 was the great German offensive and directly opposite McLeod's 2 Squadron near Amiens was Richthofen's Flying Circus.

On 27 March, seven AWFK 8's of 2 Squadron, including McLeod's with his gunner observer Lieutenant A.W. Hammond MC took off for a bombing run on massing German troops. After a fruitless reconnaissance and flying independently McLeod was about to abandon his sortie when a balloon was spotted below him. He quickly dived to attack, before he could get within range a lone Fokker triplane appeared cruising at about 3000 feet. Immediately the Canadian pulled his aircraft into a climb to engage the German where Hammond shot it down. The combat had been seen by a loose formation of German Fokkers from the circus who immediately piled down on the bomber to seek their revenge for their lost comrade.

In the ensuing battle, Hammond was wounded three times and McLeod once in the leg. One of the German pilots, Hans Kirchstein maintained a relentless attack on the lone bomber continuously raking it with machine gun fire, damaging the fuselage and setting the fuel tank on fire forcing Hammond to move about the stricken aircraft. The flames burned away the cockpits of the crew and set McLeod's flying boots and coat aflame while his instrument board and control column was engulfed in smoke. Satisfied his victim was doomed, Kirchstein broke off the engagement leaving McLeod to crablike slide slip his aircraft in an attempt to prevent raging flames from reaching Hammond clinging precariously to his scarf ring gun mounting. All through this ordeal, McLeod had been controlling the aircraft with the control column from the lower left wing root as most of his cockpit was completely gone.

As McLeod's bomber was rapidly descending to a blazing end, one Fokker followed it down and despite his grievous wounds, Hammond managed a burst into the German and sending him into his own lines.

The blazing bomber crashed in No Man's Land and slithered into a crater. Although wounded five times, McLeod pulled the unconscious Hammond from the wreck despite knowing his fully bombed up plane could blow them to bits any second. With Hammond on his back, McLeod headed towards friendly lines. In the process he was wounded by shrapnel finally making it to a section of the line and collapsing from loss of blood and exhaustion. For five hours they were unable to move to a dressing station due to the German barrage. Hammond had suffered six wounds and a shattered leg. Finally after an extensive journey stretcher borne they arrived at Prince of Wales hospital in London where for several weeks young McLeod lingered near death from his many wounds.

Notified of his son's critical condition, McLeod's father travelled from Canada to spend two months by his side as he slowly recovered.

On 1 May 1918, the London Gazette announced the award of the Victoria Cross to McLeod and on the 4 September wearing the newly introduced RAF uniform and accompanied by his father he hobbled with two canes to receive his cross from the king. Immediately afterward he was sent home to convalescent, arriving in Winnipeg 30 September 1918.

Gradually his health improved, but in November 1918, the Spanish flu struck Alan Arnett McLeod VC and still visibly weak he passed away on 6 November. He was buried in Kildonan cemetery, Winnipeg just two days before the armistice in Europe.

His courageous companion Hammond recovered from his wounds, and was awarded a bar to his MC.

At nineteen years of age, Alan McLeod was the youngest recipient of a VC for aerial operations during 1914-18 war and was only the second youngest air VC of both world conflicts.

NOW YOU KNOW WHY

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