

Armstrong Whitworth F.K.8

# Victoria Cross Hero



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**O**n 1 May 1918, the name of 2nd Lieutenant A A McLeod of the Royal Air Force appeared in the *London Gazette* as having been awarded the Victoria Cross. Only three Canadian aviators received this decoration during the last Great War, and he was the youngest, being not then 19. As a matter of further interest he was not a fighter pilot, to whom, as a rule, fate sent more opportunities for winning the VC; he was one of the very few airmen to win it in a heavy bomber. As a record of successful achievement, dogged endurance and high courage, the story of the fight that gave McLeod his decoration is worth re-telling.

## LOST IN THE FOG

With Lieutenant A W Hammond as observer, he was flying an Armstrong-Whitworth one morning on a bombing raid against German troop concentrations near Bray. They were flying in company with six other planes, but soon lost them in fog and had to come down at another squadron's aerodrome. Owing to slight damage on landing they did not take off again till afternoon, but in spite of the weather and disregarding the fact that Richthofen's famous circus was known to have been operating in the neighbourhood, they determined to finish the job they had started out to do.

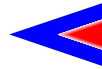
Reaching the Bray area, with clouds now at about 3,000 ft, they started to look for a target. Soon they spotted a German battery in action and were just getting into position to bomb when suddenly a German triplane appeared only 200 yards away.

The enemy was one of the fast new Fokkers for which the heavily-loaded Armstrong-Whitworth was hardly a match, but without hesitation they attacked. By skilful manoeuvring McLeod put Hammond in position, and after three short bursts of fire the German machine went over on its back, then into a spin and crashed to the ground.

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**Lieutenant A A McLeod, a young Canadian aviator who received the Victoria Cross**



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## **OUT OF THE BLUE**

McLeod and Hammond were waving congratulations to each other over their unexpected success, when all at once the clouds broke and they saw blue sky. At the same moment another Fokker triplane dived at them, followed by six others. (It is quite clear from Richthofen's reports for the day that these machines were his and were therefore flown by some of the finest German pilots.) The German aircraft swarmed around them, firing from all directions, but Hammond and McLeod made good use of their guns, firing just enough to keep the enemy at bay and at the same time conserving their ammunition. Presently, by very skilful handling of the Armstrong-Whitworth, McLeod again gave Hammond the chance for a good burst, this time at a plane which had dived so close that he was only a few feet away when Hammond opened fire. The force of the bullets hitting the German aircraft was so great that the body of the triplane broke off at the pilot's seat and the wreckage immediately burst into flames.

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At the same time another triplane dived from behind and zoomed up underneath the British machine, raking it with fire, hitting both McLeod and Hammond and igniting the tank. At last the fight had come to its almost inevitable end. They were still about 2,000 ft up, and McLeod put the machine into an easy dive in an effort to reach the ground. Before long, the floor of the machine fell away, carrying with it the revolving stool on which the observer sat.

In spite of his wounds, Hammond managed to climb up and sit on the ledge surrounding the top of the observer's cockpit. It now looked as though death was certain, but McLeod climbed out on the left lower wing and controlled the plane from there, putting it into a steep sideslip so that the flames blew clear of himself and his observer. One of the Germans, evidently thinking that the British aircraft was hopelessly out of action, dived so close that Hammond could see the features of the pilot.

Even though one of his arms was completely useless and that he had been hit in several places, Hammond once more manned his gun and shot the German machine down in flames. The remaining Fokker again opened fire, and finally jammed Hammond's gun. He was then able to follow them safely almost to the ground, hitting them time and time again. McLeod still kept the Armstrong-Whitworth in a steep sideslip and finally succeeded in flattening it out just before it hit the ground, where it crashed into a shell-hole. Before it did so, Hammond had climbed on to the upper wing and both were thrown clear of the wreckage.

## **CRASH LANDING**

As it crashed the plane began to blaze fiercely, and as there were eight heavy bombs and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition still in it, the two airmen, who had escaped death most miraculously, were once more threatened. Hammond, who had been wounded six times, was now quite helpless, and McLeod, although he himself received five wounds, began to drag him to safety. The machine-gun bullets from the plane were going off all around, and soon the bombs also exploded and blew parts of the aircraft about the pair, but without further injuring either of them.

When they had come down, neither had known where they were, until heavy machine-gun fire told them that they were between the two front lines. McLeod dragged Hammond toward the British trenches and was again wounded. However, before collapsing from loss of blood, he had dragged his companion by sheer dogged courage to within a few yards of the trenches where some men from the South African Scottish rushed out and carried them into the trench.

Then came perhaps the worst experience of all. They were in the very midst of the battle area, and at this particular point there were no communication trenches through which they could be carried back to safety. Their rescuers could only wait for darkness, and all afternoon they lay in terrible pain, expecting at any time to be attacked.

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About eight o'clock that night they reached the reserve trenches where their wounds were dressed and the pain relieved by morphine. Then they were taken by stretcher bearers to a dressing station, on by ambulance to the Casualty Clearing Station and thence to hospital at Etaples. Two nights later both were safely back in England.

For this epic fight Hammond received a bar to his Military Cross, while McLeod was awarded a well-earned Victoria Cross.

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