

A local hero remembered, Lt. Alan Arnett McLeod V.C.



On Tuesday May 9, 2017 a special commemorative monument will be dedicated to the life of Lt. Alan Arnett McLeod V.C. The commemoration will take place at the grave site of Alan Arnett McLeod, which is located in the Historic Kildonan Church & Cemetery situated at 2373 Main Street, Winnipeg. The dedication ceremony will start at 10:30am and will be followed by a reception in Nisbet Hall, which is part of Kildonan Community Church, just north of the cemetery. Officials from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Canadian Armed Forces will be present.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Historic Kildonan Church and Cemetery Inc., we invite you to come out to this event and honor the memory of Lt. Alan Arnett McLeod V.C.

As conservators of the Historic Kildonan Cemetery, we feel an obligation to retell the story of our fallen young Manitoban, Lt. Alan Arnett McLeod V.C.

Almost 100 years ago, in March of 1918, a brave young man from Stonewall, a descendent of the Selkirk Settlers, was piloting RAF bomber over enemy lines in France, when he and his gunner were set upon by 8 German fighter aircraft. McLeod, using his superior flying skills, and in spite of he and his gunner being wounded several times, somehow McLeod was able to crash land his plane and both men survived.

The following is an extract from The London Gazette,' dated May 1, 1918, records the following:

Whilst flying with his observer (Lt. A. W. Hammond, M.C.), attacking hostile formations by bombs and machine-gun fire, he was assailed at a height of 5,000 feet by eight enemy triplanes, which dived at him from all directions, firing from their front guns. By skillful maneuvering he enabled his observer to fire bursts at each machine in turn, shooting three of them down out of control. By this time Lt. McLeod had received five wounds, and whilst continuing the engagement a bullet penetrated his petrol tank and set the machine on fire. He then climbed out on to the left bottom wing, controlling his machine from the side of the fuselage, and by side-slipping steeply kept the flames to one side, thus enabling the observer to continue firing until the ground was reached. The observer had been wounded six times when the machine crashed in "No Man's Land," and 2nd Lt. McLeod, not withstanding his own wounds, dragged Lt. Hammond away from the burning wreckage at great personal risk from heavy machine-gun fire from the enemy's lines. This very gallant pilot was again wounded by a bomb whilst engaged in this act of rescue, but he persevered until he had placed Lt. Hammond in comparative safety, before falling himself from exhaustion and loss of blood.

Recorded below is a longer history of Alan Arnett McLeod

Alan Arnett McLeod, VC

World War I Aerial Hero



A Short History

Alan McLeod wasn't a fighter pilot, and he didn't rack up a massive kill of German planes, but he and his gunner/observer were daring aces all the same.

Alan Arnett McLeod was born in 1899 in Stonewall, Manitoba. He had a simple childhood typical of the early 1900's. He was a shy and unassuming child, slight of build and quiet. His father was the medical doctor in Stonewall, and later Winnipeg. Being the area doctor he owned an early Ford, and Alan enjoyed driving it down the back country roads. Early on he developed an affinity for the military. He enrolled in [The 34th Fort Garry Horse](#) in 1913, at age 14. He was 4 years under age, but the officers looked the other way. It was peace time and there was little doing. Mostly he groomed horses, shovelled manure and the like. But he was thrilled, they even let him wear a uniform.

When the "Great Adventure" started in 1914, Alan was sent home, with a riding crop as a souvenir, the officers were not so callous as to take a 14 year-old boy to France. He tried several times to enlist in the army in Winnipeg, but he was rebuffed each time and sent back to home and school. He tried to enroll in the cadet wing of the Royal Flying Corps then taking enlistment in Toronto. They insisted on a birth certificate, when they saw he was 17 he was rejected, but they promised to process his application when he turned 18. As soon as he turned 18 he quit school and headed to Winnipeg to start his enrollment in the RFC. His imagination had been captured by stories of flying and fighting in the air. He was signed up as a pilot-in-training and sent to Long Branch just outside of Toronto for pilot training. He turned out to be a natural at it, throwing his [AVRO 504](#) around the sky with abandon. An 18-year old's ignorance of mortality probably played a big role in his abandon. He soloed on his fifth day of in-flight instruction with only 3 hours of experience in aircraft. He proceeded on to Camp Borden for "intermediate" training and graduated with fewer than 50 hours of flying experience. On August 20, 1917 he was shipped off to France in the *Matagama* as a new 2nd Lieutenant in the RFC.

His trip over was relatively eventful, nearing the coast of Ireland they were chased by a surfaced U-boat and had to put in to port for several days to shake off the Germans. He arrived in London on September 1, 1917.

They proceeded to a training base near Winchester to ensure the English that the "colonials" could actually fly. Of course, McLeod wanted to be a fighter pilot like his classmates Don MacLaren and Bill Claxton. MacLaren became the 4th highest scoring Canadian ace with 54 German planes to his credit, and Claxton downed 40. But fate held something else in store for McLeod. He was originally posted to 82 Squadron flying "scouts". When his CO found he was only 18 he decided he was too young for combat, and had Alan posted to 51 Squadron, a Home Defence squadron flying an antiquated [R.A.F. BE12](#) "fighter" against [Zeppelins](#) at night. He was sorely disappointed to be separated from his class-mates and not to be on scouts. It turned out that night flying was very hazardous, as there were so many things that could go wrong. The airfields weren't well lit, balloons were suspended over London from long cables that could tear the wing off of a BE12, and the weather was unpredictable. He spent two exciting weeks flying from a field near London trying to deter Zeppelins. He even managed to get shot down by a Zeppelin gunner. He made a decent landing and considered it to be part of the adventure of war.

He improved his flying abilities, but that was all. By November, 1917 many pilots had been killed in the battles for Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele. He managed to convince the general in command of his group to change his age to 19 on his forms, and he was sent to the Pilot Pool at St. Omer, France. However, he still didn't get into a scout aircraft. Many of the pilots and machines lost in the fighting were reconnaissance aircraft doing artillery spotting and aerial photography of German positions. He went to war as a two-seat bomber pilot, so he practiced bombing runs, aerial photography and artillery spotting. He was posted to 2 Squadron, a Corps Squadron working for the area HQ, near Hesdigneul in northern France.

The squadron flew the [Armstrong-Whitworth FK8](#), two-seat bomber. It was massive by WWI standards, a very sturdy aircraft, but no match for German fighters. It was big, ungainly and slow

in speed and climb rate. It was however, a good bombing and photography platform and came well armed for the time with a forward firing Vickers and a rear firing Lewis machine gun.



His first "get-acquainted flight" with the Ack-W was disastrous. He demolished the landing gear and was grounded for a week. The squadron commander posted the most experienced gunner/observer he had to fly with Alan, in the hopes that he would survive long enough to get some experience. On December 17 he went over the lines for the first time. McLeod and Lt. Fred Higgins did the standard artillery spotting work over the front. Their job was to patrol up and down the front line until they spotted their target, then they would circle near it and called up artillery with a wire-less using Morse Code. They spotted the fall of shot and called in corrections until the artillery was on target. Then they would call for a barrage on the target until it was destroyed. This was the main work of Corps Squadrons, and was very important. The fighters, who got all the glory, were there mainly to either defend their artillery and photographic aircraft or to intercept German aircraft bent on doing the same job on their positions.

They flew nearly every second day. On the 19th, his log book simply stated "Unsuccessful shoot on BY-75 owing to mist. Scrap with 8 Huns, 1 spun away." These were probably [Albatros DIIs](#). In two-seaters, then as now, both men were credited with the award of a victory, as it was a team effort. In this case it would have been called "Out of Control, or OOC for short.

This wasn't what Alan had planned for himself in the air and he tried to transfer to a fighter squadron, but was denied. So, he decided to use his lumbering bomber as a fighter whenever he got the chance. He and his observers took to cruising behind German lines when their regular

work was finished, looking for Huns to shoot up. The Huns usually found them. One day they got into trouble attacking a fast German scout that got behind them. Alan managed to avoid the aircraft with skillful flying until he could regain their own lines, as the Germans were loath to fly into British airspace. They found out that his even-more inexperienced observer hadn't fired a round because his safety was still on. On Dec. 22 they again were jumped by Germans and had most of the controls shot away. Fortunately aircraft of the day were good gliders, and they managed to coast down behind Allied lines. Poor weather kept them grounded throughout Christmas until early January. On the 3rd he was up with Lt. Reginald Key when he spotted a large troop congregation in the town of La Basseé. He dove down and attacked them with his machine gun, apparently causing considerable casualties.

He and gunner Lt. Comber, became famous on the front. Under attack by three [Fokker Dr.I](#) triplanes, Comber kept them off until they made it over the lines to Allied territory. The Fokkers peeled off, not willing to chase them into British airspace. McLeod seeing they had dismissed the Ack-W as lost to them, wheeled around in a wide circle and made for the nearest Hun aircraft. He managed to sneak up on the German, who wasn't expecting such audacious behaviour from a bomber, and fired when the pilot filled his gun site. The Dr.I reared up, stalled and fell over onto a wing and dropped to the ground. He was awarded a "Destroyed" victory only after a British balloon observer corroborated his story. No one would believe him or Comber, bombers just did not shoot down enemy fighters.

Several weeks later he and Key attacked a German [observation balloon](#) at 2,000 feet near Beauvin. He had to fly 12 miles behind German lines to get to it, and plunge through a shrapnel field of AA before he could fire on it. But he put 100 rounds into it and blew it into a flaming rag. This was dangerous work, the "drachens" were protected by high powered, long-range machine guns, AA guns and fighters. It required fast and nimble flying, not something one could coax from an Armstrong-Whitworth. He was mentioned in dispatches for this and given another "Destroyed" to his credit.

Two days later he and Key had their next notable exploit. They were detailed to an artillery shoot near La Basseé but were frequently interrupted by a particularly accurate AA battery. He flew low over the remaining trees and, with much heavy machine-gun fire directed at them, strafed the battery, then he accurately dropped 20 lb bombs onto it and left it a smoking ruin. On returning to the lines they attacked a column of infantry. Then they successfully completed their artillery shoot. He was awarded with two weeks leave in London for this work. This was nearly his undoing, for the Savoy Hotel, where he was staying, was hit during a Zeppelin raid. Forty-nine people were killed and 127 injured. He was not among them.

When he got back to France he found out that Lt. Key was being transferred to bolster another squadron with his experience. Key wrote of McLeod:

"Alan would take on anything, and I was willing to go anywhere with him. I had absolute confidence in him. He was the finest pilot I have ever flown with, devoid of fear, and always merry and bright. We were in many scraps together and often after getting out of a very tight corner by sheer piloting, with six or seven Huns on our tail, he would turn round to me and laugh out loud."

McLeod got a new gunner, Lt. A.W. Hammond. A very experienced man with a Military Cross to his credit. They did artillery spotting in the morning and then went up at noon in a group of three aircraft to photograph behind the German lines to a distance of 10 or 12 miles. The work was becoming increasingly dangerous as the Germans had taken to flying in large groups (a Jagdgeschwader, equivalent to a British wing), initiated by Rittmeister Manfred von Richthofen, to counter the superior abilities of the British fighters. The Germans often painted their aircraft in colorful variations on a theme, and because they would travel en masse up and down their sector, the British called JG I "Richthofen's Circus". Richthofen's old unit, Jasta 11 (also called a staffel equivalent to a squadron) the aircraft were mostly red with various individual decorations, Jasta 6 had black and white zebra stripes on the elevators, while Jasta 10 used a yellow theme. The British decided that three machines would attract too much attention, and so cut the photographic patrols to one aircraft in the vain hopes of avoiding detection.

McLeod and Hammond were a very strong team, and were given a roving commission when not on organised patrols. They would usually do an artillery shoot in the morning and spent the afternoons bombing anything German that looked vaguely threatening. After rearming in the late afternoon they became a fighter and trench straffer. Sometimes they did all three in one mission. Often the aircraft came back shot to pieces.

By March 21, 1918 the final German offensive was in full swing. The initial advance by the Germans was fierce and the Allies fell back. They threw everything they had into the desperate fight to stop the advance. All British aircraft were detailed to bomb and strafe the infantry and artillery.

McLeod and Hammond were flying three missions a day, bombing and strafing anything and everything. On the evening of March 26 they were detailed, with six other aircraft, on a bombing mission, with the heaviest bomb load manageable and extra ammunition. The morning of March 27 dawned and they took off on the mission to Bray-sur-Somme, near Albert, but lost their way in fog. They were forced to land at a neighbouring field, home of 43 Squadron, damaging the landing gear in the process. It wasn't until just after noon that the plane was fixed, by then all of the 2 Squadron planes had gone home. The CO of 43 Squadron sent up a flight to "test" the air for the massed forces of JG 1, Richthofen's Circus. They came back shortly stating that the weather was terrible, with continuing fog and low cloud. However, McLeod and Hammond continued on with their original mission and found a likely artillery battery to bomb. Before they could begin a bomb run a Fokker Driodecker appeared out of the cloud 200 yds away and slightly below them. It was faster and much more agile than a heavily loaded bomber, but McLeod skillfully manoeuvred so that Hammond could get a shot in. With three bursts from Hammond's Lewis gun the triplane flipped over on its back and plunged to earth. They congratulated each other. While doing so, the skies cleared somewhat and another Fokker triplane dove down on them, followed by six more. Now they were really in for it.

The German machines swarmed around them, taking turns diving, firing and pulling up. Hammond and McLeod in turn made good use of their guns, firing just enough to keep the enemy at bay and at the same time conserving their ammunition. With further skilful handling of the bomber McLeod placed Hammond so he got the chance of a sustained burst of fire at a

Fokker that had dove very close to them. The force of the bullets shattered the German aircraft so that it broke off at the pilot's seat and the wreckage fell away on fire.

Lt. Hans Kirschstein of Jasta 6, an experienced pilot and soon to be a top-scoring ace, dove under the bomber and fired up into its belly. McLeod was wounded three times in the side and Hammond was slumped in his seat, wounded six times. To make matters worse, the fuel tank was punctured and caught the aircraft on fire. Sensing an easy kill another German cut close in. Hammond struggled up and, despite having the use of only one arm fired a volley into the Fokker. It fell away from the fight, although it likely did not crash, as the Germans did not report any losses from JG1 that day.



It seemed like the end, they were on fire, chased and surrounded by enemy aircraft behind German lines and both men were wounded. McLeod climbed out of his cockpit onto the left, lower wing to avoid the flames and yawed the Ack-W to fan the flames to the right side. By now, Hammond had to lie along the rim of his cockpit as the flames had destroyed the bottom of the aircraft and his seat had fallen out. Another Fokker bore in on them, coming in for the kill, and put two more bullets into McLeod, but he side-slipped the Armstrong-Whitworth for Hammond to get a shot in. He did, and this one spun down out of control.

McLeod Memorial Painting by
George Tanner

Kirschstein came back to the attack, and kept on attacking putting Hammond's gun out of commission, and hitting the aircraft time and again. Finally, the bomber was obviously doomed, and heading for British airspace so he pulled away hunting for more British. Lt. Kirschstein was successful again 5 minutes later, shooting down his third victim, a Camel pilot. He was awarded the victory over McLeod and Hammond, but he would die before either of them.

McLeod continued to side-slip the bomber over the German lines managing to flatten out the glide to crash in no-mans-land. Somehow, they were both still alive, although Hammond, with six wounds and badly burned, was unable to move. With a fire burning around their eight bombs and a load of ammunition to motivate him, McLeod struggled up and hauled Hammond towards a shell hole. The bombs blew up, wounding McLeod again and scattered burning debris all around them. German soldiers in forward positions fired at them and McLeod was hit a sixth time. They lay in a shell hole until night fall when they were rescued by soldiers of the South African Scottish Regiment. Amazingly they were still alive. Sixty years later one of them recollected

"We attended their wounds but could not safely get them away until dusk. Both were burnt and in a bad way. Captain Ward and I cheered them as best we could until dark enough for our bearers to carry them back to a dressing station. In trying to cheer McLeod I said "You will be in Blighty in a few days." He said, "That's just the trouble, I would like to have a crack at that so-and-so that brought me down." The observer was too bad to talk; both smelt terribly of burnt flesh."

They managed to survive a three mile stretcher trip and primitive surgery to remove bullets and patch wounds at a forward aide station. They were taken to Amiens in an ambulance and to a Casualty Clearing Station where they were cleaned, and their wounds re-dressed. They were separated in this journey. McLeod was shipped back to England to the Prince of Wales's Hospital in London. For months Alan lay between life and death, but by the beginning of September he appeared to be recovering well.

He was convalescing in England when he was awarded the Victoria Cross, and Hammond received a bar to his Military Cross.

"His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned officer of the Royal Air Force, for services displaying outstanding bravery:

2nd Lieutenant Alan Arnett McLeod, Royal Air Force.

While flying with his observer, Lieutenant A. W. Hammond, M.C., attacking hostile formations by bombs and machine gun fire, he was assailed at a height of 5,000 feet by eight enemy triplanes which dived at him from all directions, firing from their front guns. By skilful manoeuvring he enabled his observer to fire bursts at each machine in turn, shooting three of them down out of control. By this time Lieutenant McLeod had received five wounds, and while continuing the engagement a bullet penetrated his petrol tank and set the machine on fire.

He then climbed out on to the left bottom plane, controlling his machine from the side of the fusilage, and by sideslipping steeply kept the flames to one side, thus enabling the observer to continue firing until the ground was reached.

The observer had been wounded six times when the machine crashed in "No Man's Land" and 2nd Lieutenant McLeod, notwithstanding his own wounds, dragged him away from the burning wreckage at great personal risk from heavy machine-gun fire from the enemy's lines. This very gallant pilot was again wounded by a bomb whilst engaged in this act of rescue, but he persevered until he had placed Lieutenant Hammond in comparative safety, before falling himself from exhaustion and loss of blood."

On the 4th, he attended the investiture at Buckingham Palace with his father, who had sailed over to tend his son. Due to weakness, he was not able to attend a luncheon that he and his father had been invited to with the King at Windsor Castle.

A few days later Alan and his father returned to Canada to continue his recuperation. Unfortunately, the highly virulent Spanish Influenza was striking Canada as well as the rest of the world, and he contracted the virus. In his weakened state he developed pneumonia and died in Winnipeg five days before the Armistice.

Dr. David Christie, of Westminster Church in Winnipeg wrote this eulogy in the Manitoba Free Press.

"Alan McLeod was the finest flower of chivalry. The old days of knighthood are over, but for the very fairest blossoms of the spirit of knighthood the world has had to wait till the twentieth century. It is these dauntless boys who have saved civilization. The heroism of the Crusades pales before the incredible and quiet courage of such boys who gave us a new interpretation of Calvary. I saw Alan within a few hours of his death. He faced the last enemy with the same joyous confidence with which he started on what he called the very happiest part of his life. For our children's children names like Alan McLeod's will be written in letters of splendour in the annals of Canada."



As a final honour Alan McLeod was inducted into the Canadian Aviation Hall of Fame in 1973.

Special thanks to www.constable.ca/caah/mcleod.ht