

Yorkshire heroism

Phil Penfold on the county's incredible VC honours

It starts with the name Aaron and sixty-nine names later ends with Wyatt... Arthur Louis Aaron and George Harry Wyatt were born both miles and generations apart, and in different classes of society. Arthur aspired to be an architect; George had his heart set on joining the police. They have only two things in common – the first is their solid link to Yorkshire. And the second?

Both won that most celebrated and glorious of military honours, the Victoria Cross. In fact, they join an amazing company of soldiers, sailors and air force personnel from the county who could proudly wear the VC – incredibly, there are more from this county who achieved the honour than anywhere else in Great Britain. And the sad fact is that so many of them never knew that their gallantry

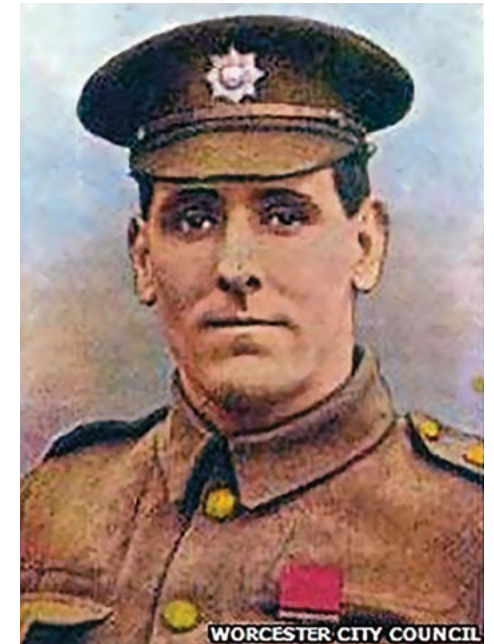
was recognised, for they died in combat. Arthur and George are classic examples.

Flight Sergeant Aaron was born in Leeds in 1922 and went to Leeds College of Architecture. His hobbies were rock-climbing and flying. He joined the Air Defence Cadet Corps (later the Air Training Corps) and then enlisted in the RAF. In 1943 he was on a raid over Turin, when his Stirling bomber came under fire.

Arthur was terribly wounded and treated with morphine shots as the plane turned toward a “safe” airbase. It took nearly six hours for him to reach Bone in North Africa (now Annaba in Algeria), and it took five attempts, with his help, to get onto the makeshift runway. During that flight, he drifted in and out of consciousness, and died nine



Arthur Aaron



George Wyatt

hours after he got his crew back to the ground. He was buried with full military honours in the tiny cemetery at Bone. His parents received their son's medals (Arthur had also been awarded the DFM) at an investiture at Buckingham Palace in 1944, but, only two years later, thieves burgled the family home, and stole them. They were returned anonymously after a police appeal. This incredible young man is now commemorated with a statue to him, and his compatriots, by one of Yorkshire's most acclaimed sculptors, Graham Ibbeson, and it stands opposite the Leeds Playhouse, in the centre of the city. Many thousands pass it daily, and most will be blissfully unaware of the exploits of this hero.

George Wyatt, on the other hand, was a Worcester

lad, who had served with the Coldstream Guards in Egypt before leaving the British Army in 1904, and moving to Barnsley, where he became a member of the town's police force, later transferring to the Doncaster Borough Police. When hostilities began in the August of 1914, he returned to the Coldstreams, and was part of the British Expeditionary Force. He fought in the filthy Battle of Mons and was recommended for his VC after an action that saw him put out a fire being used by the Germans to camouflage their position. Despite orders, he returned again and again, making sure that the enemy were routed. He was wounded twice. Not only did George get his VC, he also could wear the 1914 Star and Bar, the British War Medal, The Victory Medal

Our boys go over the top during the First World War



“What he did just takes your breath away”

and The Russian Order of St George. Since he lived until 1964, he could, when he paraded in South Yorkshire, add on the 1937 and 1953 Coronation Medals. He is buried in Cadeby Churchyard, alongside his wife Ellen.

Later interviewed about his exploits, George had little to say. In a transcript that runs to little more than one hundred words, he says “I just did as I was told... yes, there was heavy fire from the Germans... I got hit on the head and went on firing. That’s all”. He doesn’t mention that, in the 1920s, he stopped a runaway horse from mowing down members of the public in central Doncaster. George just wasn’t that kind of man.

But then, none of the seventy-one Yorkshiremen awarded a VC were ever (or ever will be) “that kind of man”. Those seventy-one make up just under ten percent of ALL the recipients of the Victoria Cross. An outstanding number, by any standard of measurement. The first group of VCs were announced in the London Gazette, in February 1857. The medal



Jack Cunningham

was pinned on each chest by Victoria herself – the ceremony, in the June of the same year – was held in Hyde Park and, at the time, was the largest official royal event to have been staged. Sixty-two men met their Queen, and the fourteenth in the long line was our first Yorkshireman, Bombardier Thomas Wilkinson, from York. He was only 24, and fighting at Sebastopol, in the Crimea, when he replaced sandbags “under galling fire” to repair damages to the defences. It is staggering to learn that Bombardier (later Sergeant Instructor) Wilkinson went on to fight at Balaclava and Inkerman, and that, when his funeral was held in York cemetery in 1887, on top of the coffin were not only the VC and the French Legion of Honour, but also the British and the Turkish Medals. His grave has the inscription “Honour the brave”, and his old comrades paid for the stonemason to carve the words.

Most of the deeds of the men who won their VCs seem – of course – to be a little distant to our modern times. But occasionally there is a rare flash of connection.

Wing Commander Alan Bartlett, of York’s Army Museum (which has no less than five of the actual Victoria Crosses in its collection) reveals that in its astonishing archive, there is footage of John (Jack) Cunningham, filmed in 1917. Jack served as a Private with the 12th Battalion, East Yorkshire Regiment. His family home was in Hull. The reason for his award makes incredible reading and, if it was recreated as an action movie, audiences would probably not believe what they were seeing. Basically, Jack collected all the live bombs from slain or severely wounded colleagues and hurled them at the German trenches. Having got rid of the first load, he went back for more, and threw those at the enemy as well. On top of that, he then killed ten of the enemy.

“What he did just takes your breath away”, says WC Bartlett. “It’s quite astonishing – so much so that you have to read it all again, just to make sure that you got it right the first time. But to add to that, we have almost three minutes of film of Private Cunningham, and there he is, firstly receiving his medal from the King himself, and then we cut to him, back home, in the street where he lived, where his family and friends are all around him, and clearly so proud of him. The funny thing is that, when you look at the two locations, and the expression on Jack’s face, he seems very composed in the presence of George V, and yet, on his own turf, he stands rather awkwardly, and looks rather bemused at all the shenanigans going on around him. It’s such a contrast. And you must remember that, if he was slightly embarrassed by it all, then he would have to suffer that for a few days more, because the film is clearly



Ibbeson’s statue honouring Arthur Aaron, photo by Tim Green

newsreel footage, and he would have been seen by thousands of others as well. It's a poignant reflection of Jack's time, but it also resonates today, and the clip is, in effect, the start of what we know as 'social media'.

"The collection is always growing, but there is a common denominator – each artefact we have has its own tale to tell, and none of them is alike, or commonplace. A film like Jack's adds so many more dimensions and revelations, and is a gift to anyone wanting to do further research. You ask 'Who was that little girl in the foreground, what on earth happened to her?', things like that. Digging deeper, you will nearly always find a broader, and more personal, portrait of the time."

Research throws up tale after tale of mind-boggling disregard for personal safety. Putting any one of them in the spotlight – as Cunningham discovered only too well – was strangely conflicting with the personalities of these servicemen. No-one went out into enemy territory, whether on air, sea, or land, thinking to himself: "Right my lad, I'm off to win a VC today". They all just got on with it. Like Company Sergeant Major Stan Hollis, of the Green Howards. "He was the only man",



A VC medal – more have been presented to Yorkshire service men and women than from anywhere else in the country

says Alan Bartlett, "to be awarded the VC on D-Day. When the troops had pushed forward, and had moved slightly inland, Hollis was part of what we could call the 'mopping-up operations', securing pill boxes which were still held by the enemy, and very actively firing on our landing forces. Quite amazing courage." An understatement – for Hollis took no less than twenty-six prisoners, and thus saved the lives of many of his companions. He later remarked: "I could never throw them grenades like the army taught you to. I threw them like cricket balls!"

And there you have another thread of these stories – just a little bit of British self-effacing eccentricity woven into the story. 🐣