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Arthur Louis Aaron: Public and Private Remembrance of a WWII Pilot

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Date

Monday 16 October 2017



Arthur Louis Aaron was an RAF pilot in Bomber Command during the Second World War. He was killed in action after a raid on Turin on 12 August 1943 and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross: the only Leeds serviceman to be awarded the Victoria Cross during the conflict.

Aaron's heroic conduct during the war has meant that his story is relatively well known in Leeds, and he was chosen as the subject for a memorial to mark the millennium after a public vote (beating Joshua Tetley, Quaker reformer Isabella Ford, and Henry Moore). The memorial was unveiled in 2001 and stands in the centre of the Eastgate roundabout.



Leeds Museums and Galleries has a range of items relating to Arthur Aaron in the collections, including the six medals which are a testament to his bravery. Alongside the Victoria Cross he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal, the Air Crew Europe Star, the 1939-1945 Star and the 1939-1945 Medal. Aaron was also commemorated at his former school with a scholarship, and by the Leeds St Mark's Harriers with a memorial shield awarded to the winner of an annual cross country race. Some of these objects are on display at Leeds City Museum and they give visitors an insight into life during the Second World War.

We also have his citation, which describes the circumstances of his death. After his aircraft was hit Aaron was badly wounded in several places, but although he was in great pain and suffering from exhaustion he helped the remaining crew to fly the plane to safety. The report ends: 'In appalling conditions he showed the greatest qualities of courage, determination and leadership, and, though wounded and dying, he set an example of devotion to duty which has seldom been equaled and never surpassed'.

In a letter to Aaron's parents, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris wrote: 'In my opinion never, even in the annals of the Royal Air Force, has the Victoria Cross been awarded for skill, determination and courage in the face of the enemy of a higher order than that displayed by your son on his last flight'.



Arthur Aaron was one of 70,000 RAF personnel who lost their lives during the war. Bomber Command aircrew had only a 50% chance of survival, and they made up the majority of the dead. There are probably lots of similarities in the ways that these men have been remembered by loved ones – keeping medals, photographs and letters, and visiting graves and memorials – but there were also more individual ways of remembering the dead in memories and through places and objects which hold a personal connection.

At Abbey House Museum we are currently planning an exhibition on ‘Remembrance’ which will open next spring. We are really interested in the ways that people have been remembered publicly, and the many different ways that Arthur Aaron was commemorated provide poignant examples of public remembrance. But we are also interested in presenting a broad range of stories and experiences – both public and private – in the exhibition. To do this we are working with a number of community groups in Leeds, but we would like your help too.

We are particularly interested in the period between 1900 and 1950 but as we research our collections we are finding gaps in the material. We have been surprised to find that although we have lots of examples of First World War commemoration, we have very little for the Second World War.

Do you know some of the ways that those who were killed during the Second World War – both military and civilian – were commemorated in public and in private? Do you have any objects or ways of remembering any loved ones or ancestors? If so, please leave a comment below or email our Community Curator Pat Bourne (Patrick.Bourne@leeds.gov.uk).

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