



Heroes and Role Models

Key Stage 3

English:

- competence
- creativity
- cultural understanding
- critical understanding

Overview of the activities

Discussion and creative writing activity based on heroes, heroines and role models.

Heroes and role models.

Preparation

Background notes on Victoria Cross Recipients from 5 Group, Bomber Command.

Venues

All

NOTE: The background information contains accounts of activities carried out by the nine members of Bomber Command who were awarded the Victoria Cross in the Second World War. Some were awarded posthumously. Teachers should read the accounts carefully to ensure they are suitable for use with their group.

Activity 1: Heroes and role models

Introduction

Tell young people you are going to discuss heroes, heroines and role models today.

In small groups ask them to think about what it means to be a hero, heroine or role model. Can they write a definition? Are heroes and roles models the same? Are they different? If so, why?

Plenary

Ask young people to feedback to the group. Write their definitions on the whiteboard. When you have received feedback from all of the groups, write a dictionary definition of the terms on the board.

Activity

Now ask the young people to think about and discuss who do they consider to be heroes, heroines or role models. What is it about these people that makes them heroes, heroines or role models?

Plenary

Share ideas with the group.

Activity

Now explain that the Victoria Cross is Britain's highest honour. Explain why it is awarded.

Next give the young people an account of the activities of the members of Bomber Command who were awarded the Victoria Cross. If you give young people one account per group, ask them to provide a synopsis of what that person did and why they were awarded the Victoria Cross, how old they were etc. to share with the class.

Next ask them to compare these men with their heroes, heroines and role models. How are they similar, different? What is it that distinguishes these people from others?

What are their views of the heroic acts performed by the men in Bomber Command?

Next

Ask the young people individually to produce a piece of writing based on one of the stories from Bomber Command. They could write a factual account of events for a newspaper, or they could write a creative piece about how it felt to be in that situation, either as the recipient of the Victoria Cross or as a crew member in the aircraft.

Plenary

Ask them to share their stories.

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Extension

Ask young people to write a similar piece about their heroes and heroines from today and analyse the similarities and differences in their accounts.

Background information

Victoria Cross For Valour

The Victoria Cross (VC) is Britain's highest award, established in February 1856 by Queen Victoria.

The medal is awarded for "most conspicuous bravery. A daring or pre-eminent act of valour, self sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy."

The medal has precedence over all other British and Commonwealth awards.

The cross itself is cast from the bronze of cannons captured at Sebastopol during the Crimean War.

The design, chosen by Queen Victoria, consists of a cross with a Royal Crest resting upon a scroll bearing the words "For Valour."

The reverse of the suspender bar is engraved with the recipient's name, rank and unit while the reverse of the cross is engraved with the date of the deed for which the recipient was honoured.

During World War II, 30 awards of the Victoria Cross were made to allied airmen serving in the Royal Air Force and Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve or the air forces of the Commonwealth countries.

Nine of these VCs were awarded to airmen serving with 5 Group, Bomber Command based in or close to Lincolnshire.

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Victoria Cross

Recipients

Royal Air Force

5 Group, Bomber Command

(Based in and close to Lincolnshire)

Information provided by Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Visitors Centre



LEAROYD, Roderick Alastair Brook

Flight Lieutenant (later Wing Commander)

49 Squadron (RAF Scampton)

Royal Air Force

Born: 5th February 1913 at Folkestone, Kent

Gazetted for the VC: 20th August 1940 in the London Gazette

Died: 24th January 1996 at Rustington, Sussex

Cremated at Worthing Crematorium

Name on RAF memorial in St Clement Dane's Church, London

Details and Digest of Citation for Roderick 'Babe' Learoyd's Victoria Cross:

This officer, as first pilot of a Hampden aircraft, has repeatedly shown the highest conception of his duty and complete indifference to personal danger in making attacks at the lowest altitudes regardless of opposition.

On the night of 12th August 1940, he was detailed to attack a special objective on the Dortmund Ems Canal. He had attacked this objective on a previous occasion and was well aware of the risks entailed. To achieve success it was necessary to approach from a direction well-known to the enemy, through a lane of especially disposed anti-aircraft defences, and in the face of the most intense point-blank fire from guns of all calibres. The reception of the preceding aircraft might well have deterred the stoutest heart, all being hit and two lost. Flight Lieutenant Learoyd nevertheless, made his attack at 150 feet, his aircraft being repeatedly hit and large pieces of the main plane torn away. He was almost blinded by the glare of many searchlights at close range, but pressed home this attack with the greatest resolution and skill.

He subsequently brought his wrecked aircraft home and, as the landing flaps were inoperative and the undercarriage indicators out of action, waited for dawn in the vicinity of his aerodrome before landing, which he accomplished without causing injury to his crew or further damage to the aircraft.

Additional Information:

Learoyd survived the war and subsequently worked for the Malayan Civil Aviation Department, acting as the personal pilot to successive Governors of Malaya. He then became the Export Sales Manager for the Austin Motor Company up to retirement.



MANSER, Leslie Thomas

Flying Officer

50 Squadron (RAF Skellingthorpe)

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Born: 11th May 1922 at New Delhi, India

Gazetted for the VC: 23rd October 1942 in the London Gazette

Died: 31st May 1942 when his aircraft crashed in flames in Belgium.

Memorial on grave at Heverlee War Cemetery, Belgium and at Christ Church, Radlett, Hertfordshire

Details and Digest of Citation for Leslie Manser's Victoria Cross:

Flying Officer Manser was captain and first pilot of a Manchester aircraft which took part in a mass raid on Cologne on the night of 30th May 1942. He was just 20 years old.

Despite searchlights and intense and accurate anti-aircraft fire he held his course and bombed the target successfully from 7,000 feet. Thereafter, although he took evasive action, the aircraft was badly damaged, for a time one engine and part of one wing were on fire, and in spite of all the efforts of pilot and crew, the machine became difficult to handle and lost height.

Though he could have parachuted to safety with his crew, he refused to do so and insisted on piloting the aircraft as long as he could hold it steady, to give his crew a better chance of safety when they jumped.

While the crew were descending to safety, they saw the aircraft, still carrying the gallant captain, plunge down to earth and burst into flames. By remaining at his failing controls those extra few seconds, Manser had preserved the lives of his crew, but sacrificed his only slim chance of personal survival.

In pressing home his attack in the face of strong opposition, in striving against heavy odds to bring back his aircraft and crew, and finally, when in extreme peril, thinking only of the safety of his comrades, Flying Officer Manser displayed determination and valour of the highest order.

Additional information:

All of Manser's crew members, except the navigator, evaded capture and were repatriated to the UK within weeks via the 'Comet' underground escapers' system with the help of courageous Belgian and French resistance workers.

Flying Officer Manser was the brother-in-law of Captain J N Randle VC of the Royal Norfolk Regiment.



NETTLETON, John Dering

Squadron Leader

44 Squadron (RAF Waddington)

Royal Air Force

Born: 28th June 1917 at Nongoma, Natal,
South Africa

Gazetted for the VC: 28th April 1942 in the London
Gazette

Died: 12/13th July 1943 when his Lancaster failed
to return from a bombing raid to Turin – presumed
killed in action.

(Death officially announced on 23rd February 1944)

Details and Digest of Citation for John Nettleton's Victoria Cross:

Squadron Leader Nettleton was the leader of one of two formations of six Lancaster heavy bombers detailed to deliver a low-level attack in daylight on the diesel engine factory at Augsburg in Southern Germany on April 17th, 1942. The enterprise was daring, the target of high military importance. To reach it and get back, some 1,000 miles had to be flown over hostile territory.

Soon after crossing into enemy territory his formation was engaged by 25 to 30 fighters. A running fight ensued. His rear guns went out of action. One by one the aircraft of his formation were shot down until in the end only his and one other remained. The fighters were shaken off but the target was still far distant. There was formidable resistance to be faced.

With great spirit and almost defenceless, he held his two remaining aircraft on their perilous course and after a long and arduous flight, mostly at only 50 feet above the ground, he brought them to Augsburg. Here anti-aircraft fire of great intensity and accuracy was encountered. The two aircraft came low over the rooftops. Though fired at from point blank range, they stayed the course to drop their bombs true on the target. The second aircraft, hit by flak, burst into flames and crash-landed. The leading aircraft, though riddled with holes, flew safely back to base, the only one of the six to return.

Squadron Leader Nettleton, who has successfully undertaken many other hazardous operations, displayed unflinching determination as well as leadership and valour of the highest order.

Additional Information:

On the same day that Nettleton's death was officially announced, 23rd February 1944, another notice announced the birth (on 19th February) of the son he never saw, John Dering Nettleton.



REID, William

Flight Lieutenant

61 Squadron (RAF Syerston)

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Born: 21st December 1921 at Glasgow, Scotland

Gazetted for the VC: 14th December 1943 in the London

Died: 28th November 2001 at Crieff, Scotland

Named on Lanarkshire VCs memorial at Hamilton, Lanarkshire

Details and Digest of Citation for Bill Reid's Victoria Cross:

On the night of 3rd November 1943, Flight Lieutenant Reid was pilot and captain of a Lancaster aircraft detailed to attack Dusseldorf.

Shortly after crossing the Dutch coast, a Messerschmitt 110 attacked the Lancaster. The pilot's windscreen was shattered, the aircraft became difficult to control, the rear turret was badly damaged and the communications system and compasses were put out of action.

Reid was wounded in the head, shoulders and hands but, having ascertained that his crew were unscathed and saying nothing about his own injuries, he continued the mission.

The Lancaster was then attacked by a Focke Wulf 190, which raked the bomber from stem to stern. The navigator was killed instantly and the wireless operator fatally injured. The mid-upper turret was hit and the oxygen system put out of action. Flight Lieutenant Reid was again wounded and the flight engineer was hit in the arm.

Wounded in two attacks, without oxygen, suffering severely from the cold, his navigator dead, his wireless operator fatally wounded, his aircraft crippled and defenceless, Flight Lieutenant Reid showed superb courage and leadership in penetrating a further 200 miles into enemy territory to attack one of the most strongly defended targets in Germany, every additional mile increasing the hazard of the long and perilous journey home. This tenacity and devotion to duty were beyond praise. Photographs show that, when the bombs were released, the aircraft was right over the centre of the target.

Reid then set course for home although he was growing weak from loss of blood and lapsed into semi-consciousness. When an English airfield (Shipdham) was sighted he revived, resumed control and although much bothered by blood from his head wound getting into his eyes, he made a safe landing, although one leg of the damaged undercarriage collapsed and the Lancaster slithered along the runway for 60 yards.

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Additional Information:

Bill Reid's VC was presented to him a few days before his 22nd birthday.

After recovering from his wounds, Reid joined 617 Squadron and flew more raids on enemy targets, including operations against V1 rocket sites, before being shot down on 31st July 1944. Reid and his wireless operator, the only survivors, became prisoners of war.



THOMPSON, George

Flight Sergeant

9 Squadron (RAF Bardney)

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Born: 23rd October 1920 at Trinity Gask,
Perthshire, Scotland

Gazetted for the VC: 20th February 1945 in the
London Gazette

Died: 23rd February 1945 in Belgium (died of
wounds)

Grave: Brussels Town Cemetery, Evere-les-
Bruxelles, Belgium

Details and Digest of Citation for George Thompson's Victoria Cross:

Flight Sergeant Thompson was the wireless operator in a Lancaster aircraft which attacked the Dortmund-Ems Canal in daylight on 1st January 1945. The bombs had just been released when a heavy shell hit the aircraft in front of the mid-upper turret. Fire broke out and dense smoke filled the fuselage. The nose of the aircraft was then hit and an inrush of air, clearing the smoke, revealed a scene of utter devastation. Most of the Perspex of the nose compartment had been shot away, gaping holes had been torn in the canopy above the pilot's head, wiring was severed, and there was a large hole in the floor of the aircraft. Equipment was badly damaged or alight; one engine was on fire.

Thompson saw that the mid-upper gunner was unconscious in his blazing turret. Without hesitation he went down the fuselage into the fire and the exploding ammunition. He pulled the gunner from his turret and, edging his way round the hole in the floor, carried him away from the flames. With his bare hands, he extinguished the gunner's burning clothing. He himself sustained serious burns on his face, hands and legs.

Despite his own severe injuries, Thompson braved the flames a second time and moved painfully to the rear of the fuselage where he found the rear gunner with his clothing alight, overcome by flames and fumes. With great difficulty he extricated the helpless gunner and carried him clear, again using his bare hands to beat out flames on a comrade's clothing.

By now almost exhausted, Thompson then made the perilous journey back through the burning fuselage, clinging to the sides with his burnt hands to get across the hole in the floor, to report to the pilot. So pitiful was his condition that his captain failed to recognise him. Thompson's only concern was for the two gunners. He was given such attention as was possible until a crash-landing was made some forty minutes later.

Flight Sergeant Thompson might have devoted his efforts to quelling the fire and so have contributed to his own safety. He preferred to go through the fire

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to succour his comrades. He knew that he would then be in no position to hear or heed any order which might be given to abandon the aircraft. He hazarded his own life in order to save the lives of others.

Three weeks later Flight Sergeant Thompson died of his injuries. One of the gunners unfortunately also died, but the other owes his life to the superb gallantry of Flight Sergeant Thompson, whose signal courage and self-sacrifice will ever be an inspiration to the Service.



CHESHIRE, Geoffrey Leonard

Wing Commander (Later Group Captain)

617 Squadron (RAF Woodhall Spa)

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Born: 7th September 1917 at Chester

Gazetted for the VC: 8th September 1944 in the London Gazette

Died: 31st July 1992 at Cavendish, Suffolk

Details and Digest of Citation for Leonard Cheshire's Victoria Cross:

This officer began his operational career in June 1940. Against strongly-defended targets, he soon displayed the courage and determination of an exceptional leader. He was always ready to accept extra risks to ensure success. At the end of this first tour of operational duty, he immediately volunteered for a second. Again, he pressed home his attacks with the utmost gallantry. On his third tour he was given command of a squadron.

In October 1943 he relinquished the rank of Group Captain at his own request so that he could return to operations for a fourth tour, in command of No 617 Squadron. He led his Squadron personally on every occasion, always undertaking the most dangerous and difficult task of marking the target alone from low level in the face of strong defences.

Wing Commander Cheshire's cold and calculated acceptance of risks is exemplified by his conduct in an attack on Munich in April 1944, for which he marked the target from very low level. His aircraft was badly hit by shell fragments but he continued to fly over the target area until he was satisfied that he had done all in his power to ensure success. His aircraft came under withering fire, but he came safely through.

Wing Commander Cheshire has now completed a total of 100 missions. In four years of fighting against the bitterest opposition he has maintained a record of outstanding personal achievement, placing himself invariably in the forefront of the battle. What he did in the Munich operation was typical of the careful planning, brilliant execution and contempt for the danger which has established for Wing Commander Cheshire a reputation second to none in Bomber Command.

Additional information

Of the 32 World War II airmen who were awarded the Victoria Cross, he was the only one to win the medal for an extended period of sustained courage and outstanding effort, rather than for a single act of valour.

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Cheshire was, in his day, both the youngest Group Captain in the service and, following his VC, the most decorated.

He wrote several books including 'Bomber Pilot', 'Pilgrimage to the Shroud' and 'The Face of Victory'.

He was the founder of the first Cheshire Home, a hospice for the incurable.



GIBSON, Guy Penrose

Wing Commander

617 Squadron (RAF Scampton)

Royal Air Force

Born: 12th August 1918 at Simla, India

Gazetted for the VC: 28th May 1943 in the London Gazette

Died: 19th September 1944 near Bergen-op-Zoom, Holland

Buried in Steenberg en Kruisland churchyard, Holland

Details and Digest of Citation for Guy Gibson's Victoria Cross:

As an operational pilot and as leader of his squadron, Wing Commander Gibson achieved outstandingly successful results and his personal courage knew no bounds. On conclusion of his third operational tour, having pressed strongly to be allowed to remain on operations, he was selected to command a squadron then forming for special tasks (617 Squadron).

Under his inspiring leadership, this squadron executed one of the most devastating attacks of the War – the breaching of the Mohne and Eder dams on 16/17th May 1943. Wing commander Gibson personally made the initial attack on the Mohne Dam. Descending within a few feet of the water, he delivered his attack with great accuracy. Afterwards he circled very low for 30 minutes drawing the enemy fire on himself in order to leave as free a run as possible to the following aircraft which were attacking the dam in turn. He then led the remainder of his force to the Eder Dam, where, with complete disregard for his own safety, he repeated his tactics, and once more drew on himself the enemy fire so that the attack would be successfully developed.

Throughout his operational career, prolonged exceptionally at his own request, he has shown leadership, determination and valour of the highest order.

Additional Information:

Gibson was only 25 when he led the Dams Raid. 19 Lancasters took part; 11 returned.

After receiving his VC, Gibson was sent on a lecture tour of the United States. This was a time when the first American airmen were going home 'tour expired' after 25 operations. During questions, one lady asked Gibson how many operations he had flown over Germany. "One hundred and seventy-four" he replied. There was a stunned silence.

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After pestering Bomber Command, Gibson returned to operational duties in 1944. He was killed on a bombing raid in Rheydt. His Mosquito crashed near Steenberg, the Netherlands, on 19th September 1944. It was assumed for many years that he had been shot down, but following the discovery of the wreckage of his plane, it was found that a fault with the fuel tank selector had meant that the aircraft had simply run out of fuel.



HANNAH, John

Sergeant

83 Squadron (RAF Scampton)

Royal Air Force

Born: 27th November 1921 at Paisley,
Renfrewshire, Scotland

Gazetted for the VC: 1st October 1940 in the
London Gazette

Died: 9th June 1947 at Birstall, Leicestershire
Memorial on grave at St James' Churchyard in
Birstall, Leicestershire

Details and Digest of Citation for John Hannah's Victoria Cross:

On 15th September 1940 over Antwerp, Belgium, after a successful attack on German barges, the Handley Page Hampden bomber, in which 18-year old Sergeant Hannah was wireless operator/air gunner, was subjected to intense anti-aircraft fire, receiving a direct hit, which apparently burst inside the bomb compartment. A fire started which quickly enveloped the wireless operator's and rear gunner's cockpits and, as both the port and the starboard petrol tanks had been pierced, there was a grave risk of the fire spreading. The rear gunner and navigator had to bale out and Sergeant Hannah could have acted likewise, but instead he remained to fight the fire, first with two extinguishers and then with his bare hands. He sustained terrible burns to his face and eyes but succeeded in extinguishing the fire. He then crawled forward, ascertained that the navigator had left the aircraft, and passed the latter's log and maps to the pilot. This airman displayed courage, coolness and devotion to duty of the highest order and by his action in remaining and successfully extinguishing the fire under conditions of the greatest danger and difficulty, enable the pilot to bring the almost-wrecked aircraft safely back to its base.

Additional information

Hannah was the youngest recipient of the VC for aerial operations.

He contracted tuberculosis only a year later, in mid 1941, brought on no doubt by his weakened condition following the severe burns he sustained during his VC action. This necessitated his eventual discharge, with full disability pension, from the RAF in December 1942. However, unable thereafter to take up a full-time job, he at first took a job as a taxi driver, but he found it increasingly difficult to support his wife and three small daughters and his health ultimately gave out. He died on 9th June 1947 at Markfield Sanatorium in Leicester, where he had been lying for four months.



JACKSON, Norman Cyril

Sergeant (later Warrant Officer)

106 Squadron (RAF Syerston)

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Born: 8th April 1919 at Ealing, London

Gazetted for the VC: 26th October 1945 in the London Gazette

Died: 26th March 1994 at Hampton Hill, Middlesex
Memorial on grave at Percy Road Cemetery,
Twickenham

Details and Digest of Citation for Norman Jackson's Victoria Cross:

Jackson completed his tour of 30 missions on 24th April 1944 but, as he had flown one sortie with a different crew, he chose to fly once more so that his original aircrew finished their tour together. Jackson's 31st mission took place on the night of 26/27th April 1944, when his crew flew in a night raid on the German ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt.

Having bombed the target, Jackson's Lancaster was attacked by a German night fighter and a fuel tank in the starboard wing caught fire. Jackson, already wounded from shell splinters in the right leg and shoulder, clipped on his parachute and equipped himself with a fire extinguisher before climbing out of the aircraft, via the escape hatch above the pilot's head, to deal with the fire, whilst the aeroplane was flying at 200mph. His parachute partially opened causing him to slip out onto the wing and, although he succeeded in clinging on, he lost the fire extinguisher, which was blown away. As he passed through the fire he sustained serious burns before falling 20,000 feet to the ground with a partially opened and burning parachute.

Sergeant Jackson was unable to control his parachute descent and landed heavily sustaining a broken ankle to add to his injuries and burns, but managed to crawl to a nearby German village where he was taken prisoner and paraded through the streets.

To venture outside, when travelling at 200 mph, at a great height and in intense cold was an almost incredible feat. By his ready willingness to face these dangers he set an example of self-sacrifice which will ever be remembered.

Additional Information:

Sergeant Jackson spent 10 months recovering in hospital in Germany before being transferred to a prisoner of war camp. He subsequently made two escape attempts, the second of which was successful as he made contact with a unit of the US Third Army.

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Jackson's astonishing actions did not become known until after the War, when the surviving members of the Lancaster's crew were repatriated and recommended him for a high decoration. Jackson himself had nothing to say about his courage.

In April of 2004 Jackson's VC medal was sold at auction for £235,250.