

Sergeant Arthur
Banks GC, MiD



Sergeant Arthur Banks GC withheld
potentially sensitive information
while enduring extreme torture
VIA ANDREW THOMAS

HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft



Banks joined 112 Squadron, which in North Africa flew P-40 Kittyhawks adorned with the unit's distinctive shark mouth insignia. From 1944, it operated Mustang Mk.III/IVs OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

Sergeant Arthur Banks was a hugely courageous airman who, after being shot down and eventually captured by the enemy, was subjected to the most appalling torture before being murdered in cold blood. As a result of his inhumane treatment and after the full story of his brutal death emerged, he was eventually awarded the George Cross – Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry award for courage that is not in the presence of the enemy. I recently took the opportunity to visit Banks' grave in northern Italy to pay my respects to this brave young man just over 80 years after his death.

Arthur Banks was born in Llanddulas, Abergele, Denbighshire, Wales, on October 6, 1923. He was the son of Captain Charles Banks and his wife Harriet (née Phibbs). His father had served in the Royal Flying Corps, the forerunner to the RAF, during World War One when he had become a fighter ace with 43 Squadron, destroying at least six enemy aircraft and being decorated for his bravery – his first victory, on January 28, 1918, was a Gotha bomber that he shot down while flying with 44 Squadron.

Some reports say he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, others indicate it was the Military Cross. Sadly, Arthur Banks' mother, who was originally from Cheltenham, died when he was just six. Charles Banks then married his late wife's sister, Charlotte, and the couple went on to have a daughter, Margaret, who had been the second name of Arthur's mother.

“Banks flew as far south as possible, hoping to land in an Allied-controlled part of Italy, but was unable to make it that far in his damaged aircraft. He was forced to make a crash landing behind enemy lines”

Charles ran a school at Arnold House in Llanddulas, which had previously been operated by his father. The novelist Evelyn Waugh studied for a time at Arnold House when he was a schoolboy. Arthur, too, was educated there before attending St Edward's School, Oxford, where he became head boy of Apsley House.

Behind enemy lines

When World War Two broke out in early September 1939, Banks was only 15 years old and still at school. At Arnold House, Banks was nicknamed 'Sausages', or 'Sausages Banks', because of his penchant for eating them at every opportunity even during rationing. This was partly possible because his great friend at school, Edward Walker, lived on a farm and his parents seemed to conjure up sausages for their son and his best friend.

However, in June 1942, and by this time 18, Banks enlisted into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Over the next year, he underwent training as an aircraft hand/

pilot/observer in London, Shropshire and Cornwall before, in May 1943, he was sent to South Africa for further training as a fighter pilot. In due course, he served with 112 'Shark' Squadron, Desert Air Force, in North Africa in 1944 before being transferred with that unit to Italy. The first Allied landings on mainland Italy had taken place in early September 1943.

Even after Italy changed sides in the war later the same month, it then took the Allies many months gradually to push the Germans back towards the north of the country. After the loss of central Italy, the Germans had withdrawn to the Gothic – or Green – Line. In the east, this reached the Adriatic coast at Pesaro. On August 25, 1944, the British Eighth Army launched an attack on the eastern section of this defensive line, but they encountered fierce German resistance.

Banks, by this point promoted to the rank of sergeant, and his fellow pilots were flying P-51 Mustang fighter-bombers in direct support of army operations. On August 29, he took part in an attack on the Ravenna and Ferrara areas. During his sortie, his aircraft – Mustang Mk.III serial HB936 – was damaged by German anti-aircraft fire, but he was able to radio that he had been hit. He flew as far south as possible, hoping to land in an Allied-controlled part of Italy, but was unable to make it that far in his damaged aircraft. Eventually, he was forced to make a crash landing behind enemy lines near Rovigo. A fellow airman watching from the skies saw him land safely.

His aircraft had been destroyed, and Banks resolved to reach Allied lines on foot. However, after he made contact with a group of Italian partisans, he decided to help them fight the Germans. It was not long before he was regarded by the partisans as a heroic figure for the advice, encouragement and knowledge he was able to impart.

A truth so revolting

The lengthy citation for Banks' eventual award of the George Cross takes up the story: “Early in December 1944, an attempt at crossing into allied territory by boat was planned. Sergeant Banks and a number of partisans assembled at the allotted place, but the whole party was surrounded and captured.

“Banks was handed over to the German commander of the district, who presided at his interrogation. During the questioning, Banks was cruelly tortured. At one stage, he succeeded in getting hold of a light machine gun, with which he might have killed most of his captors, had not one of the partisans – fearing more severe torture – intervened and pinned his arms to his sides. Sergeant Banks was badly knocked out before he was taken to another prison.

HERO OF THE MONTH

Bomb-armed Mustangs of
112 Squadron before taking
off from their Italian airstrip.
Note the PSP matting
OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



“On December 8, 1944, Sergeant Banks was taken, with a number of partisans, to a prison at Adria. He remained there until December 19, when he was handed over to the commander of a detachment of the ‘Black Brigade’ [Brigate Nere, an Italian fascist paramilitary group, also known as the ‘Black Shirts’]. He was then transferred to another prison at Ariano Polesine. Here, in the presence of Italian fascists, he was stripped of his clothing and again tortured. Banks was eventually bound and thrown into the River Po. Despite his wounds, even at this stage, he succeeded in reaching the riverbank. The fascists then took him back to the prison, where he was shot through the head.

The citation continued: “At the time of his capture, Sergeant Banks was endeavouring to return to allied lines, so that he might arrange for further supplies to the partisans. He endured much suffering with stoicism, withholding information which would have been of vital interest to the enemy. His courage and endurance were such that they impressed even his captors. Banks’ conduct was, at all times, in keeping with the highest traditions of the service, even in the face of most brutal and inhuman treatment.”

“The court heard that the facts of the case are ‘in truth so revolting as to make the task a most unpleasant and unsavoury one’”

Arthur Banks had died on December 20, 1944, at Ariano nel Polesine, Italy, aged just 21. His George Cross – the only ‘tier one’ award bestowed on an airman in the Italian campaign – was announced



Banks' grave can be found in the Argenta Gap War Cemetery
LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION

on November 5, 1946, more than a year after the end of World War Two. His sister received his posthumous GC from King George VI in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on December 3, 1946.

Later, more details emerged about Banks’ horrific treatment. In August 1946, the trial began in Naples of ten Italians, including two women, relating to Banks’ death. Two Germans were also accused of complicity. The court heard that the facts of the case are “in truth so revolting as to make the task a most unpleasant and unsavoury one”.

After refusing to betray those who had assisted him, Banks was repeatedly struck, kicked and subsequently whipped, being hung up by his wrists, which were bound with thin wire that cut deeply into his flesh while he was again lashed with a whip. Banks was then burned with red hot irons, but still refused to provide any valuable information. Next, his German captors then handed him over to fascist security officers. A Lieutenant Rinaldi renewed the flogging and torture with irons. Then two women tortured him further in what was described as an “unspeakable fashion”.

Next, they threw Banks on his back, poured petrol on his chest and set light to him. Finally, they dragged the badly injured airman to a bridge over the River



The Mustang flown by Banks on the day he was shot down VIA ANDREW THOMAS

Po, tied a large stone to his feet and dropped him into the river. In a final effort, Banks miraculously managed to free himself and struggled to the bank, but he was seen by his two women torturers. Having then been dragged back to prison, Rinaldi then shot him through the back of the head with a pistol. Banks' body was discarded, apparently on a dung heap.

A courageous Englishman

In all, 32 people came under investigation from the Italian and British authorities who were determined that this vile war crime should not go unpunished. After a hearing lasting a month, Banks' main torturers, Anna Paola Cattanio and Olimpio Ferracini, were found guilty and sent to prison for 20 years. Three others were also convicted of involvement in his torture, and they received shorter prison sentences of between five and eight years. Six others were acquitted.

Shortly after the end of the war, Banks' remains were reinterred at the Argenta Gap War Cemetery in northern Italy and it was here I paid my respects to him earlier this year. His grave is inscribed: 'The righteous are in the hands of God and there shall no torment touch them.'

I discovered that at this immaculately kept Commonwealth War Graves

Commission cemetery, Banks is in very good company. Also buried there is Corporal Thomas Hunter VC, who died aged 21 in a diversionary raid on nearby Lake Comacchio. Hunter, a Royal Marine, was awarded a posthumous VC, the only one to the Royal Marines during World War Two. In an incredible act of self-sacrifice, Hunter, who was in charge of a Bren section, had offered himself as a target to save his troop. The citation for his decoration ended: "Throughout the operation his magnificent courage, leadership and cheerfulness had been an inspiration to his comrades."

The graveyard is also the final resting place of Major Anders Lassen VC, MC & two Bars, who was killed, aged 24, leading another diversionary raid near Lake Comacchio. To this day, Lassen, a Dane, remains the only member of the SAS to have been awarded the VC in the regiment's 84-year history. Lassen's citation ended: "The high sense of devotion to duty and the esteem in which he was held by the men he led, added to his own magnificent courage, enabled Major Lassen to carry out all the tasks he had been given with complete success."

Banks' name is on a headstone at the War Memorial, Llanddulas, where he lived as a boy. Similarly, his name is on

a memorial board at St Edward's School Chapel, Oxford. Because of his mother's links to Cheltenham, Banks is also commemorated on Cheltenham Borough War Memorial and on a plaque at St Mark's Parish Church, Cheltenham.

War artist Robert Swan also painted an impressive painting of him. For many years after his death at Ariano nel Polesine, Banks was known simply, with great affection by local Italians as "the Englishman" – a very courageous Englishman for sure. **BW**

GEORGE CROSS HEROES



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