

Bravery of an air ace

NIGHT HAWK: John Vincent tells the story of a peace-loving theologian who became a wartime legend as a defender of the skies.

HIS name may not be as well known as those of Douglas Bader and "Johnnie" Johnson – but Wing Commander Bransome Arthur Burbridge, known as Branse, was every inch the World War Two flying hero.

The former conscientious objector became the highest scoring British and Commonwealth night fighter pilot of the war, surpassing colleague Group Captain John "Cat's Eyes" Cunningham's score of 20 kills with a final total of 21 confirmed.

He earned the Distinguished Service Order and Distinguished Flying Cross, both with Bar. But, like many war veterans, he rarely spoke of his experiences and the medals have been gathering dust in a locked drawer for almost half a century.

It was only when his grandson took an interest in the medals that the true extent of his extraordinary bravery and skill was fully appreciated by a younger generation.

Reluctantly, the 92-year-old wing commander's family decided to part with the coveted awards to cover care home fees. So it was that, then, that they appeared as the star lot at auctioneers Dix Noonan Webb in London, where they fetched a premium-inclusive £186,000.

The successful bidder was an unidentified medal dealer who almost certainly had a buyer in mind. He paid a hammer price of £155,000, plus buyer's



HONOURS: The medals awarded to Second World War night fighter pilot Branse Burbridge, inset, including the DFC with Bar have sold at auction for a premium-inclusive price of £186,000.

premium of 20 per cent, against a pre-sale estimate of £100,000-£120,000.

The medals were accompanied by the wing commander's battered flying jacket, logbooks, combat reports, commendations, training notes, portrait photograph and models of the planes he flew.

One night in November, 1944 he and his navigator friend Flight Lieutenant Bill Skelton downed four German planes in a single sortie – for which "Branse" was awarded the DSO to add to the DFC earned in 1943 – and saved countless lives by bringing down three V1 rockets before they hit London.

All but one of the 21 confirmed victories were achieved with Skelton. Together

they were known as the Night Hawk Partners and, after surviving the war, both studied for the Church.

In *The Fighter Aces of the RAF*, author ECR Baker said the "fearless fliers" shot down 20 enemy planes during more than 100 sorties in ten months, both earning the DSO and Bar. "On one occasion their Mosquito was hit and caught fire over Hamburg but Burbridge, by means of some expert flying skill and a little luck, managed to put out the fire and limp home across the North Sea."

Wing Commander Burbridge registered as conscientious objector but grew uneasy with his predicament and joined the RAF in 1941, shortly after his 20th birthday.

Now the sale of the medals awarded nearly 70 years ago are ensuring comfort in his old age.



SALEROOM

Happy ending to toy story at Ilkley auction

THERE is always a market for rare teddy bears and dolls in good condition – and so it proved at Hartleys of Ilkley when examples of both old favourites sold exceptionally well. A pale gold Steiff bear from about 1920, looking ever so slightly sorry for himself and with a humped back, found a new home for a premium-inclusive £3,910 against an estimate of £800-£1,200. And a 19th-century French bisque character doll by Bru Jne & Cie (previewed here) realised £10,350, nearly twice as much as expected. Other highlights included an Allwin



INTO PLAY: The character doll and Steiff bear that wowed buyers at Hartleys of Ilkley.

DeLuxe penny-in-the-slot amusement machine (£776), The Speaking Picture Book from 1890 with a complicated system

of bellows and string-pulls (£460), a toy coal-fired quarry locomotive (£1,725) and a clockwork Shackleton's Foden six-wheel yellow tipper lorry with accessories and original box (£414).

Duelling pistols prove to be shooting stars

A pair of late 18th-century flintlock duelling pistols by Robert Wogdon of London hit the mark at an arms, armour, militaria and ethnographica sale at Tennants of Leyburn, fetching a premium-inclusive £7,050, against an estimate of £2,000-£3,000.

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