

# How Bishop Vesey's old boy Alan became known as the Pyjama VC

SUTTON Coldfield has its very own war hero and he started out like all our local youngsters – studying at a school in the Royal town.

Alan Jerrard, who went to Bishop Vesey's Grammar School, where his father Herbert was headteacher from 1902 to 1926 – was awarded the Victoria Cross for his contributions during the first world war.

The plaque celebrating his cross is there for all to see in his former school.

The World War One hero volunteered for the army while he was studying at university and went on to serve his country across Europe.

Among his heroic actions as a pilot, he was shot down and crashed into a tree while flying on a mission wearing his pyjamas.

He was captured by Austrians and after spending three months at a Salzburg camp, he escaped.

He became an 'Ace' at his job and was the first member of the Staffordshire Territorial Force to be awarded with the Cross.

Alan went to Birmingham University and it was here that he volunteered to join the army.

He was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the 5th Battalion of the South Staffordshire (Territorial) Regiment in early 1916 and sent to France.

However, seeking excitement above the static trench systems of the Western Front, Alan transferred to the 66 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, the precursor to the Royal Air Force, and trained in England, becoming a pilot in June 1917.

On one of his first patrols, over France, Alan became separated from the rest of his flight.

Descending in order to get his bearings, he chanced upon a German convoy which he fired at with his machine guns.

Despite injuries which included a broken nose and broken jaw after crashing into an embankment, he was sent to Italy.

It was in Italy where Alan claimed his first victory.

On February 27 1918 he shot down a Berg scout plane.

In early March he also shot down an enemy observation balloon, and a week later two more Berg scout planes. His tally eventually reached

**As the Royal Town paid tribute and remembered local heroes that battled for their country in the Great War at the weekend, a former Sutton Coldfield schoolboy's heroic efforts were there for all to see with a plaque to commemorate his efforts in the Great War. DAN NEWBOULD found out more**



Alan Jerrard.

seven confirmed "kills" and he became an "Ace".

In March 1918 while flying in a patrol of three Sopwith Camels, 20-year-old, Alan was awarded the only aerial Victoria Cross of the Italian campaign.

His award citation in the London Gazette on May 1, 1918 said: "When on an offensive patrol with two other officers he attacked five enemy aeroplanes and shot down one in flames, following it down to within 100 feet of the ground.

"He then attacked an enemy aerodrome from a height of only 50 feet from the ground and, engaging single-handed some 19 machines, which were either landing or attempting to take off, succeeded in destroying one of them, which crashed on the aerodrome.

"A large number of machines then attacked him, and while thus fully occupied he observed that one of the pilots of his patrol was in difficulties.

"He went immediately to his assistance, regardless of his own personal safety, and destroyed a



The Brass plaque for Alan on show at Bishop Vesey's School.

third enemy machine. Fresh enemy aeroplanes continued to rise from the aerodrome, which he attacked one after another, and only retreated, still engaged with five enemy machines, when ordered to do so by his patrol leader.

"Although apparently wounded, this very gallant officer turned repeatedly, and attacked single-handed the pursuing machines, until he was eventually overwhelmed by numbers and driven to the ground."

Having been 'stood down' for the day due to poor visibility, Alan went to bed.

While asleep, an order came through for a mission. He hurriedly dragged his flight suit on over his pyjamas and dashed to his aeroplane to carry out the job.

Alan was shot down by the Austrian pilot Oberleutnant von Fernbrugg flying an Albatross D.111. Alan amounted to what was the Austrian's 14th "kill", and his tally would eventually reach 28, making him the third highest ranked Austrian ace of the Great War.

Alan crashed into a tree and was pulled free of the wreckage by Austrian troops. Shortly afterwards, Von Fernbrugg arrived at the crash site by car and inspected Alan's damaged Sopwith aeroplane. He found it had 163 bullet holes, including 16 in the engine and 27 that had hit the fuel tank, spilling



At the crash site of his Camel aeroplane.



With his plane in December 1917.

the fuel. This damage saved Alan from being burnt alive – he had been forced to crash land as parachutes were not allowed to be used in allied planes as they were heavy, unreliable and it was believed a pilot might bail out instead of attempting to regain control of his plane.

Von Fernbrugg was informed that Alan was wearing his pyjamas underneath his flying suit and sent a message to Alan's squadron requesting some clothing.

Two parcels marked for Alan's attention containing uniforms were dropped on an Austrian aerodrome.

He escaped several months later from a Prisoner of War camp in Salzburg and here the nickname 'Pyjama VC' emerged.

Alan was presented with his Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace in April 1919 while he was still recuperating from his crash and injuries.

He was also presented with French and Italian Military War Crosses.

In 1920 Lord Dartmouth, at a

Territorial Force Association meeting, presented Alan with a silver-gilt rose bowl which was over ten inches high and weighed 10lbs.

Lord Dartmouth said Alan's story "almost read like a fairy tale".

In 2012 the rose-bowl was placed in an auction in Salisbury by his relatives, and sold for nearly £10,000.

The inscription states: "To Lieutenant Alan Jerrard VC the first member of the Staffordshire Territorial Force to win the honour.

"In recognition of a great service and in appreciation of a very gallant action."

Alan died in May 1968 at Buckfield Nursing Home at Lyme Regis and his ashes were interred into the family grave at Hillingdon and Uxbridge cemetery with full military honours. His nemesis Oberleutnant von Fernbrugg predeceased him by four years.

Jerrard's Victoria Cross is on display at the Imperial War Museum as part of Lord Ashcroft's VC Collection.

Alan is not the only man to be educated at Bishop Vesey School who has been awarded a Victoria Cross. Another from the Great War was Charles Bonner, who engaged a German submarine in August 1917 in the Bay of Biscay.

These details have been kindly provided by Lee Dent and Richard Pursehouse, of the Chase Project Military History Group.