

Flight Lieutenant
Alan Jerrard VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



ALAN JERRARD
(SAT ON GROUND,
SECOND RIGHT) WITH
HIS 66 SQUADRON
COMRADES
VIA ANDREW THOMAS

“It took some time with manfully applied intrenching tools, pickaxes and even their bare hands for them to dig the wrecked aircraft out”

Flight Lieutenant Alan Jerrard was known affectionately as the ‘Pyjama VC’ because, when he was captured, he was wearing only his nightclothes beneath his bulky flying overalls. When his squadron “scrambled”, he was in such a rush that he saved time by keeping on his pyjamas. Furthermore, Jerrard was the only Sopwith Camel VC from the Great War and the only air VC from the Italian Front. It is unsurprising, therefore, that I feel immensely privileged to be the custodian of his medal group having purchased it privately in 2010.

Alan Jerrard was born in Lewisham, London, on December 3, 1897. He was the son of Herbert Jerrard, a teacher, and his wife Jane (née Hobbs). Five years after Alan’s birth, the family moved to the West Midlands because of his father’s work: Herbert became the headmaster of Bishop Vesey’s Grammar School in Sutton Coldfield. Jerrard Jnr was first educated at his father’s school, then Oundle School in Northamptonshire and, finally, at Birmingham University.

After a short time at university, he volunteered, in 1915, to join the British

Army. On January 2, 1916, Jerrard, a quiet and unassuming man, was commissioned as a second lieutenant into the South Staffordshire Regiment. However, he spent only a matter of months as an infantry subaltern before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps, the forerunner to the RAF.

At the time, Britain was short of pilots and training was quick: having reported for initial training on September 23, 1916, he was posted to No.59 Squadron based at Narborough, Norfolk, on December 5. Here, he fell ill as the unit was preparing for operations in France and he was therefore temporarily attached to No.50 (Reserve) Squadron, based at the same station.

First Patrols

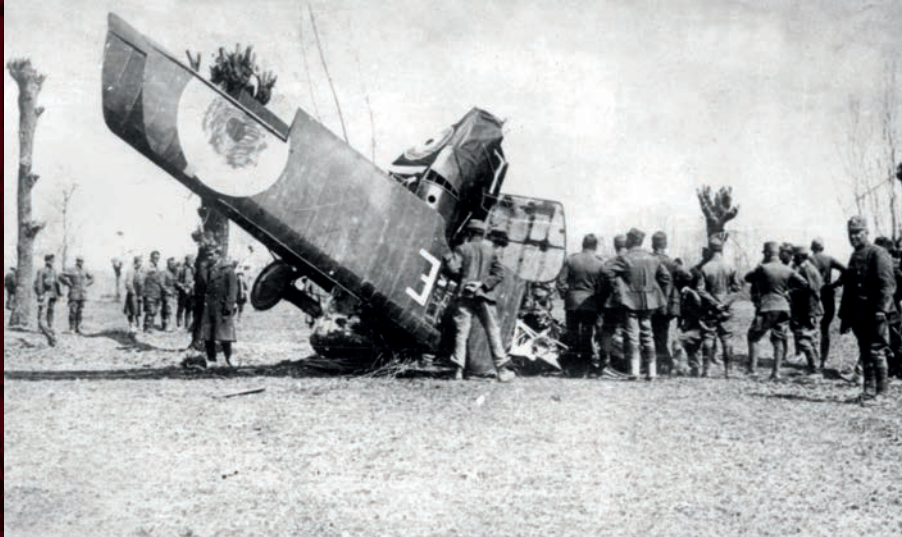
Once fit, he graduated as an RFC pilot on June 14, 1917. He showed above-average abilities in his further training and, on July 2, he was promoted to lieutenant. Jerrard was then selected to fly single-seat aircraft and was notified of his first operational posting, arriving at No.19 Squadron, based at Liettes, France, on July 24.

On July 29, he flew his first operational patrol and, after failing to see the enemy,

lost contact with his formation and had to land at Saint-Omer. His second patrol on August 5 was more eventful. Still inexperienced, he again lost contact with his formation and flew low to get his bearings. When he came across a large convoy of German vehicles, he raked it with his machine gun, causing several vehicles to burst into flames. After climbing to 10,000ft through fog and low cloud, his engine cut out and he was forced to crash-land his French-built Spad SVII fighter, A8830, into a railway embankment near Sainte-Marie-Cappel. Allied troops reached him and dug him out of the wreckage.

In his book *VCs of the World War: The Air VCs*, Peter G Cooksley writes: “Alan was only semi-conscious and in pain when the soldiers reached him and it took some time with manfully applied intrenching tools, pickaxes and even their bare hands for them to dig the wrecked aircraft out of the railway bank into which the force of the blind impact had driven it. The balance sheet of Alan Jerrard’s second sortie in France had not been favourable to the Allies – a pilot temporarily lost through facial injuries that included a broken ▶

THE TWISTED AND BULLET-RIDDEN REMAINS OF JERRARD'S CAMEL FIGHTER, FROM WHICH THE 'PYJAMA VC' EMERGED WOUNDED BUT ALIVE VIA ANDREW THOMAS



nose, multiple fractures of the jaw and a multiple of less serious wounds, plus a valuable aircraft destroyed for a few German vehicles set ablaze.”

After being invalided to England, Jerrard was declared fit for operational flying once again in the New Year. On February 22, 1918, he arrived in Italy to join No.66 Squadron, which flew Sopwith Camels. Just five days later, he claimed an Austrian Aviatik D.I single seater (often known as the 'Berg Scout' after the firm's chief designer) as shot down and out of control. Over the next month, he met more success, shooting down an enemy observation balloon, claiming a pair of Berg Scouts (one crashed, the other damaged) and, finally, shooting down an Albatros Scout.

6 to 1 Odds

On March 30, Jerrard and two other pilots (one experienced, the other a novice) were given a sortie in their Sopwith Camels. There are some discrepancies over exactly who did what next, but essentially the trio found themselves in a dogfight with at least 19 enemy aircraft near Mansuè, Italy. According to the British pilots (their account was disputed by their Austro-Hungarian opponents), Jerrard shot down three enemy and the other two downed a further three between them. Jerrard also launched a courageous attack, flying as low as 50ft, on an aerodrome to shoot up aircraft as they tried to take off.

Jerrard only retreated when ordered to do so by his patrol leader, though he was pursued by five enemy aircraft.

However, by then wounded and with his Camel damaged, he crash-landed west of Mansuè aerodrome, where he was captured. In his book, Cooksley again paints a vivid picture of the scene with Jerrard's fighter in a meadow having lost both port wings in the crash and with the aircraft's nose down in the ground: "When assistance arrived, Alan was found dazed and in shock, able only to sit with clasped hands and bowed head on the

remains of his machine: mask, goggles and helmet discarded and flung on the ground in a heap, small wonder considering the effect of the fight.

The Camel's wreckage had 163 bullet holes, nearly 30 in the fuel tank and half that number in the engine, circumstances with which his victor hastily sympathized before taking Alan with every sign of cordiality to Austrian Army Headquarters at Oderzo.”

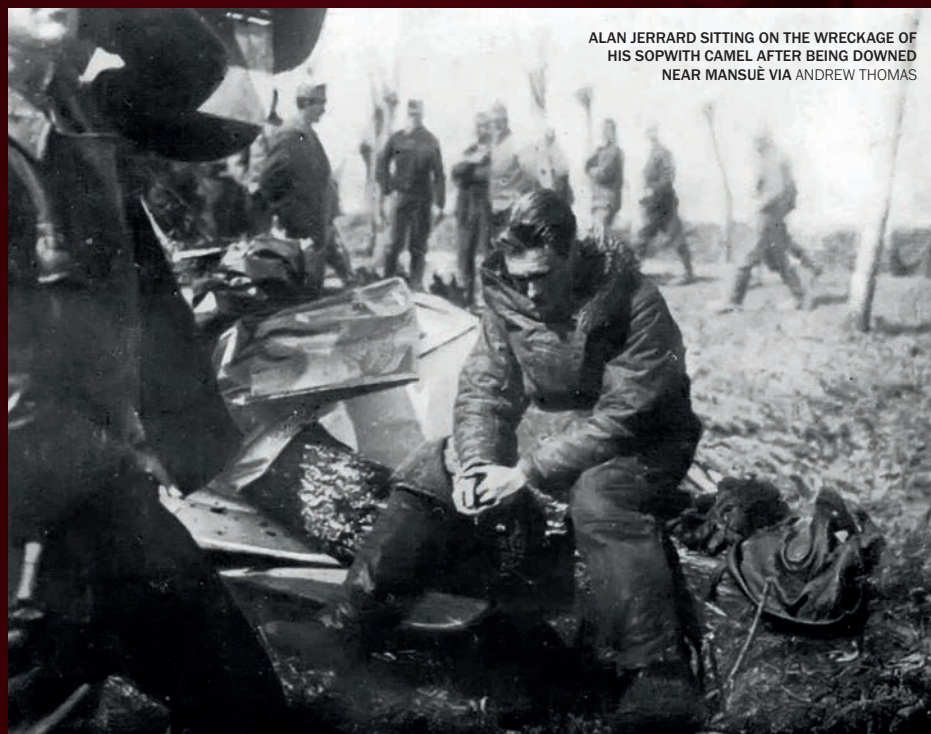
The officer who shot down Jerrard was Oberleutnant Benno Fiala von Fernbrugg, an Austrian air ace flying with Fliegerkorps 51J. After landing his Albatros D.III, he commandeered a motorcar and drove to the crash site to meet his 14th victory.

Captors' Sympathy

Although some of the precise details of the sortie were unclear – shrouded, as they say, in the 'fog of war' – one thing was certain, Alan Jerrard was still wearing his nightclothes and he was therefore, as stated, always known as the 'Pyjama VC'. On the morning of March 30, the weather had been unsuitable for flying and Jerrard thought he had been stood down for the day. When he was suddenly ordered to action, he had been asleep and had to dress rapidly, pulling on his overalls over his pyjamas.

Jerrard's chivalrous captors had sympathy for his predicament as a pyjama-clad

“[Jerrard's] wreckage had 163 bullet holes, nearly 30 in the fuel tank and half that number in the engine”



ALAN JERRARD SITTING ON THE WRECKAGE OF HIS SOPWITH CAMEL AFTER BEING DOWNED NEAR MANSUÈ VIA ANDREW THOMAS



ALAN JERRARD'S VC MEDAL GROUP, INCLUDING OAK LEAF CLASP FOR BEING MENTIONED IN DISPATCHES COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

prisoner and arranged for a note to be dropped behind Allied lines, requesting various items to be delivered for him. Jerrard's 66 Squadron organised two such packages to be dropped for the 20-year-old captive, containing everything from his military uniform to cigarettes and other clothing.

A combat report led to Jerrard being recommended for the VC and his award was announced in *The London Gazette* on May 1, 1918, while he was still a POW. His citation described his dogfight and ended: "When on an offensive patrol with two other officers he attacked five enemy aeroplanes and shot one down in flames, following it down to within 100ft of the ground.

"He then attacked an enemy aerodrome from a height of only 50ft 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 whilst 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 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.

"Lt Jerrard had greatly distinguished himself on four previous occasions, within a period of 23 days, in destroying enemy machines, displaying bravery and ability of the very highest order."

Sole Camel VC

As well as his affectionate sobriquet, Jerrard had the distinction of being the only air VC during the prolonged war on the Italian Front. Furthermore, he was the only Sopwith Camel pilot to be awarded the VC, despite the many successful pilots who fought gallant actions in the fighter, which by the end of the Great War was as well known to the British public as the Spitfire was during the second war.

The single-seat biplane had its first flight in December 1916 and was introduced into service six months later. Although inexperienced pilots found it difficult to handle, more experienced flyers found it highly manoeuvrable in an era of relatively low-speed, low-altitude dogfights. It should not be forgotten that the world's first powered flight from the Wright brothers had taken place as recently as December 1903 so, less than 15 years later, aircraft were still very much in their infancy.

Jerrard remained a POW at Salzburg until the end of the war, when he was repatriated. He chose to stay in the RAF and, after his investiture by George V at Buckingham Palace on April 5, 1919, he flew with the RAF Murmansk detachment in Russia. While still serving, he married Eliza Woods in London in 1926. He rose to the rank of flight lieutenant but, due

to ill health, retired from the service on August 24, 1933. In 1956, he lent his VC to an exhibition to mark the centenary of the award.

Jerrard died at a nursing home in Lyme Regis, Dorset, on May 14, 1968, aged 70. Three days later he was buried with full military honours and his ashes were later interred at Hillingdon, Uxbridge. His name is on a family grave in Hillingdon, on a memorial at Lewisham Civic Centre and on an RAF memorial at St Clement Danes, London. ●

Heroes of the Skies



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His fourth book on gallantry, *Heroes of the Skies*, was first published in 2012 and is available

in hardback and paperback. For more information, visit: www.heroesoftheskies.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London. For more information, visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes Details of his VC collection may be found at: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

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