Alex Vale: Wartime pilot turned police officer

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Alexander Augustus Vale, RAF pilot and police officer: born London 30 August 1922; DFC 1946; married 1943 Rose Dann (died 2003; one son, two daughters); died Salisbury, Wiltshire 22 September 2007.

Alex Vale's life was transformed by the Second World War. During the opening phase of the conflict, his youth and staunch pacifism kept him out of military service. But the devastation inflicted on London by German air-raids soon challenged his fashionable pacifist ideals, prompting him to join the RAF. His wartime experiences left him unwilling to resume his pre-war desk-bound routine and, indulging a newfound taste for travel and adventure, he went on to lead a varied existence far removed from the life that his younger self might have envisaged, becoming, among other things, a fingerprint specialist with the Metropolitan Police then the Colonial Police in Uganda.

Vale was born in the tough south London district of Peckham; an escape route from working-class drudgery arrived in the form of a scholarship offering an otherwise unaffordable education at Alleyn's School in Dulwich. Besides demonstrating an aptitude for Latin and Greek, he showed considerable promise as an artist. He accepted a traineeship in the graphic design studio run by Holdron's, a local department store, and hadn't been there long before Britain declared war on Germany.

In 1940, he volunteered for the RAF and was sent to America for training. The following year, he was assigned to a Fighter Command squadron equipped with Supermarine Spitfires. Defying the short life expectancy of RAF fighter pilots, he was still flying combat missions during the spring of 1944. After a spell with a unit based on Malta, he was transferred to Number

One Squadron which flew several sorties each day from Predannack Airfield in Cornwall.

In the run-up to D-Day, he and his squadron were ordered to strafe the communications network in occupied France. Only a month before the Allied invasion of Europe, he was shot down over Brittany. When he crash-landed in a field, a farmer hauled him from the wreckage. He was then taken to a local farmhouse, ready for him to be smuggled out of the country by the Resistance. Before that could happen, the Gestapo received a tip-off that led to his arrest.

He was taken to Stalag Luft 3, the prisoner-of-war camp on the Polish border. With the German army in retreat, Vale and the other half-starved inmates were subjected to a gruelling march through thick snow to Luckenwald. At this notorious prison camp near Berlin, they endured sadistic treatment by the guards before being freed a few months later by the advancing Russians.

When he got back to England, Vale was presented with the Distinguished Flying Cross. Turning down the opportunity to remain an RAF pilot, he enrolled in the Metropolitan Police. He was immediately sent to the police training college at Hendon. Though the tutors attempted to shock the new recruits by taking them to a mortuary, the war had accustomed Vale to such gruesome sights.

No sooner had Vale finished his probationary period than he obtained a transfer to the Criminal Investigation Department. Off-course gambling remained illegal in those days, yet so-called "bookies' runners" were positioned on most street-corners, accepting bets on behalf of big-time bookmakers. As Vale quickly discovered, it was a system that flourished with the connivance of the police. He and a colleague borrowed a wheelchair and strolled round the streets of Brixton pretending to be a disabled war veteran and his carer. Vale would leap out of the wheelchair and arrest the startled runners. The ploy was so effective that the bookmaker who controlled the

business in that part of London persuaded the police to order Vale to stop "harassing" his employees.

Frustrated by his experiences in the local CID, Vale secured a move to the Fingerprint Branch of Scotland Yard. There his career prospects were stymied by a clash of personalities with his commanding officer, Detective Superintendent Fred Cherrill, a celebrated fingerprint expert who made a cameo appearance in the movie The Blue Lamp. In 1951 Vale switched from Scotland Yard to the Fingerprint Branch of the Colonial Police, his new job taking him to Uganda where he learned Swahili and deployed his detective skills on a series of undercover operations.

For the best part of a decade and a half, he remained in Uganda, successive promotions elevating him to the rank of Senior Superintendent of Police by 1965. Eventually, he resigned from his job and returned to England where he and his wife "Danny" were planning to settle with their three children. Eager for a change of direction, he embarked on a teacher training course, at the end of which he revised his plans.

He took a post as a detective training officer in Botswana, where he became an enthusiastic participant in the expat community's amateur dramatic productions. He also revived his dormant graphic art career, producing designs for three sets of postage stamps issued by the Botswana government. One of these earned him an Observer Commonwealth Design of the Year Award. In 1971, Vale moved back to London to a job with the Construction Industry Training Board, where he remained until his retirement in the mid-1980s.

In 2004 he joined a friend on a pilgrimage to the site of his wartime crash-landing. With the help of a French researcher and a regional newspaper, he was reintroduced to the now elderly farmer who had rescued him from his mangled Spitfire. Undaunted by increasing infirmity, he carried on travelling. His destinations included the ruins of the prison camp at Luckenwald where he was fêted by the German press and public. As a reminder of the grim

background to his visit, he presented the local museum with an extraordinary set of photos, taken on a camera that had been stolen from one of the guards.

Paul Willetts