

# PRIVATE ALFRED HENRY ORCHARD

1889 - 1978

437413 'B' SECTION

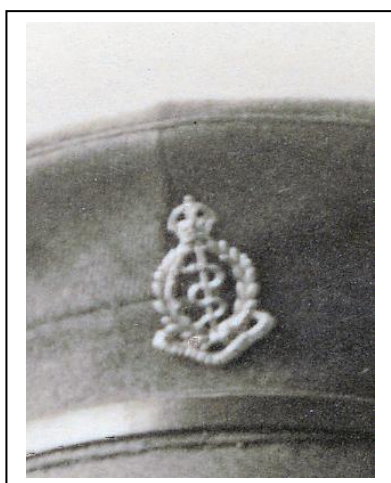
REGIMENT NUMBER 2407

1<sup>ST</sup>/2<sup>ND</sup> SOUTH MIDLAND FIELD AMBULANCE

ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS



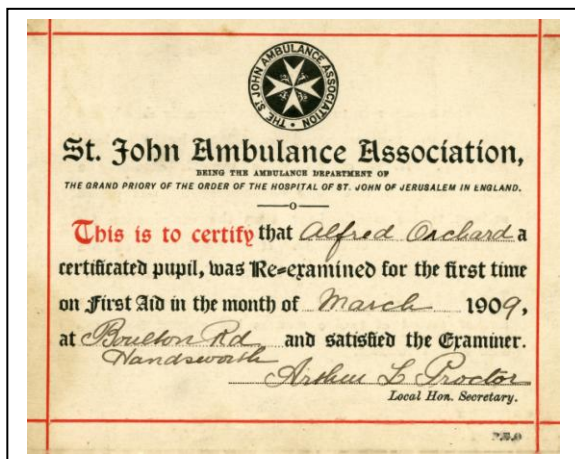
If we did not know from other sources, we can be sure that Alf, as he was always known, was in the Royal Army Medical Corps, from his cap badge: -



Because he was already in uniform in December 1915, Alf must have volunteered for military service as conscription was not introduced into the United Kingdom (excluding Ireland) until February 1916 (*Conscription commenced with the Military Service Act 1916*). Alf was a deeply religious man, indeed he was a Church Warden of his local Anglican church, St John the Evangelist, Perry Barr, Birmingham until well into his 80's. Because of this some members of the family assumed that Alf had been a Conscientious Objector, if this was so though he would surely have not volunteered for army service.

No we can be certain that Alf joined the Royal Army Medical Corps because of his involvement with the St. Johns Ambulance Association.

Alf must have joined St. Johns in 1907 when he was 18 or even earlier because in March 1909 he was awarded his medal, after re-examination at least 12 months later than he was awarded his adult first aid certificate, which he must have gained in 1908.

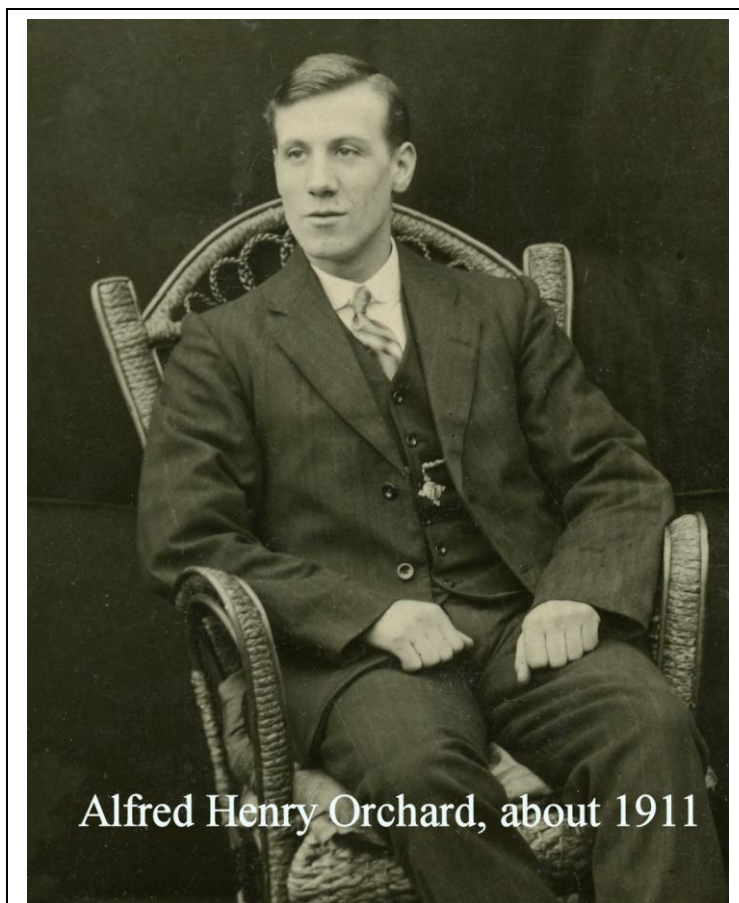


The rear of the medal is inscribed: - "132047, Alfred Orchard"

So by the time Alf joined the army in 1915, he was a qualified First Aider with at least 7 years experience. There had always been a close association between the royal Army Medical Corps since it was founded in 1898, and the St. John Ambulance Association, to quote from its history: -

*"The RAMC operated the army's medical units and provided medical detachments for the units of infantry, artillery and other arms. The Corps was assisted in its work by voluntary help from the British Red Cross, St John's Ambulance, the Friends Ambulance Unit, the Voluntary Aid Detachments and hundreds of private and charitable ventures."*

Alf was proud of his medal, and wore it on his watch chain for many years





Here are two more photographs of Alf wearing his medal dated to March 1912. Apparently a waistcoat with a watch chain was the height of fashion about 100 years ago for the well dressed young man about town. Alf was 23 in March 1912.



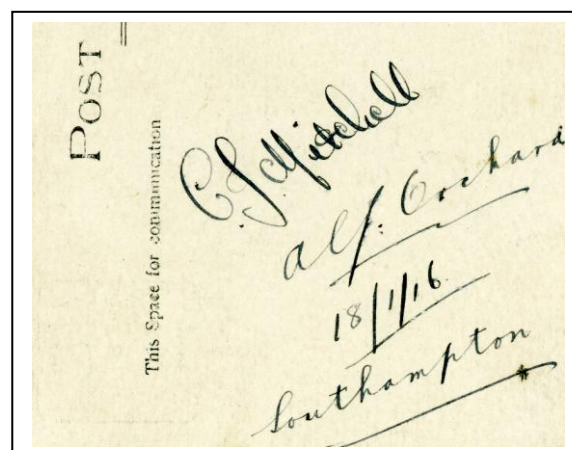
We do not know when or how Alf met his future wife Amy Eliza F. Southerton, only that they were courting before the war, and that Amy did not want to get married until the war was over. However Amy's younger brother Walter Bertram Southerton, was also in the Royal Army Medical Corps and it could well be that like Alf, he was in the St. Johns Ambulance Association in Handsworth, Birmingham, and it was through Walter that Alf and Amy met.

## Military Service

Alf evidently did his initial army training in the Southampton area, as the following photograph makes clear. Note that even recruits to the Royal Army Medical Corps were trained to use weapons for self defence, but officers were not allowed to draw their swords when on parade, or rank and file to fix their bayonets. Note that Alf gives his friends name on the back of the postcard which is shown, but I have been unable to identify the surname.

A great many photographs in this period were printed on photographic paper that had previously been printed on the reverse for use as a postcard, which could be sent for one halfpenny and posted with the next day, or even the same day delivery guaranteed. It also had the advantage of easily identifying the emulsion side of the paper under the dim red light of the darkroom during processing.

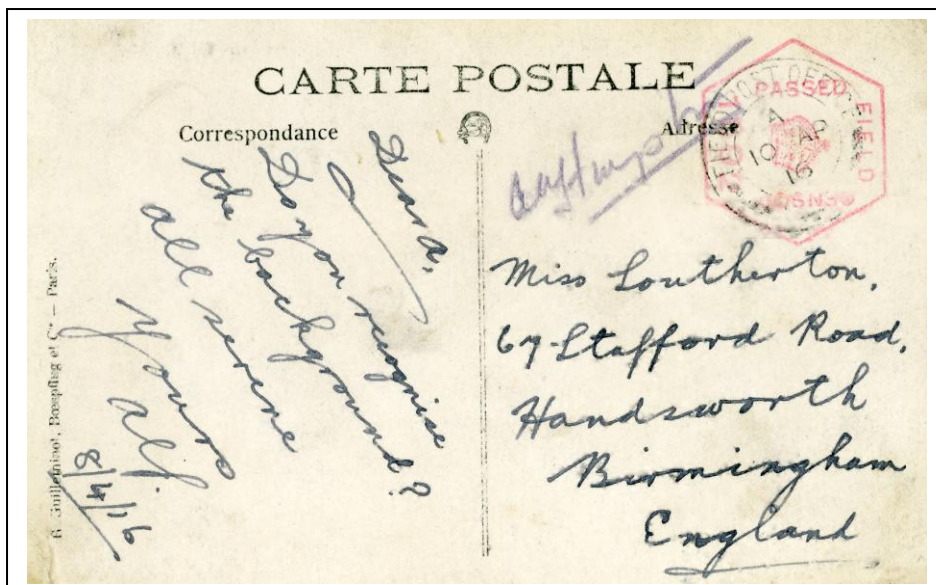




Three months after the above photograph was taken, Alf was in France, and apparently stayed there until he was transferred to Italy as part of the Italian Expeditionary Force in 1918. There are a few photographs from his time in France; the most interesting is this one that he sent to Amy in April 1916 which is complete with the Field Post Office stamp, and the Military Censors stamp (in red) and signature



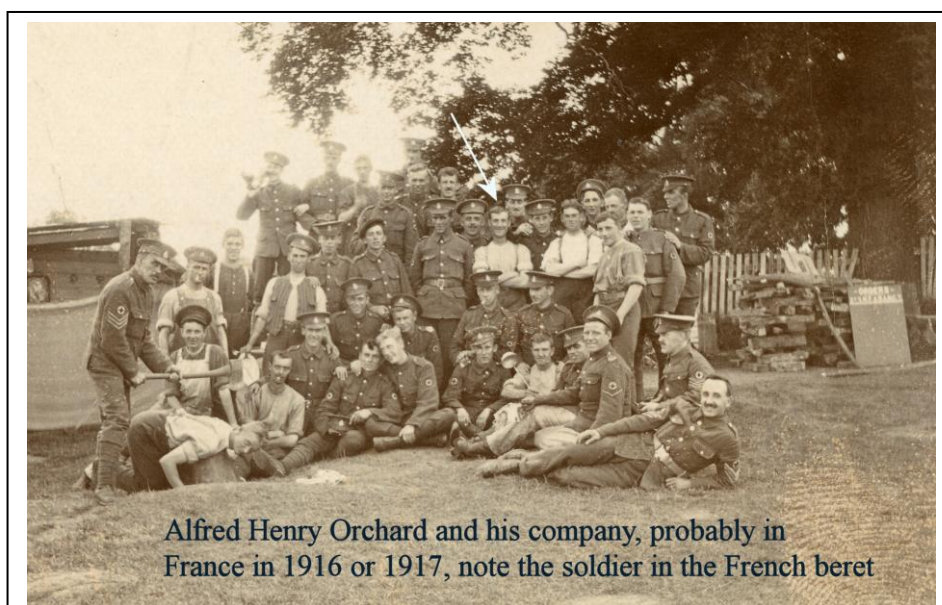




The significance of Alf's remark about the background is because there is a photograph of Amy's brother Walter Bertram Southerton in exactly the same place.



It is known that Walter was in training somewhere near Malvern Worcestershire in August 1915 some 4 months before Alf joined-up, so Walter was probably sent to France some time before Alf. The following photograph of Alf and his comrades was most probably taken in France



The blackboard on the right of the photograph is headed

ORDERS  
1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> F.A. R.A.M.C.

The following photograph is endorsed Italy, December 1918, although it is known that Alf was in Italy as early as February 1918.



On the reverse, Alf has numbered and named the others as: -

- 5) Corporal Davies
- 4) Frank Elvins
- 3) Herbert Eccles
- 1) Jack Brazier
- 2) Fred Blackwell

I have been unable to resolve which name belongs to which individual. There is another photograph of the same group



While he was in Italy Alf kept a diary in which he records that several times he saw his future brother in law, Wal; that is Walter Bertram Southerton, who was also in the South Birmingham Field Ambulance



## Alfred Henry Orchard 1918 Diary in Northern Italy

27 <sup>th</sup> February 1918	We leave Ongarie for Falze to run D.R.S.
23 <sup>rd</sup> March 1918	Went to Padova (Padua) for the day in the G.S. Wagon. We had a good time. Decent place.
1 <sup>st</sup> April 1918	Rain all day.
2 <sup>nd</sup> April 1918	We leave Marsango for Rampazza
3 <sup>rd</sup> April 1918	We leave Rampazza for Zezze, passing through Vicenza. Vicenza is a very large town, long march.
18 <sup>th</sup> April 1918	We leave Zezze for Salceda with advance party in cars, about 40 kilometres. Beautiful ride, now fixed in the mountains, fine scenery
19 <sup>th</sup> April 1918	Walked to Velo to A.D.S.
5 <sup>th</sup> May 1918	Went to see Wal at St. Georgio
12 <sup>th</sup> May 1918	Wal came to Salceda and we went to Velo
16 <sup>th</sup> May 1918	We leave Salceda and march to Thiene. Saw Wal as we came through St Georgio
17 <sup>th</sup> May 1918	We leave Thiene for San Martino
29 <sup>th</sup> May 1918	We leave San Martino for Camisino in lorries
30 <sup>th</sup> May 1918	We leave Camisino for M. L. Sunio and afterwards went to A.D.S. at Boscan. 4000 to 5000 feet above sea level, rather cold.
31 <sup>st</sup> May 1918	I start on nights
21 <sup>st</sup> July 1918	We leave Aziznana for a place close to Vicenza
22 <sup>nd</sup> July 1918	We leave Vicenza for Salcida – this was the last entry

Note that the photograph dated December 1918 was taken after the war had ended. We do not know when Alf was discharged from the Army; it is assumed to be sometime in 1919 and he was awarded the 'Victory' and the 'British' medals, even so he and his Amy did not marry until the spring of 1920



Amy and Alf had 44 years together, until Amy died age 74 in 1964. Alf soldiered on for another 14 years on his own, eventually dying in 1978 age 89. At his funeral oration made by a retired clergyman from the church where Alf served as a Church Warden for so long, he recounted how he was once horrified to find Alf up a ladder, over 30 feet up in the church roof, changing a light bulb. Alf was well into his 80's at the time, and it gives some insight into the type of man he was.

Alan S. Parr  
December 2009.