

ALFRED SEYMOUR SHEPHERD.

BEST PALS?

Colin Lock



Alfred Shepherd in his RFC uniform

Alfred Seymour Shepherd was born on 13 April 1893 and was the eldest son and second child of Emily aka Emma and James Shepherd's five children. His siblings were Edith Jane b.1891, who married John William Ashman Adair in 1914, James Hiram b.1899, Alice Winifred b.1900 and Minnie Florence b.1904. All were born in the Nowra district. James senior, a storekeeper and himself the son of a James, suffered from ill health and was in the process of securing Sydney accommodation when he died, aged only 46, on 2 October 1908. James was buried in Nowra cemetery and a memorial window was later placed in Nowra Methodist Church to which he was a committed parishioner. James' brother Richard, an Alderman for 13 years and Mayor of Berry for 10 years, also died young. He was only 53 when he passed away in December 1920. Following James' death, Emma moved to 8 Miller Street, Petersham, the house appropriately named *Nowra*.

Whilst attending Bomaderry Public School, Alfred received tutoring from Mr E Reid which assisted him in winning a scholarship to Sydney Boys High School in 1908. (1) In 1911 he matriculated to Sydney University with 'A' passes in Algebra and Plain Trigonometry, 'B' passes in English and Geometry and 'C' passes in Latin, Mechanics

and Physics.(2) Then in September 1915, he graduated from Sydney University with a Civil Engineering degree. (3/4) Whilst at university he was a member of the scout group.

On 8 September 1915 Alfred enlisted in the AIF at Warwick Farm. He was described as being 5'6¹/₂" (169 cm) tall, weighing 57 kilos and possessing a florid complexion with brown hair and eyes. He was allocated to the 4th reinforcements of 30 Battalion AIF. Alfred was soon promoted to Sergeant and, after successfully sitting a competitive examination, commenced Officer training. (5) Thus when HMAT *Orsova* sailed from Sydney 11 March 1916, 2nd Lieutenant Alfred Shepherd was Officer Commanding the 30th Battalion's 4th reinforcements headed for Egypt.(6).

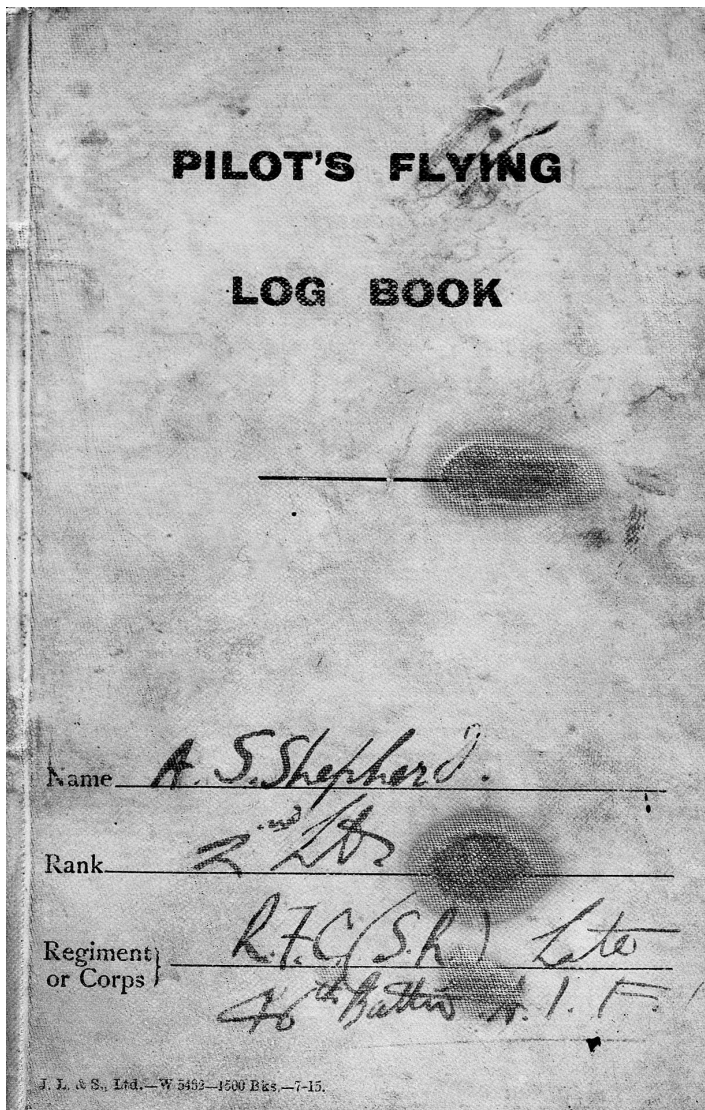
After training in Tel-el-Kabir, Egypt he was taken on strength of the 4th Pioneer Battalion on 3 May 1916. Then on 24 May 1916 he transferred to the 46th Battalion at Serapeum. On the 6 July 1916 he was taken on strength as the AIF's 4th Division's Salvage Officer, this was possibly a fortunate transfer for in August the 46th Battalion took part in the Pozieres campaign. The stay with the Salvage Company was short lived for on 22 October Alfred resigned his AIF commission and next day commenced training at 2 Royal Flying Corps (RFC) School of Instruction, Oxford.

According to his logbook Alfred's flying training commenced on the 22 December 1916 with 27 Reserve Squadron and later with 16 Reserve Squadron. When he arrived at Central Flying School, Upavon, Wiltshire, on 7 February 1917, he had accumulated almost 18 hours of experience. This time was gained on the Maurice Farman Short Horn, Henri Farman, RAF and Avro aircraft.

MFSH dual	3 hours 30 minutes
MFSH solo	5 hours 27 minutes
Avro dual	38 minutes
Henri Farman dual	37 minutes
Henri Farman solo	4 hours 30 minutes
RAF FE2b	2 hours 45 minutes

Alfred had only been with 'D' squadron, Upavon two days when he logged that he was 'feeling ill' and later 'too ill to continue'. He had caught the measles and spent the next 12 days in hospital plus another seven recuperating. Returning to flying duties on the 2 March he continued with 'D' squadron until the 15th when he carried out a cross country exercise to Gosport and joined 'B' squadron. With 'D' and 'B' squadrons he gained additional experience so that, on 21 April 1917, with a grand total of 37 hours and 37 minutes solo time, Alfred was posted to 29 Squadron RFC based at Izel-Le-Hameau, France. 29 Squadron had recently re-equipped with Nieuport 23 aircraft. Once there Alfred got off to a shaky start for on the 25th he logged: *First flip in France; very cloudy; lost aerodrome.[landed [Bellineau?]; engine conked on taking off; landed in field; bad take-off.*(7)

However, as his experience grew he became known



month he brought down seven hostile machines completely out of control. (11).

Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haigh was so impressed with Alfred's aerial accomplishments that he personally acknowledged him and he was Mentioned In Dispatches (MID) 7 November 1917. (12)

Unfortunately by the time these citations were gazetted Alfred was already deceased.(13). After taking off from Poperinghe, Belgium at 1930 hours on 20 July on his first flight after returning from leave, he was shot down near Faudvoorde, Belgium. It was also his first flight as a recently promoted temporary Captain.(14). His adversary was Leutnant Alfred Niederhoff flying an Albatros D.V and a member of Jasta 11 which was Manfred von Richthofen's unit. As fate would have it Leutnant Niederhoff was killed eight days later when he was shot down by a member of Alfred Shepherd's squadron. (15)

On August 24 Captain Charles Bean, an official Australian war correspondent, visited Proven and Droglandt in Belgium to report on 29 and 32 Squadrons RFC.(16). At 29 squadron the C.O. was away and he spoke to a Captain who was in command. When asked about the Australians in the squadron the Captain replied:

"Oh, then there was Capt. Shepherd - he went missing on 20th July - he was an Australian and a D.S.O. and M.C. - we are very proud of him in the Squadron. He came in from the Australian Infantry to the R.F.C."

He asked if he had done fine work - "Many splendid things" said the youngster. "Perhaps one [of his] finest was his last. His best pal had 'gone west' three days before, when Shepherd came back from leave. He was tremendously effected - I never saw a chap more down in the mouth - and he was out for German blood. They tried to calm him down and dissuade him from doing anything foolish; he went out next day with 3 other men and ran into about 12 Huns. He led straight for them, like a bulldog and they got him. He brought down a great number of Huns in his time here."(17)

Another report stated:

Shepherd after the fight was first posted missing. But a German airman later dropped a message in the British Lines. It contained the simple words, "We have lost a noble foe." Shepherd had paid the supreme sacrifice.(18)

And: Then on July 20, 29 Squadron lost their finest pilot when A. S. Shepherd DSO, MC was killed in action. (19)

Alfred's identification disc was returned and passed on to RFC headquarters.(20). Alfred's life is commemorated at the Arras Flying Memorial, Pas de Calais.

As compensation for the loss of her son, from 3 January 1918, Emma began receiving a fortnightly pension of £3-10-0. Alfred's medals were presented to Emma by the Governor General Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson during a ceremony held in Martin Place, Sydney on 20 August 1918. (21).Emma passed away 20 April 1920, some thought never having recovered from her loss.(22)

So who was Alfred's best pal mentioned by Charles Bean earlier? The answer will probably never be known for sure, but there is one strong possibility: Alfred lived with his mother at 8 Miller Street, Petersham. Not far away at Melrose, 4 Eltham Street, Petersham lived Percy Eric Theodore Palmer, the son of Theresa Clare and Herbert Frederick Young Palmer. On the 8 September 1915 Percy travelled to

as the 'Lone Hand Flyer' (8) and his logbook shows Alfred was a very competent pilot. His first successful aerial combat against the enemy occurred on 11 May. This was to be the first of 12 officially credited to him although there are others mentioned in his log. If unconfirmed 'driven down' enemy aircraft are included some sources mention 25 successes.(9)

Alfred was awarded the Military Cross (this predated the Distinguished Flying Cross which was first awarded in June 1918) and a Distinguished Service Order.

His Military Cross citation was:

*2nd Lt. Alfred Seymour Shepherd, R.F.C. Spec. Res
For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. While on balloon attack he came under heavy fire from a rocket battery. He attacked this battery from a low altitude, silencing it, and dispersing the gunners. He then returned to the attack on a balloon, and fired all his ammunition, and though his machine was badly hit he crossed the line at 100 feet. (10)*

The citation for his DSO read:

2nd Lt. Alfred Seymour Shepherd, M.C., R.F.C., Spec. Res.

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty on numerous occasions when engaged in combat with hostile aircraft. Though surrounded by enemy machines, he continued to fight for nearly an hour with the utmost gallantry and determination against two hostile formations, finally bringing down one of the enemy out of control. Within a

Warwick Farm to enlist in the AIF. There he attested he was aged 21 years and one month, was employed as a motor engineer by T D Chapman (who imported the first motor lorry in Sydney in 1908) and had spent five years in the Royal Australian Navy Reserve. Significantly this was the same day as Alfred enlisted. Perhaps they travelled together? Percy was assigned to the 11th reinforcements for the 1st Battalion which sailed for Egypt from Sydney on 5 October 1915. In fact Percy had lied about his age, he was born on the 31 July 1897(23) and was therefore barely 18 when he embarked HMAT *Themistocles*.(24).

Percy also spent time at Tel-el-Kabir, although he had left before Alfred arrived, sailing from Alexandria on the 22 March 1916 and arriving at Marseilles on 28 March. The 1st Battalion was to see much action in the ensuing months so Percy was probably relieved when his application of the 22 September 1916 to transfer to the RFC became effective on 28 October 1916. In this application Percy stated he was in the Navy from July 1910 and remained active until 30 May 1915. He again lied about his age giving his date of birth as 31 July 1894.(25).

Percy entered the number 5 School of Aeronautics at Denham on 16 November 1916. Not being a commissioned officer he had to attend the RFC Officer Cadet Battalion, Oxford where he was taken on strength 26 January 1917. Upon completion Percy received his discharge from the AIF on 16 March 1917 and was taken on strength as probationary 2nd Lieutenant with the RFC 17 March 1917. From there he commenced flying training with 28 Reserve Squadron around the 30 March. His next move was to 68 Reserve Squadron at Harlaxton, Lincolnshire around the 25 April.

This squadron was flown by Australians wishing to join the RFC. From around the 10 June time was then spent with 45 and 81 Squadrons before being allocated to 29 Squadron 30 June 1917.(26). At this time his rank as a 2nd Lieutenant had been confirmed (27) and it appears he was trained on the rotary engine Sopwith scout. It is interesting to note that Alfred and Percy were both in England, albeit at different locations, between mid November 1916 and late April 1917 at least.

If Percy was superstitious he would have been concerned that his start date with 29 Squadron was 13 July 1917, a Friday! His first operational duty was on 16 July when he departed Poperinghe, Belgium at 1600 hrs flying Nieuport 17 B3478. His brief was to attack kite balloons. His aircraft came under anti aircraft fire at about 1715 hrs which resulted in his engine being damaged and causing Percy to make a forced landing near Elverdinghe.(28). His next flight was on the 17th flying Nieuport 23 B3453. Taking off at 1050 hrs he was attacked and shot down at 1215 hrs. Amazingly, Percy was shot down by Leutnant Alfred Niederhoff ! (29).

Palmer was with me in 29th Squad. Royal Flying Corps. His name was Percy and he was the only Australian called Palmer in the squadron at the time. He was short, with dark curly hair. He had been a Naval Cadet or something to do with the [Navy] and had been hurt there and then went away with the 1st Battalion. He was out on patrol in July 1917 (about 3 or 4 days after he and I went up to the 29th Squadron) on the Ypres Sector, and he was seen driven

down by three Hun machines within our Lines, he was in a single seater machine and it was his second stunt, he was found later shot dead amongst the wreckage of his machine. I was told about it by the Adjutant Captain Briggs who belonged to the West Yorks and was attached to the Flying Corps. His body was recovered and buried.

INFORMANT - Lieutenant A.F.G Stafford

Australian Flying Corps, attached to Royal Flying Corps, 29 Squadron. (30)

Charles Bean was told during his visit to 29 Squadron:

'Palmer, I think he was R.F.C., - he was killed on 17th July, shot down just the other side of Ypres - he had only been out four days.'(31)

This was the second tragedy for the Palmer family: their eldest son Herbert Leopold, who had enlisted on 19 October 1914 and had landed at Gallipoli on the 25 April 1915, had been killed in France barely four months earlier. (32). A very minor consolation was when Percy's next of kin received £98.7.6 from the British authorities.(33)

So was Percy the 'best pal' referred to by Charles Bean? We will probably never know but consider: they lived near to each other in Petersham; they signed up at Warwick Farm on the same day; they both transferred to the R.F.C. and flew in the same squadron; Percy was shot down two days before Alfred returned from leave. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website there were five RFC pilots killed over the two days the 16 and 17 July. Two were in the UK, another was with 48 squadron and the fourth, a New Zealander, with 27 squadron. Percy was the only member of 29 squadron to lose his life over those two days. As well, Percy stated on his AIF attestation that he was a motor engineer by trade. When Alfred applied to join the RFC he added that he had raced motor cycles in Australia and had 'considerable experience of petrol engines'. (34). Was this the common connection?

Alfred's last entry in his log is dated 3 July 1917 so it can be assumed he went on leave shortly after. This was his first break since joining the squadron. His photograph, which shows his MC ribbon at least, was taken in London which means it was taken during his leave. The author speculates that as Percy didn't join 29 squadron until the 13th, perhaps Alfred and Percy had the opportunity to meet in London. Having possibly farewelled each other with a 'see you in Belgium', upon his return Alfred would have been, as described, devastated to learn his pal had lasted four days.

On the 17 July 1918 and 1919, as well as an *On Active Service* memorial from Percy's mother, father and sister Miranda in the *Sydney Morning Herald* was:

PALMER. - A tribute of love to the memory of my dear friend, Lieut. P. E. Palmer, R.F.C. killed in action, July 17, 1917. He died an Australian hero

The greatest death of all.

Inserted by his friend, Elsie (35)

Date and Hour	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Passenger	Time	Height	Course	Remarks
27/4/17. 5:15 a.m.	Mild.	N.S. A.6665	—	120	6000		O.P. over lines; A.A. active; lost patrol; landed Beauvais, 23 squad.; filled up & returned.
4:20 p.m.	Mild.	N.S. A.6665	—	80	2000		Diving on ground target. Clouds low.
6:30 p.m.	Fresh.	N.S. A.6665	—	30	3000		" " " " " "
28/4/17. 8:30 a.m.	Mild.	N.S. A.6665	—	110	5000		O.P. 3 H.A. flying low E.; A.A. active.
4:45 p.m.	"	N.S. A.6665	—	120	6000		O.P. No H.A.
29/4/17. 6 a.m.	"	N.S. A.6665	—	110	4000		O.P. No H.A.
10:25 a.m.	"	N.S. A.6665	—	20	4000		Machine test. Satisfactory.
11:45 a.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	110	14000		O.P. No H.A. seen. Followed Milling & Humble down to 200' in Hun land. A.A. & M.S. fire very severe. Returned alone to report losses.
4:15 p.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	110	13000		O.P. H.A. engaged & driven over Hun trenches.
30/4/17. 8:15 a.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	15	4000		O.P. Returned with flag tattered.
8:55 a.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	70	10000		Continued O.P. No H.A. seen.
11:30 a.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	35	8000		Chasing H.A. None seen.
3 p.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	115	13000		O.P. H.A. seen & driven off.
7:15 p.m.	"	N.S. A.6767	—	65	10000		O.P. No H.A. seen.
1/5/17. 5:45 a.m.	"	N.S. B.1504	—	105	12000		O.P. 4 H.A. seen & driven off.
10:30 p.m.	"	N.S. B.1504	—	125	14000		O.P. 2 H.A. seen; too high to engage.

and in 1919:

In loving memory of my dear friend Lieut. P. E. Palmer, R.F.C., killed in action July 17, 1917.

Too dearly loved to ever be forgotten.

Inserted by his friend, Elsie. (36)

There were no subsequent entries from Elsie. One wonders if she ever found a new love or remained unmarried, never forgetting Percy?

Endnotes:

- (1) Ulladulla and Milton Times, 8 February 1908, p.1.
- (2) Sydney Morning Herald, 9 December 1911, p.26
- (3) Sydney Morning Herald, 24 June 1915, p.5.
- (4) Calendar of the University of Sydney 1916, p.438
- (5) NAA: B2455, Shepherd Alfred Seymour.
- (6) First World War Embarkation Rolls, 30 Infantry Battalion - 1 to 6 Reinforcements.
- (7) A S Shepherd Log Book, 25 April 1917.
- (8) The Sun, 8 September 1918, p.11.
- (9) C Bower and N Franks, No 29 Squadron RFC/RAF 1915-1919 in Cross & Cockade V2. No.4 1971. p.100.
- (10) Supplement to the London Gazette, 16 August 1917 (30234/8382)
- (11) Supplement to the London Gazette, 17 September 1917 (30287/9557)
- (12) Sydney Morning Herald, 31 July 1918, p.12 and Flight, 20 December 1917, p.1324.
- (13) Although not gazetted for some time, apparently the recipient could wear the ribbon once the award was confirmed.
- (14) Supplement to the London Gazette, 30 July 1917 (30210/7773-3).
- (15) www.theaerodrome.com, accessed 18 August 2016.

- (16) Proven and Droglandt, now Droogland are both a short distance from Poperinghe.
- (17) CEW Bean's diaries, notebooks and folders, AMW383DRL 606/87/1, August 1917, p.24.
- (18) The Sun, 8 September 1918, p.11.
- (19) C. Bowyer and N Franks, No 29 Squadron RFC/RAF 1915-1919 in Cross & Cockade V2 No.4 1971.
- (20) Australian Red Cross Society. Wounded and missing Enquiry Bureau files, 1914-1918 war, 1DRL/0428.
- (21) Sydney Morning Herald, 20 August 1918, p.8
- (22) The Shoalhaven News and South Coast District Advertiser, 24 April 1920, p.1.
- (23) Birth transcription 24921/1897, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages.
- (24) First World War Embarkation Rolls, 1 Infantry Battalion—9-12 reinforcements.
- (25) WO 339 89337 folio 8.
- (26) Supplement to the London Gazette, 10 April 1917 (30014/3467).
- (27) Supplement to the London Gazette, 3 July 1917 (30166/6686.
- (28) Henshaw T, The Sky Their Battlefield, Grub Street, London 1995, p.199.
- (29) Henshaw T. The Sky Their Battlefield, Grub Street, London 1995, p.200.
- (30) Red Cross First World War Wounded and Missing, Palmer, Percy Eric.
- (31) CEW Bean's diaries, notebooks and folders, AMW383DRL 606/87/1, August 1917.
- (32) NAA: B2455 Palmer Herbert Leopold.
- (33) Supplement to the London Gazette, 31 December 1918 (37632/15260)
- (34) WO 339 77371, folio 8.
- (35) Sydney Morning Herald, 17 July 1918, p.10.
- (36) Sydney Morning Herald, 17 July 1919, p.6.

Captain Alfred Seymour Shepherd DSO, MC, MID

Victories

DATE	TIME	AIRCRAFT	OPPONENT	LOCATION
11 May 1917	1015	Nieuport 23 (A6787)	Albatros D.III (DES)	Sailly
20 May 1917	1245	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (DESF)	E of Douai
24 May 1917	0800	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (DESF)	Vitry
24 May 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Drove down	Log book entry
28 May 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Drove down	Log book entry
1 June 1917	0515	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (OOC)	Brebieres
5 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Drove down	Log book entry
5 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Drove down	Log book entry
16 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Drove down	Log book entry
16 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Drove down	Log book entry
21 June 1917	0800	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (OOC)	Ecourt St Quentin
23 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Two seater	Log book entry
24 June 1917	1900	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (OOC)	Douai
24 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Two seater	Log book entry
24 June 1917		Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Two seater	Log book entry
27 June 1917	1920	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (DES)	Bullecourt
27 June 1917	1925	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (OOC)	Drebieres
29 June 1917	0720	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (OOC)	Bullecourt
29 June 1917	0830	Nieuport 23 (A1504)	Albatros D.III (OOC)	Henin-Lietard

DES = destroyed, DESF=destroyed forced down, OOC= out of control

Right: A Nieuport 23.

