

## The insanity of British Army Numbers in the First World War

I recently became a member of the Western Front Association and one benefit of this membership was that it gave access to certain WWI soldier's records. These included Medal Index Cards, records of pensions awarded to the next of kin of soldiers who lost their lives and sometimes other odd associated documents. These led me down a rabbit hole from which I had to dig myself out!

I typed in the name of one of my Great Uncles, Corporal John William Yerrell, 2<sup>nd</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who was killed during the war, and the document below came up as part of the pension documents. We can see that he died of wounds received in action on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1915, (he arrived in France on the troopship on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1915). The notification of his death was on 12<sup>th</sup> April. It must have been shocking for the family to learn that he had lost his life little more than two months after arriving in France, and why did it take ten days before his death was notified? We can see the name of his wife, Nellie, and her date of birth, also his two children and their dates of birth. The 'Date of Expiry' for the two girls, Grace Emily and Louisa, must have been when they were to stop receiving any pension benefits which would have been on their sixteenth birthdays. It seems Nellie was receiving a combined pension of nineteen shillings a week from 18<sup>th</sup> October 1915.

Name	YERRELL John William		Regimental No.	4/9493	Case No.	11/W/413290/14
Regiment	Argyll Sutherland Highlanders		Rank	Corporal	427	
Form 104-88 received	16-4-15	Date of notification of death	12/4/15	Form 104-76 received	6.5.15	
Date and cause of death	2.4.15 Died from wounds received in action					
Widow	Nellie		Date of birth	8.2.89		
Children :-						
Name	Date of birth	Date of expiry	Remarks			
Grace Emily	10.12.12	10.12.25	No. for whom S.A. is paid 50/4.10.15			
Louisa	9.5.15	9.5.31				
			Noted for Novel			
Pension	19/-		a week from	18.10.15		
Date awarded	14.10.15		If refused, reason			
Papers						
W 13917 -517 20,000 3/15 H W V(P) G. 15/251						

Man's Name (1) Yerrell John William.			P.F. 23 M.		
Surname first in BLOCK Letters.			Regimental No: (1) 9493.		
(2) Yerrell, Samuel.			(2) 9493.		
Widow			Regiment.....(1) A & S H.		
Name of Guardian Dependant			(2) Northants		
Emily Yerrell.					
Awards Reference No:	Initials	Date	P.I.O. Reference No:	Initials	Date
DP.1.8					
71 DP/2130		29.7	DPM.2985		29.7

Another document that popped up was the one on the left, written in beautiful calligraphic script. I am sure it wasn't a requirement from the War Office for officers to write these up in this way but the person filling in this card has definitely gone the extra mile to use his best handwriting. The card records John William Yerrell and his brother, Samuel Yerrell, both killed, with the name of their mother and dependant, Emily. Note the brothers' consecutive numbers.

The document below tells us (second from bottom), that John disembarked (arrived) in France on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1915, and the date he died of wounds.

(To be rendered in duplicate.)

Artyll and Sutherland Highlanders **Regiment or Corps when Decoration was earned.** 689

ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Decoration granted under Army Order 20 of 1919.

To be left blank	On date of Disembarkation		NAME	Date of Disembarkation	REMARKS (a) If non-effective -- Cause, etc. (b) If transferred -- Present Regt. No., Rank and Unit. (c) If forfeited -- Cause.	Record of disposal of decoration (a) Presented (b) Despatched by Post (c) Taken into Stock	To be left blank for use in War Office
	Regt. No.	Rank					
	S/4648	Pte. ✓	Wyper, James	19.9.15.(1)	Trans. Class "Z" 8.5.19.		
	S/5016	Pte. ✓	Wyse, David	9.7.15. (1)	Trans. Class "Z" 25.2.19.		
	S/5015	Pte. ✓	Wyse, James	9.7.15. (1)	Trans. Class "Z" 27.3.19.		
	S/8126	Pte. ✓	Yardley, David Forsyth	6.10.15.(1)	Trans. Class "Z" 10.4.19.		
✓	S/6651	Pte. ✓	Yates, Alexander	11.5.15.(1)	Trans. Class "Z" 9.5.19.		
	2237	Pte. ✓	Yates, David	15.12.14(1)	Disembodied 20.1.19. Discharged 392(xvi)		
	S/4948	Cpl. ✓	Yates, Henry	19.9.15.(1)	13.9.18. Discharged 392(xxv)		
	S/2581	Pte. ✓	Yeardley, John	11.5.15.(1)	13.9.18. Discharged Commission		
	10277	Sgt. ✓	Yeatsley, James	19.12.14(1)	A. & S. Hrs. 20.5.18. <span style="color: red;">X</span> 8/4/533	24/4/536 d/29.7.21	
	1743	Dmr. ✓	Yeoman, John	1.5.15. (1)	L.C. 15. Killed in Action		
	4/9493	Pte. ✓	Yerrell, John William	24.1.15.(1)	Died of wds. 2.4.15.		
	1582	Pte. ✓	Young, Bertie	15.12.14(1)	Died of wds. 17.6.16.		

I certify that according to the Official Records the individuals named in this ROLL are entitled to the Decoration as detailed above.

Place Perth

Date 16/12/19

Signature and rank of Officer certifying 12-6

Another document (below), told me that John had died of wounds in No. 19 Field Ambulance.

Record No.	Registry No.	Soldier's Name	Regiment, Rank, No.	Date and Place of Death	CREDITS		
					Account and Date	£	s. d.
184886	94196	Yerrell	2nd. Bn.	2-4-15 Perth	3 2 1		
		John	Arg. Ambula	15/19/15	6/15		
		William	Highlrs	Ambulana			
		✓	Corporal	4/9493	19/20 4083. 12/5/19	3	=
		A. & S. 5070 sent		24 APR. 1919	Regd. Paper 1064. Luc 8		
					Serial No. 1612.		
					WAR GRATUITY.	1	.
					Transfer 9/20 5171 30.8		
					Regd. Paper 31 2020 Luc 118		
					Serial No. 17776.		



The next document (below) is part of a roll of individuals entitled to the Victory Medal and/or British War Medal granted under Army Orders 266 & 301. John is the tenth name down.

Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. REGIMENT OR CORPS.

ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Victory Medal and/or British War Medal granted under Army Orders 266 & 301.

of 1919.

Regt. No.	Rank	NAME	Unit previously served with. Regt. No. and Rank in same on entry into theatre of war	Theatre of war in which served								Clause awarded (to be left blank)	Record of disposal of decorations	REMARKS	
				From	To	From	To	From	To	From	To				
9488	L/C	McGregor, Neil.	9488 2/A&SH. Pte.	07/12											
S/9488	Cpl.	Elair, Alexander.	S/9488 10/A&SH. Cpl.	X											
9491	Pte.	Dick, William.	9491 2/ " Pte.	07/12											
S/9491	WO.C.2	Williamson, Thomas	S/9491 14/ " WO.C.2.	07/12											
		Stewart.													
9492	Pte.	Balmer, James.	9492 2/ " Pte.	07/12											
4/9492	Pte.	Lawrie, Joseph.	4/9492 1/ " Pte.	X											
S/9492	Pte.	McTaggart, Robert.	S/9492 10/ " Pte.	X											
			11/ " "												
			12/ " "												
S/9493	Pte.	McLean, James.	S/9493 10/ " Pte.	X											
9493	Pte.	Scott, David.	9493 2/ " Pte.	07/12											
4/9493	Cpl.	Yerrell, John William.	4/9493 2/ " Cpl.	X											
S/9494	Pte.	Orr, Andrew.	S/9494 1/ " Pte.	07/12											
4/9494	Pte.	Simpson, Alexander.	4/9494 1/ " Pte.	X											
			10/ " "												
9495	Pte.	Elair, Alexander	9495 2/ " Pte.	07/12											
		Stewart.													
4/9495	L/Sgt.	McCreath, Daniel.	4/9495 11/ " Cpl.	07/12											
			1/8 " "												

I certify that according to the Official Records the individuals named in this ROLL are entitled to the Medal or Medals as detailed above.

Place \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature and rank of Officer certifying. \_\_\_\_\_

What is of added interest is the entry for Private James Mclean eighth name down. If we look across to the last column on the right we see in red letters 'Deserted 8.3.17'. Most likely this meant that Pte. McLean did not get his medals.

Let's look at the first few columns in this form (below left), as it provides the details that prompted me to write this article in the first place. There are fourteen names here, but only six different regimental numbers, albeit, some are prefixed with an 'S' or a number. First of all, John's brother, Sergeant Samuel Yerrell, 1<sup>st</sup> Northamptonshire Regiment, had the number 9492. In this list fifth down, we see that Private Balmer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, also had the number 9492. It is clear from the official army document (below right), that Sam Yerrell's number was definitely 9492 with no prefix, the same as Private Balmer. And to make doubly sure, we can see a picture (bottom right), showing Sam's Army Book of Common Prayer in which he inscribed his details on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1912. Clearly his number on entering the army was 9492 and never changed.

On 11/11/15 or on becoming non-effective

Regt. No.	Rank	NAME	Unit previously served with. Regt. No. and Rank in same on entry into theatre of war	Theatre of war in which served		
				From	To	From
9488	L/C	McGregor, Neil.	9488 2/A&SH. Pte.	07/12		
S/9488	Cpl.	Elair, Alexander.	S/9488 10/A&SH. Cpl.	X		
9491	Pte.	Dick, William.	9491 2/ " Pte.	07/12		
S/9491	WO.C.2	Williamson, Thomas	S/9491 14/ " WO.C.2.	07/12		
		Stewart.				
9492	Pte.	Balmer, James.	9492 2/ " Pte.	07/12		
4/9492	Pte.	Lawrie, Joseph.	4/9492 1/ " Pte.	X		
S/9492	Pte.	McTaggart, Robert.	S/9492 10/ " Pte.	X		
			11/ " "			
			12/ " "			
S/9493	Pte.	McLean, James.	S/9493 10/ " Pte.	X		
9493	Pte.	Scott, David.	9493 2/ " Pte.	07/12		
4/9493	Cpl.	Yerrell, John William.	4/9493 2/ " Cpl.	X		
S/9494	Pte.	Orr, Andrew.	S/9494 1/ " Pte.	07/12		
4/9494	Pte.	Simpson, Alexander.	4/9494 1/ " Pte.	X		
			10/ " "			
9495	Pte.	Elair, Alexander	9495 2/ " Pte.	07/12		
		Stewart.				
4/9495	L/Sgt.	McCreath, Daniel.	4/9495 11/ " Cpl.	07/12		
			1/8 " "			

I certify that according to the Official Records the

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE RE.

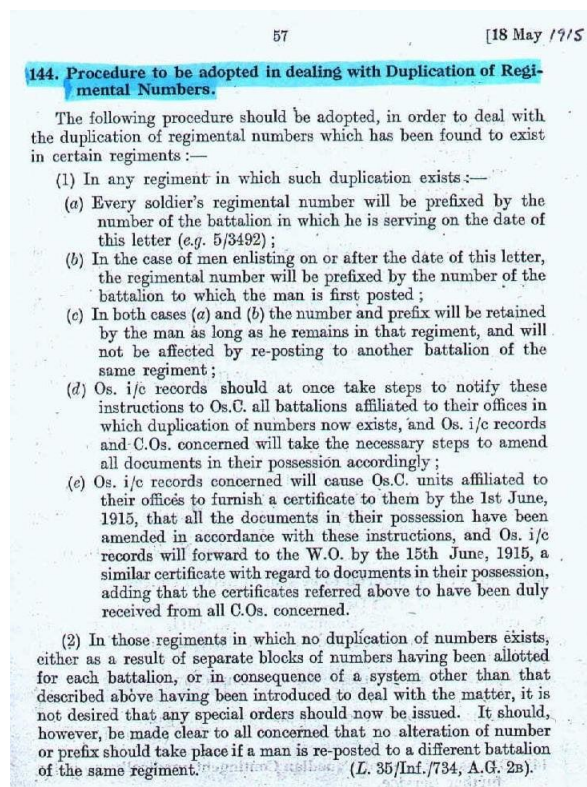
ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Victory Medal

Held by an individual in the Corps in respect of which the rolls are submitted.		NAME	In sequence Units and Corps previously served with by each individual and Regt. Nos. therein; the highest rank, whether substantive, acting or temporary, recorded as having been held for any period in a theatre of War, unless reverted for misconduct, being shown against the name of the regiment or Corps which is to be inscribed on the medal.
Regt. No.	Rank		
9492	Sgt.	✓ YERRELL Samuel.	1st. North'n.R. 9492. Sgt.

9492 Pte S Yerrell  
1 Northamptonshire Regt  
Devonport 15 April 1912

Private Balmer, service number 9492, also confirmed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, was killed in action on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1914. Sam joined the army in 1912 and was killed in action on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1916. This confirms they both had the same army number while serving at the same time. After discovering this information I thought I would find out how many more soldiers had the number 9492 at the same time. I checked the pension Records and after finding ten in the first two pages I gave up as there were 255 other results to check through. I was amazed that there was the possibility of a number of men serving with the same service number of 9492, going up into three figures.

It appears that the prefix numbers, .e.g. 4/9492, denote the battalion number, in this case the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion. But as can be seen in the army instruction below, the prefix did not change if the soldier transferred to another battalion. This seems to me to defeat the original object and leave even more cause for confusion.



The prefix 'S' in the list of names on page 3, denotes either 'Scottish Regiments Wartime Enlistment' or 'Highland Regiments wartime enlistment', I guess as this is the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the second option would be most likely.

On beginning this research I thought I would highlight the various prefixes which were applied by the army in order to remove the possibility of two men having the same number. How wrong I was. It seems that thousands of men were serving with the same service number as others at the same time. I will leave it to the army to show just how interested they were in having a properly organised numbering system. A section of the last paragraph above which gives guidance to regiments that were still without duplication of numbers reads, '*in consequence of a system other than that described above having been introduced to deal with the matter, it is not desired that any special orders should now be issued.*' In other words, 'if you have put in place your own system of numbers, prefix letters or numbers, etc., and it appears to work, there is no need to change to the system that the other regiments have been ordered to introduce.'

Even though the British army system of service numbers in WWI appears to resemble the Wild West, there was still a set of prefixes to numbers in front of a forward slash with a multitude of different meanings and it is still useful to know what these denote if you happen to come across them. Unfortunately, but typically for the army at the time, the prefixes mean a lot of different things, e.g. 'A' has eleven different meanings, 'B' has ten and 'S' has twelve, so you still need to do some homework.

I confess I lifted the information below from the 'Great War Forum'. The contributor stated it might not cover every single prefix but it is pretty much all there. I am not sure if it clears up confusion or just makes it worse!

A – Army Service Corps old Army Special Reserve.  
A - King's Royal Rifle Corps Early wartime recruits  
A - Royal Scots Fusiliers 3rd (Reserve) Battalion  
A - King's Own Scottish Borderers 3rd (Reserve) Battalion  
A - Highland Light Infantry 3rd (Reserve) Battalion  
A - Scottish Rifles 3rd (Reserve) Battalion  
A - Army Ordnance Corps  
A - Royal Fleet Reserve First period of enlistment  
A - Royal Navy Alexandria (WW2 Only)  
A - Australia Silver War Badge Prefix  
A (HT) - Army Service Corps Horse Transport Special Reserve  
AA - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Anti-Aircraft  
ARMR - Army Ordnance Corps Armourer  
ASE - Army Service Corps  
ASR - Army Service Corps

*(A B prefix for coldstream guards means an old soldier who when reenlisting finding his number had been reused (used to go to 9999 then back to 1) but kept his number but now with a B.)*

B - Royal Fusiliers 26th (Banker's) Battalion  
B - Royal Fleet Reserve Second Period of Enlistment  
B - King's Royal Rifle Corps  
B - Highland Light Infantry Service No. 21000 onwards all ex-RA / Cavalry  
B - Highland Light Infantry 4th (Special Reserve) Battalion  
B - Scottish Rifles 4th (Special Reserve) Battalion  
B - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Bristol Division  
B - Unknown Silver War Badge Prefix  
B - Army Service Corps Special Reserve  
B (HT) - Army Service Corps Horse Transport Special Reserve TF  
BZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Bristol Division wartime enlistment  
C - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Clyde Division  
C - King's Royal Rifle Corps 16th Battalion onwards enlistment  
C - Royal Fleet Reserve 3rd Period of Enlistment  
C - Royal Munster Fusiliers 1st Garrison Battalion  
C - Middlesex Regiment  
C - Rifle Brigade  
C - Royal Fleet Reserve Chatham  
C - Royal Navy Chatham  
C (MT) - Army Service Corps Mechanical Transport Special Reserve  
CAT - Army Service Corps Caterpillar Mechanical Transport  
CH - Royal Marines Chatham Division Royal Marine Light Infantry  
CH - Royal Fleet Reserve Chatham



CH/RMP - Royal Marine Police Chatham  
CHT - Army Service Corps Corps of Horse Transport  
CMT - Army Service Corps Corps of Motor Transport  
CZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Clyde Division wartime enlistment  
D - Dragoons  
D - Royal Fleet Reserve Devonport  
D - Royal Navy Devonport  
DEAL - Royal Marines Deal Depot  
DEPOT / D - Royal Marine Light Infantry Deal Depot Permanent Staff  
DEV - Royal Fleet Reserve Devonport  
DM2 - Army Service Corps Mechanical Transport Learners, discontinued 11/16  
E - Royal Fusiliers 17th (Empire) Battalion  
E - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Birmingham Electrical Volunteers  
E - Army Service Corps Forage (ordinary rates of army pay)  
EX - Royal Marines Exton Division (WW2 Only)  
F - Middlesex Regiment 17th & 23rd (Football) Battalions  
F - Royal Naval Air Service  
F - Army Service Corps Forage (not paid from Army Funds)  
F - Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm  
FAA - Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm (WW2 Only)  
G - Royal Irish Fusiliers 1st, 2nd 3rd (Garrison) Battalion  
G - Home Counties Regiments New Army men and later  
GOA - Royal Navy Goa  
GS - British Army General Service Enlistment  
GSR - Royal Sussex Regiment Special Reserve, enlisted under hostilities only terms  
GSSR - Royal Sussex Regiment Special Reserve, enlisted under hostilities only terms  
H - Hussars  
H - Hussars  
H - North Irish Horse Given to all on strength in mid-1917  
I - India Silver War Badge Prefix  
J - Royal Navy Seaman branch Prefix  
J - Royal Fusiliers 38th, 39th 40th, 42nd (Judean) Battalions  
J - Royal Navy Seamen and Communications  
K - "Kitchener battalion"???  
K - Royal Navy Stokers  
K - Royal Fusiliers 22nd (Kensington) Battalion  
K - Royal Navy Stokers and Mechanics  
KP - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Crystal Palace Enlistment from Kitchener's New Armies  
KW - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Crystal Palace Enlistment from Kitchener's New Armies  
KX - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Crystal Palace Enlistment from Kitchener's New Armies  
L - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve London Division  
L - Lancers  
L - Home Counties Regiments Regulars  
L - Royal Artillery Wartime enlistment  
L - South Wales Borderers 3rd (Reserve) Battalion  
L - Royal Navy Officers' Stewards, some Officers' Cooks  
L - Royal Navy Lee-on-Solent (FAA)  
LSR - Royal Sussex Regiment Special Reserve, enlisted under regular terms  
LT - Royal Navy Lowestoft (WW2 Only)  
LT - Royal Navy Lowestoft (WW2 Only)  
LZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve London Division wartime enlistment

M - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Mersey Division  
M - Army Service Corps Mechanical Transport  
M - Royal Navy Miscellaneous enlistments (e.g. writers etc.)  
M - Royal Navy Others -Artificers, Electrical, Supply etc  
M1 & 2/(SR) - Army Service Corps Enlisted Special Reserve for New Armies  
M1, 2 - Army Service Corps Mechanical Transport  
MALTA - Royal Navy Malta  
MB - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Motor Boat Reserve  
MC - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Mine Clearance Service  
MN - Merchant Navy Silver War Badge Prefix  
MS - Army Service Corps Mechanical Specials  
MZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Mersey Division wartime enlistment  
N - Royal Army Medical Corps  
N - Royal Navy NAAFI staff (WW2 Only)  
NZ - New Zealand Silver War Badge Prefix  
O - Rifle Brigade  
O - Unknown Silver War Badge Prefix  
P - Military Foot Police  
P - Royal Fleet Reserve Portsmouth  
P - Royal Navy Portsmouth  
P - Dragoon Guards  
PET - Army Service Corps Petroleum Dept  
PLY - Royal Marines Plymouth Division RMLI  
PLY/RMP - Royal Marine Police Plymouth  
PO - Royal Marines Portsmouth Division RMLI  
PO - Royal Fleet Reserve Portsmouth  
PO/RMP - Royal Marine Police Portsmouth  
Prefix Unit Designation  
PS - Royal Fusiliers 18th, 19th, 20th & 21st (Public Schools) Battalions  
PS - Middlesex Regiment 16th (Public Schools) Battalion  
PW - Middlesex Regiment 18th, 19th & 26th (Public Works) Battalions  
PZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Crystal Palace Enlistment from civilian life  
R Royal Navy Rosyth (WW2 Only)  
R - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Royal Naval Division  
R - Army Service Corps Remounts  
R - King's Royal Rifle Corps Later recruits up to 16th Battalion  
R - Army Service Corps Army Remount Section  
R4, RX4 - Army Service Corps 1st/2nd/3rd/4th New Armies Remounts  
RAF - Royal Air Force Silver War Badge Prefix  
RM - Royal Marines Silver War Badge Prefix  
RMA - Royal Marines Royal Marine Artillery  
RMB - Royal Marines Royal Marine Band  
RME - Royal Marines Royal Marine Engineers  
RN - Royal Navy Silver War Badge Prefix  
RS & R/TS - Army Service Corps Remount Specials  
RX - Army Service Corps Army Remount Section  
S - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Sussex Division  
S - Army Service Corps Supply Branch  
S - Scottish Regiments Wartime Enlistment  
S - Army Service Corps Supply Branch  
S - Royal Army Medical Corps

S - Royal Artillery  
S - Highland Regiments Wartime Enlistment  
S - Home Counties Regiments 3rd Battalion  
S - Rifle Brigade  
S - Royal Munster Fusiliers  
S - Army Ordnance Corps  
S - Dorset Regiment  
S1, 2, 3, 4 - Army Service Corps 1st/2nd/3rd/4th New Armies Supply (S4 Labour)  
SA - South Africa Silver War Badge Prefix  
SD - Sussex Regiment 11th, 12th & 13th (South Downs) Battalions  
SE - Army Veterinary Corps 9th Section  
SF - Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm (Short Service)  
SK - Royal Navy Stokers (Short Service)  
SM - Royal Navy Miscellaneous (Short Service)  
SPTS Royal Fusiliers 23rd & 24th (Sportman) Battalions  
SR - British Army Special Reserve ?  
SRMT - Army Service Corps Special Reserve Motor Transport  
SS - Army Service Corps Supply Specials  
SS - Royal Navy Seamen and Communications (Short Service)  
STK - Royal Fusiliers 10th (Stockbroker's) Battalion  
SWS - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Shore Wireless Service  
SZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Sussex Division wartime enlistment  
T - Army Service Corps Horse Transport  
T - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Tyne Division  
T - Army Ordnance Corps  
T - Territorial Force  
T1 & 2/(SR) - Army Service Corps Enlisted Special Reserve for New Armies  
T1, 2, 3, 4 - Army Service Corps 1st/2nd/3rd/4th New Armies Horse Transport  
TF - Territorial Force  
TS - Army Service Corps Transport Specials  
TT - Army Veterinary Corps Territorial Force ?  
TZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Tyne Division wartime enlistment  
W - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Wales Division  
W - Cheshire Regiment 13th (Wirral) Battalion  
W - Royal Artillery 38th (Welsh) Division  
WR - Royal Engineers Waterways and Railways  
WT4 - Army Service Corps Welsh ?????  
WZ - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Wales Division wartime enlistment  
Y - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Deferred enlistment (replaced by divisional prefix on actual enlistment)  
Y - King's Royal Rifle Corps Early wartime enlistment  
Z - Rifle Brigade