



Alfred Ablett VC & DCM

Victoria Cross & Distinguished Conduct Medal

Sergeant, 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards

He died on 12th March 1897

Alfred is buried at St Andrew's Parish Churchyard, Weybread

This is a terribly sad tale of a hero of the Crimean War whose life, after the act of heroism that won him the Victoria Cross, was dogged with losses: losses of two wives (one who died young, one on repeated occasions to mental health crises probably brought on by pregnancies); loss of children, either as they died one after another either as babies or toddlers, as survivors were fostered out or adopted during his second wife's various incarcerations, some dying as older children; losses of positions as he failed to juggle one crisis after another with working and caring for his surviving children. Finally, in spite of his death being mentioned in papers all through the British Isles and a full funeral being conducted in his home village of Weybread when his body was returned from London, we have lost the precise location of his final resting place.

However, let's stop jumping ahead and go back to a time before Alfred's heroism both Military and everyday. In 1841, brickmaker Samuel Snr and his wife Elizabeth Ablett were living in Weybread, a small village on good clay on the Suffolk side of the River Waveney. It was a good time to be a brick maker as the late Georgians and early Victorians were busy putting brick skins over the front of their old timber framed homes and business premises. The Ablett family was a fair size, 8 children we know of at the time of this census: 3 sons and a daughter between the ages of 15 and 20 (including George aged 17) a 14-year-old (James), a 12-year-old (Alfred), a 10-year-old and, bit of a late arrival, a 4-year-old daughter made up the 7 still living at home.

The oldest son, Samuel Ablett jnr, had already married and set up his own household in the village with his new wife, Harriet Norman and their illegitimate son George Norman who, 10 years later, by the time of the 1851 census had been quietly absorbed into the family and become an Ablett.

The Ipswich Journal
21 Dec 1888

WEYBREAD.
DEATH OF MR. S. ABLETT.—Mr. Samuel Ablett died early on Saturday morning. The deceased was born December 15th, 1819; for upwards of 25 years he was foreman at the brickyard, under the late Mr. G. Chase, but he has been in failing health for the last three years. He leaves a widow and eight children, all of whom are married; two are in America and one in Australia. The morning of his death was his birthday, he having just entered his 70th year.



Just to give an idea of how mobility changed between the start and the end of the 19th century, when Samuel Ablett jnr., the brickmaking son of a brickmaker, died aged 70, 2 of his children were in America and one in Australia! The Australian son was George Ablett née Norman who headed off to Australia in 1869 where he became an unqueried Ablett for the rest of his life and handed that name on to his family, who strictly speaking should be Normans not Abletts!

*George Norman Ablett
Died Australia 1912*

By 1851, another of Samuel Ablett Snr's sons, George Ablett, had also become a married man and had a second child on the way. His oldest daughter, Elizabeth (4), appears in this census staying with neighbours as was common if households were crowded or under stress. Elizabeth Ablett grew up and married local chap William Wiles; one of their grandsons, Stoker Arthur William Wiles, died during WW2 and his name is also marked on our war memorial.

However, it was one of the younger of Samuel Snr and Elizabeth's sons, Alfred Ablett, 12 years old in 1841, who, turning his back on the family clay trade, joined the army and became the first Suffolk man to win a Victoria Cross. Alfred Ablett, private soldier, former labourer, appeared in the 1851 census down at New Winsor, Berkshire, one of over five-hundred soldiers in the Grenadier Guards Infantry Barracks there.

Almost inevitably, by 1854 Alfred was serving out in the Crimea, one of the more complicated European wars in which the French and British became uneasy Allies against the Russians with a wild card of Turkish troops hurled into the mix!

Ablett went on to see action in all the major battles of this campaign, Alma, Inkerman and Balaclava as well as the siege of Sebastopol. When, a few years later, Ablett became a father he chose to commemorate this in the names of his children.

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE, FEBRUARY 24, 1857. 657

Regiment.	Rank and Name.	Act of Bravery for which recommended.
3rd Bat. Gren. Guards	No. 5872 Serjeant Alfred Ablett	On the 2nd September, 1855, seeing a shell fall in the centre of a number of Ammunition-cases and Powder, he instantly seized and threw it outside the trench; it burst as it touched the ground.

It was in 1855 ,whilst he was serving in the trenches at the siege of Sebastopol that he performed an act of calm heroism, which saved the life of many of his comrades. When a live shell, with its fuse still burning, landed amongst his

fellows, and (more worryingly) amongst cases of ammunition and gunpowder, Ablett grabbed the shell and threw it clear, disregarding the high possibility of it exploding in his hand and blowing him into various sized pieces. This heroism was observed by an officer, and it was on his recommendation that Ablett was (two years later) given the highest military award, equally available to men and officers, the Victoria Cross.



*Ablett in action as appeared
on a later cigarette card*

Major Frank Clark, who did much investigation into the History of the Grenadiers, his own regt, has written a very full account of the incident.

Sebastopol. Fate conspired to place Alfred Ablett centre stage of the drama now to unfold. A working party of Grenadiers were moving explosives into a forward trench when an alert sentry spotted a high trajectory shell heading straight for the Grenadier's trench, now packed full with gun powder barrels. The sentry just had time to let out a desperate warning cry when the shell fell, with its fuse burning. There was panic in the trench as everyone seeking their own survival dived for cover, yet in a split second, Private Ablett acted. He rushed towards the hot and smoking shell and succeeded in lifting it but it was red hot from the friction of the barrel so burning Alfred's hands, it slipped between his legs. He quickly turned and with superhuman strength picked up the heavy burning object again and managed to throw it outside the trench. It exploded and Ablett was thrown to the ground and covered with earth. Sergeant Baker who was in charge of the working party, ran forward but surprisingly, Alfred Ablett arose from the debris like a phoenix. Was he hurt? "No; but I have had a good shaking" was his reply. Private Ablett had saved the British trenches from disaster and the lives of all his comrades too. His Commanding Officer promoted him to Corporal and gave him his own personal silk neck tie which Her Majesty, Queen Victoria had given to him. Ablett was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal [DCM] for his general conduct in the campaign, later when the Queen's special award was introduced, he was awarded the Victoria Cross for his outstanding bravery in the trenches. After the war back in England, he was promoted to Sergeant and it was soon after that, he signed on to complete an army career of 21 years.

Considering the early death of many of his children, I found it an interesting side note that in 1854, the year before Alfred won his Victoria Cross, a Susan Ablett died in Weybread at the mind-boggling age of 104, being happy, cheerful and fully sensible until the last year of her life. If you want to check this out - in both 1841 and '51 widowed Susan appears in the censuses as head of her household being cared for by a Lydia Mickleburgh.¹

The Ipswich Journal
21 Oct 1854

LONGEVITY.—On the 7th of October, Mrs. Susan Ablett died at Weybread, in the county of Suffolk, aged 104 years. She was born on the 4th of June, 1750, and baptised on the 13th of October, 1754. It is remarkable that her burial took place on Friday, the 13th of October, 1854, just a century after her baptism. She enjoyed the use of her faculties until the last year of her life, and had a cheerful and happy expression of countenance.

Although in later years the Victoria Cross came to be awarded at Buckingham Palace, Queen Victoria publicly awarded the first tranche of Victoria Crosses in a ceremony that, combined with a military review, was covered

¹ Lydia had been one of a pair of twins baptised by Susan nee Mark and John Mickleburgh in Brockdish in 1792

in multiple news columns from London to Carlisle. This first award ceremony was held on 26 June 1857 in Hyde Park, but the order was backdated to 1854 to recognise acts of valour during the Crimean War.

On the day of the big event, London more or less came to a standstill. It was a baking hot day, the streets around Hyde Park were thronged with civilians wending their way through columns of soldiers, military bands blasted forth, ladies hung over balconies, the pubs were heaving with thirsty pedestrians and three thousand police, including some mounted, were ready to help usher the ticket-holding public to their allocated places. Stands had been erected to accommodate ten to twelve thousand people, mostly like the old football terraces, unseated. Unfortunately, such was the press of the people that the vast majority could only view the spectacle from afar.

Around four to five thousand troops comprising Lifeguards, Dragoons, Hussars, Footguards, Highlanders, other infantry, Engineers, Royal Marines, and the Rifle Brigade were joined by Cadets from Chelsea and Greenwich as well as Army and Navy Pensioners.

The focus of the elegantly dressed in the galleries, the cavalry and artillery on the outskirts of the parade ground, the infantry drawn up in squares, and the hoi polloi all round was entirely bent on a single line of sixty-two men, some retired from service, some missing limbs but all mustered to collect their medal – amongst them was Sgt. Alfred Ablett from Weybread.

The cortège of British and European royalty rolled in accompanied by various senior military men with the Horse Guards bringing up the rear. Prince Albert and Queen Victoria were mounted on horses with the Queen sporting a black skirt and scarlet jacket in honour of her troops. Having completed an entire circuit of the parade ground, the cavalcade came to a halt and, rather than the Queen dismounting, the medals were presented by Victoria whilst she remained seated on her horse. Unfortunately, the diminutive Queen, mounted on a diminutive horse was, for about half the spectators, completely shielded from view by the rather larger Prince Albert on a significantly larger horse!



Each hero received his medal from the Queen who fastened it to the breast of the recipient with her own hand, including to the jacket of our local hero, Alfred Ablett of the Grenadier Guards who had by then gained his third stripe and was now a sergeant.

Ablett's act of heroism took place during the Siege of Sebastapool, Crimea² in 1855 but Alfred was back in London in time to marry his first wife in late 1856. Although the couple married in the Trinity Church, Marylebone, his lady, Caroline Wheeler, claimed birth in Berlin – unusual to say the least so I decided to track down her family. Looking in the 1851 census, Caroline, at 15, was the oldest of four children living with parents James and Hannah and it seems that whilst she was then described as having been born in Paddington she later stole a bit of glamour from the next brother down, aged 13 who had been born in Berlin whilst the next child along, only aged 3, was born in Paris. Their youngest, a baby of 7 months, had been born in London. At this stage the Wheelers were struggling, James was a coach man, his wife a laundress and they were one of 6 households crammed into No10 George St. Westminster. My best guess is that James Wheeler had previously been attached to one of the grander aristocratic, or even royal households. He, his wife and family had travelled with this household across Europe, those travels being reflected in the birth places of his children.

Alfred and his new wife Caroline nee Wheeler were posted to Dublin, Ireland where a son, Alma Samuel Ablett³ was born, in 1859. There may well have been other children born in Ireland but if they survived to return to England, I have been unable to find records of them. After the family returned to London another son, Inkerman Alfred Ablett Snr was baptised in Whitechapel in late 1860. The 1861 census reveals that Caroline Ablett nee Wheeler, and their 5 month old son, Inkerman Alfred Ablett Jnr, born at the Tower of London, were then staying with Alfred Ablett's parents in Weybread, Suffolk, just across the border from Harleston, in Norfolk. Their oldest surviving son, Dublin born Alma Samuel Ablett, aged 2, was meanwhile living with Samuel's slightly older brother James Ablett and his wife, also in Weybread, on the Fressingfeild Road. Children scattered about friends and family was a pattern which, for various reasons, was to become part of Ablett family life. Sadly young Inkerman died aged only 10 months old, his burial being recorded in Hackney on the 12th of September 1861.

Alfred Ablett V.C. had remained with his regiment in the New Winsor Barracks for the 1861 census, whilst his wife and children enjoyed the relatively safe and healthy environment of his home village. Caroline may have already been unwell as she died in Berkshire in the third quarter of 1861, at much the same time as her second son's death was recorded in Hackney. The regimental history reveals they both died of T.B. After her death her only surviving child Alma Samuel Ablett either continued or returned to live in East Anglia. Later evidence indicates that Ablett had left the Army and taken up employment in Harleston by 1862; I suspect his wife's death triggered this move but his own ill health would also have contributed; it appears he had frequently been hospitalised with Rheumatism which terminated his military career.

² An almost island like peninsular sticking out into the Black Sea from the southern coast of the Ukraine.

³ Alma, named for a Crimean river where one of the first Crimean battles took place, Samuel, named for his paternal grandfather.

P.R.O. Pension Rolls. VC pensions etc from 1846 to 1878. WO 23/84.

Grenadier Guards. Sjt. Alfred Ablett.

Grant: 2. 9. 1855.

Admitted to Out Pension: 21. 10. 1862. Rate 10d.

P.R.O. Pension Board - 21 Oct 1862. WO 116/83.

3rd Bn. Grenadier Guards. Sjt. Alfred Ablett. Age: 32 (35). Laborer.

Born: Weybreid, Woodbridge, Suffolk. 5' 10"; dk brown; grey; dark.

Character: Good. 2 marks. Served in the East 2 yrs. Eupatoria 14/9/1854.

Crimea & Turkisk medals also one for Field Service also the
Victoria Cross. Alma, Inkerman.

Service: Sjt 6 yrs 3 mths; Cpl 11 mths; Pte 5 yrs 6 mths... 12 yrs 8 mths.

Chronic rheumatism frequently in hospital. Constitutional. Unfit to
earn livelihood.

Pension Rate: 10d. 3 years final.

Although in later years pictures of Ablett reveal an impressive white beard, it appears that whilst in his prime his hair was dark brown, whilst his grey eyes would have contrasted with his dark complexion. At 5ft 10, Ablett was a good 5 or 6 inches taller than most of his peers; presumably this height being one of the factors that led to him joining the Grenadier Guards!

It would be fairly likely that young Alma continued to live with his father's family whilst the now retired Sgt Alfred Ablett took over the administration and drilling of the Harleston Volunteers; a well established equivalent of what we would now call the Territorial Army with the Armoury situated somewhere near the market place.

In 1864 Alfred Ablett went on to marry a local lass, Sarah Pearce, the daughter of Charles Pearce, the landlord of the Sir Robert Peel. This pub was at the foot of Mendham Lane, not far from the Volunteer Armoury and I suspect a rapport was struck up over the odd pint or three between this tall handsome hero and the young barmaid. This marriage was none too soon as young Arthur Inkerman was well on the way; Arthur was baptised on the 7th of October 1864, his parents having married 6 months earlier. This was a time of general upheaval as it was also about this time that Sarah's father Charles Pearce moved to the Three Horseshoes on the outskirts of town which later proved to be a poor business decision. Difficult times were to follow for this little family but Sarah stuck with Alfred all through, and indeed vice-versa. For a woman with children in the nineteenth century there were few other options available, but for a tall, strong ex-soldier like Alfred Ablett, the fact he stuck with his family in spite of all the troubles they were to meet, speaks volumes for the character of this man.

The Halesworth Times
26 Mar 1867

More children were to follow for Alfred and Sarah Ablett; Alfred Balaclava was baptised in September 1866 but sadly, baby Alfred B Ablett died in 1867, aged only seven months old; it seems most likely that this death was, caused by a chest infection. Moving as this is, what was more remarkable was that the evidence at the inquest was given by baby Alfred's maternal grandmother and that it appears the baby was being cared for by his aunt; the fact that his mother Sarah was not around only becomes significant a little later as the story develops.

HARLESTON.
An inquest was held at the Swan Inn, on Friday before J. Muskett, Esq., on the body of Alfred B. Ablett, son of Alfred Ablett, drill instructor, a child about seven months old. From the evidence of Mrs. Pearce, deceased's grandmother, it appeared that the child had been suffering from a bad cold for two or three days, and on the morning in question it was taken worse whilst being dressed by its aunt. Before a surgeon had arrived death had taken place. Verdict, "Death from natural causes."

Before the welfare state, if a relative landed in an asylum, hospital or workhouse, the able-bodied next of kin were expected to contribute at least a small amount towards their keep and this is what reveals the whereabouts of Sarah Ablett at or shortly after the death of her son. Only 5 weeks after the death of little Alfred B, Sgt. Alfred Ablett Snr was hauled up before the local magistrates for

neglecting to make his contribution to the care of Sarah

Alfred Ablett, Harleston, was charged by Mr. Robert Lightfoot Bond, relieving-officer, with allowing his wife to become chargeable to the common fund of the Depwade Union. The magistrates ordered him to pay 7s a week costs 3s⁴

As later events prove, Sarah Ablett had wound up being incarcerated in the Asylum; it is questionable whether the reason baby Alfred B was being cared for by his aunt was due to his mother having already fallen ill having been sent to the Asylum for a cure, or whether her mental health collapsed after the death of her baby.

By October 1868 life had overwhelmed Ablett; in the way of many military men over the years, heroes, scoundrels and all shades between, Alfred had attempted to drown his sorrows in alcohol. Whilst today emotional support is available to struggling ex-service men, in those days support would have largely consist of sinecures and turning a blind eye to odd indiscretions. Ablett, like other men and women from all walks of life, found booze to be a false friend when he was struggling with life whilst his wife had once more gone away to the asylum. Trying to turn local farm boys into part time soldiers with his wife incarcerated and his children farmed out around town must have been a painful contrast to the excitement, glory and optimism of only 10 years earlier.

Living in the Harleston Volunteer's Armoury (which I believe at that time was between the Market Place and Broad Street), Ablett had easy access to firearms and was within sneezing distance of half a dozen pubs open at all hours (at the time the town had over a dozen!) which gave him easy access to alcohol.

On the 19th of October, a visiting militia man, Capt. Cubitt, was looking for Ablett, and having failed to rouse him, gathered up a local man to gain access to the armoury only to find a tired and emotional Ablett mopping blood from his forehead.

According to evidence given at the subsequent court case,⁵ on discovery the, to some degree

Attempted Suicide at Harleston.
had just attempted to blow his brains out; that he was driven to the act owing to his wife having been taken to the asylum; and that he was sorry he had not succeeded. While Mr. Calver went for a surgeon, defendant explained to the captain how he attempted to commit suicide. At that time defendant appeared to Captain Cubitt to be only excited, not intoxicated. When Mr. Yates, surgeon, dressed the wound, defendant told him that he did not know what he had been doing, as he was muddled and very much depressed. Defendant, who was not perfectly sober, and not master of his own actions, smelt strongly of drink. This witness attributed the commission of the act more to drink than anything else, but he was unable to say what instrument would cause the wound, which was a simple abrasion. When before the magistrates, defendant said he had got into an excited state of mind on account of his difficulties, and through drinking, so that he did not know what he did; at any rate he had not the slightest intention of committing such an act. A similar statement was now made by defendant. Captain Cubitt informed the Court that he had known defendant for six years; that he was astonished to find him in that state on Monday; that he had served in the Guards, and so distinguished himself at Inkerman

intoxicated Ablett stated, "I've just been trying to blow my brains out; I am tired of my life as my wife is gone away to the Asylum and I am sorry I did not succeed." There then followed a fair bit of argy-bargy about how drunk Ablett was at the time. Bearing in mind the general ubiquity of drunkenness at the time, and it has to be said that Harleston with its legacy of transients, fairs, markets and rather wild families had more than its average degree of drunkenness, I think you would have to be fairly legless and/or obnoxious to be noted as intoxicated. Captain Cubitt had known Ablett, for about six years (since his arrival in Harleston), obviously respected him, was surprised to find Ablett drunk. At the end

⁴ Norfolk News 4 May 1867

⁵ Suicide, or attempting suicide, was illegal in this country until 1961 although sympathetic courts would often fudge

of the day, this local lad was found not guilty of attempting suicide and was discharged with a caution.

Perhaps it was fortunate he was discovered and exonerated, if he had not been discovered in the aftermath of this botched attempt, he may later have made a more sober and successful attempt. As things panned out, being forced to address his actions in public whilst also hearing the esteem in which his peers held him, in addition to the respect accorded due to his previous achievements may have encouraged him to carry on and turn his life around.

Norwich News
24 Oct 1868

Not long after this failed suicide attempt, with his wife, Sarah, now released from the asylum, rather than staying in Harleston where, now as then, everyone knew your business, Alfred and Sarah had struck out for London, presumably to prepare a new life for themselves and their family. This however, with the birth of their next son, Alfred Jnr, led to another collapse of mother Sarah. The couple (or Alfred Snr at least) had returned to Harleston in July 1869 to baptise this son, the London born Alfred Jnr.

18 69 4 th July No. 26	Alfred	Alfred and Sarah	Ablett	London	Soldier -	W. Bourne off. Minister
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A few months previously, in April 1869, six months after Ablett's botched suicide attempt, Sarah Ablett's father, Charles Pearce, Publican⁶ was declared a Bankrupt⁷ although he was back trading from a beer house (probably not far from Wilson's Square) in time to appear in the 1871 census with the older two surviving of Alfred and Sarah's sons, Alma and Arthur aged 12 and 6. in his house. Charles and his wife, both in their 50's did have their 22 year old daughter, Susannah, also in the household to help with the two lads and Susanna's illegitimate daughter, 1 year old Anne Marie. Meanwhile the third surviving son of Alfred Snr and Sarah, the two years old London born but Harleston baptised Alfred Jnr, was living on nearby Mendham Lane.⁸

This was probably originally meant to be a temporary arrangement as Alfred Jnr was then described as 'a visitor' in the household of William Long (a bill poster aged 63) his almost as elderly wife and his 20 years old unmarried daughter. 10 years on and young Alfred was still living with the now widowed William and his daughter but was then described as adopted – looks like he never made it back to his parents. There does not seem to have been too much money around as 12 years old Alfred was already out working as an under groom.

So, after the first son (that we know of for sure, although I suspect there was at least one older child), Alma Samuel was born, at least two more sons died, Inkerman Alfred and then Alfred

the issue by returning a verdict 'whilst of unsound mind' indicating this to have been the unfortunate outcome following a temporary aberration of thought rather than a genuine intent.

⁶ Beershop Proprietors at the Robert Peel on Mendham Lane

⁷ Norfolk News 17 Apr 1869

⁸ Responsible family man as Pearce was, he slightly blotted his copy book by receiving a caution in 1880 for working an unfit mare. Norfolk News 13 Nov 1880

Balaclava. At the time Alfred Balaclava died, his mother was probably in a mental institution, she came out, had another child in London, named Alfred for his father and recently deceased brother. This lad was sent back to Harleston and whilst his two older siblings stayed with their grandparents, he was farmed out some elderly neighbours.

Heading off sideways for a relatively cheerful diversion in this tale of infant death, mental ill health and involuntary incarcerations – William Long was quite the lad! In 1887 the Wombell touring circus had come to town, our elderly guardian (or possibly his son and namesake) of young Ablett, was rather daring or possibly un-imaginative or more likely somewhat inebriated:-

...visited Harleston, and a man named Long, a bill poster and painter, in company with the lady lion tamer, entered and walked round 'the lion's den' having courageously shaken his fist in the face of the fiercest looking of the lot, Long emerged from the cage and was loudly applauded. He received a framed certificate for his foolhardiness. About 2000 persons were present.

So, with three of their surviving children shared between grandparents and one of the Pearce's neighbours in 1871, where were Alfred and Sarah? The 1871 census reveals that Ablett was working as a Hall Porter in a London Club House, regimental history reveals this to be the Colonial Club at 13 Grafton St in the heart of Mayfair. Gentlemen's Clubs, Public Schools, the Police Force and School Attendance boards often employed retired military men. Not too surprising that Ablett was filling such a post, but was surprising was the appearance, also in London, of a fourth child, Alfred and Sarah's daughter, Annie Sebastapool⁹ Ablett, aged 1.

Annie was their fourth surviving child and to date only daughter but unlike her siblings who were fostered in Harleston, one year old Anne Sevastapool Ablett, Holborn baptised and Middlesex born, was being boarded out in London. We are very lucky that we can confirm the paternal link between her and Alfred; fortunately for us, he was visiting his daughter at her foster family's house in Saffron Hill London, on the night of the census.

The location of little Anne Sevastapool's mother, Ablett's wife Sarah, was a mystery worth pursuing. Not the easiest of tasks but I am pretty sure she was the 31 years old inmate 'S.A.' from Metfeild, Suffolk, a married Domestic Servant appearing at St Leonard's Shoreditch in 1871. At this time the conditions in this combined Workhouse and Asylum were particularly grim, the Lancet gave a corruscating report shortly before improvements were made to the building in the early 1870s.¹⁰ Perhaps Sarah Ablett was prone to post natal depression or psychosis and the arrival of another baby caused her to relapse and be re-institutionalised, certainly Metfeild matches her birth place and the age is right so I reckon we can safely assume S.A. from Metfield was indeed her. This in turn raises the question whether Alma and Arthur had stayed in Harleston or if they had moved up to London with their parents and been sent back to the grand-parents when Sarah had endured another crisis, possibly brought on by the birth of London born 'baby' Alfred who also returned to Harleston, possibly brought on by the birth of Annie Sebastapool, possibly two separate episodes brought on by the birth of each child..

1871 was a significant year; Sarah must have been released not long after the census as the Ablett's

⁹ Sebastapool – home of the Tsar's Black Sea fleet and scene of the last battles in the Crimean War

¹⁰ <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Shoreditch/>

next child, Agnes Kate B Ablett, aka Kate Ablett, was baptised in 1872 in Poplar marking the start of a more stable phase of the family's life. A fellow Grenadier Guardsman, Pte now Capt Palmer had stood beside Ablett in the ranks when each received their VC some 18 years previously. Palmer, not the best disciplined of soldiers had been born under a lucky star and risen to the position of head of the newly formed Docks Police which meant he could recommend Alfred Ablett be taken on the force which he, accordingly, was, working in the Millwall Docks as a Police Constable but life was about to deal the family some more harsh blows. Three years later both Arthur Inkerman Ablett and his sister Anne Sebastapool¹¹ died in Poplar, in 1875, aged 11 and 5 respectively. This does show that Arthur had returned to the family fold, not so 'baby' Alfred – more of him later. We can only assume an infectious disease struck, taking away two more of the Ablett's children to add to the three already lost. Both children's bodies were returned to Harleston to be buried at the mother church at Redenhall,¹² Annie on the 23rd of March, Arthur on the 11th of May.¹³ In 1881, the family, or at least the younger members, were all living in Poplar where all four of the children living at home¹⁴ were Poplar born, Poplar being a major Dock area.

Young 'baby' Alfred, conceived between two periods of his mother's incarceration, baptised in Harleston in 1869 and adopted by an elderly widower and his daughter, did, eventually wind up in London, dying in Wandsworth in 1906 aged only 37. Was he in touch with his parents – who knows?

The 1891 census locates the, now, Sergeant Alfred Ablett of the Dock Police, still living in Poplar, this time with just two children living at home. Ada (Louise) Ablett, aged 6 in the 1881 census was one of the two children still living with her parents in 1891 whilst her older sister, Kate, aged 9 in the 1881 Census (actually full name Agnes Kate Balaclava Ablett), married Albert Taylor in 1892. Albert was actually a lad from Alburgh so it seems the local roots had been maintained even for this girl born and raised in Poplar! Whilst, in 1901, Kate was raising her family out in Leytonstone, unfortunately her spinster sister Ada had followed in her mother's path and was incarcerated at the Essex County Lunatic Asylum in Brentwood. By 1911, Ada had recovered sufficiently to be able to work in West Ham as a servant for an Irish Physician and Surgeon, his wife and two children. I wonder if there was a degree of hereditary fragility she had inherited from her mother Sarah nee Pearce?¹⁵ Meanwhile Kate Taylor nee Ablett's family had increased to 5; fortunately her 3 sons were all too young to be involved in the imminent Great War.

One of the sons, who had appeared as Charles Ablett, aged 4 in Poplar in 1881, was actually Anthony Charles Ablett; he had disappeared in the 1891 census but popped up again in 1901 having, like his father and older brother followed a military route. In his case he joined the Imperial

¹¹ The little girl being visited in lodgings by her father in 1871.

¹² Harleston never had a Church per se, merely a Chapel of Ease. Until very recently, whilst christenings took place at the chapel, weddings and internments all took place at St Mary's Redenhall. There is still no burial facility in Harleston.

¹³ Parish Registers

¹⁴ Kate 9, Ada 6, Charles 4, and Albert 7 months

¹⁵ The Pearces were one of slightly wilder, but not wildest, of the Harleston families: -

1861 – Daniel Pearce, bound over in £100 for threatening the life of Mr Cann, 1866 – Charles Pearce sued for £21 13s 6d by the Brewers supplying him at the Three Horse Shoes, 1869 – Charles Pearce, this time the injured party reclaiming damages from two men who pulled down his booth (Beer tent) at the 'charter fair', 1870 – following the animal cruelty case Charles Pearce decided to sue his solicitor for not turning up, in spite of Pearce having him instructed him not to do so!, 1879 – Henry Pearce, failing to send his sons Walter and William to school, 1884 – Henry Pearce, failing to send children to school, 1886 – Henry Pearce failing to send children to school, 1895- Anna Pearce, using profane and obscene language in Broad Street, 1887 – Walter Pearce, disorderly conduct during a Salvation Army service,

Yeomanry, and was in Aldershot, likely on his way to or freshly returned from South Africa.¹⁶ Unlike many of those in the Yeomanry, Charles Anthony, or Anthony Charles (depending on which entry you look at), remained in the Army and appeared in 1911 as a Sergeant in the 19th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery and 96th Battery, Royal Field Artillery, Tempe, Orange Free State, South Africa¹⁷ After his adventurous Army career, Charles Ablett died at the early age of 53 in West Ham leaving two children.

The baby of the family in 1881, Albert (Edward) Ablett, was (not too surprisingly) the other child still living with the Ablett parents in 1891. In the case of Albert Edward Ablett there are a surprising number of chaps around with that very name, born in and around London at the same time as 'our' Albert Edward which made it a little tricky to work out what happened to him.

Alfred Ablett was a hero of the Crimean war but his attempt to immortalise his achievements in the names of his first five children failed when all but one died whilst still young. The son who carried his name and did survive to adult hood wound up being adopted in Harleston whilst he moved off to London. He was a family man, whose wife seemed to have been tipped into either post natal depression or post natal psychosis triggered by the birth of many of those children; perhaps he could or should have decided to have no more children with his wife but he was a man of his times and children were sent by god; his will finally crumbled following the death of yet another child and the removal of his wife to an Asylum but he still managed to pull himself together and carry on as yet more children were born, died and his wife yet again wound up in an asylum. Children had to be abandoned whilst he carried on trying to earn a living and create a home for his wife to return to.

Perhaps the surge of patriotism associated with the British participation in the Boer war revived memories of the first winners of the Victoria Cross but Ablett's deeds were still being commemorated in the 20th century as depicted on this commemorative tin dating from the turn of the C19th and C20th. Have to say our hero does look a little pop-eyed in this rendition!



¹⁶ The Imperial Yeomanry was a British volunteer cavalry regiment that mainly saw action during the Second Boer War. Officially created on 24 December 1899, the regiment was based on members of standing Yeomanry regiments, but also contained a large contingent of mid-upper-class English volunteers.

<https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/5079/imperial-yeomanry/>

¹⁷ Census Transcript Household Military 1911

We hope that in his final years with his respected role as a police sergeant at the docks and the knowledge of at least two of his boys joining the army, were a better time for him. Having died in 1897, he may have never known that his daughter Ada Louise had, like her mother, wound up in a Lunatic Asylum. Ablett's death was reported in papers from one end of the United Kingdom to the other although the reports were fairly uniform; this is a typical example.

Suffolk and Essex Free Press
17 Mar 1897

A Victoria Cross Hero.

On Saturday there died at his residence, East India Dock-road, Poplar, a Victorian Cross hero, named Alfred Ablett, who for 26 years had been a sergeant in the dock police. Ablett joined the 3rd Battalion Grenadiers in 1852, and fought all through the Crimean war, for which he held three medals, besides the Cross. The latter he gained while serving with his regiment at the Siege of Sebastopol. While the troops were in the trenches a live shell from one of the Russian forts fell among the men of Ablett's company. Without a second's hesitation he picked up the shell and hurled it out of the trench. He was not an instant too soon, for scarcely had the shell touched the ground than it exploded.

HARLESTON.

MILITARY FUNERAL.—The funeral of Alfred Ablett, late of the 3rd Battalion, Grenadier Guards, and 32 years ago drill instructor to the A Company, 4th V.B.N.R., of this town, took place at Weybread Church on Thursday week, the Rev. H. S. Oriol conducting the service. The deceased was a veteran of the Crimean War, and for his bravery in pushing a shell off the walls of the trenches during the siege of Sebastopol he was decorated with the Victoria Cross. The regiment was represented by five sergeants, as well as a few men, of the N.B.A.V. and V.B.N.R.

Norfolk News
27 Mar 1897

It seems only fitting that, when his body was returned to the church in his home village of Weybread, Alfred Ablett's funeral was attended by men and N.C.Os from the volunteer regiment he had drilled during his darkest hours in Harleston. I would imagine that the

coffin was sent home by train from London although it would have been marvellous had he been given a military funeral through the town this does not seem to have happened. Having gone to the expense of returning the body to his home village, it is sad that his grave lay unmarked and is now lost although a marble plaque mounted inside the church commemorates his achievement as does the Harleston War Memorial.

About 60 years after Alfred Ablett made his final journey home to Weybread (and of course there would have then been some still alive then who would have remembered this) a service was held at Weybread to mark this event. In the article it was revealed that Queen Victoria had also given Ablett a neckscarf along with his V.C. The Grenadier Guards own archives believed that the scarf had been passed on to grandson Alfred Alma Ablett and was in Canada – efforts were being made to track down this wonderful souvenir in the mid 20th C – apparently unsuccessfully.

Centenary of Suffolk's First V.C. Remembered

— SERVICE AT WEYBREAD

A special service to commemorate the first Victoria Cross won by a Suffolk man — Private Alfred Ablett of the 3rd Battalion The Grenadier Guards, was held on Sunday in the Parish Church, Weybread, which overlooks the house where he was born.

Ablett, who received the award for throwing out to safety a shell that fell in the middle of a number of ammunition cases and powder, in a trench in the Crimean War on 2nd September 1855, already held the D.C.M. at the time.

He was decorated by Queen Victoria in Hyde Park on 26th June 1857, and also received a necktie which the Queen had made herself.

The Victoria Cross was instituted in January 1856, and till the supply ran out, were struck from the metal of the guns captured at Sevastopol.

INSTRUCTOR AT HARLESTON

Ablett, who was 25 when he won his V.C., later became a sergeant, and finished his military career as an instructor to "A" Company of the 4th Volunteer Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment based in Harleston.

Afterwards he was for 16 years an Inspector of Police at Millwall, London Docks until his death at Poplar in March, 1889. Appropriately he was brought back to Weybread and buried in the Churchyard of St. Andrew, where, 37 years before, he had been baptised.

The service was instigated by the Vicar of Bungay (the Rev. Canon Wm. M. Lummis), who is an authority on regimental history. Units of the British Legion from Fressingfield, Hoxne, Eye, Thorndon, Gillingham and Wortham, with their standards and that of "H" Group, were present. They were accompanied by members of the Grenadier Guards Old Comrades' Association from both Suffolk and Norfolk, and by Sergt. Charles Keable, representing the 4th Batt. Norfolk Regiment.

During the course of the service, which was conducted by Canon Lummis, a poppy wreath was placed on the war memorial inside the Church by Sergt. D. S. Slack, of Norwich, who is recruiting sergeant for the Grenadier Guards for both Suffolk and Norfolk.

MEMORIAL SUGGESTED

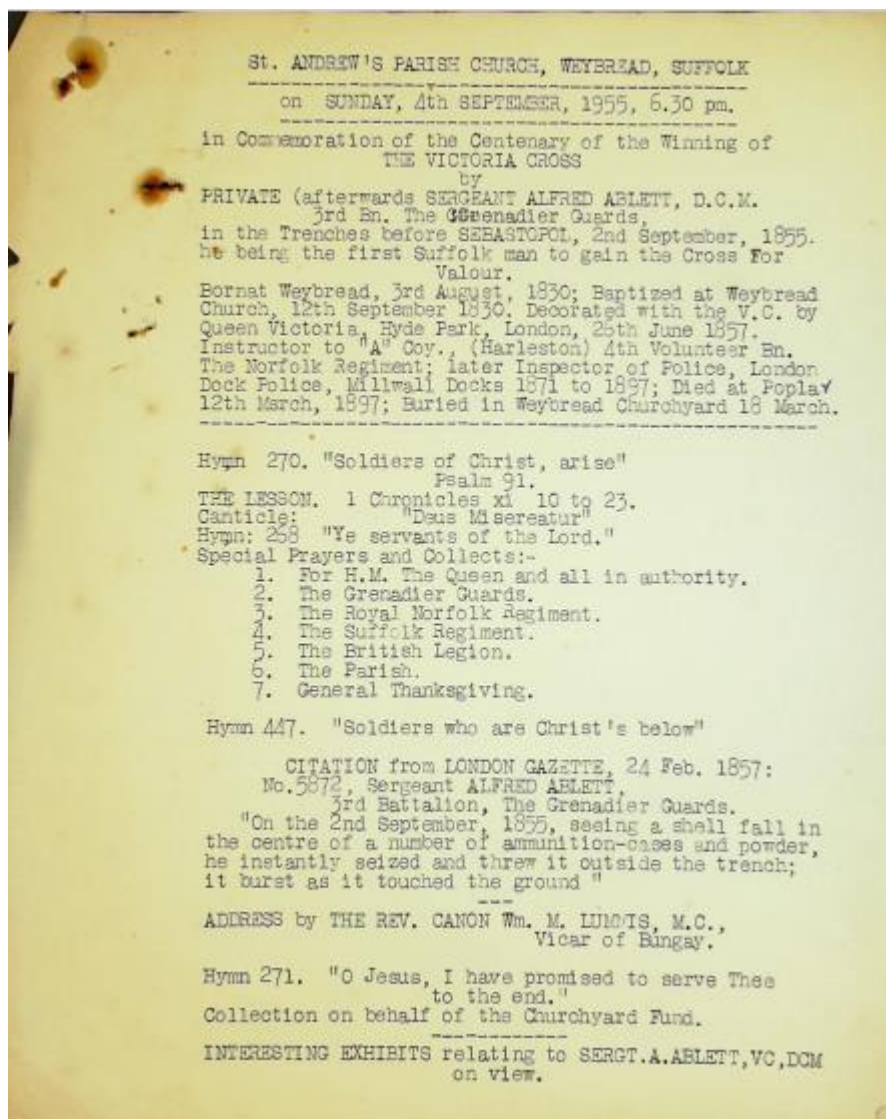
The lesson was read by Major C. W. Tew, chairman of Fressingfield branch of the British Legion.

Photographs and registers relating to Ablett and his career were on display in the Church, and Canon Lummis, in an address, expressed the hope that it might be possible in the future to have a tangible memorial to him either in the Churchyard of the Church.

Ron Knights (1st Diss Troop) represented the Boy Scouts.

At the end of the service a band of local ringers rang a commemoration peal.

Diss Express
9 Sep 1955



Order of Service – 1955

Sarah Ablett survived her husband by some 10 years or so, dying in Barnet in 1908 aged 67. Perhaps Sarah's health was beginning to fail again or maybe she was starting to run low on funds but her husband's Victoria Cross was auctioned in London in 1903, raising the sum of £62,¹⁸ a sizeable amount of money. I am pleased to say that the medal is now back in its military home in Wellington Barracks, the Grenadier Guards RHQ in London.

I could not close investigating Alfred Ablett without pursuing Alma Samuel, the only survivor of the first six or so of Alfred's children. He, following in his father's footsteps enlisted in the Army, and whilst I suspect he had long since forgotten, if he ever knew, that he had been born in Dublin, he claimed birth in Marylebone when he enlisted in the Royal Regiment of Horse Guards, appearing as a private at the Hyde Park

¹⁸ <http://www.vconline.org.uk/alfred-ablett-vc/4585904544>

Barracks for the 1881 census.

10 years later Alma was still in the Guards, this time at a posting down in North Camp – rank not given, he was just described as ‘Soldier’. In 1894 he married Blanche, in Poplar, although at what point he left the Army is unclear. Blanche Eliza Case was a Shaftesbury lass who had wound up working in London as a servant in a cleric’s house in 1891. By 1901, Alma was the Verger, a church official, in the pleasant town of Eton, Berkshire, near Windsor, and had three children from 6 years old Alfred Alma Ablet down to a 2 years old. By 1911, his brood had increased to 6 children, and, unlike his father, all his children survived, to this point at least. Slightly bizarrely, Alma, having been born in Dublin, lived in Suffolk where his mother died, possibly spent some time at his father’s new Winsor Barracks, moved to Harleston where a number of his siblings were born and died, before relocating to Poplar when the family re-united, was then claiming to have been born in St John’s Wood – a location he seems to have just plucked out of the air until later research showed it was referring to the St John’s Woods Barracks which were in the Borough of Marylebone tying in with the 1881 census entry, For some reason Alma, a man of late middle age, gave up the post of Verger and took himself and at least part of his family with him to Canada where he died in 1927.

This death was 12 years after his English born 21 years old son, Alfred Alma Ablett, then a ‘Racquets Professional’ joined the Canadian Over-seas Expeditionary Force, leaving his wife but, as yet, no children behind and continued the family tradition of service to his country. His sporting profession his stood him in good stead as he was attached to various Gymnasiums and Instruction Corps rather than being deployed as cannon fodder to the front line. His military records reveal his to have been, at 5ft 10 ½” much the same height as his grandfather Alfred Ablett VC I am pleased to say he survived his service in France with no wounds other than one to a finger and had achieved the rank of Staff Sergeant by the time he was demobilised with a \$530 pay out; I am sure, had he been alive, that the grandfather for whom he was named would have been proud of this athletic young man who weighed a trim 10st 4lbs when he was discharged at the end of his service.

Rather sadly, the medals earnt by Alfred Ablett V.C’s oldest surviving son, Alma Samuel Ablett and his own son, Alfred Alma Ablett, were also sold off to collectors.

Upper Row: Private A.S. Albett, Royal Horse Guards: Egypt Medal, 3 Clasps - Tel-el-Kebir, The Nile 1884-85, Abu Klea, Khedive's Star (unnamed); and Army Long Service and Good Conduct Medal
Lower Row: Sergeant Alfred A. Albett: British War Medal and Victory Medal



6 *b* *Original*
ATTESTATION PAPER.

No. 201001

Folio.

CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ATTESTATION.
 (ANSWERS).

1. What is your surname? **Ablett**
- 1a. What are your Christian names? **Alfred Alma**
- 1b. What is your present address? **303 Merton St. Toronto Ont.**
2. In what Town, Township or Parish, and in what Country were you born? **London, Eng.**
3. What is the name of your next-of-kin? **Blanche Ablett**
4. What is the address of your next-of-kin? **303 Merton St. Toronto Ont. Can.**
- 4a. What is the relationship of your next-of-kin? **Mother-in-law**
5. What is the date of your birth? **Dec. 23 1893**
6. What is your Trade or Calling? **Recruits Pro.**
7. Are you married? **No Yes**
8. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated and inoculated? **Yes**
9. Do you now belong to the Active Militia? **No**
10. Have you ever served in any Military Force? **No**
If so, state particulars of former service.
11. Do you understand the nature and terms of your engagement? **Yes**
12. Are you willing to be attested to serve in the CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE? **Yes**

DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, **Alfred Alma Ablett**, do solemnly declare that the above are answers made by me to the above questions and that they are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements by me now made, and I hereby engage and agree to serve in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force, and to be attached to any arm of the service therein, for the term of one year, or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided His Majesty should so long require my services, or until legally discharged.

Alfred Alma Ablett (Signature of Recruit)

Date: **28 October 1915** 191 . *A. R. Malne* (Signature of Witness)

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, **Alfred Alma Ablett**, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as in duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.

Alfred Alma Ablett (Signature of Recruit)

Date: **28 October 1915** 191 . *A. R. Malne* (Signature of Witness)

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE.

The Recruit above-named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence. I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me, at **Toronto** this **28** day of **October 1915** 191 .

M. M. Malne (Signature of Justice)

M. P. W. 23
 200 M-6-15
 H. Q. 1772-29-841

Description of **Alfred Alma Ablett** on Enlistment.

Apparent Age **21** years **10** months.
(To be determined according to the instructions given in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.)

Distinctive marks, and marks indicating congenital peculiarities or previous disease.

(Should the Medical Officer be of opinion that the recruit has served before, he will, unless the same dates with those of any previous service, attach a slip to that effect, for the information of the Approving Officer.)

Height **5 ft. 10 1/2** ins.

Girth when fully expanded **36 1/2** ins.

Range of expansion **2 1/2** ins.

Complexion **Fair**

Eyes **Hazel**

Hair **Brown**

Church of England **C. of E.**

Presbyterian

Methodist

Baptist or Congregationalist

Roman Catholic

Jewish

Other Denominations
(Denominate or be stated)

Round scar on right shin.
Large mole on right side of abdomen
3 small moles on right side of abdomen.
Few small moles down right side of back.

CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

I have examined the above-named Recruit and find that he does not present any of the causes of rejection specified in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.

He can see at the required distance with either eye; his heart and lungs are healthy; he has the free use of his joints and limbs, and declares that he is not subject to fits of any description.

I consider him **fit** for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.

Date: **28 October 1915** 191 .

Place: **Toronto**

A. R. Malne (Signature of Medical Officer)
 Medical Officer,
Toronto Recruiting Depot

* Insert here "fit" or "unfit."
 Note.—Should the Medical Officer consider the Recruit unfit, he will fill in the foregoing Certificate only in the case of unfitness for the Force attested, and will attach a note below the name of the unfit.

CERTIFICATE OF OFFICER COMMANDING UNIT.

Alfred Alma Ablett having been finally approved and inspected by me this day, and his Name, Age, Date of Attestation, and every prescribed particular having been recorded, I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.

W. C. Marshall (Signature of Officer)
 Date: **28/12** 191 **5** MAJOR 95th (O.S.) BATTN. C.E.F.
 for O.B.

Military sacrifice continued unto the fourth generation: Alfred Alma Ablett's own son, Alfred Alma Frederick Albert died in the closing weeks of WW2. Aged only 20, he struggled for his life for 11 days after he was injured before dying of his wounds on the 5th of May 1945. Alfred is buried amongst his countrymen from a number of Canadian regiments at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands.

PTE. ALFRED A. F. ABLETT, 20,
 Lincoln and Welland Regiment, died
 May 5 of
 wounds while
 in action
 April 24. On
 Sept. 14 last,
 he received
 mortar bomb
 fragment
 wounds in
 the left foot.
 Born in To-
 ronto, he left
 Northern
 Vocational
 school to en-
 list on his
 18th birthday.
 He had been
 overseas since
 April 1944



Pte. A. A. F. Ablett

Pte Ablett attended St. Cuthbert's
 Anglican church, Leaside. He is
 survived by his parents, Mr. and
 Mrs. Alfred Ablett, Dunfield Ave.,
 and a sister, Sergt. Betty Ablett,
 overseas with the C.W.A.C.

Young Alfred had enlisted on his 18th Birthday and had, 6 months earlier, had already had a narrow escape when he was injured in his foot by mortar bomb fragments. Despite this and being rendered shirtless Ablett pressed on with the rest of his unit, swimming two canals in the aftermath. In this 20th C war, it was not only Alfred who served his country, but also his sister Betty Ablett. She too was posted overseas, in the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Corps.

*A slightly nervous looking
 Pte Ablett poses for a
 Christmas Card.*



1202/1/1/8	9.A.11
B.135808 Private	14
A.A.F.Ablett	21
Canadian Infantry Corps	15
5th May 1945 Age 20	
(Cross)	14
The echo of his voice,	15
His eyes, his smile,	14
Just as they were,	20
Are with us all the while	<hr/>
19	716
RR 16/9	

His grieving parents requested a poignant four-line poem at his final resting place this being one of a number of cemeteries created after the cessation of hostilities with remains being gathered from a number of temporary grave sites. Private Alfred Alma Frederick Ablett, Canadian great-grand-son of Alfred Ablett V.C. of Weybread, the fourth generation of men who served their country, now lies at peace in the Netherlands amongst almost 1400 of his countrymen who also perished during the fierce fighting the spring of 1945.

