



TEN HEROES ONE CITY AT WAR

An account of the ten servicemen from Birmingham who were awarded the Victoria Cross in the First World War and an insight into aspects of life around Birmingham at that time

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Dedication

I dedicate this work not only to the particular memory of the ten Victoria Cross holders born in Birmingham but also to all those who fought and suffered in the horrendous conflict of the First World War whatever their background, race or religion.

Also, a dedication to my parents Wilfred and Joan Boot, who worked tirelessly to give my sister Lesley and I a better start in life than they were ever able to enjoy themselves.



Foreword

by

PAUL SABAPATHY CVO CBE

The great privileges and freedoms we enjoy in this wonderful country of ours are often forgotten until one looks at events in other parts of the World. It is beholden on us all therefore to remember these precious freedoms were in good measure earned for us by the courage, dedication, professionalism and sacrifice of the men and women who served and fought on behalf of their fellow citizens in the First World War.

In particular we are paying a special tribute here to the 10 servicemen from Birmingham whose very exceptional bravery earned them the Nation's highest honour.

This book is a fitting tribute to their memory and I salute their extraordinary commitment in the service of their Country.

We should also remember at this time the immense contribution made to the War effort by not only those on the Home front but all also those from Commonwealth and other countries who freely volunteered to support the Allied effort in a truly global war.

I am particularly pleased that various schools were involved in producing this excellent book and my personal thanks go to all the students, staff and parents of the schools involved.

My thanks in no small measure also go to Richard Boot whose idea it was to produce this book. Richard was moved to do this book as his wife Sandra's great uncle was Arthur Vickers one of the VC winners. Thank you, Richard and all those who made this excellent book a reality.

PAUL SABAPATHY CVO CBE

Formerly HM Lord-Lieutenant of West Midlands



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Preface

by

RICHARD BOOT OBE DL

It is indeed a little strange when I reflect on it that in later life and when on duty in my role as a Deputy to the Lord-Lieutenant I now wear an Army officer's uniform and sport a sword and spurs.

Strange, because as a young man I did not join the Military. I came perilously close on leaving King Edward VI Camp Hill to signing up for a Short Service commission with the Royal Green Jackets but finally gave up that prospect for the thrill and excitement of becoming a Chartered Accountant!

Any soldiers likely to be under my command and indeed the whole Country were probably far safer without me in charge of a map or worse still, a gun.

I have always had however a keen interest in Military history but it was the fact that my wife Sandra's great uncle, Arthur Vickers won a Victoria Cross in 1915 and that he served with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment where I held a Trustee role for many years that prompted me to undertake this project.

It has without doubt been a most interesting experience learning more about some very brave men but all of whom were in many respects people with very ordinary and normal backgrounds.

Not having been myself in a combat situation but trying to imagine the pressure and emotions they encountered my respect for anyone in those circumstances is truly unbounded.

When the situation demanded it however the ten servicemen we deal with here all went that extra mile to do more than their duty normally expected of them and supported their comrades in an extraordinarily brave way. It is that which marks them out as a rare and very special breed.

I hope you enjoy reading this book and looking at the associated website www.birminghamvc.co.uk

This is not a commercial venture so if you have enjoyed it and found it of interest readers might feel minded to make a small charitable donation to The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (Royal Warwickshire) Museum whose details are set out below.

Thank you

Donations can be made to The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (Royal Warwickshire Regiment) Museum, through their website: www.warwickfusiliers.co.uk



Acknowledgements

In completing this quite challenging project I have received an immense amount of support from a large number of people and contributors and I am really most grateful for their input and encouragement.

In particular, to the students and all those who contributed content and who are listed in the various chapters a truly massive thank you for all your hard work.

Special thanks to Dr Nicola Gauld who served as the Coordinator for 'Voices of War and Peace: The Great War and its legacy' based in the Library of Birmingham. Nicola's positive involvement, advice and encouragement at the start of this project was invaluable.

Thanks also to a very dear man, Paul Sabapathy CVO CBE, formerly HM Lord-Lieutenant of West Midlands who I had the honour to serve as one of his Deputy Lieutenants. It was his suggestion that I should seek to involve schools so that they might not only receive the output from the project but also have the opportunity to contribute.

My sincere thanks go to Jean Weston and Marlene Price, authors of a superb book, 'The Lost Twenty Nine' (Remembering the soldiers of the Great War buried in Lye and Wollescote Cemetery) and the Trustees

of the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust ('WMHBT') for their kind permission to use the design template from that publication. WMHBT is dedicated to the conservation of historic buildings at risk in the West Midlands.

To Mike Foster and the team at Maltings Partnership who gave invaluable help in creating and producing this book, my most sincere and grateful thanks.

Importantly to Dr. Dan Andrews, introduced to me by Nicola who took on the task of creating our website. Dan has done such a sterling job particularly as for part of the same time he was working hard to complete his PhD in Interactive Story Telling.

To any information sources not correctly attributed I ask forgiveness for an enthusiastic and busy amateur's meagre attempt and apologise for any inaccuracies and omissions.

To all 'proper' historians I flag my esteem for your dedication, professionalism and as I now know it ...hard work!



Great War Timeline 1914 - 1918

AUGUST 4: Britain declared war on Germany



1914

JUNE 28: Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife assassinated at Sarajevo



JULY 5: Kaiser Wilhelm II promised support for Austria against Serbia



JULY 28: Austria declared war on Serbia

AUGUST 1: Germany declared war on Russia



AUGUST 3: Germany declared war on France and invaded Belgium

1915

MARCH 12-15: Battle of Neuve Chapelle



APRIL 22: Second Battle of Ypres - poison gas first used by Germans

MAY 15-17: Battle at Festubert

SEPTEMBER 25: Battle of Loos

1916

JANUARY 27: Military Service Act passed - conscription introduced



FEBRUARY 21: Start of the Battle of Verdun



1918

MARCH: Germany launches Spring offensive



APRIL 9: Start of the Battle of the Lys

APRIL 17: First Battle of Mount Kemmel



APRIL 25: Second Battle of Mount Kemmel

JULY 15: Second Battle of the Marne begins - start of the collapse of the German Army



AUGUST 14: British Expeditionary Force led by Field Marshall John French

SEPTEMBER 5: Start of the First Battle of the Marne - trench warfare begins

SEPTEMBER 12-15: Battle of the Aisne

OCTOBER 18: Battle of Le Bassee

AUGUST 23/24: Battle of Mons - BEF retreat
Germany invaded France

OCTOBER 9: First Battle of Ypres

MAY 31: Battle of Jutland - the major naval battle of the War

NOVEMBER 18: Battle of the Somme officially over

1917



APRIL 6: United States declare war on Germany

APRIL 23: Battle of Arras

JULY 31: The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendale) begins

NOVEMBER 8: Last British Cavalry Charge at Huj, Palestine

AUGUST 8: Advance to Victory of the Allies

AUGUST 21: Battle of Albert

NOVEMBER 9: Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates

NOVEMBER 11: Germany signs the Armistice at Compeigne, France



Chapter One

The Victoria Cross

by
LESLEY BOOT



HMS Hecla, part of the Anglo-French fleet was bombarding the Russian fortress of Bomarsund. As she drew closer a live shell from the fortress landed on the deck and lay there, its fuse hissing and smoking and clearly about to go off.

MAIN: The HMS Hecla at the bombardment of Bomarsund.

TOP RIGHT: Charles Davis Lucas - he was ultimately elevated to the rank of Rear Admiral.

Mate Charles Davis Lucas, aged 20, picked up the shell, carried it to the ship's side and dropped it overboard where it exploded. This event took place on June 21st, 1854 and from that day Charles Lucas was promoted to lieutenant and awarded the very first Victoria Cross.

It is interesting to note that although the medal was not instituted until 1856, it was made retroactive to cover the Crimean war.



Now move forward to the Helmand province of Afghanistan in August 2013. A joint British and American attack became pinned down by enemy fire and surrounded by insurgents. Lance Corporal Joshua Leakey, 27, of the Parachute regiment took command and risking enemy fire, came to the aid of a wounded US Marine Corps captain and led his evacuation from the battlefield. Lance Corporal Leakey then returned to the gun battle to take the fight to the Taliban, rallying the troops around him.

He is now the recipient of the most recent Victoria Cross, awarded on 26th February 2015 and presented to him by the Queen on the 14th April 2015.

Although over 160 years separate these two events, they do perhaps give a sense of what the Victoria Cross represents and the level of gallantry required to merit one.

The Victoria Cross has its origins in the Crimean war (1853- 1856) when Britain was at war with Russia. This was the first major war that was reported on by correspondents in the field. One such war correspondent was William Howard Russell of "The Times" who saw at first hand many heroic acts, these despite a lack of clothing, provisions and equipment and despite the diseases of cholera and typhoid fever. (These diseases claimed 20,000 lives against the 3,400 killed in battle *(1))

At the time, the highest award in the British army was the Order of the Bath but this was only given to senior officers. Junior officers might win promotion or be mentioned in the general's despatches. The common soldier

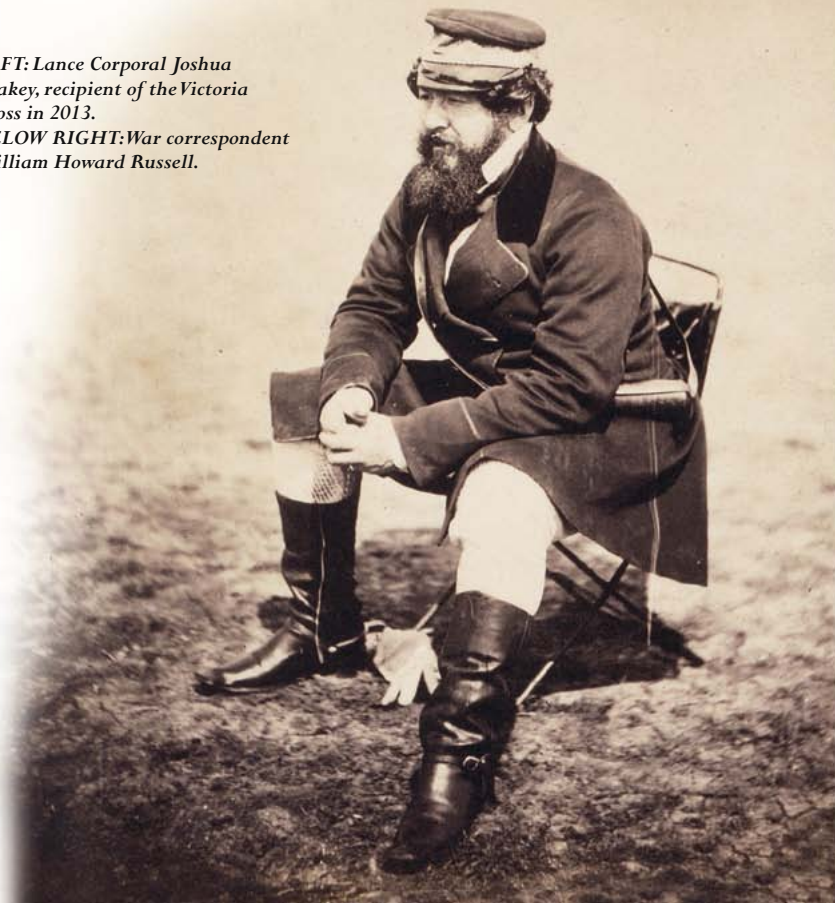
might expect a campaign medal but these would be given to every man who took part in the war *(2)

Pressure grew for rank and file British servicemen to receive recognition of their gallantry i.e. for an award available to all servicemen that ignored rank.

Senior military personnel were against such a medal believing that the strength of the British Army depended on its ability to fight in tight formation under the control of an officer. They were concerned that individuals might be tempted to "go it alone" in acts of individual bravery in an attempt to win the award, thus breaking tight formations.

LEFT: Lance Corporal Joshua Leakey, recipient of the Victoria Cross in 2013.

BELOW RIGHT: War correspondent William Howard Russell.



The Victoria Cross

Queen Victoria and in particular her consort Prince Albert were supporters of the idea for such an award and the concerns of senior military figures were overridden. Victoria and Albert ordered the War Office to come up with an idea for such a medal and Prince Albert came up with its name – the Victoria Cross.

It was instituted by Royal Warrant on 29th January 1856, to be available to the Army and the Royal Navy (and now also to the RAF). The warrant stated that it was intended to be awarded for “individual instances of merit and valour” and which “we are desirous should be highly prized and sought after”.

The warrant also set out 15 “rules and ordinances” but in essence it was intended for extreme bravery / valour in the presence of the enemy.

“The London Gazette” of 24th February 1857 published a list of the first awards and on 26th June 1857 at a ceremony in Hyde Park, Queen Victoria invested 62 of the 111 Crimean recipients with their Victoria Cross in front of 4,000 troops and 12,000 spectators.

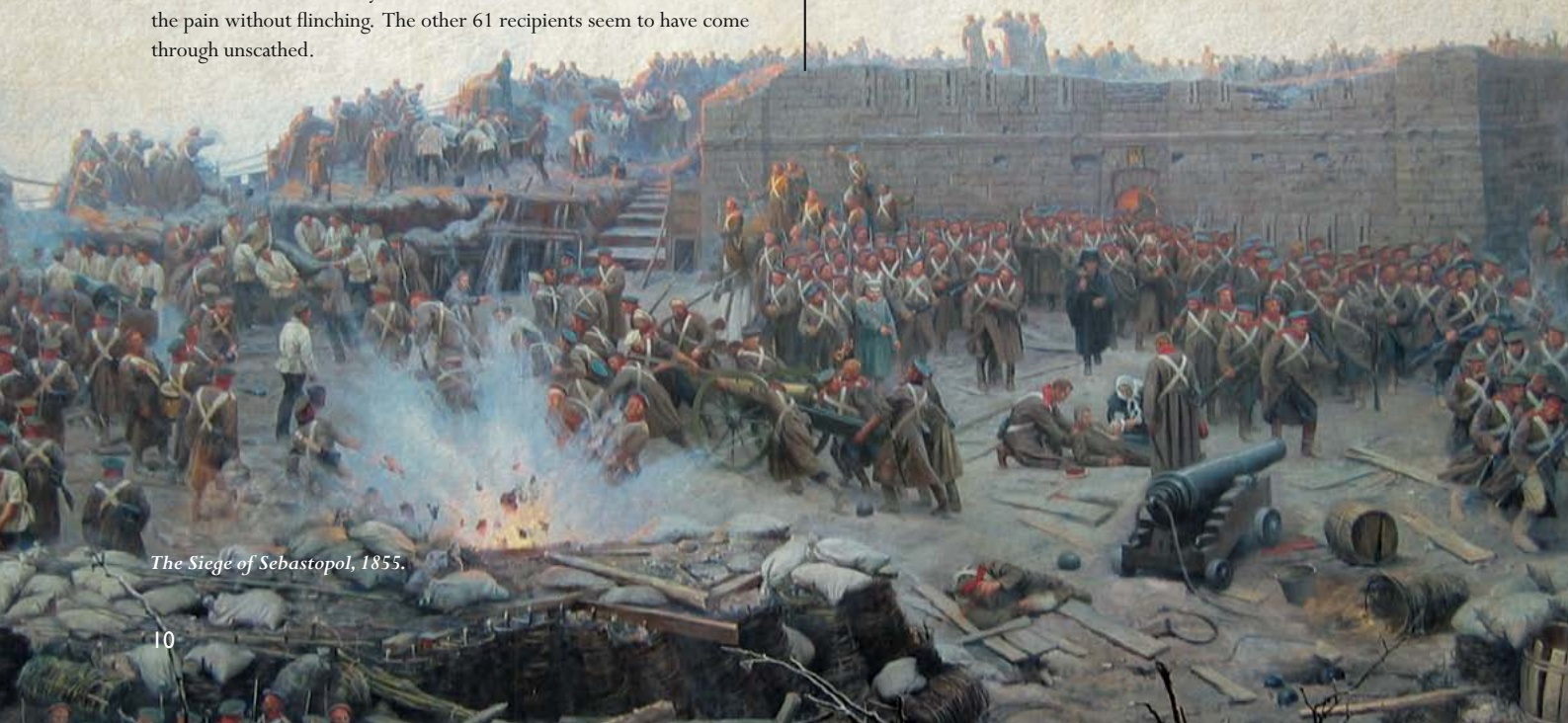
The Queen was on horseback throughout the ceremony and there is a story that, in reaching down, she unwittingly pushed the pin into the chest of Commander Raby, a veteran of the battle of Redan, who bore the pain without flinching. The other 61 recipients seem to have come through unscathed.

Since then, several changes have been made to the rules e.g. in 1858, the list of possible recipients was extended to cover non-military persons i.e. civilians under military command and in 1902, Edward VII granted posthumous VCs to six personnel involved in the Boer War. In 1902, the rules were formally re-written.

There is much debate about the metal used to make the Victoria Crosses. It is said that all 1,358 VCs awarded have been made from the bronze casabels (attachments for ropes) cast from two Chinese-made cannon that were melted down after being captured from the Russians at the 1855 Siege of Sebastopol of the Crimean War and kept in the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich. Doubts exist about this however. Research into historical documents and scientific analysis has led to claims that the Woolwich cannon were not used until 1914, 58 years after the first Victoria Crosses had been produced *(3)

Other sources seek to dispel the rumour that current VCs are no longer made from the Chinese-made cannon captured at Sebastopol, claiming that there is still enough metal from this source to make 60 more crosses and the truncated cannon themselves can be seen at the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich *(4)

The Siege of Sebastopol, 1855.



The remains of the cascabels are stored in special vaults at the Royal Logistical Corps base in Donnington, Telford. They are only accessed under exceptional circumstances, most recently on 23rd October 1959 when 50 ounces of metal was removed, enough to make 12 medals. This metal was sent to Hancocks, jewellers in the Burlington Arcade in London who have made the medals from the outset.

Bronze is a metal of poor quality. It is prone to shattering so it has to be cast in sand. It takes a good deal of finishing so that there are minor variations in design. As a consequence, no two Victoria Crosses are exactly alike.

It was Queen Victoria who favoured a Maltese Cross design with a royal crest. It was originally proposed that the inscribed motto should read "For the Brave" but Queen Victoria herself substituted "For Valour" in case anyone should come to the conclusion that the only brave men in battle were those who won the cross.

The face of the bar is embossed with laurel leaves and the recipient's details, usually the rank, name and unit are engraved on the back. The cross also carries the date of the bravery act inscribed on the reverse.

Until 1918, Army recipients were given a red (crimson) ribbon, recipients from the Navy being given blue. When the RAF was formed on 1st April, 1918, it was decided that recipients from all three services should wear a crimson ribbon with the medal. *(5)

A regimental officer is usually the one to make a recommendation for a Victoria Cross and it then needs 3 witnesses. The reigning monarch is presented with the recommendation



The Imperial War Museum.

for approval. If a group of service personnel are involved in the act of gallantry and deemed to be equally deserving of the award, a name is drawn by ballot. *(6)

A number of private and public collections of the Victoria Cross exist, the largest of its kind in the world being that assembled by Lord Ashcroft and containing over 180 VCs, which is more than one in seven of those ever awarded. They are on display in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery, Imperial War Museum, London along with personal information about each VC holder and the action that led to his decoration. The "London Gazette" citation that accompanied the award of each VC is detailed in full *(7)

In World War 1, 628 Victoria Crosses were awarded to 627 recipients, Captain Noel Chavasse being given a second VC after dying from battlefield injuries in 1917. His is one of only 3 VCs and Bar (or double VCs) that have ever been awarded. *(8)

Of the 628 WW1 Victoria Crosses, 10 were given to men from the City of Birmingham.

Acknowledgements:

- *(1) www.victoriacrossheroes.com
- *(2) www.victoriacross.org.uk/aahistor.htm
- *(3) "The Bravest of the Brave", *The Story of the Victoria Cross*, John Glanfield.
- *(4) "The Victoria and George Cross: The Complete History in three volumes, edited by Christopher Wright and Glenda Anderson.
- *(5) www.greatwar.co.uk/medals/ww1-gallantry-awards.htm
- *(6) www.greatwar.co.uk/medals/ww1-gallantry-awards.htm
- *(7) www.lordashcroft.com/philanthropy/lord-ashcroft-medals/
- *(8) www.victoriacross.org.uk/vcrosshtm



Chapter Two

Birmingham at War

by

PROFESSOR CARL CHINN AND STUDENTS AT PERRY BEECHES ACADEMY



Much has been written about Birmingham and the West Midlands in the Great War and in this chapter Professor Carl Chinn and students from Perry Beeches Academy look at certain events and aspects of life at the time in our area.

Birmingham Women Munitions Workers:

It was 1914 and the war had just begun. At this time, men had to take a stand from the age of 16 and go and fight for this country but who was to keep things running back home?

Women, yes women!

Women who had always been expected to stay at home and clean, cook, and look after the children. Despite this view of married women, however, many of them had always worked in the industries of Birmingham and now in the difficult times of the war even more had to go and work. This opened the doors for women to be regarded in a more positive way and as a result in 1918 women over 30 got the opportunity to vote. This was the start of changing the typical stereotype of how women were perceived. Further reforms came in 1928 when all women over 21 received the vote, on the same terms as men. This brought political equality, although women are still fighting for other rights.

Birmingham's women played a major role in the war effort as the city was a significant centre of manufacturing. At the time of the war, Birmingham was known as the city of a thousand trades, and its citizens made many different things, ranging from guns to buttons and chocolate to jewellery. When the war came along, making things like chocolate and jewellery was not the first priority. The government had to win the war and to make the needed munitions many factories were turned over to wartime production. One of the most important factories was the BSA (Birmingham Small Arms Company), located in Small Heath, where they made things like rifles and machine guns.

Another extremely important factory was the Kynoch's ammunition in Witton just by where Aston Villa play today. Surprisingly both of these factories employed many women. Another place where many women worked in important roles was the Mills grenade factory in Hockley and women made an important contribution to making aeroplane parts at the Longbridge car factory.

In my opinion, Britain would not have been able to win the First World War without women doing their part and by doing so it opened doors for them especially in the political aspect. The important work of women in the First World War began to challenge the stereotypical view of women having to stay in their homes.



Women workers at the BSA factory in the First World War. They were proud of 'doing their bit' making aeroplane parts, Lewis guns and military bicycles.

I think having this knowledge and learning about the women's part within the war helps me to understand how significant they were for future generations of women in the work places and politics. Now I know about what these women did I think I have gained knowledge and inspiration, which I can take on further as a young woman.

by PANASHE

Birmingham's Factories in the Great War and a visit from the King:

It was March 1918 – a few months before the end of the First World War – and a group of journalists from British, American and Dominion newspapers visited Birmingham as it was the metropolis of the United Kingdom's munitions industry. They spent a week in and

around the city, visiting various works, and they were staggered at the colossal scale of Birmingham's wartime production.

'Its immensity is beyond calculation'. You work here—work night and day, without talk, with sleeves rolled up, and your shoulder to the task.' So vast were the operations that 'this industrial epic will never be written, for the simple reason that no man is equal to the task. There is an article in every workshop, a volume in every trade.'

In each and every hive of industry, work proceeded 'to the roar of the furnace, the hiss of escaping steam, the rhythmic throb of the engine, the crash of hydraulic presses, the metallic ring of stamping machines, and the clatter of lighter operations at the benches'. The minds of the journalists were left with 'nothing but confused impressions'.

But out of this welter of ideas, imperfectly grasped and imperfectly correlated, emerge two very distinct conceptions—one of immensity of effort and output and the other of the power of organisation'.

No turn of a kaleidoscope had ever produced a more startling change than the total conversion accomplished in Birmingham for the munitions needs of a total war. Jewellers made anti-gas apparatus and other material; firms noted for their art productions manufactured an intricate type of hand grenade; cycle-makers devoted their activities to fuses and shells; world-famous pen-makers adapted their machines to produce cartridge clips; railway carriage companies turned out artillery wagons, tanks and aeroplanes; and the chemical works attended to deadly T.N.T.

Other factories and workshops manufactured shells, fuses, rifles by the million, Lewis guns by the thousand, artillery limbers by the hundreds, monster aeroplanes, battalions of tanks, aeroplane engines, and big guns. In fact, Birmingham had so transformed itself for the purpose of war, that 'it is well that the world should be made aware of the magnitude and the thoroughness of the achievement'.

That remarkable transformation had been achieved early in the War; so much so that it warranted a visit by King George V on July 22 and 23, 1915. Nominally a secret visit, it gained local attention as soon as the King arrived in the City. He first went to speak to wounded servicemen at the First Southern General Hospital at Birmingham University, and thence spent the afternoon at the works of the King's Norton Metal Company. That night the King slept in his train in the neighbourhood of Shenstone and next day arrived at Gravelly Hill for a larger programme of visits.

*Tank built by the Metropolitan Carriage,
Wagon and Finance Company of Birmingham.*



First came Kynoch's works at Witton. According to Reginald H. Brazier and Ernest Sandford in their book *Birmingham and the Great War 1914-1919* (1921):

Though it was obviously impossible to see the whole of the works, which covered 50 acres, His Majesty went into a number of departments selected with the object of giving him an idea of the various stages of manufacture and organisation of the factory, which even at that early stage of the war had resulted in the output being increased 600 per cent. It is indicative of the object of the visit to the munitions works of the city that here, as at other places, not only were the principal officials presented to the King, but many departmental managers and old servants of the various companies. In this way it was sought to show to the many thousand munition workers of the city that their efforts were of inestimable value to the nation and that they were appreciated at their real worth.

From Witton, the King was taken to the Birmingham Small Arms works at Small Heath, the Metropolitan Carriage Wagon and Finance Company at Saltley, the Birmingham Metal and Munitions Company at Adderley Park, and finally the nearby works of Wolseley Motors Limited. The King was encouraged by what he saw and the successful manner in which 'factories had been diverted from their customary civil occupations; unfamiliar labour, including that of many women and girls who

previously had never seen the inside of a factory, had been brought in and trained to new occupations; and it was a subject of astonished comment how quickly this inexperienced labour adapted itself to unfamiliar tasks and how keen the women were to obtain the largest possible output.'

All the companies visited, as well as many more, played vital roles in the prosecution of a total war, but some of the biggest contracts went to the BSA, the Vickers-Metropolitan group of factories, and Kynoch's. The latter company had been started in 1862, by an intriguing and colourful Scotsman called George Kynoch, a bank clerk from Peterhead. His business first made percussion caps in Great Hampton Street, but its operations expanded greatly when the Lion Works were opened at Witton. Alongside its cartridge huts were built rolling mills, and this feature led to the eventual takeover of Kynoch's by ICI.

During the First World War, the company expanded to take on 18,000 workers as it was contracted to manufacture each week 25 million rifle cartridges; 300,000 revolver cartridges; 500,000 cartridge clips; 110,000 18-pounder brass cases; and 300 tons of cordite. It did so successfully and during the last major German offensive of 1918, the output of cartridges reached 29,750,000 per week. These figures are even more impressive when it is taken into account that 'there are 102 operations in the manufacture of a single rifle cartridge, and the limit of

accuracy prescribed in nearly all the finished dimensions is within one-thousandth of an inch'. Bar for the cordite, everything involved in the production was manufactured in Birmingham.

As for the BSA, the increase in output of rifles was astonishing. From an average of 135 rifles made per week in the five years before the war, production was increased to about 10,000 per week; whilst output of Lewis guns rose from 50 a week, to 2,000. In addition, BSA manufactured bicycles and motor bicycles for the Army and 150,000 aeroplane parts per week.

The Vickers-Metropolitan group of factories in Birmingham also made a considerable contribution to the war needs of the nation. Tanks, aeroplanes and 'other of the larger engines of war' were manufactured at its wagon works; whilst 38 million fuses and large numbers of anti-aircraft shells and naval and field cases were produced at the Electric and Ordnance Accessories factories in Aston and Ward End.

As notable a contribution was made by the Wolseley Motors, which built over 4,000 cars for use in the war as well as 4,500 aero engines and sufficient engine spare parts to be equivalent to another 1,500 engines. In addition, Vickers turned out nearly 700 complete aeroplanes, 850 wings and tail planes, 6,000 propellers, over three million shells and 'the whole of the transmission mechanism of the British rigid airships'. Finally, 'nearly 300 British warships were fitted with director firing gear and gun sights made at Adderley Park and 1,000 naval gun mountings were produced there.'

In 1921, when he was made a Freeman of the Borough, the Prime Minister, Mr. Lloyd George



emphasised the importance of Birmingham in a speech at the Town Hall. He declared that 'the country, the empire and the world owe to the skill, the ingenuity, the industry and the resource of Birmingham a deep debt of gratitude, and as an old Minister of Munitions, and as the present Prime Minister, I am here to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the services which you rendered at that perilous moment.'

by PROFESSOR CARL CHINN

Hall of Memory:

For some of us the Hall of Memory is within walking distance of where we live although this is taken for granted.

However, we visited this building for the first time in March 2015 resulting in a huge impact

upon the group members. The strange atmosphere there shocked all of us as it was as if we were blasting back to the past. The value and the history within the Hall of Memory is phenomenal. The Hall of Memory is a war memorial for the individuals who had died in the tragedy of World War One. This iconic structure is a great tourism attraction. A trip to the facility helps you think about the value of those who risked their lives for us the people of the future.

The Hall of Memory was built to commemorate the 12,320 British citizens who died in World War One. This was a brutal event where many people lost their lives, so what is a better way to show our appreciation by contributing to these heroes who fought for our lives by documenting their names within intuitive and historic books.

The opening of the Hall of Memory in 1925.



In the middle of the Hall of Memory is a shrine with a bronze casket. Inside is the World War One Roll of Honour. This book distinguishes every individual who had died in the war, therefore giving them each their own identity. After 1945 a Roll of Honour was added for those who died in the Second World War. There is also a third Roll of Honour with the names of those who have died in campaigns since then.

The Hall of Memory is located on Broad Street, Birmingham. The structure was first opened on July 4, 1925 by H.R.H. Prince Arthur of Connaught. Around the exterior on granite pedestals stand four larger than life bronze statues constructed almost entirely by Birmingham craftsmen. They symbolise the

contribution made to the war by the Navy, Army, Air Services and Women.

As we walked into the entrance on our visit our eyes were filled with the view of poppies in wreaths laid by schools and other local organisations in respect for the brave soldiers who had fought to make the world a better place.

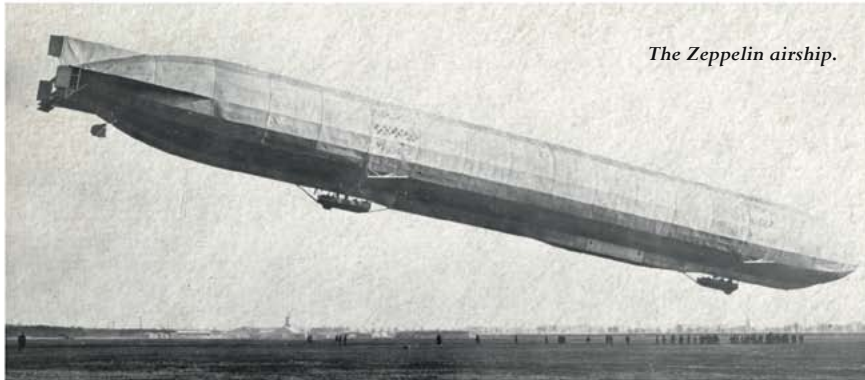
On the walls are three designs showing different aspects of the Great War. The first is 'Call' and shows men leaving home to join up. It states that 'of 150,000 who answered the call to arms 12,320 fell: 35,000 came home disabled'.

The second is Front Line. It shows a party of men in the firing line and says, 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we

shall remember them'. The third shows the wounded and maimed coming home. It states, 'See to it that they shall not have suffered and died in vain'.

We felt privileged to be able to have the opportunity to set foot in such an historical place. We will always be grateful to those who are remembered in the Hall of Memory.

by SORENA AND JADE



The Zeppelin airship.

55-year-old May Julia Salter, who was rushed to hospital suffering from severe wounds to the chest and abdomen, although she later died of shock and septicæmia.

The specific Zeppelin that caused all this death and damage was one called the L21. It was ginormous at 53 feet long and 61 feet broad. It was capable of reaching speeds of up to 60 miles an hour. It was captained by Max Dietrich, the uncle of famous singer/actor Marlene Dietrich who was successful for 50 years, from 1920s-1970s.

We did not know about the zeppelin raid until we started to research it for this project. We learnt how the Zeppelin raid had an impact on the West Midlands and its people. However, this raid was only a small raid compared to those that would attack Birmingham in the Second World War.

by NICO AND NATHAN

The Zeppelin Raid on the Black Country in 1916:

The Zeppelin Raid was a key part of the First World War in the West Midlands, due to the fact that it was the first ever air raid in that region. On January 31 1916, nine airships or Zeppelins left their bases in Germany where they were ordered to bomb Liverpool and shock the British by the long range of the attack. The year before Zeppelins had begun their raids on London and it was thought that it was impossible for them to reach as far as Merseyside. The enemy did not reach their target because of the horrendous weather with mist and fog surrounding the area. Having lost their way, they dropped their bombs on several English towns, mostly in the Midlands and not on Liverpool. Chief amongst them were Tipton, Wednesbury and Walsall in Staffordshire.

As the Zeppelin Raid flew on, more bombs were being dropped on a place called Bradley, where two civilians called Maud and Frederick, were killed as they were courting on the bank of the Wolverhampton Union Canal. Then at 8:15pm, the L21 let loose bombs in several parts of Wednesbury around King Street, near to the Crown Tube Works, at the back of Crown

and Cushion pub, and in High Bullen and Brunswick Park Road. Another fourteen people were killed: four men, six women and four children.

Walsall was finally bombed. The first bomb landed on the Congregational Church on the corner of Wednesbury Road and Glebe Street. The Zeppelin dropped bombs in the grounds of the Walsall and District Hospital and Mountain Street and its final bomb fell in the Centre of Walsall, killing three people. One of the three was the Lady Mayoress of Walsall,



An adult and child looking at the damage in Walsall caused by the Zeppelin raid of 1916; our thanks to Walsall Local History Centre.

Chapter Three

William Amey

by

STEPHANIE BENNETT

The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum (Royal Warwickshire)



The Victoria Cross is the highest gallantry medal awarded by the British monarch to the Armed Forces. From the outset in January 1856 when the medal was created it was awarded to everybody from soldiers to officers regardless of rank. It is truly egalitarian in nature and wholly awarded on merit – For Valour.

It seems to be true that very brave men do extraordinary deeds, and yet they are often very normal and modest people. They appear to be everyday people, just like you and me. If you talked to them you would never know what they had done. Corporal William Amey seems to have been one such person.

He was born in Duddeston, Nechells in the Aston area of Birmingham on the 5th March 1881. William was one of eight children; he had four brothers and three sisters and was the second youngest member of the family. In 1911 William still lived at the parental home at 58 Stella Street, Aston. As a single man of 30 years old, this was normal – households tended to be larger and families stayed together more than today. Elizabeth, the mother, at 69 years old was the head of the household and a widow. Charles her husband who was five years older than her had died in 1909. The eldest son, Charles Henry moved out once he got married, but died in 1911. Walter, aged 42, was a general labourer. Annie and Nellie 38 and 35 years old, were a metal burnisher and servant respectively.

Harry 32 was a brass worker and Sidney 27 was an insurance clerk. His youngest brother served in World War I with the Worcestershire Regiment. It was maybe a coincidence that most of the siblings married quite late if at all, rather than when they were younger as was more usual at the time. William was a chandelier maker for Verity's Limited, electrical manufacturers, at their Plume works in Aston. Birmingham has changed a lot over the years. At the time Aston was really an outer suburb and was only included within the city boundary in 1911.

His love life reads a bit like a modern soap opera. The love of his life was Evelyn ('Eve') Matilda (nee Gambles). It seems that they met when they both lived in the Aston area of Birmingham before the outbreak of the Great War. At the time she was married to Frederick Andrew Haines. During this period, it was harder, more unusual and expensive than today to get a divorce (less socially acceptable). As a result, in the 1920's Eve and William moved to 13 Lansdowne Terrace in Leamington Spa (but stayed on the electoral register for Washwood Heath Ward, Erdington, Birmingham). Evelyn's first husband then later lived with another woman, and when Frederick died in December 1937 he left his possessions to her, rather than his wife. Finally, officially able to marry, William and Evelyn tied the knot in Edmonton in Essex in the autumn of 1938. The couple settled down in 13 Willes Road, Leamington Spa. In his own quiet way, William must have been proud of his

award for Valour, as they named their house 'Landrecies' after the place where he won his Victoria Cross.

He served with the 1/8th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, which was based at Aston Manor, Birmingham. It was a Territorial Force Battalion, similar to today's Territorial Army. Unlike some Territorial Battalions it had no direct link to a previous military unit when it was created after the reforms to the British Army in 1908. At the outbreak of the War the Battalion consisted of a large number of skilled working-class men, largely due to the efforts of the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel W.R. Ludlow who had targeted such new recruits.

It was mobilised on Tuesday the 4th August 1914, the day that War was declared on Germany. Originally the Battalion was part of 143rd Brigade and 48th Division until September 1918 when it joined the 75th Brigade, 25th Division. The Battalion was initially stationed around Chelmsford in Essex before landing at Le Havre on the 22nd March 1915. The unit fought in France and Belgium, notably the Somme in 1916 and Passchendaele in 1917, and then went to Italy in November 1917, before returning to France in September 1918 for the final advance.

Whilst no service records survive for William Amey it seems likely that he enlisted in May 1915 and went to the Front in early 1916. He won the Victoria Cross for his brave actions at Landrecies in northern France on the 4th November 1918 (London Gazette 31st January 1919). The 75th Brigade attacked at Landrecies to secure the bridgehead on the River Sambre and the Sambre-Oise Canal (about 55 feet wide).

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that there was a cessation of hostilities a few days later on the 11th November. It was also common knowledge at the time that the end of the War would be soon. Nevertheless, the Battle of the Sambre, which turned out to be the Battalion's last action of the War, was fiercely contested being one of the hardest fought of the final offensive.

At 6.15am on the 4th November 1918 the Battalion attacked. The 1/8th Battalion were on the left and met with stiff opposition near Faubourg Soyeres (to the north-west centre of Landrecies).

The plan was for the soldiers who attacked first to clear the passage for the 1/8th Battalion and other units who were in the second phase of the attack so that they had a smoother run and would be able to push on. However, in practice

the thick fog that day meant that many German machine gun posts were not spotted and eliminated. No doubt in the general confusion of battle and not helped by the weather, Amey's section got separated from their Company and instead joined another Company whose progress was slowed by heavy machine gun fire. He then does three remarkably brave feats for which he is awarded the Victoria Cross. Firstly, he led his section (probably about 30 men) to attack and eventually capture a machine gun post (about 50 prisoners and their weapons).

Secondly on his own without hesitating he attacks another machine gun post, shoots two soldiers and holds the rest until other men arrive to help.

Thirdly he again acts determinedly on his own in the face of extreme danger and with





A German machine gun nest.

great disregard for personal safety. He rushes the strongly defended chateau of Faubourg Soyeres, killing two Germans and holding some 20 prisoners until reinforcements reached him.

By clearing away the last of the opposition in their area he saved many lives and enabled his comrades to successfully advance.

The citation for his Victoria Cross reads: 'For most conspicuous bravery on 4th November 1918, during the attack on Landrecies, when owing to fog many hostile machine-gun nests were missed by the leading troops. On his own initiative he led his section against a machine gun nest, under heavy fire, drove the garrison into a neighbouring farm, and finally captured about 50 prisoners and several machine guns.'

Later single-handed and under heavy fire, he attacked a machine-gun post in a farmhouse, killed two of the garrison and drove the remainder into a cellar until assistance arrived. Subsequently, single-handed he rushed a strongly-held post, capturing 20 prisoners. He displayed throughout the day the highest degree of valour and determination.'

The citation is a factual account of his bravery. As such it does not describe the reality or horrors of warfare. It does not speak of the early morning chill; the butterflies in the stomach waiting for H-Hour to start the attack; the smoke and noise of machine gun fire all around; the confusion, and shouting, or meeting the enemy face to face who were equally afraid. Maybe with racing heart and heaving lungs, he acted quickly, perhaps instinctively, in the heat

of the moment. We will never know for sure what drove him that day to make a brilliant rapid advance to capture enemy machine gun posts that so helped to secure the bridges. After a very severe fight his gallantry contributed to the capture of Faubourg Soyeres. The Battalion reached the Sambre-Oise Canal. As the main bridge had been destroyed some men crossed over the lock-gates and others used an enemy wooden bridge further north. That day many German prisoners and equipment were taken, and his conduct saved lives. He helped the 25th Division advance a total of 12 miles in extremely difficult conditions.

The next day on the 5th November the Battalion continued to advance and protected the right flank of the 74th brigade which was attacking the line of the Petit Helle River. The Battalion advanced along the road from Landrecies to Maroilles. They met no opposition until they got to the edge of Maroilles when 'A' Company in the lead came under enemy fire. The Battalion was then relieved and the men billeted in houses in the area. On the 7th they were ordered to advance again through Marbaix to the village of St Hilaire sur Helle where the Brigade faced strong machine gun fire.

The bravery shown by William Amey on the 4th November was very special. In all seven Victoria Crosses were awarded that day, including the one to 307817 Lance Corporal William Amey. Only one more Victoria Cross was awarded during the War, on the 6th November. A total of 6 Victoria Crosses were awarded to men of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment out of a total of 45,570 men who served in the Regiment during the whole of the First World War. A total of 628 Victoria Crosses were awarded during the entire conflict. Corporal Amey was also awarded another gallantry

medal, the Military Medal (London Gazette 22nd July 1919). This was awarded for 'exemplary gallantry during active operations against the enemy on land.' Unfortunately, as is often the case with Military Medals no details exist as there is no citation. Although the evidence suggests that he was actually awarded his Military Medal prior to his Victoria Cross (for an action in 1917 or 1918).

After the cessation of hostilities on the 11th November 1918 the Battalion was billeted behind the lines at Le Cateau where it was engaged in routine tasks such as training and parades. They were then employed on salvage work at Cambrai. Towards the end of February 1919 many of the men were sent to other Battalions (400 men to the 2/6th and 2/7th Battalions, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment) and almost 300 went to dispersal centres awaiting demobilisation. The 1/8th Battalion was officially demobilised at Birmingham on the 1st August 1919.

William Amey left his battalion on the 14th December on leave for Christmas. In unforeseen circumstances he became ill and was admitted to Dudley Road Hospital for an operation and to recuperate. He first found out that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous and outstanding bravery when he received a congratulatory telegram from his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel P.H. Whitehouse DSO. He was presented with the Victoria Cross at an Investiture ceremony in the Ball Room of Buckingham Palace on the morning of the 22nd February 1919 by King George V.

The unveiling of the cenotaph to the gallant Eighth Battalion at Aston Parish Churchyard on the 4th September 1921 was led by

Major General Sir Robert Fanshawe KCB DSO. He paid tribute to the Battalion, remarking that it was special for displaying three main characteristics:

- Firstly, a strong sense of pride, comradeship, devotion and loyalty among the soldiers in the Battalion.
- Secondly there was a strong Brigade esprit de corps.
- Thirdly and the main thing was that they were some of the most determined fighters that a General could ever wish to have under his command.

Through his gallant actions Corporal William Amey embodies the spirit and fine reputation of the Battalion. By remembering him we keep alive and pay tribute not only to his bravery but also the memory of his comrades, who gave their best and did their duty for King and country, to who we owe much of our freedom.

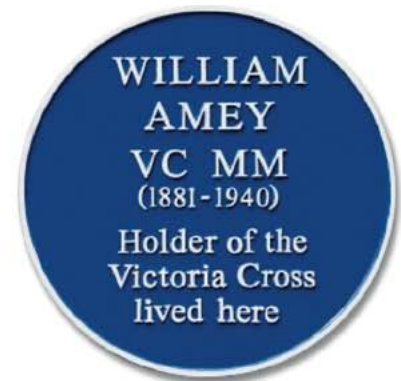
After the War he seems to have worked as a business agent in Leamington Spa. He was a prominent member of the British Legion and had many ex-Service friends, who held him in high regard and affection. Along with other winners of the Victoria Cross he attended a special Garden Party held at Buckingham Palace in 1920 and later in 1929 the Victoria Cross Dinner at the House of Lords. He was given the 1937 King George VI Coronation Medal.

William married in 1938. Sadly the new couple did not have the chance to enjoy wedded bliss for too long as William died on the 28th May 1940 aged 59 at Warneford Hospital in Leamington Spa. His funeral was attended by two other Victoria Cross holders, Mr H. Tandey and Mr Arthur Hutt. As a mark of respect befitting his bravery he was buried with full military

honours at All Saints Cemetery, Brunswick Street in Leamington Spa. In what must have been a deeply moving ceremony his coffin was draped with a Union Jack, six soldiers acted as standard bearers, and a trumpeter sounded the 'Last Post' and the 'Reveille' at the graveside. Wreaths were laid for the very gallant soldier, dear friend and a great gentleman. A carving of a Victoria Cross is worked into his gravestone. Rightly his memory lives on today. In recognition of his Victoria Cross in October 2015 Leamington Town Council sponsored a Blue Plaque to be placed on the house where he lived (13 Willes Road).

Corporal William Amey epitomised the fighting spirit of the Birmingham raised Battalion which was summed up in a poem by J. Trevannion-Foster (The Battle of Beaumont Hamel July 1st, 1916. A Poem dedicated to the Royal Warwickshire Regiment):

*"Oh! Citizens of
Birmingham, For your
motto was their war cry:
'Forward, lads, for good
old Brum' "*





Chapter Four

Norman Finch

by

STUDENTS AT THE GEORGE DIXON ACADEMY



Norman Augustus Finch was a soldier born in Handsworth, Birmingham on the 26th of December 1890. He had two sisters Ellen and Daisy and 3 brothers named Harold, Edgar and George. He was married to Elizabeth Riss in 1919.

He is one of the only 10 soldiers in Birmingham to be awarded the Victoria Cross in World War 1, the best award in the country. He joined the Royal Marines on the 15th of January 1908, when he was 17. He became a sergeant during his time in the Marines. After training Norman Augustus Finch served on various ships for the next four years. In 1921 they had a son Jack who later lived in Portsmouth.

The first record we have of Norman Finch living in Portsmouth is 1920 when he seems to have been in Lawrence Road, Southsea. By 1960 he was living at 30 Chelsea Road, which is the last known address before he died in 1966 at St Mary's Hospital. Norman Augustus Finch's medal is now at the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, Hampshire as he himself rests at Port Chester Crematorium, Hampshire.

Norman grew up in Handsworth during the 1890s, when Handsworth was considerably different compared to what it is today. The population of Handsworth in 1891 was estimated to be around 45,000, which is about half of what the population is today. It was mainly a

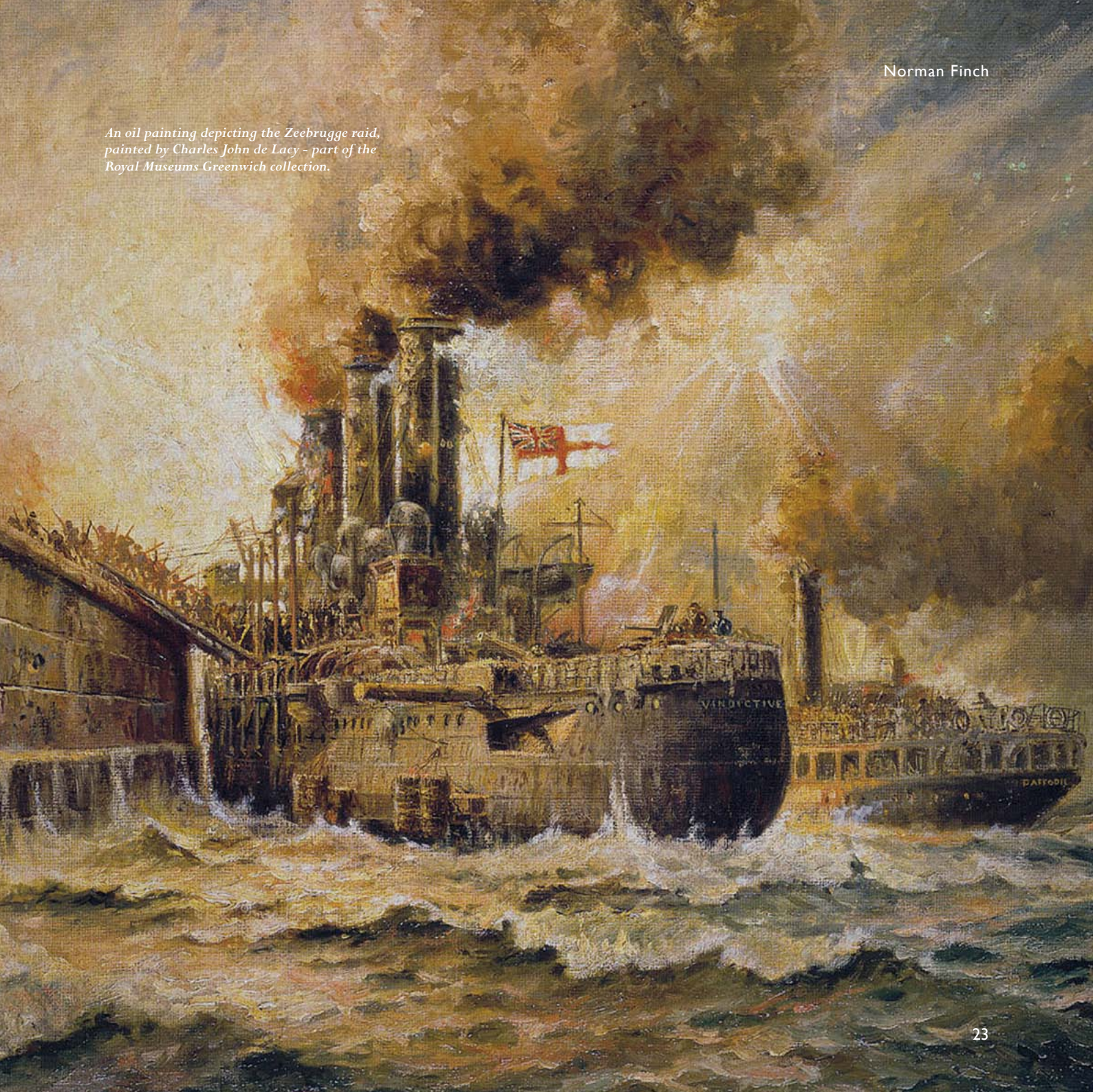
working-class area and the district became an Urban District under the Local Government Act of 1888. Handsworth was amalgamated with the City of Birmingham in 1911.

Norman attended Benson County Primary School in Hockley, Birmingham. The school officially opened in 1888 for boys, girls and infant children. In 1894, this school opened its first class in Birmingham. The name of the school was changed to Benson Road board school in 1895. Some accommodation was provided in the Ninevah Wesleyan Chapel (also called the Benson Road Temporary Council School). In 1930, the school was reorganised as an Infant and Junior School but separate facilities were created for infants and junior in 1932. In 1976, the school got closed down and was replaced by a newly secured Benson Junior and Infant School, which occupied the same premises.

Norman Finch won his VC at Zeebrugge in Belgium. The Zeebrugge raid was originally proposed by British First Sea Lord, Sir John Jellicoe, shortly before his abrupt dismissal at the close of 1917. Jellicoe gained acceptance of an attack in principle – actually formulated by Dover port commander Sir Roger Keyes.

The Royal Navy wanted to block the port of Zeebrugge by sinking old ships in the canal entrance to stop the Germans using it as a base for

*An oil painting depicting the Zeebrugge raid,
painted by Charles John de Lacy - part of the
Royal Museums Greenwich collection.*





The HMS Vindictive photographed before the raid. The foretop can be clearly identified to the right of the first funnel.

their U-Boats. At the time they built it the harbour was the biggest man-made harbour in the world. Two 'blockships' were sunk in the narrowest bit of the Bruges Canal and a submarine rammed a viaduct to trap the Germans.

He gained his Victoria Cross due to actions on 22-23 April 1918 aboard the HMS Vindictive. He and his team tried to defend against enemy fire, but unfortunately the ship was eventually destroyed. Sergeant Finch was second in command of the Lewis gun in the foretop of HMS Vindictive under Lieutenant Charles N.B. Rigby. At one period HMS Vindictive was being hit every few seconds. Although their guns were not the ones that

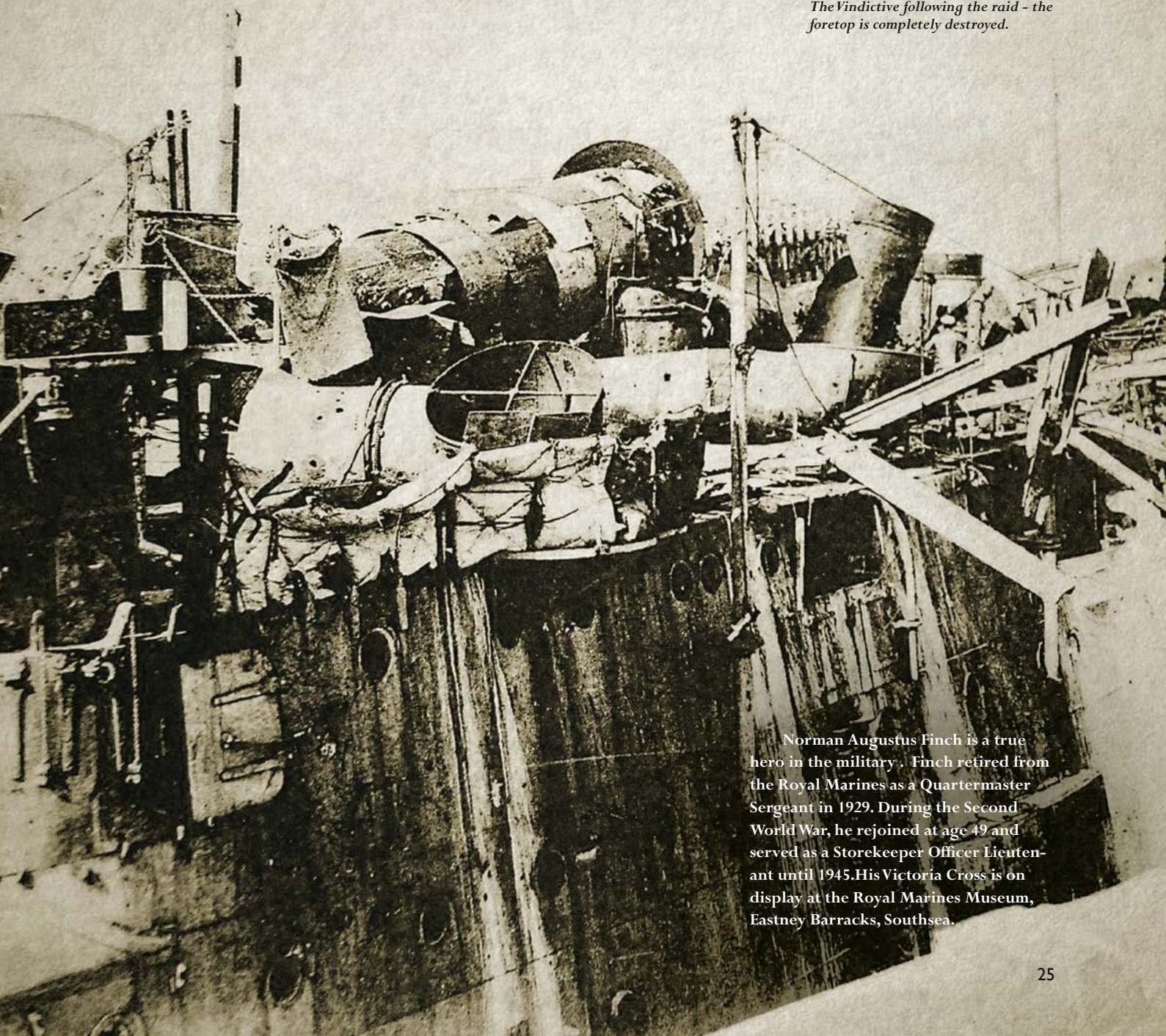
were doing the most damage, Sergeant Finch and the officer in command kept up a continuous fire which kept the enemy's fire down. Unfortunately, two heavy shells made a direct hit on the foretop. Everyone who was in the top were either killed or disabled, except for Sergeant Finch who was severely wounded. Even though he was wounded he showed great bravery remaining in his battered and exposed position. Once again, he picked up the Lewis gun, and started shooting rapidly, until the foretop got another direct hit putting the rest of the armament out of action. Before the top had been destroyed Sergeant Finch had done vital work and his bravery undoubtedly saved many lives. He was awarded the Victoria Cross

in 1918, not long after the events at Zeebrugge. This very heroic sergeant of the Royal Marine Artillery was selected by the 4th Battalion of Royal Marines, that was mostly Royal Marine Light Infantry, to receive the Victoria Cross under Rule 13 of the Royal Warrant, dated 29th January 1856. He achieved the medal on the 23rd April 1918, Zeebrugge, Belgium.

The medal is at the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, Hampshire. Keyes was knighted after the raid, and 11 Victoria Crosses were awarded. The Germans made a new channel around the two ships and within two days, their submarines were able to transit Zeebrugge.

Norman Finch

The Vindictive following the raid - the foretop is completely destroyed.



Norman Augustus Finch is a true hero in the military. Finch retired from the Royal Marines as a Quartermaster Sergeant in 1929. During the Second World War, he rejoined at age 49 and served as a Storekeeper Officer Lieutenant until 1945. His Victoria Cross is on display at the Royal Marines Museum, Eastney Barracks, Southsea.



Chapter Five

Albert Gill

by
PAUL FINNEGAN



Albert Gill was born on 8th September 1879 in Hospital Street Birmingham, the second son of Henry Gill and Sophia Gill. An older brother, Henry had been born circa 1878. Henry Senior, later known as Harry had been born in Stalybridge, Lancashire in 1856 (despite the 1881 census stating he was born in Birmingham, subsequent census returns confirm he was in fact from Lancashire) whilst Sophia had been born in Ludlow in Shropshire in 1859.

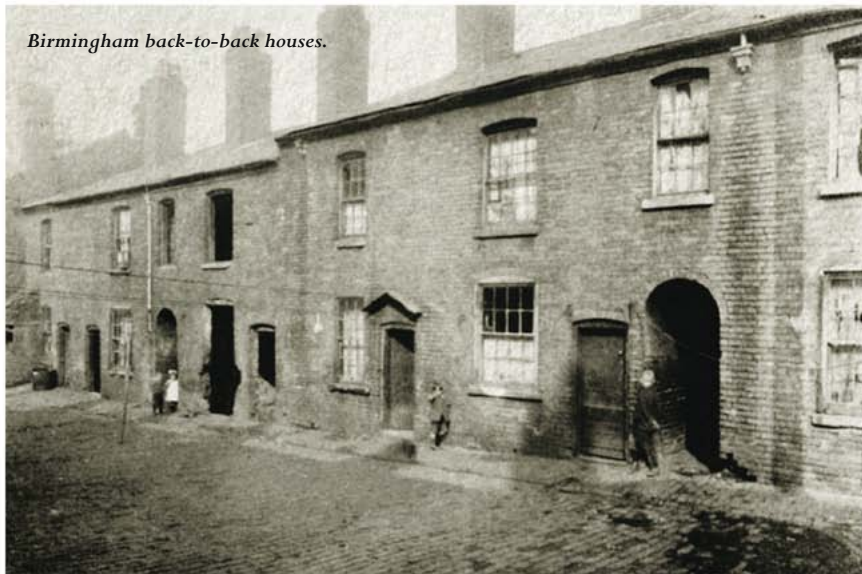
By 1881 the family had moved into an adjacent street and were lodging with the Saunders Family at Number 6, Court 28 Bridge Street West in the St Stephen's District of Birmingham. This was a very poor area of Birmingham, near the parish boundary with Aston in the area now known as Newtown where most of the housing was back to back courts. Most residents were unskilled workers and the area was described in 1849 as having two ground floor rooms, two bedrooms and a cellar. By 1891 the family had moved a few streets away to their own accommodation at Number 5, Court 4 New John Street West. Henry had found work as a tube drawer and another son, Samuel had been born in 1889. Tube drawers were found in a number of Birmingham industries including gun making, cycles and bed frames. Both Henry Junior and Albert are described as scholars and an article by David Delderfield states that Albert attended Steward Street School in Hockley .

Sophia Gill died in 1899 and there is no trace of Albert on the 1901 Census. Henry Junior is lodging with the Williams family at 60 Steward Street and has followed Henry Senior as a tube drawer. Henry Senior was lodging in Monument Road, Edgbaston and coincidentally, living next door was a soldier of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps, the regiment that Albert was to serve with; was this a connection? Albert joined the Army soon after leaving school and was posted to India with the Kings Royal Rifle Corps. He served his full time with the colours and upon finishing his service was placed on the reserve . This may explain why he does not appear on the 1901 census.

After leaving the Army Albert followed his father and brother into employment as a tube drawer with Earle, Bourne and Co Ltd of Heath Street (later Delta Metals) which at the time specialised in making bed frames. He spent six years with the company and it is reported that he began work with the General Post Office around 1907 sorting the mail at the head Post Office in Birmingham, which is where he was to meet his future wife, although this is disproved by their marriage certificate. He would later move to the Post Office in Hockley where he took the job of delivering the mail .

Rosetta Furze was born in Torquay in Devon in 1883, the daughter of Richard Furze, a builder. Richard was son of Elizabeth Furze who

Birmingham back-to-back houses.



had married a James Vinson at sea, Elizabeth already having children from a previous marriage, as had James. Albert and Rosetta were married on 4th April 1910 at St Peter's Catholic Church, their address at the time being listed as Albert's brother Harry's house at 62 Steward Street. At the time of their marriage Albert was listed as a tube drawer and Rosetta as a servant. In 1911 they are living at Number 1, Back of 17 Aberdeen Street in Birmingham. Albert's father, Henry is living with them and is still employed as a tube drawer and his entry is annotated with the words 'bedsteads' possibly a reference to Earle, Bourne and Co Ltd. mentioned earlier. Interestingly Albert is also listed as a tube drawer, contrary to the evidence that by this time he was employed by the Post Office. Albert's wife Rosetta has been attributed the incorrect maiden names over the years by the misreading of documents, particularly the Commonwealth War Graves Register of Burials. She was firstly thought to be named 'Reed' as the entry in the Register of

Soldier's Effects gives her name, Rosetta and this is annotated 'Rec'd' which has incorrectly been read as Reed. In a newspaper article of November 1916 when returning from Buckingham Palace, it states she 'was met by her father, Mr J Smith, caretaker of the Harborne Institute.' It has been assumed that Mr J Smith

is her father and thus her maiden name would be Smith as opposed to Mr J Smith being the caretaker of the Harborne Institute.

The rates book of 1911 has the couple living in Aberdeen Street and Gliddon in his account of Albert Gill states that in 1912 the family visited Australia and two of his three children were to die in infancy. A son was born to the couple, Henry in early 1914 and this birth was registered in Birmingham so it is possible another child may have been born in Australia. Upon their return to Birmingham they moved into Number 2, back of Court 14 in Cope Street, Spring Hill.

Great Britain entered the Great War on 4th August 1914 and as a former soldier and being on the Army reserve, Albert Gill was recalled to the colours with the 1st Battalion Kings Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC). The Battalion was under the command of 6th Brigade in the 2nd Division and was one of the first formations to move out to France, landing at Rouen on 13th August 1914. Albert Gill was not amongst this initial wave; his medal card shows that

The Kings Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC).



The first Battle of Ypres.



he did not arrive in France until 9th November 1914 . The Battalion was placed in 1 Corps under Douglas Haig and arrived in time for the closing stages of the First Battle of Ypres. Although in the sector which took part in the famous Christmas Truce of 1914, there is no evidence to suggest that Albert or his Battalion took part. Early in 1915, Albert would have received news that his son Henry had died. Albert's brother Henry was also to join up. He served with 1/4th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment and on 15th August 1915 took part in the ill-fated landing at Suvla Bay as part of the Gallipoli Campaign. He was wounded and evacuated to Hospital in Egypt.

In 1915 the KRRC took part in two major operations. On 9th May an attack was launched on Aubers Ridge in the Artois area near the French/Belgian border. The attack was to support the French attack on Vimy Ridge. The 2nd Division were held in reserve and were not called upon until 5pm to help relieve 1st Division and prepare for a bayonet attack at 8pm. In the event this attack was cancelled as it was decided that there were not sufficient shells for the attack to be effectively supported by artillery barrage. After making little headway it was decided to alter the focus of the attack towards the south and on 13th May 1915 the Battle of Festubert commenced.

The battle started with an artillery barrage and it wasn't until 11.30pm on 15th May that the first infantry moved out of their trenches. It was reported that 1st KRRC took their objectives on the left of the attack with few casualties. There then followed nine days of intensive fighting where British troops, supported by Indian and Canadian troops gained some of their objectives but largely the battle ended in stalemate. One important outcome of the battle was that it highlighted that the Army was desperately short of artillery shells. This led to the fall of the Liberal Government under Asquith and the formation of a coalition Government with David Lloyd George being given the post of Minister of Munitions.

In September, the French commander Joffre renewed his offensive in the Artois area. The French army had received some 200,000 reinforcements and he wanted to attack the German lines currently dug in on French soil whilst he had the numerical advantage. The British commanders agreed to support the French offensive in the area of the mining town of Loos. The 2nd Division were attached to 1 Corps under Lieutenant-General Hubert Gough, part of Haig's First Army. Over 7,000 men were to lose their lives during the Battle of Loos and it was to see the first use of Kitchener's New Army, those raised at home to support the regular troops. One of the key factors in the failure to break the German line was the insufficient artillery barrage, which

British troops with German POW's at Festubert.



The scarred landscape at Festubert.





Oil painting of the Battle of Loos
by Fortunino Matania.

failed to cut enough German wire or destroy enough strongpoints and machine gun positions to enable a breakthrough. Following the battle, Haig replaced Sir John French as Commander in Chief of British Forces.

At this time in Birmingham, many industries had been turned over to war work to support the traditional armaments manufacturers such as the Birmingham Small Arms (BSA) in Small Heath. One important weapon of war to come from Birmingham was the Mills bomb hand grenade and it would later be said the Great War was a battle between Birmingham and the giant German manufacturer Krupps. As men had signed up for the front, there was a shortage of labour engaged in war work and whilst some of these vacancies were filled by the recent influx of Belgian refugees, there still existed a gap in the labour force. It was at this time that Britain and in particular Birmingham turned to women to work in the factories and undertake other roles usually the domain of men such as tram drivers. This would be a feature of British domestic life until the end of the war when most women had to give up their jobs so that men returning from the front could be accommodated.

On 13th December 1915 the 1st KRRC was transferred to 99th Brigade but remained part of 2nd Division. On 21st February 1916 the German Army attacked the French at Verdun where in the words of German commander Erich Von Falkenhayn they intended to 'bleed France white'. This was countered by the French commander Petain's statement that 'you will not let them pass'. The battle did indeed use up enormous amounts of French resources and an approach was made to the British to launch an attack which would divert German forces away from Verdun. The British agreed and plans were drawn up for a summer offensive in the area of the Somme valley.



RIGHT: The Mills bomb hand grenade.

The Battle of the Somme was not one battle but a series of battles or phases fought along a continuous front with different objectives. The KRRC, as part of 2nd Division were attached to XIII Corps, 4th Army under General Rawlinson. Although it is recognised that The Battle of the Somme commenced on 1st July 1916 the KRRC were not called upon until 15th July 1916 when they were to take part in what became known as the Battle of Delville Wood. Delville Wood itself borders the village of Longueval and is approximately seven miles east of the French town of Albert.

On 1st July 1916 the battalion were camped at Camblain L'Abbe in the Artois area of France and on 2nd July the Unit War Diary records the sound of a 'terrific bombardment as part of the big push to support the French'. Whilst the opening battles of the Somme offensive raged, the Unit War diary for 3rd July records that 'ten percent of the battalion attended the 23rd Royal Fusiliers sports day' On 8th July it is recorded that 'the officers played the ser-

geants at rounders.' Albert had been promoted to sergeant by this time and would probably have taken part in the game. On 10th July the battalion moved to the Berthonval Section and it was reported that a sentry was killed by machine gun fire. The battalion was withdrawn from the front line on 13th July and advised that they themselves were to be relieved and moved to another section of the line. The battalion billeted at Hermin and awaited their orders. On 20th July they were ordered to move out and on 21st July arrived at Morlancourt. The War Diary records that 'the whole countryside in the rear of our trenches is a mass of troops, cavalry and infantry.' The next days were used to train for the forthcoming attack and on 23rd July they learn that they were to be moved into the front line to attack along a front running from Longueval to Waterlot Farm, which includes the southern section of Delville Wood.

On the morning of 27th July 1916, the 1st Battalion KRRC were to attack with the 23rd Royal Fusiliers on their left. They advanced as

the artillery bombardment lifted to the next line of attack but the advance was hampered by the undergrowth and rifle fire from the German trenches. The first objective, known as Princes Street trench was taken with few casualties and Albert Gill was in the supporting company who passed through the first wave of attackers and on to the edge of the wood. 'A' Company, to which Albert belonged, had suffered a high number of casualties including all of their bombing section, the name given to teams specially trained in the use of hand grenades. At around 9.00am the Germans launched a counter attack and managed to pin down the British troops in the wood. The undergrowth aided the snipers and there was a distinct possibility that a gap which had developed between the KRRC and the 23rd Royal Fusiliers would lead to the Battalion being cut off. It was at this time that the actions of Albert Gill were to result in his death. He organised his men into bombing parties and then, as the location of the enemy snipers was unknown, he stood up to draw their fire so that he could direct the fire



The Battle of the Somme.

Albert Gill

of his men to the enemy. Albert was hit almost immediately but his actions ensured that the German counter attack was repulsed and Delville Wood was taken later that day. At the end of the battle the KRRC had suffered 14 officers and 308 other ranks killed or wounded.

On 10th August 1916, Albert's Company Commander, Captain Stafford wrote to Rosetta Gill about her husband and the manner of his death 'Your husband was shot through the head and must have died at once. He would have known nothing about it. He was one of the most valued men in my company, a man whom anyone would be proud to call friend. He was loved by his platoon, of which I am sorry to say only four or five men remain. You should be justly proud of your husband in his life and death. He had one of the finest natures I have

ever known. No words of mine can express my sympathy with you in your terrible sorrow.

On 26th October 1916, the supplement to the London Gazette carried a list of men who, for their bravery in the face of the enemy had been awarded the Victoria Cross, one of these entries read: No. 2815 Serjeant Albert Gill, Late King's Royal Rifle Corps. For most conspicuous bravery. The enemy made a very strong counter-attack on the right flank of the battalion and rushed the bombing post after killing all the company bombers. Serjeant Gill at once rallied the remnants of his platoon, none of whom were skilled bombers and reorganised his defences, a most difficult and dangerous task, the trench being very shallow and much damaged. Soon afterwards the enemy nearly surrounded his men by creeping

up through the thick undergrowth and commenced sniping at about twenty yards range. Although it was almost certain death, Serjeant Gill stood boldly up in order to direct the fire of his men. He was killed almost at once but not before he had shown his men where the enemy were, and thus enabled them to hold up their advance. By his supreme devotion to duty and self-sacrifice he saved a very dangerous situation.

News of the award reached his battalion on 27th October 1916, the Unit War Diary recording 'The Times of today contained the announcement that the Victoria Cross had been awarded to the late Serjeant Albert Gill of this battalion for conspicuous gallantry during the fight in Delville Wood.'

In Birmingham the news was announced in The Birmingham Post; 'included in yesterday's list of fifteen officers and men awarded the Victoria Cross was the name of yet another Birmingham man, Sergeant Albert Gill, late of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps, who sacrificed his life in the defence of a trench against a German attack.' On the same day, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Neville Chamberlain, wrote a personal letter to Mrs Gill in which he said 'Dear Madam, it is with great gratification that I have heard of the award of the Victoria Cross to your late husband for the heroic deed which is described in the paper today. I deeply regret that your husband lost his life in the performance of his duty, but his memory will be held in the greatest honour by his fellow citizens and will serve as an example to those who come after him.' The Birmingham Gazette of 28th October 1916 carried an article that included the reaction of Albert's father to his son's death: 'Sergeant Gill's father, Mr Harry Gill who lodges at 3, back of 24 Dugdale Street, was the recipient



Delville Wood.

of many congratulations yesterday. I knew Albert would do something of the sort. He was a real soldier and a good fighter. He was always a good son and I think I would rather it was as it is than he should come back with some of his limbs off and be a cripple for the rest of his life.'

In November 1916, Rosetta Gill was invited to Buckingham Palace by the King. The report in the Birmingham Mail read 'A Birmingham woman, the widow of a VC hero, is to journey to Buckingham Palace next week to receive the highest distinction that bravery can win on the battlefield. The King's Birmingham guest is Mrs Gill of 2, back of Cope Street, Ladywood. The Royal call to Mrs Gill to receive the reward for her husband's gallantry came in the form of a telegram asking her if she could attend Buckingham Palace at 10.30am on 29 November. Mrs Gill has replied in the affirmative, and a warrant for her return fare will be sent to her this week. The Mail also covered her visit to the Palace and commented on her return 'Mrs Gill, who returned to Birmingham by the train reaching New Street Station at 4.35, was accompanied by Miss Daisy Burgess, a fellow employee at the General Post Office.' Mrs Gill said the King spoke most kindly and whilst he was pleased to present it to her, he was sorry that her husband had not lived to receive it. His Majesty, she added, asked her whether she had any children, and on learning that both were dead, expressed his sorrow, remarking that the children would have been a comfort to her in the grief she had sustained through the loss of her husband.

On 5th December 1916 Birmingham City Council voted to bestow another honour on Albert Gill. The Lord Mayor Neville Chamberlain proposed that 'this Council

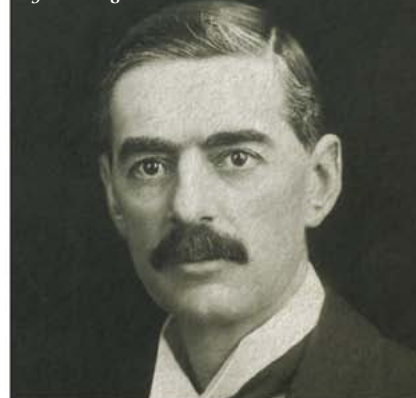
records its profound admiration of the gallantry and self-sacrifice displayed by the late Sergeant Albert Gill, V.C. a citizen of Birmingham, who gave his life for his comrades, and by his death showed a great example to others; and that a copy of the resolution be engrossed and framed and handed to Mrs Gill, his widow, with an expression of sympathy of the Council with her in her bereavement.' Albert Gill was the fourth man from Birmingham to have been decorated with the Victoria Cross but his was the first posthumous award and as such was the first man not to have received this honour in person. The Lord Mayor felt that this should not deter them from carrying on the practice of honouring the V.C. winners from the city. Rosetta Gill received the honour on 12th February 1917 and the press reported 'The Lord Mayor of Birmingham, in the Lord Mayor's Parlour, yesterday presented to Mrs Gill, the widow of Sergeant Albert Gill, V.C., formerly of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the engrossed resolution passed by the City Council expressing admiration of the sergeant's conspicuous bravery. The Lord Mayor was accompanied by the Town Clerk (Mr. Beaumont Jones), who read the terms of the resolution.'

Albert Gill was buried not far from where he fell but following the Armistice in 1918, work began on a larger cemetery where all of the graves in the Delville Wood area could be concentrated to make maintenance easier. He is buried in Plot 4, Row C, Grave 3 at the Delville Wood Cemetery. His headstone is adorned with a carving of the Victoria Cross in keeping with all those who won the award. The engraving at the base of the gravestone reads 'Peace Perfect Peace' and was added at the request of his brother Harry Gill of 62 Steward Street, Spring Hill, Birmingham.

In Birmingham itself the memory of Albert Gill is maintained by two memorials. Firstly, a memorial was erected to the workers from the Post Office Hockley Distribution Centre in the form of a bronze plaque inscribed with the names of the fallen. A photograph of Albert Gill can be found above the memorial. The second memorial is an inscription on his brother Harry's grave in Warstone Lane Cemetery. It reads 'In loving memory of my dear husband Harry Gill who died December 8th 1947 aged 69. Also, brother Sergeant Albert Gill V.C., killed in action July 27th 1916'.

Following Albert's death, Rosetta received the payment of his effects to the total of £12 and 10 shillings (worth approx. £1148 today). On 15th December 1919 she received a war gratuity of £14.00 (worth approx. £710 today.) Rosetta died in 1925 and Albert's Victoria Cross is now part of the Lord Ashcroft VC Collection held at the Imperial War Museum in London. It was purchased at auction along with his other medals on 29th March 2000 for £60,000.

Arthur Neville Chamberlain, Lord Mayor of Birmingham.





Chapter Six

Walter James

by

STUDENTS AT THE GEORGE DIXON ACADEMY



Walter Herbert James was born on the 13th November 1888 and died on the 15th August 1958; he died at the age of 69. He was born in Ladywood, Birmingham and died at St Mary Abbot's Hospital, Kensington, London. He served in the First World War, in the Worcestershire Regiment, 4th Battalion; he was a second lieutenant. Walter James spent the last months of his life living as a recluse.

Along with the Victoria Cross, Walter had also won the Military Cross, the Medal of La Solidaridad (which he was awarded in Panama), and the Croix de Guerre (which he was awarded in France).

The Military Cross is the third level military decoration awarded to officers (and since 1993) other ranks in recognition of "an act or acts of exemplary gallantry during active operations against enemy on land to all members of any rank in our Armed Forces". The Medal of La Solidaridad, was a military decoration, bestowed to members of allied countries. It was awarded to members of Allied forces during Panama's participation in World War 1. It also has 3 grades: Gold, for Commanders-in-Chief of the allied forces, Silver, for senior officers and Bronze, for other ranks.

The Croix de Guerre, in English means Cross of War, and is a military decoration of France. The Croix de Guerre was commonly bestowed on foreign military forces allied to France. It's awarded for

individuals who distinguish themselves by acts of heroism involving combat with enemy forces, and it was given out during World War 1, World War 2 and other conflicts.

Walter Herbert James also received other awards:

- 1914-15 Star
- British War Medal (1914-1920)
- Victory Medal (1914-1919) and MiD Oakleaf
- King George VI Coronation Medal (1937)
- Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal (1953)

Walter Herbert James attended a school called Smethwick Central School. In 1670 Harborne was entitled to send two boys to the Old Hospital School. By 1834 it was customary to choose them alternately from Harborne and Smethwick. Smethwick was later given three places at the school and is still entitled to send boys to it. In 1730 Smethwick children were attending a recently founded charity school at Harborne. In 1734 a charity school was established in Smethwick and by 1819 there were also two Sunday schools. Fifty-four children then attended the three schools, and the minister of Smethwick chapel considered that there was insufficient provision for the education of the poor.



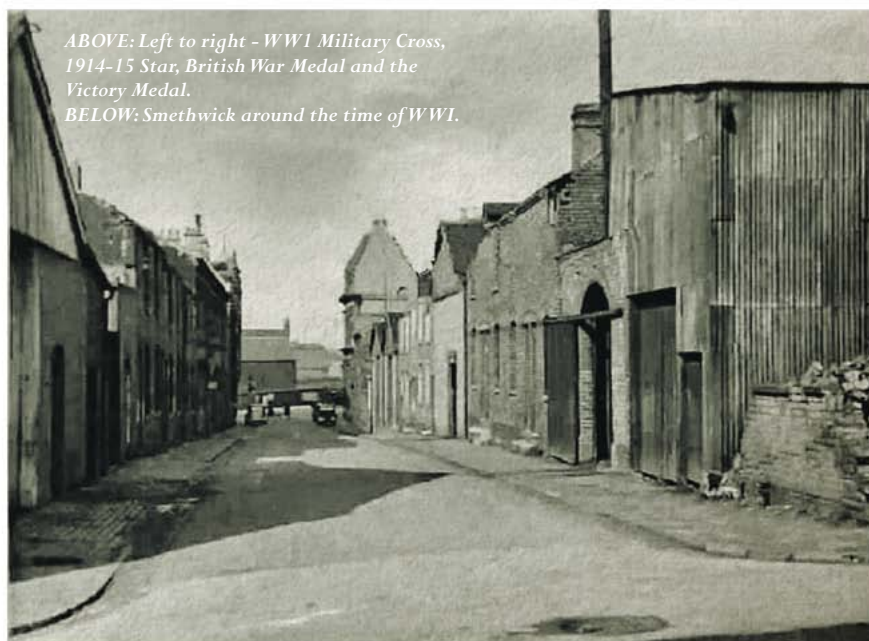
He was part of the Worcester Regiment and was fighting in the trenches alongside the 5th Royal Scots. All of the high commanding Scots had fallen, so Walter Herbert James took charge and by organising the disorganised soldiers around him, he was able to establish a strong defence. He then went back and brought forward reinforcements, but an unexpected enemy attack shattered the defence. They then fought until darkness fell. On the second of July they attacked a salient into which they had forced the enemy. On the 3rd the enemy fell.

He displayed his act of bravery on the 28th June 1915. Part of a Regiment had been killed, or wounded already, including all of the officers in charge. Completely on his own initiative, Lieutenant James gathered up a group of soldiers and led them into an intense and deadly

Walter Herbert James had taught at Brasshouse Lane School within Smethwick. At that time, when Walter was teaching there, the school was a mixed boarding school.

Brasshouse Lane Infants' School was opened in 1876 as a mixed and infants' boarding school. In 1878 the mixed department was divided into separate boys' and girls' departments. The buildings were later enlarged several times. From 1923, after another building had been added, Brasshouse Lane was a five-department school (senior boys, senior girls, junior boys, junior girls, and infants). It became a junior mixed and infants' school in 1935 (and an infants' school in 1962).

James was sent to Gallipoli in the Dardanelles in March 1915 and was injured shortly after and treated in a hospital in Malta. He returned to the area to fight again in June 1915.



ABOVE: Left to right - WW1 Military Cross, 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and the Victory Medal.
BELOW: Smethwick around the time of WWI.

Walter James

The Allies land at Gallipoli.



rifle fire. Then he again, rounded up another group of troops and charged into the fire as well.

On July 3rd, James led another group in the same kind of situation. He headed the party of bomb throwers up in a Turkish communication trench. When nearly all of his bomb throwers had been killed or wounded, he

went alone in the head of the trench and kept back the enemy until the trench was secured. Throughout the whole thing, James was exposed to a murderous fire.

James was awarded the Victoria Cross by the King, George V at Buckingham Palace on 15th January 1916.

BELOW: Over the top at Gallipoli.





Chapter Seven

Alfred Knight

by

RICHARD BOOT



In November 1917 the London Gazette published the citation from the War Office for Alfred which reads:

“For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during the operations against the enemy positions Sjt. Knight did extraordinary good work and showed exceptional bravery and initiative, when his platoon was attacking an enemy strong point and came under very heavy fire from an enemy machine gun.

He rushed through our own barrage, bayoneted the enemy gunner, and captured the enemy position single-handed. Later, twelve of the enemy with a machine gun were encountered in a shell hole. He again rushed forward by himself, bayoneted two and shot a third and caused the remainder to scatter.

Subsequently, during the attack on a fortified farm, when entangled up to his waist in mud, and seeing a number of the enemy firing on our troops, he immediately opened fire on them without waiting to extricate himself from the mud, killing six of the enemy. Again, noticing the company on his right flank being held up in their attack on another farm, Sjt. Knight collected some men and took up a position on the flank of this farm, from where he brought a heavy fire to bear on the farm as a result of which the farm was captured.

All the platoon officers of the company had become casualties before the first objective was reached, and this gallant N.C.O. took command of all the men of his own platoon, and of the platoons without officers. His energy in consolidating and reorganising was untiring. His several single-handed actions showed exceptional bravery and saved a great number of casualties in the company. They were performed under heavy machine gun and rifle fire, and without regard to personal risk, and were the direct cause of the objectives being captured”.

A clear picture emerges of a very brave and special person who was 29 at the time of this action.

It took place on 20th September 1917 at Wurst Farm Ridge in the Alberta sector, Ypres in Belgium. At the time Alfred was a Sergeant with the 2/8th (City of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Post Office Rifles).

Originally formed to protect GPO premises it is interesting to note that around 12,000 employees from across the UK signed up to join the Post Office Rifles with a further 63,000 joining other Regiments. Sadly, of those in the Post Office Rifles over half were killed (1,800) or wounded (4,500).

To accommodate the swell of recruits in the First World War, a second Post Office Rifles Battalion was formed in September 1914. They were titled the 2nd/8th Battalion, City of London Regiment.


They fought at Ypres and Passchendaele, Belgium and suffered tremendous losses.

More than half of their fighting force was lost at the Battle of Wurst Farm Ridge in September 1917 the action in which Alfred was awarded his VC.

Alfred who was the only Post Office Rifleman to win the VC was born in Ladywood in Birmingham on 24th August 1888 and attended St Philip's school in Edgbaston. He joined the Post Office and initially worked as a Clerical Assistant in the North Midland Engineering District based in Birmingham. Alfred was working for the Post Office in Nottingham from 1912 when War broke out and he enlisted in the 2nd Battalion on 26th October 1914. His unit was not posted to France until 1917 by which time he had in 1915, married Mabel Saunderson in May of that year.

The first combat situation the unit experienced was during the Battle of Bullecourt. During this action Alfred returned wounded soldiers to the trenches under severe enemy fire and for this act of bravery he was given a battlefield promotion to the rank of Sergeant.

On 3rd January 1918, Sergeant Alfred Knight was awarded the Victoria Cross by King George V in a ceremony held at Buckingham Palace. When his award was announced, Knight quickly became a local celebrity in both Birmingham and Nottingham.

G.  R.

THE

POST OFFICE RIFLES.

8TH BATTALION CITY OF LONDON REGIMENT

Are in Urgent Need of Recruits to complete Establishment of the 3rd Battalion, and an earnest appeal is therefore made to all Officers of Military age who are desirous of assisting their colleagues now fighting in Flanders.

The Object of the 3rd Battalion is to supply drafts, after having received the necessary training.

1. HOW TO ENLIST.

- (1) See your Postmaster and obtain official permission.
- (2) Having obtained permission write to Officer Commanding POST OFFICE RIFLES, 130, Bunhill Row, London, E.C.
- (3) You should not be less than 5ft. 2in. in height with an expanded chest measurement of 34in.
- (4) **Age limits - 19 to 40. 19 to 45 ex Soldiers.**

2. TERMS OF SERVICE.

- (1) Four years or duration of the War.
- (2) Foreign Service Only.
- (3) Free Discharge on termination of War or engagement.

3. Civil Posts will be kept open until return from Military Service, and such service will count for Civil Pension and for Increment of Civil Salary.

4. THE PAY OF A RIFLEMAN

is equal to full Civil Pay in the case of all Established Officers, plus Free Kit, Rations and Quarters.
 N.C.O.'s receive Extra Pay of their Rank supplemental to Civil Pay.
 Un-established Officers receive Full Army Pay and Allowances, Free Kit, Rations and Quarters.

APPROVED BY THE
POSTMASTER-GENERAL.

(Signed) A.M.O.
27/8/18.

(Signed) **J. HARVEY,**
Lieut.-Col. 1/8th Battalion City of London Regiment.
(British Expeditionary Force)

F. A. LABOUCHERE,
Lieut.-Col. 2/8th City of London Regiment.

F. OWEN,
Major 3/8th City of London Regiment.

GOD SAVE THE KING.

ABOVE: An enlistment poster to encourage postal workers to join the Post Office Rifles.

The Post Office Rifles, 8th London Regiment.



Knight served in the Post Office Rifles until the First World War ended and in 1919 was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant with the Sherwood Foresters.

When the Sherwood Foresters were then demobilized, Alfred Knight returned to his role within the Post Office.

It is said that Knight joked about press accounts of his VC action which he thought made him out to be “a man from whom the bullets

bounced”. The press was much taken by his sense of humour; one Birmingham newspaper dubbed him “the Jolly VC”.

Knight recalled being fascinated “by the pattern made all the way round me in the mud by the German bullets”. He referred to his survival as a “miracle” and added “All my kit was shot away almost as soon as we were in it. Everything went, in fact. Bullets rattled on my steel helmet - there were several significant dents and one hole in it I found later - and part

of a book was shot away in my pocket. A photograph-case and a cigarette-case probably saved my life from one bullet, which must have passed just under my arm-pit - quite close enough to be comfortable!”

After the war he was transferred to the Ministry of Labour and when he retired in 1951 he was Senior Wages Inspector in the Midlands section. He was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1951.

Alfred Knight

Alfred Knight died at home at the age of 72 in December 1960 and is buried in Oscott Catholic Cemetery Birmingham.

In 2005, Birmingham City Council named a street in his honour on the Park Central development in Ladywood, where Alfred Knight grew up.

MAIN: The terrible, battle-scarred landscape of Ypres.
BELOW RIGHT: Alfred's grave.





Chapter Eight

James Neville Marshall

by

WILL MORTON, STEFAN BUTLER AND JOSH PEARSON

from King Edward VI School for Boys, Camp Hill



James Neville Marshall was born on the 12th June 1887, to James Henry Marshall of Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, and Mary Walmsley of Southport. James was the middle child, with three sisters born before him – namely Mary Louisa, Nancy Constance and May, and a brother and sister born in the years following his birth - Dorothy and Klein. Around the time of 1892, the Marshalls move to Broad Road, Acocks Green, Solihull. At this stage, James was five years old and was about to begin his education at Wellesbourne House private school in Acocks Green.

Having excelled in Wellesbourne House, he obtained a foundation scholarship for King Edwards VI Camp Hill Grammar School for Boys, one of only four awarded each year. Perhaps because of his move to the school, the Marshall family once again move to 'Melrose' house on Clifton Road, a mile away from Camp Hill. Marshall continued to excel at school, and in 1899 aged 12, Marshall moved up a class placing him amongst 25 other boys aged from 10-14, with the average boy aged 11 $\frac{3}{4}$. The boys in his class were of mixed, but largely privileged upbringings, with fathers of the boys being registered as stockbrokers, skilled tradesmen, shopkeepers and commercial travellers. Marshall develops a reputation of being a strong swimmer and a 'handy forward' in rugby.

At this point it becomes unclear as to why Marshall left school at the age

of 15 in 1902. However he left with a favourable reputation as a well-rounded student, who excelled both academically and in sports - perhaps here one can see how such traits led to the gallant and brave soldier he was to become.

After leaving Camp Hill he went to work as a clerk at the Midlands Institute and then later in the Medical Faculty of Birmingham University arriving at the university in 1903. In the 1967 edition of the Medical Graduates Newsletter of Birmingham University, Dr Neville C Penrose wrote about Neville Marshall, describing him as "always happy and obliging" and "no less like a fire-eater could have imagined" - both would meet again in 1916. His obituary states that he left the university two years later to take up veterinary work, establishing a business in Harlow, Essex.

Marshall was definitely around Harlow in 1910 but what he was actually doing is far from clear, with him gaining experience and perhaps training in the treatment of animals particularly horses. However, it didn't lead to any formal qualifications.

Marshall in 1911 moved to a large farmhouse known as the 'Bromleys' in the parish of Latton. It was in preparation for his marriage and to facilitate his veterinary activities, in particular his work

with horses. His bride to be was Edith Taylor and they were happily married on the 20th of September 1911.

He was well liked in the Harlow community with people remembering him for his great love of sport, and active participation in the community whereby he took the Boy Scouts camping. He was also described as 'not knowing what fear was', and of being of Irish descent. He was a keen swimmer with it being referred to as his 'great love' with an assurance of a spectacular event at the gala, often involving Marshall jumping, in fancy dress, off the highest diving board. However, such joy experienced at the gala on an August bank holiday was soon to be dissipated by the outbreak of WW1 later the same year, 1914.

Everyone at the time must have known the international situation, with the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife murdered by Serbian nationals. This event and the events of the com-

ing weeks must have cast a long shadow over any activities. On the 2nd August Germany declared war on Russia and France and initiated the Schlieffen war plan, launching a massive surprise offensive into France through neutral Belgium that would, in German theory, lead to the encirclement of Paris and the quick surrender of France before German forces turned east to defeat the numerically superior Russians. However, by launching the attack though neutral Belgium, Great Britain was propelled into action to defend Belgian neutrality and entered the war against Germany on August 4th 1914. And, thus began the First World War.

Marshall like many other young British men rushed to join the armed forces, to be a part of the war effort. Many believed the war would be over by Christmas. But this was a different war. A war of static trenches, and of attrition whereby each side made little gain at the cost of horrendous losses in men and animals. A war of innovation with new weapons like tanks, airplanes, Dreadnoughts and sadly

poison gas. The war was to last over 4 years.

It has been reported that Neville attempted to join the Army Veterinary Corps at the start of the war but was unsuccessful due to being unqualified. He then made his way to Antwerp before travelling on to Malines to join the 1st Regiment of Field Artillery, which was part of the 1st Division of the Belgium Army on the 14th of September. It was whilst he was in Belgium that he was conferred by the King with the Knight of the Order of Leopold award for conspicuous bravery during the battle of Nethel. During his service with the Belgium army he was wounded three times. Unfortunately for the Belgium people Antwerp fell on 10th October with most of Belgium also being occupied. The Belgium Army, although acquitting itself well was too small to stop the Germans.

Neville was given sick leave due to injury in early 1915 returning to Harlow, after which he didn't re-join the Belgium army, instead joining the Irish Guards in December 1915.

The Irish Guards, c 1915.



James Neville Marshall

On 8th December 1915 Marshall joined the 2nd Battalion Irish Guards, a battalion despite its name being, according to Kipling, an extremely diverse group of men in both age and home place. With four VC and 406 medals in total between their establishment in 1900 and the end of the War, the Irish Guards were highly decorated. Between this date and February 1918 Marshall took posts on the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Irish Guards, switching back and forth between the two units several times throughout the years. His posting as lieutenant in the Guards saw him fighting in several areas along the Western Front, most notably in the Battle of Ypres in July 1916 – a back injury at Ypres put the lieutenant out of action for seven months during which time he received medical treatment near Banbury. As a result, Marshall avoided the bloody Somme offensive of September 1916, where heavy German machine gun fire claimed many of the Irish Guards' lives at Flers-Courcelette.

Once Marshall's injuries had recovered sufficiently he returned to France. On 30th March 1917 he re-joined the 2nd Irish Guards, though it was some time before he saw frontline action again. At this point the battalion was assisting with railway construction work. With five wounds sustained during the war thus far, Marshall's time in the trenches was quite limited, as it had been in the previous year following the significant injuries he received at Ypres. However, in May 1917 he joined Lancashire Fusiliers as Second in Command, with the rank of Major. Though he lost his role as second-in-command in the Fusiliers, he maintained his rank. Over the next year the Major's role was switched between several units: again, he served with the 2nd Battalion Irish Guards from 7th-31st April 1918. Marshall once again found himself as Second-in-Command in June 1918 with the 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment. From the battalion diary's records, it appeared that Marshall's rank as Major was not known to them, as some surprise was created by 'Lieutenant J N Marshall's appointment to the position of second-in-command'.

Marshall was renowned amongst his men for his unusually high spirits and unfailingly strong resolve to return to fight, even after the many near-crippling injuries he sustained. Though it is uncertain whether Marshall truly did receive four medals prior to the war's opening (he claimed to have won a South African medal in 1901 when he had still been studying at King Edward's school), the man without a doubt made quite an impression on the Western Front. Upon receiving the Military Cross after his actions in Ypres, the man could boast five medals and several injuries, giving him the image to his fellow servicemen of a seasoned veteran. His bravery was well known, described by one officer from the

42nd Lancashire division as an "almost reckless disregard for personal safety". From the accounts provided by some of his closest colleagues on the Western Front it is clear that Marshall was almost universally admired both as an officer and as a man. His Second-in-Command in the 16th battalion Lancashire Fusiliers stated that "I have been with the battalion but a short time, but in all my military experience I have never seen such a marvellous effect of one personality on a body of men." Such a dynamic and rallying personality was rare even on the Western Front.



James Neville Marshall died by a shot to the head on 4th November 1918, just one week before the general armistice brought the Great War to a close. Another significant figure, the famous war poet Wilfred Owen, died on the same day, whilst involved in the very same offensive as Marshall. With the 16th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers, Marshall was tasked with covering the Royal Engineers as they erected a new bridge to cross the Sambre-Oise Canal under German fire. With all other bridges destroyed and the canal seven feet deep the construction of the bridge was vital to a continued allied advance. As the bridge came under heavy machine gun fire, it was damaged and the now acting Lieutenant Colonel Marshall organised groups of men to repair the bridge. Marshall stood under heavy fire, encouraging and assisting with the repairs. Once repaired, he led the charge across the bridge directly into German fire. James Marshall was instantly killed at the crossing.

James Neville Marshall received his Victoria Cross posthumously when it was presented to his widow, Edith Marshall, on 12th April 1919 by King George V in Buckingham Palace. He is buried North-West of Ors, at the Ors Communal Cemetery. On his gravestone is written "Splendid is Death When thou fallest courageous Leading the onslaught".

Afterword

James Neville Marshall was, without a doubt, a stellar example of courage, resilience and his ability to build such strong cohesion among his troops through acts such as parachuting out of a plane in drag, displaying attributes that a leader must have in order to galvanise his men, and extract every ounce of bravery and courage from within them. Not only was he a bold and noble leader, but he was the definition of tenacious. To be struck down by injury once is unfortunate, but to be injured four times and keep

MAIN: Sambre Canal, 1918.

OPPOSITE: 1919 newspaper cutting announcing the posthumous award of a VC to Marshall.

BELOW: Marshall is buried at the Ors Communal Cemetery, north west of the town. The inscription reads "Splendid is Death When thou fallest courageous Leading the onslaught".



returning to the front is simply outstanding. Though his injuries threatened to cripple him, his resolve acted as an inspiration amongst the battalions he served with until his death. One cannot underplay Marshall's excellence in battle. His favourable characteristics were nurtured during his time at Camp Hill and contributed to his skill on the sports field. Wherever he fought Marshall made an impression on fellow soldiers, both below and above him. He died doing what he would have continued to do had he not been fatally injured, leading his men bravely from the front, with complete disregard for his own safety, and an inner urge to succeed in battle. Marshall was an attribute to the allied army, and his noble sacrifice shall never be forgotten. Few men are awarded the Victoria Cross, and I personally believe that the VC only begins to go some way to show our gratitude for his service, and our recognition of his utmost gallantry.

*"Success is not final,
failure is not fatal:
it is the courage to
continue that counts"*

~ WINSTON S. CHURCHILL



REWARDED AFTER DEATH.
Lieut. Colonel John N. Marshall, V.C.,
M.C., who was awarded the Victoria
Cross posthumously for his great heroism
at the fighting across the Oise and
Sambre Canal, beyond Catillon.





Chapter Nine

Joseph Tombs

by
RICHARD BOOT



Few people will have had such a varied a life as Joseph Harcourt Tombs nor have been involved in a military role on Land, Sea and Air. An amazing story indeed.

As outlined below Joseph spent much of his later life in Canada and I have seen reference in a Canadian document looking at his illustrious life to him actually having been born in Melbourne, Australia and also on a different date to that in UK records. Clearly at some stage too he went to school in Grantham.

I will work on the basis he was born in Birmingham on 23rd March 1887 and that he went to Australia (where his parents Frederick and Mary may well have spent some time) in 1901 to live in Hobart, Tasmania. There is reference to him travelling to South America to work on Steamers, to becoming a mercenary in Peru and to working as a dredger on the Panama Canal.

After returning to the UK and on 5th March 1912 he joined B Company, 1st Battalion, the King's (Liverpool) Regiment stationed in Warrington. Having been based for a time in Scotland the Regiment left before him and he landed in France in February 1915. Within a very short period of time he was in action and was with his comrades on 10th March when heavy casualties were incurred in a diversionary attack at Givenchy.

By the 15th May his Regiment was in action again near Rue du Bois and the Battle of Festubert with over 5,000 casualties ensued. It was here Joseph displayed his incredible bravery. Note that his citation has the date of 16th June!

The citation for his VC reads:

"No. 10073 Lance-Corporal Joseph Tombs, 1st Battalion, The King's (Liverpool Regiment). For most conspicuous gallantry near Rue du Bois, on 16th June, 1915. On his own initiative he crawled out repeatedly under a very heavy shell and machine gun fire, to bring in wounded men who were lying about 100 yards in front of our trenches. He rescued four men, one of whom he dragged back by means of a rifle sling placed round his own neck and the man's body. This man was so severely wounded that unless he had been immediately attended to he must have died."

A witness account states "Tombs looked over the parapet of the trench for a moment as though he couldn't quite make up his mind then he scaled the parapet and advanced through withering machine-gun fire to the body of the nearest wounded man whom he dragged back to the trenches. Despite a severe shrapnel wound to his stomach, Tombs made four trips through the screaming shells and chattering machine-gun fire to pick up the wounded, some of whom he carried

back on his own back or dragged to safety with his teeth”

It should be noted that Joseph was himself badly wounded in this action yet carried on regardless! These wounds were to dog him for much of his life and he had an operation in 1952 over 35 years later to remove shrapnel fragments from his stomach.

King George V invested (the newly promoted Corporal) Tombs with the Victoria Cross at Buckingham Palace on the 12th August 1915. His grandfather, Lt Col Henry Tombs of the Bengal Artillery was also awarded a Victoria Cross during the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

After recovering from his injuries Joseph was engaged in recruiting for the Army before returning to his Battalion. In 1916, Tombs trans-

ferred to the Royal Garrison Artillery where he was assigned to an anti-aircraft battery.

He was subsequently transferred to the armed Canadian Pacific Railway ship “Minnedosa” as a gunner and left the Army in March 1920.

Life in the trenches at Festubert.



In 1921 Tombs emigrated to Canada where he worked for a short period with the Canadian Pacific Railway steamship line. Tombs was then employed by the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada in Montreal from 1921 to 1939 when he was granted leave to join the Royal Canadian Air Force. He married Muriel Sylvia Gooding on 25 December 1925 and also during this time served with militia associated with the Medical Corps.

He attended several banquets for VC holders in Montreal in the late 20's, a dinner in London given by the House of Lords in November 1929 and a banquet in May 1939 held in Montreal in honour of HM King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

Tombs was already over 50 in 1939 when Aircraftsman Second Class Tombs signed up to join the Canadian Air Force Special Reserve. Reports say that he was assessed as a "short stocky fellow at 5ft 3 inches weighing 165 lbs. An excellent man with a distinguished record from the First World War. Good appearance, very polite, with good manners".

Tombs explained: "I called the Recruiting Officer and told him I wanted to enlist again. The officer told me I hadn't a chance as I was way over the age limit and that ended the conversation. Then I called a different recruiting office and asked "would you be interested in enlisting an older man with a Victoria Cross? Why certainly, let me know his name and I'll get in touch with him...you're talking to him now sir! So, I signed up and here I am at RCAF Station Trenton."

Posted initially to a training unit in Toronto his next posting in June 1940 was to RCAF Trenton where he was employed at the Central Flying School as a Disciplinarian and Drill Instructor for young aircrew. This

*LEFT: Royal Canadian Air Force recruitment poster.
BELOW: The huge RCAF facility at Trenton.*



school trained aircrew for the British Commonwealth Training Plan (BCATP) during the Second World War.

On 3 August 1941, Air Commodore HRH the Duke of Kent was conducting a tour of the facilities at RCAF Trenton and an aide to the Duke of Kent spotted the tell-tale crimson ribbon of the Victoria Cross on the uniform of Corporal Tombs. Tombs was introduced to the Duke of Kent explaining that he had received the Victoria Cross for a "bit of a thing" at Festubert, France in 1915.

RIGHT: The memorial to Joseph Tombs at his former school in Grantham.

MAIN: Hurricanes at Trenton facility.

Tombs was 'honourably released' in December 1944 as a Sergeant.

He suffered a stroke in 1964 and died on 28 June, 1966. There was a military funeral with all honours.

Joseph Tombs' Victoria Cross and campaign medals were presented to the Royal Regiment of Canada. There has always been an alliance

between the King's Regiment and the Royal Regiment of Canada and it was agreed that the Victoria Cross should be transferred between the two regiments as a means of continuing communication.





Chapter Ten

Thomas Turrall

by
RICHARD BOOT



The citation for Thomas Turrall in the London Gazette on 9th September 1916 reads:

“La Boisselle, France, 3 July 1916, Private Thomas George Turrall, 10th Bn, Worcestershire Regiment.

For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty (La Boisselle, France). During a bombing attack by a small party against the enemy the officer in charge was badly wounded, and the party having penetrated the position to a great depth was compelled eventually to retire. Private Turrall remained with the wounded officer for three hours, under continuous and very heavy fire from machine guns and bombs, and, notwithstanding that both himself and the officer were at one time completely cut off from our troops, he held to his ground with determination, and finally carried the officer into our lines after our counter-attacks had made this possible.”

Thomas George Turrall was born on 5th July 1886 (sometimes stated as 1885) in Hay Mills Birmingham. His mother registered the birth but like so many at the time was unable to sign her name. The Registrar had to make an assumption on the spelling and noted his surname as “Turrill”.

Thomas’s parents were William, a brick labourer from Coventry and Ellen who married in 1882 and his siblings were William and May. Following the death of Ellen, William Senior remarried a Louisa Slater who had children from a previous marriage. To the children from the couple’s first marriages were added their own; Violet, Rose and Lily. A large family indeed and again very common for the times. The Turralls subsequently moved to Small Heath.

Thomas attended Dixon Road School and subsequently became a painter and decorator. He married Mary Lilian Mansell at Aston in 1913 and Lilian May, was born in May 1914.

The family lived in Yardley and Turrall worked for the Council. In December 1914 he joined the 10th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment as a Private. After training the 10th transferred to France in the summer of 1915. Turrall was joined in France by his younger brother James who was with the Royal Warwick’s.

Whilst in France Turrall was told his wife was seriously ill and he was granted compassionate leave to return to England. When the leave ran out he returned to his unit and shortly after and in December 1915 he learned that Mary had died age 26.

Sadly, he was unable to have further leave to attend her funeral which must have been very distressing and his daughter was taken into the care of the family.

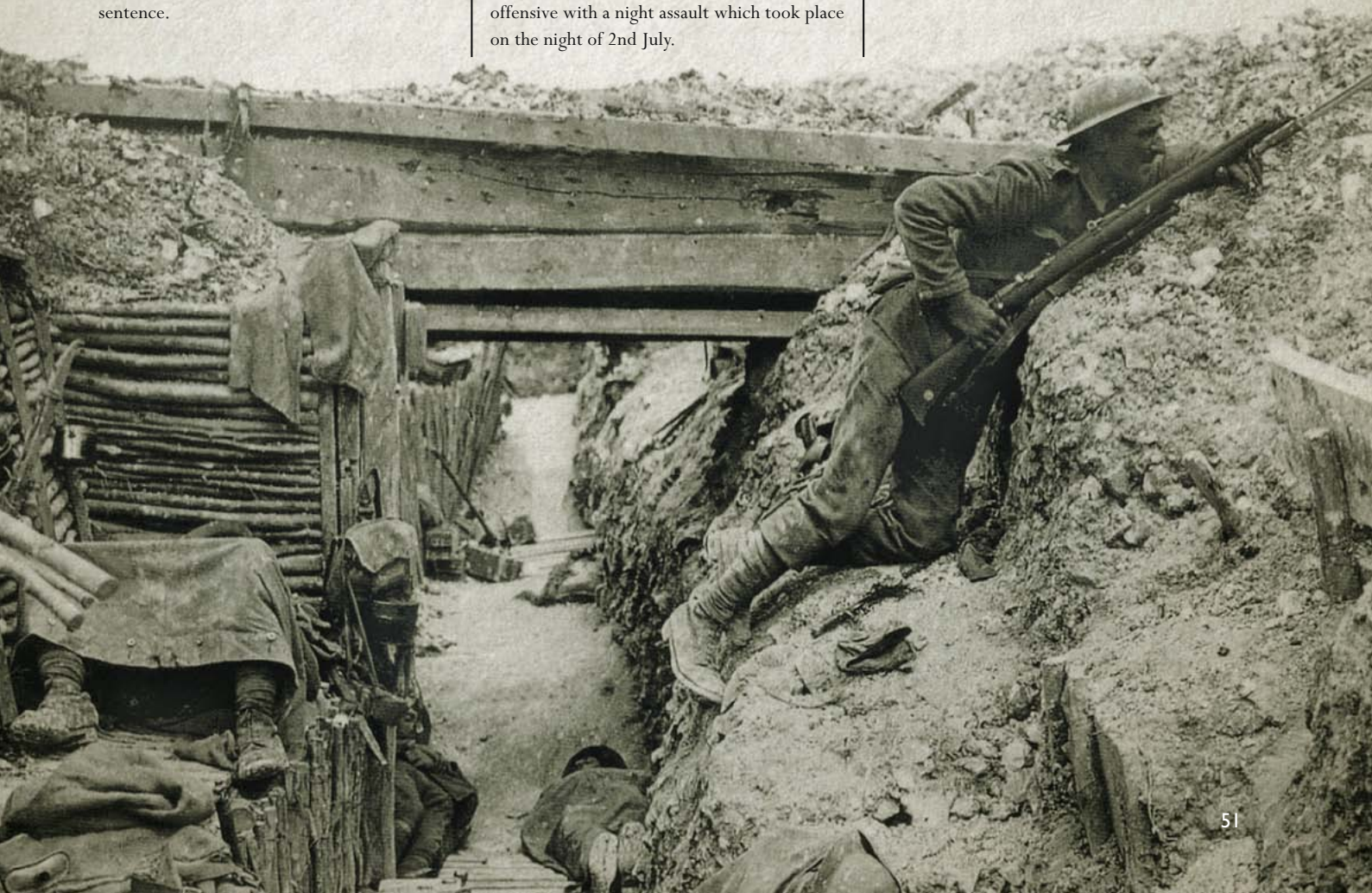
The Germans launched an offensive in early 1916 against the French Army at Verdun and to support their Allies the British 19th Division mounted a counter offensive north of the Somme. The 10th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment was part of this Division although the records appear to show Turrall was at that time in custody serving a disciplinary sentence.

He was released for Active service on the request of Lieutenant Richard William Jennings, the officer he went on to look after later in the action.

On 1st July and following eight days of continuous bombardment the British advanced. In the centre of the action fighting was around two villages, Ovillers and La Boisselle.

The first attack on La Boisselle by the 8th Division failed with heavy losses and the 19th Division was brought up to support a further offensive with a night assault which took place on the night of 2nd July.

The 10th Worcesters formed up with the companies lying down in the open ground waiting for the order to attack. The village was heavily defended by the Germans and under heavy fire the night attack descended into hand to hand combat in the network of dugouts and trenches. Heavy losses were sustained during this action. Commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel George Arthur Royston-Piggott, Captain H.A. Gillum-Webb, the Adjutant and all the senior officers were all killed or wounded. The village was however secured by the morning of the 3rd with most Germans killed or captured.





Lieutenant Richard William Jennings who had commanded a Battalion Grenade Squad led one of a number of raiding parties which then advanced out of the village. Thomas who was known to Jennings had been part of the Battalion Grenade Squad.

During the morning the raiding party came under fire from machine guns and Thomas who had dropped to the ground when the firing started was the only one of the group to remain uninjured. All others were killed other than Lieutenant Jennings who had a severe wound which had shattered his leg. Thomas pulled Jennings into a shell hole for shelter and bandaged his leg with one of his puttees. He used his entrenching tool as a splint. As this aid was being administered they were bombed by the Germans. Turrall shot two of them dead and the others retired.

During a counter-attack on the village German infantry advanced towards the shell hole occupied by the two men. Jennings had at this time fainted and Thomas was forced to feign death albeit he was prodded by German bayonets.

Once darkness arrived Thomas who had looked after Jennings throughout the day made his way back to the British lines. He carried an unconscious Jennings on his back over the shell marked landscape and at times under fire.

Notwithstanding Turrall's supreme efforts Jennings died on an operating table in the field hospital. He had however dictated an account of his bravery.

The Regiment notes that Thomas wrote to Jennings' mother giving an account of his last hours:

"I hope you will not think me taking a liberty writing to you in this manner but I feel it my duty to do so, as I was with him the whole time and I think you would like to hear the part we played. I must first of all congratulate you in possessing such a plucky son, for he led our company with unflinching pluck that we were not long in taking the enemy's front line.

I might say that when we reached it we came across a dugout held by the Huns. Here your son remarked: "Give me a bomb I will clear them out". He did so. From there we went on to the second line. This proved to be an easy thing for we did not find anyone there, so that made us more enterprising. We were not long before we were in the third line. This is, I am sorry to say, the starting of our hard times, for it was here he received his first wound; a rifle shot in the muscle of the left arm.

Nothing daunted him. He kept on until he received another wound, a bomb this time which caught him in the right thigh. I might say that it was from this time that we found ourselves practically cut off from the remainder of the battalion. It was here that a brother officer advised your son to seek medical aid, but he very pluckily refused, although had he chosen to act as advised I am afraid he could not have done so as we two were now completely cut off. It was advisable to get what cover we could. So, we retired to a shell hole some distance in the rear.

In doing so your son, I am sorry to say, received two more wounds, one in the right knee, and the other shattered his left leg a little below the knee. As we could get no further I did all I could for him, using my entrenching tool handle and bayonet scabbard as splints, and my puttees as bandages. It is hard to tell you that we were obliged to remain like this for something like three and a half to four hours before I at last carried him in.

How he bore his pain was surprising, for he continually chatted and smoked with me until I at last managed to get him to the dressing station. It was here that we parted, but not without him thanking me for the part I played. I am sure in the success of the Worcesters at (blanked by censor) your son played a very prominent part although badly handicapped by his wounds.

TOP LEFT: A drawing of Turrall defending the shell hole, by Gilbert Holiday.

BELOW: Turrall at the Palace, receiving his Victoria Cross.



Private T. G. Turrall, Worcester Regiment, one of the four Birmingham V.C.s, was decorated by the King on Saturday. Private Turrall, with his father and mother, carries his baby from Buckingham Palace.

Hoping this little but thrilling account will afford you some small consolation in your great loss and at the same time sending mine and all his comrades' sympathy".

Mrs Jennings wrote to Turrall's mother:

"Will you let me know when your brave son is in England? I will go anywhere in England to see him and give him some special thing in memory of Lieutenant Jennings. Your son must be a hero and so strong, for my son was over six feet".

Turrall's VC was gazetted on 9th September 1916 and it was reported that he was pulled out of the lines to meet King George V who was visiting the troops in France. Turrall met the King again when he formally received his VC in January 1917 at Buckingham Palace.

Thomas returned to active service with the Worcesters and was demobilised in April 1919. At that stage he had fought at Arras, Loos, St Quentin, La Bassee and Cambrai; indeed, right up to the Armistice.

After all of which he returned to his job as a painter and decorator. You can only wonder how someone would be able to adjust to that change!

His home city of Birmingham welcomed back their hero and amongst the events a testimonial football match was played for Thomas at Birmingham City's St Andrews ground on 10th May 1919.

Thomas remarried, this time to Daisy May Davis in 1920 and that same year attended Buckingham Palace at a reception for recipients of the

Victoria Cross. Present were King George V and Queen Mary. Over the years Turrall attended many events and receptions for VC winners including one at the Council House in Birmingham in 1934 where, for HRH The Prince of Wales he formed the Honour Guard with other VC winners; Arthur Vickers (see Chapter 11), Henry Tandy from Leamington and George Onions from Wolverhampton.

In 1956 the drawing shown in this chapter by Gilbert Holiday of Turrall defending the shell hole against the Germans was presented to the Regiment.

Thomas was also one of the many holders of the VC who were on parade in Hyde Park on 26th June 1956 for the centenary of the Victoria Cross and was present when HM Queen Elizabeth held a Garden Party in the grounds of Buckingham Palace on 17th July 1962 for holders of the VC.

In that same year it is perhaps sad in some respects to note that he sold his VC medal group to the Worcestershire Regiment for £500 to eke out his pension for himself and wife Daisy.

Thomas lived in the Hall Green area until his death aged 78 on 21st February 1964 in Selly Oak Hospital.

By all accounts, well liked and respected, popular and "a character". But clearly a very special man who put himself in harm's way to care for a young subaltern and get him back to safety.

Truly remarkable!





Chapter Eleven

Arthur Vickers

by
SUSAN TRANTER



Arthur Vickers was born on the 2nd February 1882 in 7 Court, Woodcock Street Aston. This was a poor and overcrowded working class district of Birmingham.

His father, John, was a brass strip caster and his mother was Amy nee Kennedy. John and Amy married on 4th April 1874 at St Laurence Church, Birmingham, Warwickshire. Arthur had six siblings, with three older brothers, a younger brother and two younger sisters.

He was small of stature, was thought to be no more than 5 feet 2 inches tall and weighed less than eight stone but was known in the neighbourhood as a "good fellow".

He became known as Midge or Titch to family, friends and comrades. He was also referred to as 'the Midget VC', after his award. He attended a local school in Dartmouth Street where he also lived along with his siblings. Leaving school, he started work at a local factory where he became a member of the firm's football team and an enthusiastic and well regarded amateur boxer.

'Go it little 'un" was heard from the crowd at Kyrle Hall in Gosta Green.

He joined the army aged 20 years in 1902 as a private in the 6th

Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment and served for six years. During this time, a keen sportsman he won a medal with the Regimental football team.

Arthur was working at Ready & Son a firm of brass founders in Birmingham at the outbreak of war and sought to re-join. Because of his height he tried 6 times at different recruiting offices to enlist until eventually he was accepted in the 2nd Battalion Warwickshire Regiment at the Curzon Street office. He was sent to France on the 4th May 1915.

Five months later on the 25th September 1915 during an attack on the German defences at Hulloch Arthur earned his Victoria Cross.

His citation reads: On 25 September 1915, during the Battle of Loos the 2nd Battalion attacked at 6.30am in the morning. In the face of terrific fire, it reached the front line of trenches to find that the wire was not cut. Private Vickers, on his own initiative and with the utmost bravery ran forward in front of his Company and standing up in broad daylight under heavy fire, cut two gaps in the wire. His gallant action contributed largely to the success of the assault.

As described by those around him although coming under heavy fire from the enemy Arthur left the trenches and ran up to the wires that

separated the forces. It was daylight but he stood to cut the wires and let the troops through. He came under heavy fire but continued whilst all around him his comrades fell, dead or wounded.

His battalion paid a heavy price and many of Arthur's comrades were killed, wounded or Missing in Action during the battle. By midnight on the 25th the Battalion consisted of only 5 officers and 140 men out of a possible 523!

Arthur returned home to Birmingham on leave to a hero's welcome from his family

and friends. Whilst home he attended many functions where everyone wanted to meet him and hear his story. So popular was he that it is said he only spent one day with his family before having to return to the front. Everywhere he went he was feted. He was much in demand as an advert for recruitment to the army and was held up as an example of patriotic valour by the establishment who tried to persuade him to become a permanent recruitment officer.

At this time Lord Mayor, Neville Chamberlain moved this resolution; "This Council, having heard with deep satisfaction that the

Victoria Cross, the highest military distinction, has been conferred upon two citizens of Birmingham, resolves to express to Lieutenant James VC, the 4th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment of Poplar Avenue and Lance-Corporal Vickers VC, 2nd Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment of Park Road, Aston, its profound admiration of the gallantry which has earned for them and for their native town so great an honour"

BELOW: Injured soldiers at the Battle of Loos.



Arthur Vickers

Barbed wire defences at Loos.





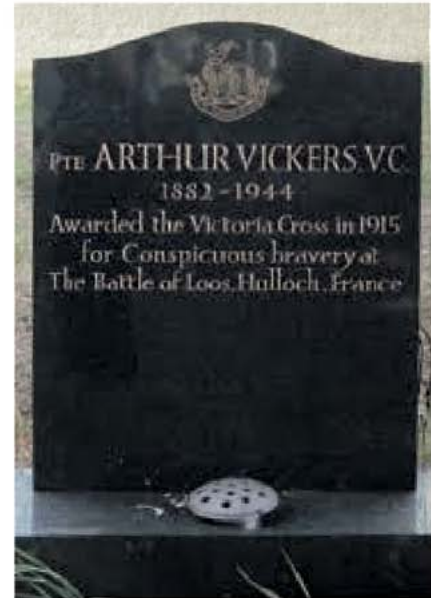
Arthur however returned to the front to re-join his regiment on the 6th December 1915 where he was promoted to Sergeant. He remained in the army until the end of the war.

On the 4th March 1916 Arthur Vickers received his Victoria Cross from King George V at Buckingham Palace. He returned to the palace in June 1920 where a garden party was held for recipients of the VC.

In addition to the Victoria Cross medal, which is held by the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum (Royal Warwickshire), he was awarded the 1914/15 Star, The British War Medal 1914-1918, The Victory Medal, The King George V1 Coronation Medal and was presented with the Croix De Guerre (avec palm) by the French Government.

Arthur was also chosen as one of those to form the Honor Guard at the burial of The Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey in November 1920.

LEFT: Arthur receives his Victoria Cross from King George V at Buckingham Palace.
BELOW: The plaque on the site at the Junction Six Industrial Park, Witton, Birmingham where Arthur formerly worked whilst with GEC.
RIGHT: Arthur's headstone, installed in 2000.



In April 1922 Arthur married a local girl, Lily Price. They had only one child, a boy who died in infancy.

During the years between wars Arthur enjoyed his celebrity, very often to be found in Music Halls and concerts in and around Birmingham, where he was bought on to the stage and applauded by the audiences. He often was the guest of honour at dinners and gave speeches to local dignities.

During the second world war he served in the local Home Guard but became ill with tuberculosis and died in July 1944 aged 62 years.

Arthur Vickers was originally buried in an unmarked grave where he lay for 56 years. It was only after an inspection of cemetery records in 1997 that his resting place was discovered and after a 3 year campaign by his family he was given a new headstone (as shown) in 2000.





Chapter Twelve

Alfred Wilcox

by
PAUL FINNEGAN

Alfred Wilcox was born on 16th December 1884 in Aston, Birmingham, the seventh child and fourth son of William and Sarah Wilcox nee Walker. Contemporary accounts from 1918 state that he was born in Tower Road, Aston but his birth certificate shows he was actually born in Wilton Street, Aston only moving to Tower Road later in life. William was born in Birmingham in 1852 the son of John Wilcox, a brass founder and Sarah was also born in Birmingham, the daughter of Benjamin Walker who was employed in the Birmingham gun trade. William and Sarah married in 1872 and by the time Alfred was born they had already had Sarah in 1873, John in 1875, Benjamin in 1877, Flora in 1879, Edith in 1881 and Walter in 1883. By 1891 they had added two more children, Selina in 1887 and Bernard in 1889 and the family were living at number 8, Court 23 Clifton Road in Aston, just a few streets away from Aston Park. The smells from the nearby Aston Manor Brewery and later on the HP Sauce factory and Samson's Vinegar works would have been familiar to the family. The family had moved to Tower Road in Aston by 1901, William working as a Gold Jeweller and had been followed into the trade by his children Edith and Alfred. Four more children had been added to the family, Ernest in 1892, Leonard in 1894, Lily in 1896 and Flora in 1899.

Alfred had been educated at Burlington Street School and after leaving found employment as a diamond mounter with the jewellery firm E

Durban and Co of Frederick Street, Aston. He left Birmingham in 1906 and moved to London. In 1911 he is lodging with the James family who also came from Aston at 57 Ferndale Road in the West Ham area of London and both Alfred and Albert James are working as diamond mounters. Prior to this Alfred joined the 1st Royal Warwickshire Volunteer battalion in 1902, serving four years as a territorial in Birmingham before moving to Liverpool where he served a further three years, rising to the rank of Corporal and retiring from the Army in 1909.

In 1910 Alfred's mother Sarah died, followed in 1912 by his father William. On 6th September 1913 Alfred married Ellen Louisa Clarke at St John's Church in Perry Barr and their first child, Doris was born on 10th September 1914, just over a month after Britain declared war on Germany. The family home at this time was 86 Little Green Lane, Small Heath. Despite being a pre-war Territorial Alfred was neither recalled to the colours nor volunteered in the first waves of patriotism that gripped the country in the first few weeks of the war. On 25th March 1915 however Alfred enlisted with the Royal Bucks Hussars but was later dismounted and attached to 2/4th Battalion of the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Despite joining up in 1915, Alfred did not move abroad until December 1917 when he joined up with 2/4 Ox and Bucks who were holding the line west of La Vacquerie in trenches that made up the former German defensive position known as the Hindenberg Line.



The 2/4 Ox and Bucks were attached to 184th Brigade part of the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division and in late November 1917 they had taken part in the Battle of Cambrai. This was a significant battle as it was the first time the British had used massed tanks in an assault. On 30th November the Germans counter attacked in an attempt to regain the lost ground and succeeded in driving the British lines back several miles over ground recently won. The 184th Brigade were relieved by the 183rd Brigade on 7th September and Alfred and his comrades were to spend Christmas 1917 in the French town of Suzanne.

On the night of 18/19 March 1918 the Battalion returned to the front line and on 21st March 1918 the great German spring offensive began. The Kaiserslacht (Kaiser's Battle) as it was known by the Germans was an attempt to break the allied lines using troops released from the Eastern Front following the treaty made with Russia after the overthrow of the Tsar. This was to be achieved before the American Forces, which had joined the war in

1917, could become effective on the Western Front. By 22nd March 1918 it was reported that the enemy had broken the British lines and the British Army was now in retreat. In April the Battalion fought many actions in the Lys area of France and the attempt to stem the German advance continued. By late April 1918 the German assault had stalled as their lines of communication became too stretched and once again a stalemate existed. By August 1918, refreshed by over one million American troops, the allies began a renewed assault on the German lines.

On 10th September 1918, Alfred's battalion made their headquarters at the old dressing station at Laventie, south west of Armentieres. It is reported that on 12th September 'at a few hours' notice and in weather calculated to make any operation a fiasco, the Battalion attacked a Junction Post, a grass-bound breastwork where the enemy was offering stubborn resistance.' It was during this engagement that Alfred Wilcox was to perform the actions that would earn him the Victoria Cross.

The award of the Victoria Cross to Alfred Wilcox was formally announced in the supplement to the London Gazette on 15th November 1918. The citation reads; 'For most conspicuous bravery and initiative in attack when his company was held up by heavy and persistent machine-gun fire at close range. On his own initiative, with four men he rushed ahead to the nearest enemy gun, bombed it, killed the gunner and put the gun out of action. Being then attacked by an enemy bombing party, Cpl. Wilcox picked up enemy bombs and led his party against the next gun, finally capturing and destroying it. Although left with only one man, he continued bombing and captured a third gun. He again bombed up the trench, captured a fourth gun, and then rejoined his platoon.

Cpl. Wilcox displayed in this series of successful individual enterprises exceptional valour, judgement, and initiative. News of the award was reported in Birmingham in both the Birmingham Daily Post and the Birmingham Mail on 16th November 1918, the Mail giving details of his exploits after the action which earned him the VC; 'Since then he has been in further severe fighting, and only a week or ten days ago he was severely wounded, two machine-gun bullets entering his ankle and four entering his leg. He considers that he saved himself from being riddled with bullets by, despite excruciating pain, hopping along on his sound leg towards the German gunner, who did not wait to be bayoneted but abandoned his gun. He was returned to England at once and is now lying in a hospital in Sunderland. It was later reported that he was actually carried to the dressing station by eight German prisoners.

Whilst recovering in Sunderland Alfred became quite the local celebrity with a party being thrown in his honour. The local press reported 'a gathering was held at the War Hospital in his



honour. The gathering was a supper given by Dr Henegan to the whole of the ward in which Corporal Wilcox is.

The Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Cllr David Brooks reported the award of Alfred's VC, which at the time was the eighth to a Birmingham man, to the City Council and in keeping with the honour bestowed on previous Birmingham VC winners proposed 'the recording of the profound admiration of the Council of the heroism which earned for Corporal Wilcox and his native city so great an honour, and that a copy of the resolution be engrossed and framed and handed to him.' Alderman (Neville) Chamberlain who seconded the motion remarked incorrectly as it turned out 'that might be the last VC they would hear of in connection with the Great War.'

Alfred was finally discharged from hospital for 12 days' leave on 19th December 1918 arriving at New Street Station and met by his wife and daughter. It was reported that his homecoming was not generally known and as such there was no demonstration on the platform. His arrival was covered in the local press and he was quoted as saying his discharge was delayed by an attack of influenza. He anticipated that he would make a full recovery from his wounds. He also alluded to a further action he had been involved in before being wounded. He was on

patrol in a cornfield with an officer and two men. They turned around and were surprised to find close behind them a dozen "Jerries" who had followed their track. They had nothing to do but to sling a bomb and make a dash for their wire, reaching safety just in the nick of time.

At the same time that Alfred was arriving back in his home town, his adoptive town in London was trying to claim him as one of their own. News of the award of his VC was recorded in the local press and announced that a public presentation was being arranged in Leytonstone. It states that whilst in Leytonstone he lived with his wife's parents at Dyers Hall Road and was hoping to return there as soon as a house of their own became available.

Alfred Wilcox was discharged from the Army on 2nd May 1919 and on 26th November 1919 was presented with his VC by King George V at Buckingham Palace. On 26th June 1920 he was to return to the Palace as one of three hundred and ten men attending an afternoon party given by the King and Queen in honour of all those who were awarded the VC in campaigns from the Indian Mutiny to the Russian Civil Wars of 1919. Also, in attendance was Private Arthur Vickers a fellow Aston man who had won his VC in 1915. On 11th November 1920, the ceremony took place at Westminster Abbey to bury the 'Unknown Warrior' and an

honour guard made up of VC winners lined the Abbey as the coffin arrived. Alfred Wilcox was not one of those who made up the guard. It is not clear why he wasn't there but one possible explanation is that space was at a premium and those chosen were by ballot.

In 1920 Alfred and wife Ellen were still living at 86 Little Green Lane and in 1921 their third child, a boy they named Douglas was born. In the years that followed Alfred attended many civic functions including the stone laying ceremony for the Birmingham Hall of Memory on 12th June 1923 along with fellow VC recipient Arthur Vickers, the event being reported in the local press 'The Prince then quitted the platform and moved down the avenue of the Guard of Honour. Here he descried two VC men, Lieutenant (formerly) Corporal A Wilcox of the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry and Corporal Vickers of 8th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Wilcox was warmly congratulated by the Prince who was interested in details of his war service. From here the Royal Party moved on to Handsworth Park where ex-servicemen had paraded; 'His Royal Highness then inspected the large number of ex-servicemen consisting of 1500 members of the British Legion. Included in them were two VCs, Corporal Wilcox and Lance-Corporal Vickers. At this time Alfred had joined the recently formed British Legion (later The Royal British Legion) a charitable organisation created in 1921 in the wake of the Great War to support the ex-service community. He went on to become President of the Birmingham County Branch and in this role he was to be present at the opening of the Birmingham to Wolverhampton Road on 2nd November 1927 by the Prince of Wales, an event captured on newsreel and reported in the press;

'A large group of ex-Servicemen and women had also been assembled, representing about eighteen of the Birmingham branches of the British Legion and also a number of Smethwick branches. The Prince walked along the lines and shook hands with several of the men. The party with the Prince included Corporal Wilcox VC (president of the Birmingham County Council British Legion) .

On Saturday 9th November 1929 a VC Reunion Dinner was held in the Royal Gallery of the House of Lords. The Prince of Wales was guest of honour and Alfred Wilcox was sat at table two, seat number sixty-seven, with CSM John Williams to one side of him and Captain Frederick Booth the other. The day following this a special performance of the play 'Journey's End' was staged at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London in honour of the VC recipients. It was reported that several of the attendees signed a copy of the programme, one of the signatories being Alfred Wilcox .

During the 1930s Alfred Wilcox moved away from Birmingham but kept his association with the British Legion, becoming President of the Twickenham Branch. On 30th October 1938 Alfred attended the Ypres Memorial Service at Horse Guards Parade and as part of the ceremony he was chosen to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. In 1939 he resigned his position as Branch President and moved back to Birmingham .

An undated newspaper article entitled 'Mine Host VC' sheds light on what Alfred did when he returned to Birmingham. The article states 'Moseley residents have welcomed into their midst one of Birmingham's heroes of the last war, Lance-Corporal Alfred Wilcox VC., who has recently become 'mine host' at the Trafalgar Hotel.' Although the article is undated it gives the ages of his sons as nineteen and twenty-five respectively which would date the article c.1940. It would appear that his wife Ellen did not return to Birmingham with him as the 1945 Electoral Roll has him





ABOVE: *Alfred Wilcox at the time he was awarded his VC.*

BELOW RIGHT: *Alfred's headstone at St Peter and St Paul's Church, Aston.*

living at the Trafalgar Hotel with John and Lily Lloyd. Whilst no longer the Trafalgar Hotel, the premises in Trafalgar Road Moseley still stands to this day and is still a drinking venue. In 1998 following a refurbishment it was renamed the Patrick Kavanagh.

In 1946 Alfred moved on the run the Old Engine pub in Park Road, Hockley leaving there in 1950 to take over what was to be his last pub, The Prince Arthur in Arthur Street, Small Heath. Alfred was later recalled in the letters page of the Birmingham Evening Mail 'At first we did not know he was a war hero. Someone spotted the VC after his name over the pub door.' His nephew, John Wilcox when speaking to the Daily Mirror shed light on a different side of Alfred's character, 'Later during the Second World War he overheard a sailor imitating King George VI's stammer. Alf vaulted over the bar and knocked him out with one blow'.

The electoral roll for 1952 has Alfred living in Arthur Street with his son Douglas and Douglas' wife Doreen. It was at The Prince Arthur on 30th March 1954 that Alfred died of coronary thrombosis. His death was reported in the Birmingham Mail; 'A VC of the First World War died at his home, the Prince Arthur licensed house, Arthur Street, Small Heath today. He was Mr Alfred Wilcox (aged 69) since 1940 a licensee, at one time of the Trafalgar Hotel, Moseley and in recent years of the Prince Arthur public house from which he intended to retire at the end of this year. A man who was raised within earshot of the roar of Villa Park, home of Aston Villa Football Club, ended his days within earshot of the roar of St Andrews, home of Birmingham City.

Alfred's funeral took place on 3rd April 1954 at St Peter and St Paul's Church, Aston. Ironically unlike his comrades who had died in battle and now lay in well-maintained cemeteries beneath a Portland stone headstone, Alfred Wilcox VC was buried in an unmarked grave. In later years, his nephew, John Wilcox began a campaign to locate Alfred's grave. He had attended the funeral and remembered that he was buried not far from his own father, Alfred's brother Leonard. Finally, on 12th September 2006, eighty-eight years from the day when Alfred won his VC, a memorial was erected in the churchyard to his memory. It reads; 'For Valour. Near this site lies Alfred Wilcox 1884-1954, awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery in France, 12 Sept 1918.' The memorial was paid for by the Wilcox family.

Alfred's Victoria Cross along with his other medals was sold at auction in 1999 by Spink of London for £48,000. It now forms part of the Lord Ashcroft VC collection housed at the Imperial War Museum in London.

An interesting yet remarkable sidebar to the Alfred Wilcox story is the fate of his brothers who also joined the call to arms to fight in the Great War. Their service is alluded to in a press article from 1918, which states 'Three brothers are in the South Staffords and one in the City Battalion of the Warwicks. The story was investigated in later years by the Daily Mirror under the heading 'A Real Band of Brothers.' Whilst the article incorrectly states that their mother Sarah waved them all off (she died in 1910) it does state that six of Alfred's brothers served in the war and all of them returned. Leonard served as a sergeant with the South Staffords, as did Bernard who was also to win the Military Medal. Ernest became a Regimental Sergeant Major who won the Distinguished Conduct Medal. John, Benjamin and Walter also served.



*A detail of the painting 'Battle Of The Somme',
by artist J.P. Beadle.*





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