

## Sidney's War



Sidney Ablett was twenty (born 4<sup>th</sup> March 1895) when he went to war and fought with the King's Royal Rifles (Service Number 71760). He came from a large family as he was the sixth of Alfred and Ellen Ablett's twelve (surviving) children. Sidney was born in Haddenham and his father supported his family by working from home as a Prudential insurance agent. The family were Methodists, and Sidney was baptised at Haddenham Methodist Chapel on 13<sup>th</sup> February 1896. Shortly after this the family moved into West Fen Road, Ely, where Sidney was sent to Silver Street Infants School on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1898.

After school Sidney became an apprentice in the local Co-operative Stores, before volunteering at the outbreak of the War.

Sidney reached France on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1915. Here are some of his letters home which were shared with the readers of the Ely Standard (dates are dates of publication):

### 8<sup>th</sup> October 1915

"We have had four days rest from the trenches but are back in them now. No doubt you read about the charge on Saturday last. Well I am pleased to say I was not in it. We happened to be out of the trenches when that came off....We have been giving the Germans socks lately. I think they will soon pack up as they begin to realise they are beaten. I killed one myself last Saturday week. It was during the night, I looked over the trench and saw a flash from a rifle about fifty yards in front of our trench, so I took careful aim and let drive at him.... soon as I knew I had hit him I pumped three more shots at him.... he soon gave over shouting. He turns out to be a German sniper.... The next night eight of us were out putting barbed wire between our trenches and theirs and when the Germans saw us they put up a couple of Maxim guns on us. We had to lie flat on our backs until they gave over and then crawl back into our trench. Thank God none of us were hit."

### 29<sup>th</sup> October 1915

"We are out of the trenches for a rest once again, and I think we deserve it too, after going through what we did in the first lot of trenches. We stood knee deep in water, and we had to work night and day to drain, and we did not know what it was to get a sleep. We were only 200 yards from the Germans and, my word, their snipers were hot! You had only got to put your head above the parapet for two seconds and you could consider yourself a dead man. Several of our chaps got hit through the head. The day before we came out they bombarded us rather severely for about an hour, but our casualties were exceedingly light. A shell burst five yards from a party of us, and completely buried two of us, and I really thought my time had come. All that we could do was to crouch down in the trenches and trust to Providence.... It was a miracle how we all escaped. We are resting now in wooden huts behind the firing line. I don't know how long we are here for, I'm afraid it's too good to last."

### **3<sup>rd</sup> December 1915**

Letter dated 26<sup>th</sup> November; "I am pleased to say I am quite alright again now, being no longer under the doctor. We go into the trenches again tonight, after having four days in reserve. You cannot imagine what a state the trenches are in now. We are over our knees in water in every part of the trench. We have got boots which come right up to our hips, but when you get standing in water for hours at a time it goes right through them and you cannot feel your feet. Several of our chaps have already fallen victim to frostbitten feet, and our casualties have been rather heavy, 60 being killed and wounded in three days. We went up to the firing line on a working party last Tuesday night, and, being moonlight, the Germans must have spotted us, as they started shelling us. They had got the range to a nicety, and you should have seen us scatter. I jumped down into an old communications trench, and was waist deep in water, but that was better than risking a bit of shrapnel at any rate. They killed one and wounded several men, so you see I have missed it once again. I think I must be one of the lucky ones. It is snowing very hard here this morning, I begin to feel the pinch now, and I shall be very glad indeed when I see old England again."

### **7<sup>th</sup> January 1916**

It is not surprising, given the contents of the letter above, that Sidney was invalided home at Christmas 1915 with frostbite. After his recovery he spent some time at Sheerness and was then sent to Salonica. The newspaper commented he "has had some terrible experiences having had comrades shot down both right and left of him." Sidney served with both the 7<sup>th</sup> and then the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the King's Royal Rifles – this may have been the point at which he was transferred between them, as the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been sent to Salonica in November 1915. Several engagements took place here against the Bulgarian Army including the capture of Karajakois, the capture of Yenikoi, the battle of Tumbitza Farm and the capture of Homondos.

Sidney was at some point made a Lance Corporal.

On **29<sup>th</sup> April 1918** Sidney was admitted to hospital with "pyrexia (fever) of unknown origin". At this stage he had served for three years and five months, of which two years and two months were actually in the field. He was then in C Company of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion, which meant he had recently returned to France.

Sidney married Elsie May Rich (who was 5 years his senior) late in 1918 at Prittlewell (a borough of Southend in Essex), where the family ran a drapery business in the Westcliff area. Here Sons Sidney (1920), Dennis (1921), Brian (1923 – died as a baby), and Ivor (1925) were born. Sidney later became a commercial traveller and moved the family to Wisbech. In 1939 he and Elsie can be found living there at the house they had named "Westcliff" in Elizabeth Terrace. They finally retired to Surrey where Sidney died in 1967 and Elsie in 1980.

*Our thanks to Sidney's relative Adam Edwards for sharing further news of Sidney Ablett:*

*"I am aware that the family at the time were very active Methodists, as Sidney's father Alfred was regularly preaching on the Ely and Cambridge circuit, with various daughters in tow. Sid was a member of the City of Ely military Band prior to the war, apparently a French horn player, but went on to be a bugler for a while in the KRRC.*

*I know that Sidney spent only a short while in Salonica as he contracted malaria, which took him on a tour of hospitals in Malta and then England (including the 1st Eastern at Cambridge). He spent a long time recovering and relapsing (one hospital had Edith Cavell's sister as matron), before return to duty in time to be posted to France, very briefly in Italy then back to France just in time for the Hindenberg offensive (the March Stunt), where he got slightly injured in a finger by a bullet crossing a machine gun's field of fire trying to get help for his colonel, who had been injured. He got sent back to the UK (it is unclear whether because of this, or because of fever - there's a lot of references to Trench fever) and continued with Instructor postings, where he successively got clobbered by someone dropping a rifle on his head while asleep, and also slicing his hand open on a bayonet two weeks before his wedding to Elsie.*

*Sidney's brothers were Albert (Bert), Fred, and Reg, who all fought in the War. We believe at least one of the sisters (probably Winny) was a VAD, as was Elsie Rich - they met during Sid's posting to Westcliff. We know that Alfred, his dad, received call up papers towards the end of the war, but it looks like it didn't proceed far due to the end of hostilities."*