

Lance Corporal James WARDROPPER

Service number 820000
Royal Corps of Signals
17 Line of Communication Signals
Killed in action on 23 February 1945, aged 32

James was born in Middlesbrough. Before the war he was in the Royal Artillery for six years. He married in Birmingham in March 1939 and the newlyweds moved to Wells. James was in the reserves and was called up when the war started. He was transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals. In the autumn of 1944, he went to Europe, and was in Antwerp in Belgium when he was killed by a V-1 or V-2 missile.



Port of Antwerp: Unloading ships of the first convoy to arrive

Photograph by Hampton, J A (Lt) © IWM A 26598

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205158169>

James' birth was registered in Middlesbrough, Yorkshire, during the second quarter of 1912. His parents were James Wardropper and Sarah née Deffew. A year earlier, in April 1911, James' father was a hall porter who still lived with his parents at 23, Holly Street, Felling, County Durham; later that year he married Sarah Deffew. In 1915, James' sister Vera was born.

James' father died in 1930. In 1932, James enlisted in the Royal Artillery in Middlesbrough. Six years later, on 14 May 1938, his enlistment ended and he became a civilian again, but remained in the Army Reserve.

On 4 March 1939, James married Linda Crucefix, at St John's Church, Sparkhill, in Birmingham. The reception was held at Linda's mother's home at 55, Clarence Road, Sparkhill. Afterwards the couple "left for their new home at Wells" (*Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser*, 11 March 1939).

It is possible that James was already living and working in Wells but we do not know. Presumably, he had a job to come to.

They did not spend long in their new home in Wells. With war looming, James was called up, and Linda went back to be with her mother in Sparkhill. In September 1939, Linda and her mother were living with her married sister and her husband at 55, Clarence Road. Linda was then working in a sweet shop. Their daughter Diana was born in Birmingham in early 1940.

James was transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals on 11 April 1941, and later joined 17 Line of Communication Signals (17 L of C Signals).

An army's 'Lines of Communication' stretch from the front line right back to the ports and bases which supply and maintain the fighting units. It is the role of the L of C Signals regiments to maintain text and voice communication over that area. There were five such regiments supporting the British 21st Army Group in North West Europe. Three of these regiments landed in Normandy and two others, 13 and 17 L of C, joined them in Autumn 1944 as the army advanced eastwards into Belgium. By the start of 1945:

The Headquarters of 17 L of C Signals was situated at Ghent together with its Nos. 1 and 3 Companies, while No. 2 was at Antwerp. This Company had moved there from Malines on January 2 and had since that date, like the rest of the town's inhabitants, been subjected to continual attacks from flying bombs, nearly all V2s.

Signals installations and billets had been extremely unlucky and damage was suffered by them on seven different occasions during the following weeks. Twice casualties were heavy. On February 1, when the main telephone exchange was destroyed, 15 men were killed and seven wounded. Then on the 23rd ... there was a direct hit on the Construction Section billet killing one officer and 13 other ranks, while another 14 were wounded, some seriously.¹

James was one of those killed on the 23rd.

The port of Antwerp was vital to the Allied advance into German. The only other major port in allied hands was Cherbourg, which was 300 miles to the west, which meant that until Antwerp's port was operational, all supplies had to be moved by road for 300-400 miles. Antwerp was captured in September 1944 and became operational again at the end of November. In an attempt to stop the Allies from using the port the German used their V-weapons:

Antwerp was the recipient of even more V-2s than London, resulting in more than 30,000 killed or injured. For the whole of the V-bomb campaign, Antwerp received on average three V-2s per day in the city and its suburbs. The number of V-1s was on average four per day in December and January, climbing to 12 daily in February.²

James is buried in Antwerp, Belgium, in the Schoonselhof Cemetery in grave IV.A.12. He is buried alongside the ten other soldiers from his regiment who died on the same day. In Wells, James is remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

At some point during the war, perhaps to get away from the bombing in Birmingham, or soon after, James' wife Linda came back to Wells with her daughter and her mother. Her mother died in Wells in the second quarter of 1946. On 24 April 1948, Linda got married to John Holcombe at St Cuthbert's Church.

¹ Taken from The Cheshire (Earl of Chester's) Yeomanry, 1898-1967: The Last Regiment to Fight on Horses, by Sir Richard Verdin (Chester 1971).

² Quoted from <http://www.v2rocket.com/start/chapters/antwerp.html>.