

Sapper Alec William MATTHEWS

Service number 14334670

Royal Engineers

91 Field Company

Killed in action on 20 November 1944, aged 20

Alec and his twin brother Christopher were born in Wells in 1924. Before the war he worked for Mr Sage the builder. During the war he joined the Royal Engineers. Alec landed on Sword Beach on D-Day, helped build the bridges needed for the battle for Caen, and died near Nijmegen.



The France and Germany Star

Awarded for service in NW Europe between 6 June 1944 and 8 May 1945

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Alec and his twin Christopher were born in Wells on 8 June 1924, to Theodore Silvester Matthews and Beatrice Lilian née Lester. They had a younger sister called Mildred.

In September 1939, the family were living at 29, Everetts Close, Hawkers Lane. Alec's father was a plasterer and tiler, and Alec worked for Mr Sage the builder of 14, Tor Street.

Alec joined the Royal Engineers and was posted to 91 Field Company. Originally this was a chemical warfare company but in 1943 it was converted into a Field Company, which was the standard unit of the Royal Engineers and provided the sappers required for a designated task. It was part of the 18th (1st London) General Headquarters Troops Royal Engineers (GHQTRE), sometimes known by its old name – the Tower Hamlets Engineers.

On 21 March 1944, Alec's mother died of pulmonary tuberculosis.

On D-Day, 18th GHQTRE provided the engineer component of Nos. 5 and 6 Beach Groups that supported the British 3rd Division's assault on Sword Beach. The GHQTRE's field companies, including 91, landed in the first wave of troops and made it easier for the fighting units to land and then get off the beach quickly.

The next task for the 18th GHQTRE was to strengthen existing bridges (such as Pegasus Bridge) and build new ones over the River Orne and Caen Canal in preparation for Operation Goodwood which was part of the battle for Caen in Normandy. This work, which had to be carried out in secrecy on the night of 17/18 July, required much preparation in road building and mine clearing, as well as bringing up and concealing the bridging material.

After the withdrawal of the 1st Airborne Division from Arnhem, Nijmegen became a front line town and remained so until February 1945. The area around it was known as the Nijmegen salient and included a bridgehead over the Waal. Nijmegen was continually under bombardment and there were many German attempts to destroy its rail and road bridges over the Waal.

Alec died near to Nijmegen. We do not know how he died, but we do know that another three sappers from his company died on the same day and another a day later. They were all buried next to No. 3 Casualty Clearing station, in a cemetery in a wooded area called Jonkers Bosch, which was about 2 miles south west of Nijmegen.

On 2 April 1947, Alec was reburied in the Jonkerbos War Cemetery at Nijmegen in grave 19.E.4. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

His twin brother, Christopher, served in the army in Italy.