

In Memory Of
Sapper

JAMES RICHARD JONES

Service Number: 1883047

217 Army Field Coy., Royal Engineers who died on 20 September 1940 Age 21

Son of Richard William and Jane Jones, of Nash, Shropshire.

TOO DEARLY LOVED IN LIFE TO EVER BE FORGOTTEN IN DEATH

Remembered with Honour

EL ALAMEIN WAR CEMETERY

XXXI. H. 5.



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Researching the life and service of James Jones filled me with trepidation because there are hundreds of James Jones's on the WW2 Casualty List. So - I'm glad I saved a Messenger note from the late Shirley Jepson when she visited Nash in October 2021 confirming that James was related to her great uncle Les Jones and his wife Dorothy (Doll) who lived at a house called "View Field" on the lane between Nash Church and Clee Hill Road. Her visit in 2021 turned out to be the last before she passed away – and at the time, she didn't know any more about James and hadn't managed to piece him into her family history.

Although Shirley lived in Kent with her husband, Roy, she spent many childhood holidays in the 1950s and 60s with Les and Doll at View Field. She would return to Nash almost every year and always left a generous donation to the Nash Church fabric fund. The best way of researching someone with such a well-known surname is to start with what you already know - so finding Leslie and Dorothy Jones on the 1939 Register and looking for other Jones's in Nash led me to 19-year-old James, who was living with his parents up the hill at Knowlegate.

Birth, early life and family background

James Richard Jones was born on January 21st 1919, only two and a half months after the end of the First World War. He was the son of Richard W Jones, a Clee Hill quarryman, and his wife, Jane Jones (nee Russell).

On the 1921 Census, we find 2-year-old James living at Stone House, Lion Lane, Nash with his father, Richard, mother, Jane, his older sister, Gladys, and his younger brother Harry, a 9-month-old baby. James's father and grandfather were both locally born quarrymen. His father, Richard, was born at Knowbury on April 21st 1891 and baptised at St Paul's Church, and in 1921 he was working as a "machine man" for the Clee Hill Granite Co. Ltd. James's grandfather, another Richard Jones (Richard Senior), and his grandmother, Sarah (nee Milward) lived just round the corner at No 7 Titrail. Richard Senior was born at Milson in 1866 and in 1921 aged 55 he was still working as a quarryman under Samuel Bate at Caynham.

James Jones's mother, Jane, was the 5th of 8 surviving children of James and Emily Russell. She was born at Totley Bent near Sheffield on the Derbyshire/ Yorkshire border on September 9th 1889 and baptised in the parish of Dore on September 24th.

In those days it was most unusual for a locally born lad like Richard Jones to marry a girl from outside the area. Jane's family tree reveals that her father, James Russell, was a navy born in Portsmouth who moved all over the place in search of dangerous and back-breaking work building bridges and infrastructure on mainline and mine railways. This is illustrated by Census and baptism records which show that Jane's mother (James Jones's grandmother), Emily Potter, was from Copthorne in Sussex; and that Jane's brothers and sisters were almost all born in different counties. For example, her oldest brother, James, was baptised at Oxenton in Northamptonshire; Thomas, was baptised at Meare in Sussex and her older sister Emily was baptised at Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire.

Jane Jones's father, James Russell, died at Chesterfield in Q3 of 1900 when he was only 45, Jane was 10 and her youngest brother, Robert William Russell was only 2. In the following year, the 1901 Census reveals that her mother, Emily, and all 8 of their children were living in one of the Tunnel Huts at Alfreton in Derbyshire. The huts, which were probably wooden, were built as temporary accommodation for navvies working on the upgraded Alfreton Old Tunnel between 1899 and 1901. Her mother's occupation is given as a Lodging House Keeper, so Emily Russell was running the hut they were living in, Jane's 3 older brothers aged 18, 16 and 14 were already working as navvies and there were a couple of boarders supplementing the family income with rent.

I haven't been able to trace Jane's older brothers after 1901 - but because they were railway navvies, it is possible that James Jones's Mum either travelled with one of them to Clee Hill during WW1 to work on the quarry railway, or she came here by herself to do war work at one of the quarries before her marriage to Richard Jones at Ludlow in 1916.

Military Service

On the day Britain declared War on Germany, September 3rd 1939, the National Service (Armed Forces) Act became law. The Act required all medically fit men aged between 18 and 41 to register for service, with exemptions for people in "reserved occupations" such as baking, farming, medicine and engineering.

According to the 1939 Register (an additional Census taken by the government on September 29th 1939 shortly after the outbreak of War), James Jones was living at property 43, Knowle Gate with his parents, younger brother, Harry, and his 11-year-old sister Bette or Betty. By then his older sister, Gladys, had left home and gone to live with her maternal uncle, James William Russell, and his family at Epsom in Surrey, where she was working as a hospital cleaner.

The purpose of the 1939 Register was to establish who was available for conscription or War work here in the UK, with a basic overview of their employment status and family situation. 20-year-old James was working as General Labourer at the brick works on Clee Hill, which would have earmarked him as suitable for the Royal Engineers.

An extract from The Life and Military Service of Col. Douglas Victory Hutchinson MBE (James Jones's commanding officer) tells us how a Royal Engineers Field Company operated at the start of WW2. The Field Company was the standard Royal Engineers unit within each Infantry Division, and it provided a pool of trained engineers (known as sappers) "to undertake tasks directed by Headquarters, Divisional Royal Engineers, or by the Brigade with which they were operating". The sappers' trades were variable and the tasks they were given included building bridges, demolition, setting up and clearing obstacles and roadblocks, building concrete and semi-permanent defences, providing water supplies for the troops and disposing of unexploded bombs.

Sapper James Richard Jones served in 217 Army Field Company attached to the 12th Field Company, Royal Engineers. I haven't been able to find out where in the UK he did his basic training - but we know that he travelled by ship to Egypt in August 1940 with the

12th under the command of 2nd Lieutenant Douglas Victory Hutchinson at the start of the Western Desert Campaign.

By way of some background, the Italians began to colonise neighbouring Libya during the Italo-Turkish War in 1911-12, when they captured the 2 Ottoman colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. These were run separately by Italian governors until 1934, when they were unified into what we know as Libya with a single capital at Tripoli.

The North African Campaign began when Italy entered the War on June 10th 1940, aligning itself with Nazi Germany. British forces (including troops from India and Rhodesia) were already stationed in Egypt under the command of General Sir Archibald Wavell. Their main base in 1939 was at the terminus of the Egyptian state railway line, which by August 1940 had been extended to the port of Mersa Matruh about 200 miles west of Alexandria.

At first, Wavell was ordered to take defensive measures and not to provoke the Italians, although there were raids on Italian shipping and skirmishes along the border. Mussolini ordered the Italian Tenth Army to invade Egypt on August 8th, and again to coincide with the start of Operation Sea Lion – Hitler’s planned invasion of the UK thwarted by the heroic efforts of the RAF in the Battle of Britain. However, nothing happened until September because the Italian Tenth Army was ill-equipped and hampered by poorly trained officers and a lack of military transport.

When James Jones and the 12th Field Company disembarked at Mersa Matruh on 28th August 1940, his commanding officer, Douglas Hutchinson, describes in his memoir “a continuous scene of heavy bombing from enemy aircraft, with hundreds of shells falling in the area on a daily basis. In between air raids, the 12th Field Company were building reinforcements, pill boxes, digging anti-tank ditches, slit trenches, revetements and mine laying as part of the Defence Programme”.

The Italian land invasion began on September 8th 1940, when the Tenth Army advanced along the coast road, crossing the border into Egypt on the 14th with limited armoured forces protecting its desert flank to the south. General Wavell ordered his screening forces to harass the advancing Italians, falling back towards the bridgehead at Mersa Matruh, where the main British infantry force was based. At the same time, the 7th Armoured Division, which was positioned on the British Army’s desert flank, would strike at the flank of the Italian force.

By 16 September 1940, 4 days before James Jones died, the Italians had advanced to Maktala about 80 miles west of Mersa Matruh, where they halted due to supply problems. They reached the Egyptian village of Sidi Barrani 3 days later on the 19th where, despite Mussolini urging him to carry on, the Italian commander, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, ordered his men to dig in and establish fortified camps in forward positions.

On September 20th 1940, the night James Jones died, the 12th Field Company were strengthening the British defences at Mersa Matruh. The 6th Royal Tank Regiment

carried out a recce in the local area and reported in their War Diary that at “1000 hours Mersa Matruh was heavily bombed by 33 bombers escorted by 27 fighter aircraft. Anti-aircraft fire strong. Water ration one gallon per man per day. Party of NCOs (Non Commissioned Officers) assisted in the laying of a minefield forward of the Heavy Brigade area”.

Thanks to History Hutch’s blog on October 5th 2021 entitled “12th Field Company Royal Engineers – The mystery behind the sad loss of Sapper Jones. 1940” I have an account of how James died in an extract from the 12th Field Company’s War Diary for 1940:-

“September 21, 1940.

Sapper JONES discovered dead in slit trench at 0730 hours.

Part of the trench had fallen in burying Sapper JONES to a depth of 18 ins.

He had been dead some time when found.

Court of Enquiry, held at 1600 hrs, found that death was accidental and that neither the deceased nor any other person could be blamed.

The Medical Officer gave as his opinion that death was due to heart failure as a result of asphyxiation.

The deceased was buried at 1730 hrs in MATRUH War Cemetery”

Sapper James Jones died early in the Western Desert Campaign. He didn’t live to see the Allied army defeat the Italians in Libya in 1941 or Montgomery’s famous tank battle against Rommel at El Alamein in 1943 which turned the tide of the War. Later on James’s body – along with the remains of all the other men who died at Mersa Matruh - were removed to the El Alamein War Cemetery, which (according to the Commonwealth War Graves website) “contains the graves of men who died at all stages of the Western Desert campaigns, brought in from a wide area”. James’s final resting place is Plot 32 Grave H5. The inscription on his gravestone confirms him as the son of Richard William and Jane Jones of Nash, Shropshire and the inscription reminds us that he was “too dearly loved in life to be forgotten in death”.

As a postscript, many years later James’s old CO retired Colonel DV Hutchinson MBE ended a letter written to Major Gordon Lane on December 8th 1990, just before the 12th Field Company deployed to Kuwait in the Gulf War, with the following sentences:-

“I am not going to ask what you are doing or offer advice, except in one small aspect, which will enable me to sleep more peacefully at night if I have warned you about it. It is this – if your men have to sleep in slit trenches do make them take care not to be buried alive; not because the trench may collapse but from very fine sand drifting and sifting in and suffocating them whilst they sleep. Some men, when tired or tight, sleep very soundly and are unaware of the danger.

Unfortunately, I had two such separate accidents in the Western Desert when very fine sand disturbed by winds or earth shaking ‘activities’ covered them, and I had to instruct night sentries to inspect all slit trenches.”

Sources

- Ancestry.co.uk and Fold 3 – Family history, Census and military records
- Imperial War Museum (www.iwm.org.uk)
- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (www.cwg.org)

- From britishmilitaryhistory.co.uk:-
 - Field Company 1944-45 Personnel and Structure – Chapter on The Field Company, Royal Engineers published on 17th July 2014
 - A Concise History of British Troops in Egypt (History and Personnel) by Robert Palmer MA published on britishmilitaryhistory.co.uk on 2nd July 2020
- Conscription : the Second World War – from the UK Parliament website (www.parliament.uk)
- Wikipedia – Military history Egypt and Libya 1940-41 including information on The Western Desert Force, The Baggush Box British Army field fortification and Operation Compass against the Italians in Libya
- The Life and Military Service of Col. Douglas Victory Hutchinson MBE – Memoirs of a Royal Engineer in the British Army and other posts compiled and written by History Hutch in 2021 on ubiquevir.wordpress.com, including:-
 - The structure and function of a Royal Engineers Field Company, and an overview of how one operated at the start of WW2.
 - An account of James Jones’s death in a blog post entitled “The mystery behind the sad loss of Sapper Jones. 1940” published on October 5, 2021
- The 12th Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary for 1940
- Heritagegateway.org.uk - Historic England Research Records for Monument Number 610325 – Granite Quarry operated by the Clee Hill Granite Company 1867-1929
- Forgotten Relics of an Enterprising Age (forgottenrelics.org) – Details about the building of Alfreton Old Tunnel.
- Kelly’s Directory for Shropshire 1913 from Leicester University Special Collections – Details of Knowbury parish, including Clee Hill Quarry companies based in Knowbury and Caynham
- The Wartime Memories Project (wartimememoriesproject.com) – Information about the early days of the Western Desert Campaign and extracts from the War Diary of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment’s action at Mersa Matruh in September 1940.

Bobbie Matulja
7th November 2024

Appendix



Painting of Mersah Matruh by CF Lock – Imperial War Museum

UK, World War II Army Casualty Lists, 1939-1945 for J. Jones				345
Casualty Lists-Other Ranks (1940 Oct 25-1940 Nov 30)				Date of Casualty.
2. <u>Home and Stations Abroad</u> (Contd.)				
(a) <u>Abroad - Middle East.</u> (Contd.)				
<u>Died.</u>				
Nottinghamshire Yeomanry.		Tpr.	N.	1. 10. 40.
325855 - SHIELDS	104			
<u>Palestine.</u>				
<u>Died.</u>				
Royal Engineers.		Spr.	J. 217 A. Fd. Coy.	20. 9. 40.
1883047 - JONES	104			
(b) <u>Home.</u>				
<u>Killed in Action.</u>				
Royal Artillery.		Gnr.	W. J. 2 Res. Fd. Regt. Att. H. T. T. G.	16. 10. 40.
1074618 - COOK	104			
1565165 - PALLISTER	105	Gnr.	J. T. 186/208 Lt. A. A. Tng. Regt.	15. 10. 40.
991815 - WHITELAW	104	Gnr.	D. 2 Res. Fd. Regt.	16. 10. 40.
1502466 - WOOD	105	Gnr.	F. A. D. 208 Lt. A. A. Tng. Regt.	14/15. 10. 40.



Western Desert Campaign, Annotated screenshot from Wikipedia showing where Sapper James Jones died, and the later removal of his body to the El Alamein War Cemetery.

1939 England and Wales Register

Shropshire > Ludlow Rd > Ojib

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ADDRESS:	SCHEDULE.	SURNAME AND OTHER NAMES	O. V. S. P. or L.	M. or F.	BIRTH:		PERSONAL OCCUPATION.	See INSTRUCTIONS.		
					Day.	Year.				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Knowle Gate, Ludlow	43	1 JONES Richard W		M	21 st	1891	Heavy work Road Stone Quarries			
		2 JONES Jane		F	31 st	89	Unpaid Domestic duties			
		3 JONES Harry		M	9 th	20	Kitchen Gardener			
This record is officially closed.										
Knowle Gate, Ludlow	44	5 JONES Betty		F	14 th	28	at School			
		6 JONES James R		M	19	19	General Labourer, Brickwork			
		1 GREENHOUSE Sarah		F	10 th	86	Unpaid Domestic duties			
Knowle Gate, Ludlow	44	2 GREENHOUSE William		M	3 rd	12	Farm Carter, Heavy Worker			
		3 BROWN Mary J		F	15 th	18	Unpaid Domestic duties			
		This record is officially closed.								
Knowle Gate, Ludlow	45	1 DAWSON IAN		M	8 th	65	Private Chef/Cook			
		2 DAWSON Bella		F	19 th	97	House Work			
This record is officially closed.										
Knowle Gate, Ludlow	46	1 GROVE William H		M	24 th	61	DRUG & SEED STORE Proprietor, Retired			
		2 GROVE Annie		F	2 nd	64	House Wife			
Knowle Gate, Ludlow	47	1 HALL William F		M	17 th	01	Quarry Works Carpenter			
		2 HALL Edith		F	4 th	67	at home work			
		3 HALL Benjamin T		M	30 th	29	at School			
The Bungalow, Nash	48	1 DANCER Graham S		M	8 th	88	BOOT & SHOE DEALER			
		2 DANCER EDITH E		F	6 th	97	Unpaid domestic duties			
Wanda Vale, Nash	49	3 DANCER GRAHAM L		M	22 nd	16	Farm Produce Dealer Assistant			
		1 BROWN William		M	8 th	65	Retired Farmer			
Sodom, Nash	50	2 BROWN Frances M		F	29 th	67	Housewife unpaid			
		3 BROWN THOMAS H		M	9 th	01	Farm Produce dealer, Heavy Work			
		1 DOVEY Thomas W B		M	12 th	93	Farmer			
Sodom, Nash	50	2 DOVEY Gladys M		F	26 th	95	Unpaid domestic duties			
		This record is officially closed.								
Shebbone, Nash	51	1 LEWIS William		M	10 th	63	Farmer, Retired			
		2 LEWIS Alice		F	24 th	66	Unpaid Domestic duties			
		3 LEWIS Mary Ann A		F	23 rd	66	Housekeeper			
		4 LEWIS Leonard J		M	16 th	06	Farm Manager			
		5 LEWIS		M	26 th	67	Farmer Ploughman			
		6 Waythe Emma		F	26 th	87	Unpaid Domestic Duties			

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1939 England and Wales Register – screenshot from Ancestry.co.uk with James Jones’s residence in Knowle Gate highlighted.



1942 – A driver writes home from a slit trench in the Western Desert. [IWM E 18362](#)

Photo of a British army driver sitting in a slit trench in the Western Desert in 1942. This shows what basic cover they provided. It also gives an idea of the place where Sapper James Jones died when he was suffocated by loose sand falling into a slit trench in which he was sleeping.

Plan of El Alamein War Cemetery from the Commonwealth War Graves website annotated in red with the location of James Jones' grave

