



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Walter Henry Messenger". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a dotted line.

**FINAL REPORT INTO THE
DISAPPEARANCE AND DEATH OF
GUNNER WALTER HENRY "SONNY" MESSENGER.**

PURPOSE

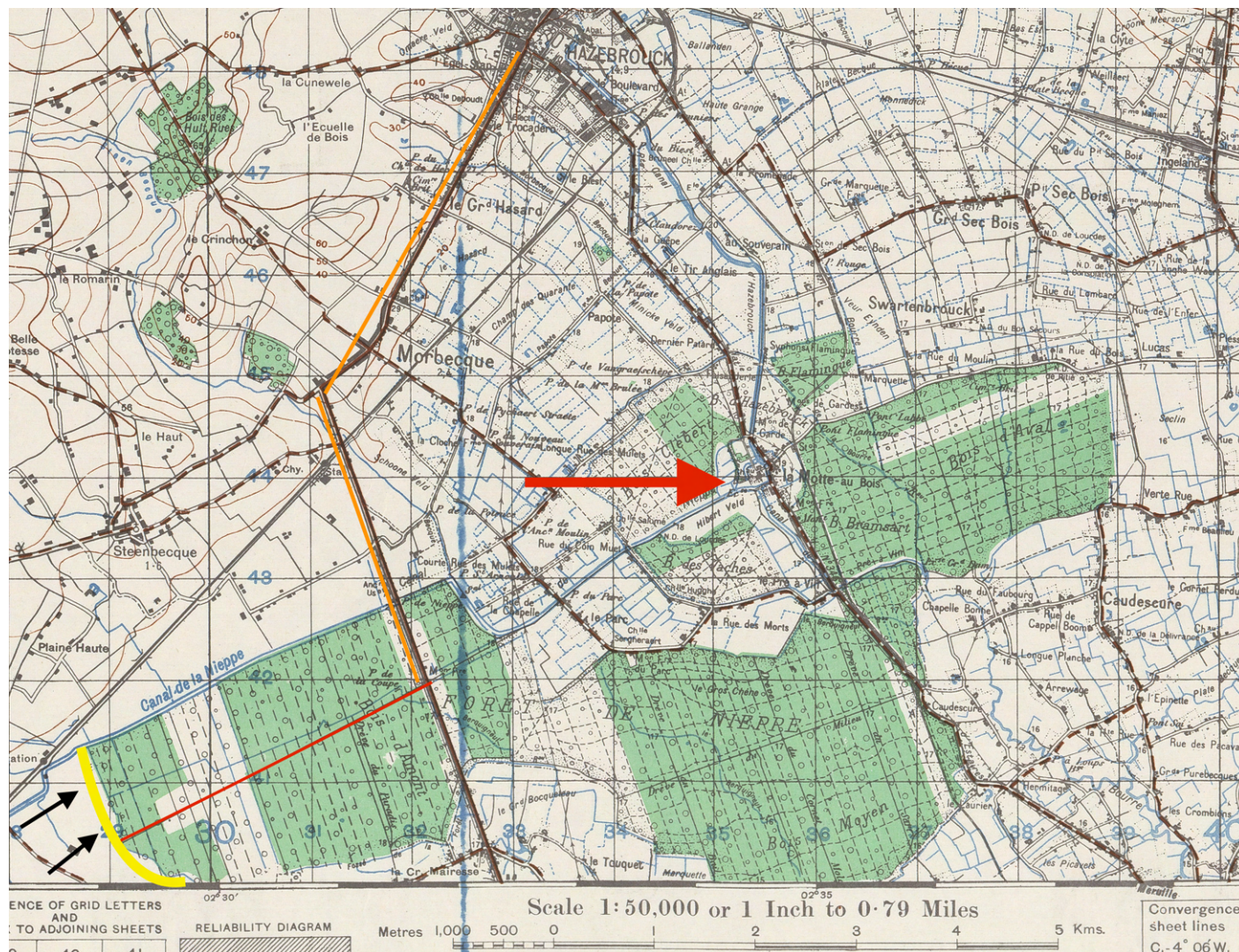
To compile the known facts and then describe scenarios that may explain the death and disappearance of Gunner Walter Messenger. Finally, to offer a reasoned opinion on what most likely happened to him.

FACTS

- **Identity:** Walter Henry Messenger (“Sonny”), born 14 August 1918.
- **Service:** Enlisted 15 July 1939; 57th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery; Rank: Gunner; Service Number 1491432.
- **Role:** No. 3 (Layer) on a 2lb Anti-Tank gun in a three-man crew (No.1 Commander; No.2 Loader; No.3 Layer). The Layer traversed/elevated and fired on the No.1’s orders.
- **Deployment:** Initially in NE France; advanced into Belgium at the outbreak of hostilities, then withdrew back into France with the British Expeditionary Force BEF.
- **26 May 1940:** His gun and others took up positions on the South-West corner of the Forêt de Nieppe (Northern France) to form a gun line covering the open approaches. Vehicles were likely parked facing NE for rapid withdrawal.
- **Battalion HQ: La Motte-au-Bois** (“The Mound in the Woods”), 7 km NE of the gun line.
- **Context:** The BEF was under severe pressure, falling back toward the Channel coast; the forest was a designated strongpoint to delay the German advance and buy time for the rest of the BEF and the eventual Dunkirk evacuation.

SONNY'S LOCATION – MORNING OF 27 MAY 1940

From his Military Medal citation he was on the SW corner of the forest. While the Regimental diary does not give exact map refs, a reasonable reconstruction places the gun line along the forest edge facing the open fields to the SW (see Map O1: 1:50,000 Forêt de Nieppe, 1937-38).



Map O1

- **Map annotation:** Yellow = gun line; Black Arrows = German Advance; Red line = track to the D916; Red arrow = BHQ; Orange Line = Route to Hazebrouck

THE ACTION

- **Enemy approach:** German infantry advanced from the SW in column, flanked by machine-guns. Battle commenced at approximately 0800 and roughly 200 yards.
- **Wounds:** Gnr Messenger was immediately wounded in the hand and leg. As No.3 behind the gun's shield, frontal fire was unlikely to hit him directly; oblique flanking Machine Gun fire (e.g., MG34, 7.92×57 mm) could reach an exposed left limb around the shield edge.
- **Effect of wounds:** A significant hand wound with blood loss is disabling but not usually fatal in the short term; a thigh/calf strike could be catastrophic through bony fragmentation and arterial/venous damage, even without complete femoral transection.
- **Continued fire:** Despite wounds he kept firing, which is consistent with the gun's controls (traverse/elevation by right hand only is possible; firing with right foot pedal was normal) and with adrenaline under fire.
- **Withdrawal:** When nearly surrounded (≤ 100 yds), the crew abandoned the gun and withdrew by vehicles (plural). Gnr Messenger was alive when last seen getting on a vehicle.
- **Time in contact:** From first fire (200 yds) to withdrawal (≤ 100 yds) likely 2–5 minutes depending on the German tempo and the anti-tank guns delaying effect.

POST-BATTLE MOVEMENT

Assuming vehicles were staged on the forest track, the logical egress was NE to the D916, then left (W/NW) toward Morbecque → Hazebrouck. Continuing straight ahead on the track towards BHQ was possible only if the driver knew its location; turning right (East) would have risked collision with advancing enemy elements.

Road conditions (27 May 1940): Congestion from military traffic, refugee flows, breakdowns and battle damage meant slow progress. A journey to Hazebrouck that might take 15 minutes in a modern vehicle could feasibly take 60 minutes or more under 1940 conditions.

Medical state: His ability to board a vehicle argues no complete femoral transection, but a serious leg wound could produce progressive haemorrhage. Field first-aid (tourniquet/pressure) may have bought time, but shock and blood loss would accumulate without rapid evacuation to a Regimental Aid Post/Casualty Clearing Station.

If he died on the truck, practical necessity suggests he was laid to rest by the roadside at the next halt, freeing space for the living—a grim but documented practice during fast withdrawals.

OTHER POSSIBLE SCENARIOS (BRIEF)

- **Air attack:** Possible but unlikely to single out one moving truck over a short exposure window.
- **Direct Tank or Anti-Tank gun hit:** Risk rises only near Hazebrouck's approaches; otherwise low near the forest exit and Morbecque.
- **Dropped at an Aid Post:** Possible; even if reached, care may have only delayed the inevitable if the bleed was severe.
- **Concussion/amnesia:** Physiologically possible, but rare as a sole explanation and unlikely given the leg wound's assumed severity.
- **POW capture:** Considered virtually impossible in this case (no Red Cross trace; family would likely have heard from him).

PROBABILITIES (AGGREGATED OUTCOME)

Treating immediate death en route, later death at an aid post and loss through misidentification or unrecovered burial as a single outcome—“died from wounds”—and discounting POW as implausible:

- **Died from wounds:** approx. 95%
- **Killed by German tank/AT fire:** approx. 3%
- **Killed by air attack:** approx. 2%

These percentages reflect the tactical situation on 27 May 1940 along the D916 corridor and the medical realities of severe limb wounds under 1940 evacuation conditions.

WHY HE WAS NEVER IDENTIFIED

There is no evidence he was never found—only that no identified remains have been linked to him. Several factors could break the identification chain:

- **ID discs ‘dog-tags’:** British 1940 discs were vulcanised fibre (green to leave, red to remove). They degrade quickly in wet, acidic soils. In practice, soldiers sometimes removed both discs (from confusion or to carry proof of death) and pay-books could be lost or destroyed.
- **Improvised burials:** Roadside or verge burials—later obliterated by shelling, traffic or farm work left no durable marker.
- **Overrun medical posts:** RAP/CCS sites sometimes fell to the enemy; paperwork and temporary graves were lost or garbled.
- **Concentration gaps:** Post-war exhumation teams recovered thousands of isolated graves; a portion inevitably remained Unknown due to missing/illegible data.

“VEHICLES” (PLURAL) – A NOTE

The citation notes vehicles in the plural. If Gnr Messenger boarded a different truck (e.g., a vehicle carrying wounded) from his two crew-mates, it would explain why they could not later recount his exact fate. If he died among unfamiliar men and both discs were accidentally removed or subsequently lost, his identity could not be reattached in the post-war process.

AUTHOR’S FINAL THEORY

On 27 May 1940, at the SW corner of the Forêt de Nieppe gun line: Gnr Messenger, No.3 on a 2lb Anti Tank gun, was wounded in the left hand and left leg by flanking MG fire around the shield edge. Despite this, he continued to fight, materially delaying the German advance. As the enemy closed to approx. 100 yards, the crew abandoned their gun and escaped by vehicle(s). Gnr Messenger’s leg wound, serious but not a complete femoral cut, allowed him to move with assistance but caused ongoing haemorrhage. Wound to hand could also have contributed to further haemorrhaging.

The truck likely took the forest track to the D916 and turned left toward Morbecque and Hazebrouck. Within about 60 minutes, before reaching Hazebrouck, Gnr Messenger succumbed to blood loss and shock. At a halt, he was laid to rest by the roadside. In the confusion, a well-meaning soldier removed both ID discs; any paperwork was absent or later lost.

In the days following, bodies along the route were recovered and buried; after the war, remains were concentrated to Commonwealth cemeteries. Without discs or documents, Gnr Messenger would have been recorded and re-interred as an Unknown.

In the absence of precise information, the War Office has adopted the opening and closing dates (26th-28th May) of the Regiment’s engagement at Forêt de Nieppe as the casualty period. He was known to be alive 27th May and death therefore most probably occurred 27 May (not 28 May). Most likely resting place: Le Grand Hasard Commonwealth War Grave Military Cemetery (Morbecque) – named after the nearby hamlet “Le Grand Hasard” (The Big Chance). The cemetery contains numerous late May 1940 burials and has 58 Second World War Unknowns. It is not only plausible but also my own personal belief that one of these Unknowns is Gunner Messenger.

CLOSING

Duty brought Gunner Walter Henry “Sonny” Messenger to the gun line on the edge of the Forêt de Nieppe. When the line was tested, he didn't falter. Wounded in the hand and leg, he stayed at his post and continued to engage the enemy – notably holding up the enemies relentless advance. That is gallantry in its plainest form and the Military Medal records it for eternity.

We do not yet know the exact place where he fell or where he lies. An absent headstone does not mean an absent life. His courage under fire is written into the story of that morning and carried forward by his family, who have never forgotten him. Until a name can be matched to a grave, we honour his duty by continuing the search, by telling his story faithfully, and by recognising that one of the “Unknown” may bear his name.

For his duty, his steadiness under fire and the courage that earned him the Military Medal, Sonny is remembered – by his Regiment, by his Country and above all by those who loved him. We remember him not for how he was lost, but for his selfless actions when King and Country called.

Adam Goddard

History To Life

8th September 2025

Army No.	NAMES (in full) (Surname first, in block letters)		Transfers to other Corps or cause of becoming non-effective and record of re-enlistment (if any) (Including date)
1491433 (MIL. NO) 10154204 SOA/T. Ing Rgt 107/52	MAWSON H.	✓	To Field Branch 13/7/45 to R.D.O.C.
1491433 " 10005425	MESSINGER W.H.	✓	^{between} Died 26/28.5.40.
1491433 " 10005392	MOAKES H.	✓	31.12.41 Trans To Field Branch 19/9/45 Para 390 (XVI)
1491434 " 10241329 W/T Reserve	MORRIS S.	✓	30 9/39 W.T. Res
1491435 " 10117082	MCSKELLY M.	✓	To Field Branch - Staff 19/4/46 Z Res
1491436 " 10113114	MILLER J.T.	✓	To Field Branch - Staff 8/5/46 Z Res RA. W380
1491437 " 10115010	MINNICAN T.W.L.	✓	To Field Branch - Staff 30/11/42 to A.C.C.
1491438 " 10117008	MOUND A.	✓	31.12.41 Trans To Field Branch 13/7/46 Z Res.
1491439 " 10123062 SO. A/R. Ing Rgt 31/72	MULHOLLAND J.P.	✓	To Field Branch - Staff 17/5/41 Para 390 (XVI) KR. 40
1491440 " 10117056	MULLOY J.	✓	To Field Branch - Staff 14/4/46 Z Res

Royal Artillery Attestation 1883-1942

DEATHS 1939 - 46 (ENTRY FORM)

FORM RH

REGT OR CORPS TO WHICH THE PERSON BELONGED AT TIME OF DEATH } RA 225/57 A/H Reg 8

Part I

Army No (1)	Rank (2)	Name in full (Surname first) (3)	Age (4)	Country of birth (5)	Date of death (6)	Place of death (7)	Cause of death (8)
1691632	CNR	MESSENGER WALTER HENRY	21	ENGLAND	26/28.5.40	BEF	KILLED IN ACTION

Part II

1 DECORATIONS - ENTER one in each space

2 PARENT CORPS } i) at time of death RA
OR REGT } ii) on 1 Sep 1939 RA

3 RANK held at time of death CNR

4 PLACE OF BIRTH SWANAGE, DORSET.

5 PLACE OF DOMICILE LONDON, SE. 15.

6 DATE OF DEATH (in figures, e.g. 11/12/44) Enter in boxes .. 26/28.5.40 BETWEEN 26/28 DAY MONTH YEAR 5 40

7 THEATRE OR COUNTRY WHERE FATAL WOUND SUSTAINED OR DEATH OCCURRED FRA/BEL.

For War Office use

3000.
3000
52
371
505
31

Record Office Stamp NB - FOR INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETION & DISPOSAL OF FORM RH
RA. (C.A. & A.A.) Records SEE WOCM 19/GEN/1252/AG 1(Records) DATED 5 SEP 46.

British Army War Office Deaths 1939-1946 Entry Form

705

SECRETCasualty List No. 705 (Soldiers and Auxiliaries)

Copy No. 79.....

(This list contains all casualties reported to the War Office Casualty
Section for the 24 hours ended 9 a.m. 27th December, 1941.)

1. Expeditionary Forces

Date of Casu

(a) France.Killed in ActionRoyal Artillery

1491432 MESSENGER 305 Gnr. W.H. 225/57 A.Tk.Regt. 26/28.5.4
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 235 as Wounded and Missing, 28.5.40. Unit

1458675 PRITCHARD, 304 Gnr. G.D. 211/53 A.Tk.Regt. 28.5.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 240 as Missing, date not reported)

8th Bn. Royal Warwickshire Regiment

5112823 RAYNOR, 305 Pte. G.E. 21.5.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 246 as Missing, 21.5.40,
Army No. 3112823).

1/5th Bn. Sherwood Foresters

4976950 BEVERLEY, 3/2 Pte. T. 8.6.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 260 as Missing, date not reported).

Presumed Killed in Action.Royal Artillery

832732 MASON, P.O.A.C. W.S./Bdr. J. 201/51 A.Tk.Regt. 12.6.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 263 as Missing, 15.6.40).

Hampshire Regiment

5502676 KEEBLE, P.O.A.C. Pte. G.G. Att. 2 I.B.D. 19.5.40
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 284 as Missing, date not reported).

Presumed Died of Wounds.Royal Engineers

2094324 DIXON, P.O.A.C. Spr. L.W. 248 Fd. Coy. On or since
21.5.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 418 as Missing, 21.5.40).

South Staffordshire Regiment

5042909 FARTON, Pte. T.D. K.I.A. at 14/6/9. On or since
26.6.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 280 as Missing, date not reported.)

4th Bn. Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment

6342994 HENNIKER, P.O.A.C. Sgt. W.J. On or since
26.5.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 261 as Missing, date not reported).

Presumed Died2nd Bn. Lincolnshire Regiment

4801693 CLARKE, P.O.A.C. Pte. B.A.C. On or since
1.6.40.
(Previously shown on Casualty List No. 240 as Missing, date not reported).

War Office Casualty List

Confirms KIA status issued 27th Dec 1941

6. Registration Number		1. Surname		3. Army Number	
683426		MESSENGER		1,491,432	
2. Christian Names		WALTER HENRY		A. Rank	
				B. Service Trade	
4. Regiment or Corps		RA (AA) 20		Part II Order	
5. Nature of Engagement		m			
6. Date of Joining (Army Class) or Date of Enlistment (Others)		15-7-39			
7. Date of Birth		14-8-18			
8. Nationality or Dual Nationality		E		C. Medical Category	
9. Religion		CE		D	
10. Industry Group		ZM		11. Occupational Classification	
				169	
12. Cause of becoming Non-effective		killed in action with		15.	
D.E.F.		12 (a) Date		16.	
13. Single or Married		S		18.	
14. Home Town and County (U.K.) or Country (abroad)		London		19. Location	
				B.E.F.	
				X Date Rejoined from Reserve	
				60	

M 18603/271. 2,000M.7/41. H. D. & Co. 51-650. A.F. B. 103

British Army personnel index card
Army Form B.103 (Service & Casualty Form)

IDENTIFICATION OF Walter Henry Messinger JOINING.

Height ... 5 ft. 11 1/2 ins.
 Weight ... 154 lbs.
 Eyes ... Blue
 Hair ... Fair
 Chest measure - { Girth when fully expanded ... 38 ins.
 Range of expansion ... 2 1/2 ins.
 Religious denomination ... C/E

Distinctive marks, and marks indicating congenital peculiarities or previous disease.

NLL

MEDICAL CLASSIFICATION ON ENLISTMENT.

Grade ... I

Trade classification 169 Z.M.

MILITARY HISTORY SHEET.

Service at Home and Abroad.

Country.	From	To	Years.	Days.
<u>Home</u>	<u>15-7-39.</u>	<u>7-4-40.</u>		<u>264</u>
<u>B.B.F.</u>	<u>8-4-40</u>	<u>26/28:5:40</u>		<u>49</u>
		<u>TOTAL</u>		<u>316</u>
		<u>316/316 SERVICE</u>		<u>316</u>

Initials of Official making the Entry.

Army School and other certificates of education

Passed classes of Instruction
 This includes any authorised class of instruction, e.g., in swimming, chiropody, &c.

Campaigns (including medals and decorations)

M.M. Lister Report of 11/7/40
Awarded 1939-45 STAR ARR P10.234 of 12/45.
AWARDED WAR MEDAL 1939/45.

853 SEP 1949

Wounded

Wounded in action B.E.F. 26/28:5:40 serial 516

Effects of wounds

Special instances of gallant conduct and mentions in public despatches.

Injuries in or by the Service

STATEMENT of the SERVICES of No. 10005425 Name Walter Henry Messinger
 including Annual Training in Camp and when mobilized, etc.

No. of Part II Order or other Authority.	Unit.	Promotions, Reductions, Casualties, Annual Training in Camp, &c.	Rank.	From	To	Signature of Officers certifying correctness of Entries.
<u>18: A/T</u>						
<u>Regt Rtd</u>	<u>Mul/10</u>					
<u>No 99/6</u>						
<u>of 18/7/39</u>						
		Deemed to have been enlisted <u>15-7-39</u>				
		Previous service reckoning towards present engagement				
		Due for discharge <u>14-7-43</u>				
		Joined for six months' training	<u>Gnr</u>	<u>15-7-39.</u>		<u>James H. R.A.</u>
<u>339 50 A.T. Training Reg</u>		POSTED		<u>24 9 39</u>		
<u>5/19 225 57 A.T. Reg C</u>		POSTED		<u>22 12 39</u>		
<u>5/19 225 57 A.T. Reg C</u>		POSTED		<u>28 5 40</u>		
<u>5/40 62 A.R.</u>						
<u>17/41.</u>	<u>225/57</u>	<u>Killed in action</u>	<u>Gnr R</u>			
<u>RA LAR.</u>	<u>A.T.</u>	<u>between 26/28:5:40</u>				<u>Between 26/28:5:40</u>
<u>26/28:5:40</u>		<u>with 10.3.4 Category</u>				<u>26/28:5:40</u>
		<u>40) Authy: 11/28/41</u>				<u>Authy: 11/28/41</u>
		<u>11/10.2:9:12:41</u>				<u>11/10.2:9:12:41</u>

683426

Service Record

15



Morris C8 Mk1

Likely the vehicle type his 2lb gun was towed with.
Probably the type of vehicle Sonny made his escape aboard.

In Memory Of

Gunner

WALTER HENRY MESSENGER

Service Number: 1491432

225 Bty. 57 (1/5th Bn. The East Surrey Regt.) Anti-Tank Regt., Royal Artillery who died on 26 May
1940 Age 21

Son of Walter and Dorothy Eva Messenger, of Peckham, London.

Remembered with Honour

DUNKIRK MEMORIAL

Column 19.



|||||
COMMONWEALTH
WAR GRAVES
|||||

COMMEMORATED IN PERPETUITY BY THE COMMONWEALTH
WAR GRAVES COMMISSION



Le Grand Hasard Military Cemetery