

MAJOR SAM TOWNSEND, who has died aged 94, was awarded an MC in 1945 as one of the youngest majors in the British Army.

Serving with 4th Field Squadron Royal Engineers, Townsend landed at Arromanches on D-Day+6. He linked up with 7th Armoured Division south of Caen and was immediately involved in the battle of Villers-Bocage. Aged 24, an acting major, he was second-in-command of the squadron and in charge of the heavy earth moving and bridge-laying equipment.

After the breakout from Normandy his unit, in an infantry role, was ordered to hold the bridge at Wetteren, south-east of Ghent. They were attacked by an SS company supported by mortars and anti-tank guns. Fierce fighting took place in the houses and gardens to the north of the bridge, but the squadron held its own and the enemy lost 25 killed and 10 prisoners, including their commander.

In January 1945, as the 7th Armoured Division advanced towards Germany, Townsend was given the task of building a bridge over the Vloed Beek canal near the Belgo-Dutch-German borders. After clearing a number of booby traps, he was able to push a bridge over the canal on rollers despite coming under heavy fire from railway guns sited some four miles away.

In preparation for the forced crossing of the Rhine, he had to make a gap in the huge banks that had been built to protect the land from flooding. Equipped with six bulldozers, he had to finish the job before daybreak.

A Wellington bomber flew up and down the river in order to cover the noise of the bulldozers and draw the enemy fire. By first light the job was done, and the bridging equipment, which had been assembled behind the banks, was pushed forward across the river.

Townsend was awarded a Periodical MC. The citation paid tribute to the numerous daring reconnaissances that he had carried out, often single-handed and well forward of the front line, and to his resource, technical skill, inspiring leadership and gallantry under fire.

Sam Fletcher Townsend was born at Kirmington, Humberside, on July 27 1919 and educated at Bromsgrove School, Worcestershire. He played rugby for the first XV



Praised for his leadership and gallantry

and spent his last term's allowance on gunpowder to make a large rocket which exploded on the cricket pitch just before he left the school.

At Edinburgh University, where he read Civil Engineering, he had digs near the castle and overlooking the station. The "one o'clock gun" fired from the castle was the signal for the London train to leave "on the dot". One day, at five minutes to the hour, he and a friend packed a metal pipe with explosive. They fired it out of their window and, to their glee, watched the train pull out early.

Having joined the Corps of Royal Engineers in the ranks, he was quickly commissioned. In the closing stages of the war, he took the surrender of 20,000 Germans who were assembled in a football stadium at Hamburg.

After the war, he worked for the Cleveland Bridge Co before moving to a firm of management consultants. In 1950 he joined John Crossley and Sons of Halifax and was managing director from 1964 to 1968.

Following the merger of John Crossley Carpet Trades with Carpet Manufacturing Company in 1969, he became executive vice-chairman of the newly formed Carpets International. He was also chairman of the British Carpets Export Promotion Council and of the National Joint Committee for the Carpet Industry.

In 1971 he retired on medical advice and settled in the Lake District. He took up salmon fishing and hill walking and collected and restored 18th-century pottery and porcelain.

Sam Townsend married, in 1946, Katherine Mary Reynolds (always known as Judy). She predeceased him, and he is survived by their two sons and a daughter.

Major Sam Townsend, born July 27 1919, died October 15 2013