

Major General James Herbert Samuel Majury CB MBE
(26 June 1921 – 4 September 1996)



Portrait as Colonel of The Regiment, The Royal Irish Rangers

The following is an extract from the tribute written by Major General Corran Purdon that appeared in the 1995 - 1996 edition of 'Blackthorn, The Journal of The Royal Irish Regiment'.

James was born in Antrim, on 26 June 1921, to the Reverend Doctor Matthew Majury and his wife Florence, nee Stuart.

He went to school at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution ('Inst'). He excelled in Athletics and Rugby, getting a trial for Ulster Schools at Rugby Football.

He enlisted in The Royal Ulster Rifles in the Summer of 1940 and did his training at The RUR Infantry Training Centre, Ballymena. He was commissioned from 168 OCTU into The Royal Ulster Rifles on his twentieth birthday.

After a short time with the Regiment's 2nd Battalion, James went out to the Indian Army with a batch of Royal Ulster Rifles 2nd Lieutenants, and, on arrival, was attached to the 15th Punjab Regiment.

From 1943 to 1947 he was seconded to the South Waziristan Scouts on active operations on the North West Frontier. During his time in India he became ADC to General Le Fleming.

In 1947 James had joined the 1st Battalion The Royal Ulster Rifles at Ballykinler.

The Battalion moved to Colchester, and in 1950 sailed to Korea to form part of 29 Infantry Brigade in the Korean War. The Battalion was quickly involved in operations, and on 1 January 1951 was holding a defensive position in mountainous country.

A Platoon of B Company, holding a feature called Hill 195, was overwhelmed by a mass attack of the enemy. James's skilful handling of the Battalion Mortars brought devastating fire to bear on the enemy, enabling a

counterattack by Ivor Daniel and his platoon to regain the position. By now the enemy were attacking in increasingly heavy numbers, and that night the Battalion rearguard were being attacked by wave after wave of Chinese. The acting CO was killed, James and his Mortar Platoon Oxford carrier was cut off, and heavily involved in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Corporal, now Major, Joe Lavery, James's signals NCO at the time, tells how James fought with his fists, laying out a number of enemy before he was overpowered by sheer weight of numbers.

During the long march of the Allied prisoners of war to their prisoner of war camps, in temperatures of 40° below zero, wearing inadequate winter uniforms and boots some of whose soles fell off the uppers, James's large, cheerful presence raised morale, and inspired confidence. In the prison camp, the Padre of the Gloucestershire Regiment was frequently placed in 'The Pit' for punishment, for holding religious services and prayer meetings. When this happened, and later when the prisoners were separated into two camps, James and Joe Ryal stepped in immediately to continue the services. No bibles or prayer books were allowed, but James remembered a number of prayers taught him by his father. These were written down on rice paper, made into a prayer book which was kept concealed, and later presented to James in tribute to his courageous Christian leadership.

When peace was signed, the wounded were the first to be repatriated. Then came those who had not given too much trouble to their captors. Those who had laughed at their captors' attempts at political indoctrination, and those who had led them in their opposition, were kept to the end. Among the last, if not THE last, was James, who has so inspired his fellow captives.

When it came to the turnout this final hard core to be repatriated, and they were collecting their gear to move, Padre Davies of the Gloucesters took with him the rough wooden cross made in the camp. The Chinese would not let him have it, saying it was camp property. "Right", said James, "We stay here until you let us take it". Such was his personality that everyone belonging to the various United Nations Allies, and including Muslim Turks, sat down, and refused to move until the symbol of the Christian faith had been handed to Padre Davies. The cross is now in the Royal Army Chaplains' Department Museum, Bagshot [Editor's note: expected to move and open at the Defence Academy site at Shrivenham]. Typical of James's charismatic leadership, courage, and faith. On his return to England his gallant and distinguished services were recognised by the award of a Mention in Despatches.

After leave, James attended the 1955 Course at the Staff College, Camberley, in C Division, Minley. Here he made a great impact, working hard, playing wing three-quarter for the 1st XV at rugby, golf, and taking part in the Staff College pantomime. He made a terrific hit as an Irish barman - who was it said that clergymen's children are the wild ones?

On leaving Camberley, James was appointed a Grade II Staff Officer at Headquarters Home Counties District. This was followed - from 1957 to 1961 - with five years in the Parachute Regiment, including two years as DAA & QMG, 16 Parachute Brigade. For three years James commanded B Company, 2 PARA. During this time, he captained the Regimental Rugby Team in which he was the only Irishman. At the end of each game, when James called for three cheers for their opponents, he always added "And an Irish one". It says much for his personality that this extra cheer, Irish, cheer was always lustily, if bemusedly given by fourteen English, Scots, and Welsh players.

During this time [1958], it was feared for the position of King Hussein of Jordan, and despite world opprobrium after our Suez venture in 1956, the British Government decided to mount an operation to support the King. The force used was a Battalion group based on 2 PARA. The operation was one of great political delicacy, involving overflying Turkey, and was mounted from Cyprus. The force was twice turned back while airborne, by the British Government. The go-ahead was Major J. KoJgiven for a third attempt and the force took off. James and thirty men of B Company, 2 PARA, were flying in an RAF Hastings. After a bit, the captain of the aircraft came back to James. "We're to turn back for the third time" he said. "Well" said James, "You never got the message, did you?" "No" said the captain grinning, "Radio not too good". "OK", said James, "Let's go on". "Certainly" the captain replied. Meanwhile, the rest of the force had turned back. James and the stout-hearted RAF captain flew on with thirty paratroopers until they reached Amman airport, which they found deserted.

They decided not to jump, and instead the captain made a perfect landing. James and his men got out and occupied the key positions. Jordanians arrived and gave them a friendly welcome. The rest of the force was informed and flew in the next day, to be greeted by, according to a British national daily newspaper, "a raw-boned Irish Major and his men", with everything under control. The Nelson touch had resulted in the situation being restored!



The 21-year-old King of Jordan, reviews B Company 2 PARA escorted by the Company Commander, Major James Majury

In 1961 James was promoted Lieutenant Colonel and appointed to command the 1st Battalion The Royal Irish Fusiliers, and one of their Warrant officers, now a Major, remembers vividly the impact made by their new CO, who spent as little time as possible supervising his Battalion's training, playing games, and doing PT with his men. James was a real 'hands on' CO. His highly successful tour was curtailed in 1962 when he was struck down with tuberculosis he had picked up as a POW. He had to give up his Command early and spend six months in the King Edward VII Sanatorium, Midhurst.

He recovered from TB, and went as GSO1 to the Joint Warfare Establishment, Old Sarum. Here, his efficiency and his love of fun made their mark. He is remembered for altering the words of popular songs to topical verses taking the micky out of the staff of the JWE from the Commandant downwards. At dances he would take over the microphone, and in his own fine singing voice, delight those present with HIS version of the words of popular 'hits'. James made soldiering fun.

However, the serious side of James had been noted - as far back as in 1947, when the CO, 1 RUR had rated him outstanding, and in 1965 he received accelerated promotion from Lieutenant Colonel to Brigadier, to command 2 Infantry Brigade at Plymouth. Despite his experience in Joint Service Training, his first operation was the aftermath of the Torrey Canyon disaster, when everyone in 2 Brigade, led personally by their new Brigade Commander, physically took part in cleaning up the beaches.

On completing Command of 2 Brigade. James attended the Imperial Defence College for a year, after which he had the important job of Brigadier General Staff in the Directorate of Military Operations.

In 1970 he was promoted Major General, GOC West Midland District, where he remained until 1973. He then chaired the Majury Committee, making recommendations for the future of the Territorial Army. He retired in 1974, but before he left, he was summoned to Whitehall and asked if he would be Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. In the event, no doubt for political reasons, a senior professional policeman was selected. James would have made a tremendous success of the appointment. He was Honorary Colonel 2 Mercian Volunteers from 1975 to 1979, a tribute to the affection and respect he had inspired when GOC West Midland District.

From 1971 to 1972 he was Colonel Commandant of the King's Division, but probably one of his proudest achievements was his Colonelcy of The Royal Irish Rangers from 1972 to 1977. James was a wonderful Colonel of the Regiment, and his visits to its various components were eagerly awaited. At this time, he was inspired with the idea to have a Regimental Chapel in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast. Built in 1901, the

Cathedral was not fully completed - the North Door area, in which the Chapel is now located, had been unfinished and behind boarding for seventy years.

James persuaded HRH Princess Alice to be Royal Patron, Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer to be President, and he got together a splendid working committee. His last 'official' act in the Regiment was to take part in the Service of Dedication of the new Regimental Chapel in St Anne's Cathedral on 6 June 1981, almost forty years after he had been commissioned into the Regiment.

James was unsparing in his help to others, be they organisations or people. He was a successful President of the Indian Army Association, Chairman of the Naval and Military Club, and President of the Royal Ulster Rifles Officers Club. After the Royal Ulster Rifles 50th Anniversary return to Caen, it was James who wrote and published the delightful, illustrated booklet account of their visit, and directed that the money from its sales would go to the RUR Benevolent Fund.

He was very interested in, and an expert on, greyhounds and was Senior Steward of the National Greyhound Racing Club. He was an excellent and highly competitive golfer, Captain of Ashdown Forest, and until recently, of the Lucifers. He was a Committee Member of St George's Golf Club and ran the administrative side of the Open Championships when held at the Club.

James was the most unpompous, modest man, accessible and friendly to all. As we all know, he was a strikingly handsome, very distinguished-looking man, tall and powerful. He had a terrific sense of humour and zest for life. A photograph of James was hung in the wardroom of our affiliated ship HMS Antrim, bearing the caption, 'The Army's answer to Errol Flynn'.

None of us who were privileged to know James will ever forget him. Each one of us is enriched by memories of his outstanding qualities - his commanding presence, his powers of leadership, his charisma and charm, his professionalism, his sense of fun, his warmth, kindness and thought for others. We remember a true friend, a devoted husband and father, a gallant soldier, a truly Christian gentleman.



Major General James Majury's medals

Order of the Bath. Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. 1939-45 Star. Defence Medal. War Medal 1939-45. Korea Medal with Mention in Despatches. United Nations Korea Medal. Silver Jubilee 1977 Medal.