

Fireman James Colston Cecil

13th November 1920 to 4th July 2005



James Colston Cecil, better known by friends, family and colleagues simply as Jim, was born on 13th November, 1920. All his life he was extremely proud of his middle name as he was born on the same day as Edward Colston, a major benefactor of the City of Bristol, founding amongst other things Colston's Girls school. He grew up in Paultow Road, Bedminster and had three sisters, Clare, Vi and Dorothy.

Whilst his father was extremely proud of him, as the only son, he was worshipped by mum and his sisters, something that followed him throughout his life. His own wife and two daughters adored him, and even into his later years, the ever helpful Jim attracted many female friends and admirers.

On a cruising holiday with seven ladies consisting of two sisters and five friends, he found himself alone at the breakfast table after all the others in his group were taken ill, suffering seasickness. It was here a fellow female passenger approached him and after ensuring none of the companions were his wife, she offered to become his friend and keep him company. Jim could never understand it, but with a kind and friendly nature, blue eyes and solid build, I am told it was obvious. His wife, Effie was, however, his one true love and no-one could replace her.

Growing up was not easy and Jim knew hardship. His father was a Docker who had suffered an injury at work, badly injuring his arm which kept him from working. There being no sick pay then, the family had to make do. Jim learnt to repair his shoes using old tyres, and in order to provide for the family, Jim rose early to help the local milkman with his deliveries, travelling as far as Whitchurch before he went to school.

With the advent of war, Jim joined up, following the long family line into the Royal Marines. He was posted to the battery defences in Alexandria in Egypt and served with them in 1943. His transfer into the Royal

Marine Commando group came about by accident.

One evening, when on sentry duty, he was approached by a senior officer who asked about his ability with a rifle. Jim was known as a boxer, representing the Marines on numerous occasions, and he told me that he couldn't hit a barn door at five paces with a rifle. However, not to be outdone, he said he was ok and the officer told him to aim at a buoy floating in the harbour. To Jim's utter amazement, he hit it first shot and the officer told him that he was to report the following day for reassignment. That was the new body of Commandoes being formed for specialist duties.



Jim returned to England and was sent, along with many other new recruits to Fort William by train. Upon arrival, the door was opened on the platform side, but the Regimental Sergeant Major ordered all men back inside the train, making them jump out on the track side. Here they formed up and were marched along the railway track in formation. This became the start of a completely new regime for Jim and his colleagues. Upon arrival at Achnacarry Castle, where training was to start, there were a number of graves just inside the main gate. These frightened the new arrivals as on each grave there were reasons for their death such as "....This man forgot to duck" or "....this man failed to stay quiet" and "....this man couldn't stay still".



These headstones, designed to frighten the potential Commando, gave the new arrivals something to think about as Commando training was extremely tough, with many being killed during training because they used live ammunition, grenades and mortars to ensure a realistic environment, with machine guns set to fire just above head height when they were in their landing craft. Jim was glad of this training as it saved his life whilst he was in Sicily. At Achnacarry, he kept twitching whilst stood to attention, and the officer in charge kept shouting at him. The midges kept annoying him and there was no way he could get away from them. To teach him a lesson, he was forced to run the entire perimeter of Achnacarry with his rifle above his head. Then, when completely tired out and sweating profusely, he was made to stand to attention under a tree, where the midges gathered by the million. Each time he moved, he was made to run some more until eventually he learnt to ignore the midge invasion.

On Sicily, he, along with a fellow Commando, were being tracked and hunted on a mountainside by a cadre of German soldiers, sometimes being shot at. Eventually, they found a massive tarpaulin, used for dragging slate down the mountain, and the two of them hid beneath this. They waited a long period of time, hearing the Germans pass them. Jim told me that whilst under this sheet, all manner of creepy crawlies that lived there found their way into various facial orifices, something Jim loathed, but something he had learnt to deal with in his Commando training. He also saw action in Germany at the taking of Osnabruck and the Weser and Aller crossings and was also amongst the first British troops to cross the Rhine.

One other notable fact during his time with the Commandos was that he was chosen by the Sculptor who created the Commando Memorial at Spean Bridge as the Royal Marine Commando on that statue. The statue represents the tri-group of military that comprised the Commando group, namely Royal Marines, Army and the XY group, made up of foreign fighters. If you visit this memorial, Jim is the Commando on the left, and a photograph of the miniature statue that the sculptor commissioned, found in a nearby hotel museum, shows a totally recognisable Jim.



Following the cessation of war, Jim was demobbed upon his return to England and missed the comradeship and organised life that the armed forces offered. Therefore he sought similar surroundings in Civvy Street and in 1946 he joined the National Fire Service (NFS). The Fire Service then, however, was totally unlike the Service of today. Upon completing his training, Jim was posted to Ilfracombe. The Bristol boy was completely lost in the quiet seaside town and during the nine months of his posting there he never attended one fire. Frustrated, his request to the South West Fire Force Commander states that he had no experience of fire -



fighting due to the quiet area and he wished to be posted back home to Bristol. He achieved a result of sorts by being transferred to Bridgwater. Closer, but he still was not home and Bridgwater was another quiet station. Again, a request was penned to the Fire Force Commander, stating that "...the station of Avonmouth in Bristol has more calls on a Sunday than Bridgwater has in a week".

Eventually his request was granted and Jim moved back to Bristol and was posted to Bedminster station on Ashton Drive where this picture was taken in around 1950. Ashton Drive was later renamed Station 5 of the Bristol Fire Brigade.

Jim settled to a happy normal life back in Bristol, and eventually met Effie White, later to become his wife. In fact, prior to a Christmas party at the station, Jim was trying to arrange transport to get him and his girlfriend to the dance. He approached Ron Osborne, a fireman on another watch, who had a car at that time. Asking if he could pick them up, Jim also arranged to get a blind date for Ron with Effie's twin sister, Edna.

And so it came to pass that Jim and Ron married the White twins, thus becoming brother-in-laws. His family was completed with the births of his two daughters, Catherine and Ann in the mid 50's



Jim became over the years a legend within the job. Fearless, strong and a good companion to all, Jim was extremely well respected by all those who came into contact with him. His professionalism and love of the job was a beacon to everyone and I never once heard a bad word said about him. His belief that a fireman has to rely fully on himself, his colleagues and his equipment, meant that he often led the way when being asked about the job.

He would spend hours with new recruits, walking around the appliance, questioning them about the equipment, where it was stowed, what the limitations were, and ensuring the new fire-fighters knew all about their roles in the service. Woe betides any wrong answer, for Jim was known to carry a length of line (rope in everyday parlance). At the end of this line was a large Turks Head Knot, and this knot could cause serious pain when brought down across a malingerers head. Paddy O'Leary, who first came across Jim on Red Watch Temple in 1974, and had him as his mentor, has this to say about him,

"Although he was very strict he was a great teacher, so much so that when I was in hospital after an operation he came to visit, and after asking how I was he immediately grilled me to name twelve multi point hydrants.

I learnt a lot from Jim sometimes the hard way such as after breakfast I decided to go downstairs via the pole drop, my hands and legs were on the pole when Jim grabbed me by the hair, pulled me up and slapped my head and said "Fire poles are for Fire calls only" needless to say that was the first and last time I did it.

Last but not least shaking hands with Jim was something to fear as everybody who knew him would cringe because they would know it was like putting your hand into a vice as Jim would squeeze your hand so tight it would bring tears to your eyes.

Jim was a great man, a gentle giant and will always be fondly remembered."

It never paid to mess with Jim however, the story has been told many times of the young fire-fighter who jumped out on Jim near the lockers in Bridewell station. His Commando reflexes kicked in and Jim swung around and knocked the prankster out. Something I know he would have regretted, but no doubt the prankster regretted his folly more.

Jim's antics in the station kitchen were the stuff that legends are made of. Having just made a cup of tea for the watch, they received a shout and the station emptied, so Jim placed all the cups in the oven to keep them warm until their return. Upon their return they grabbed their cups and their asbestos like hands had no problem, but when the cups hit their lips, there were several problems with burnt lips and blisters.

On another occasion when Jim was cooking for the watch due to the cook's absence, he knocked over a pot of gravy. Hating waste of any kind, he checked to see if anyone was watching and then proceeded to mop up the gravy with a dish cloth, which he then wrung out into the pot. No one was any the wiser and Jim's belief that firemen had "guts of steel" was born out.

Jim also served on the Fireboat moored adjacent to the Bascule Bridge in Bristol docks. Clive Brain, who now works on the renovated Pyronaut, tells many stories of Jim's service aboard.

When not inspecting the various ships that visited the docks, the crew were required to keep the fireboat "ship shape and Bristol fashion". Whilst varnishing the deck boards, Jim was aware that they were running low on varnish. Rather than return to the stores to replenish the varnish, Jim had the bright idea of mixing the varnish with Linseed Oil. They finished the job that day, but due to the oil, the decking didn't dry out for weeks. On another occasion, when passing below Prince Street Bridge, the crew had to lower the flag mast in order to pass without incident. On this occasion, an attractive young lady distracted Jim, who forgot to lay the mast down. The snapping of the aforementioned mast brought Jim's reveries back to the here and now, as a plausible story had to found for damaging Brigade property.



Jim also spent time in 1967 in Cornwall when the super tanker SS Torrey Canyon hit rocks just off of Land's End, spilling 32 million gallons of crude oil into the sea and damaging hundreds of miles of coastline. Jim was heartbroken to see so much damage to habitat and death to seabirds and sea life.



*Jim is pictured here on the right at Land's End with two fellow fireman.
If you can identify them, please contact Avon Fire & Rescue Service
Pensioners Association*

Jim returned home with a small brandy bottle containing oil and seawater, something that his daughters were fascinated by, because no matter how much it was shaken up, the two would always separate out, the oil floating on the water.

When Jim retired from “Red Watch” at Temple Back in 1975, he was presented with a mounted length of hose with the names of colleagues he had worked with including :-



J. Roe, J. Allen, R. Newson, I. Player, E. Capp, A. Wotton, G. Burchell, G. O'Hare, A. Doyle, A. Whitham, B. Denning, D. Barton, A. Baxter, P. Brown, G. Chappell, J. Clarke, R. Cook, B. Dou, B. Edmunds, C. Higgins, M. Evans, P. Noble, R. Baker, L. Watts, J. Winterson, M. Cowley, R. O'Leary, J. Addison, W. Beachgood, R. Williams, R. Cleveley, I. Andrews, D. Appleton and T. Franklin



Before long he was back working in the centre of Bristol, at the Courage brewery just across the road from the Temple fire station. After only a few years, Jim moved job back into his beloved Fire Brigade, working as the handyman within the Brigade workshops. Here he stayed until his retirement in 1985.

In 1998, Jim was invited to attend a passing out ceremony at the Royal Marine Commando training camp at Lympstone in Devon. Passing out that day was Matthew Osborne, son of Divisional Commander Merv Osborne and grandson of former Divisional Officer Ron Osborne, Jim's brother-in-law. The event was very moving, with the Marines knowing how to look after their guests. At the formal event, Jim was heartily welcomed back as a former boot-neck who had seen active service in the Second World War, with Ron being recognised as a former “tankie” who had also seen active service. After the demonstrations and parade, everyone gathered in the large mess area and the Brigadier who had officiated entered the room and made his way towards the Osborne party. Jim was introduced to the Brigadier as a former Marine who had trained at Achnacarry. The serving officer stood to attention to acknowledge Jim's former role, shook hands and began to ask questions of where Jim had seen action. This sparked Jim's memory and he opened up to the officer, and in return, it was plain that the officer knew his Royal Marine history by stating the names of many of Jim's former Commanding Officers. Jim thoroughly enjoyed his status on the day, which was made all the more poignant by the fact that he came face to face with his own image in the form of the miniature statues of the Spean Bridge memorial, something Jim never saw in real life.



Outside of work, Jim played a major role within his community on Bedminster Down and within the church of St Oswald's, helping many elderly and lonely people in a multitude of ways. Sadly in 1991, his wife Effie passed away, but Jim carried on helping anyone who asked for his assistance.

This was recognised in 1999 when he was nominated to receive Maundy Money from the Queen in Bristol Cathedral. As the date was 1st April, he was convinced that it was an April Fool's Day prank, and even the headed letter from Buckingham Palace did not convince him of its veracity. At the rehearsal in the Cathedral, Jim failed to turn on his hearing aid so was unaware about the correct protocols to be used during the service. Jim was however unfazed by the whole thing, and when the Queen stopped to speak to Jim, he answered in his own way.



When asked later what she had said, he told his daughters that he couldn't remember because he had forgotten to wear his hearing aid that day. He was however, very proud to have been honoured in this way, and his daughters ensured that the money was kept in a safe place, because, still being legal tender, Jim was likely to have used it to pay the paper Bill!

Whilst in his eighties, Jim paid a visit back to Temple Back station, and a young fireman, on hearing that he was being shown around, walked up to him and asked to shake his hand, having heard many tales about his strength. Jim did not disappoint and despite his age, gave one of his specials which had the young man begging for mercy. Nevertheless, he was pleased to tell everyone that he had survived a Jim Cecil handshake.

Jim's philosophy on life was one that many of us would do well to adopt, namely "...Each day is a bonus, so make good use of it", a philosophy that he aspired to for a large part of his life.

He died on the 4th July 2005, and his funeral service was packed to capacity, a testament to how loved he was by all that had met him. The inscription on his grave stone says it all, "...Loved too much to be forgotten."

Merv Osborne

1st August 2015