



united service club

history & heritage notes

Major General William Brian ('Digger') James AC, AO, MBE, MC

(14 May 1930 – 16 October 2015)

Based mainly on material sourced from various websites.



These Background Notes have been prepared as 'bite-sized' light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden awareness and understanding of selected aspects of the Club's rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these notes.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigour, attributions, and acknowledgements required for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

Major General William Brian ('Digger') James AC, AO, MBE, MC

(14 May 1930 – 16 October 2015)



Introduction

Major General William Brian ('Digger') James AC, AO, MBE, MC was an outstanding Australian. He was an inspirational and charismatic Army officer who was renowned for his professionalism, leadership, and courage. He began his military career as an infantry officer and changed direction after being grievously wounded in Korea to become a doctor and later rose to become Director General of Army Health Services until he retired from the Army in 1985. Digger was a decorated veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars who established a successful career in business after his retirement, and was a loving and beloved family man.

He joined the United Service Club in 1972, was elected to the Committee in 1986, and was Club President in 1990 and 1991, including the Club's Centenary year. He was appointed Life Member in 2004.

Digger was a tireless advocate for veterans' issues and other medical and military causes. He was Patron of many organisations and also served as National President of the Returned Services League, on the Council, Chairman of the Australian War Memorial, and Chairman of the Australian Light Horse Association.

His service over the years was recognised through the following Honours and Awards: Companion of the Order of Australia (1998), Officer of the Order of Australia [military] (1985), Member of the Order of the British Empire [military] 1969, and Military Cross (1953).

Major General Digger James AC, AO, MBE, MC died on 16 October 2015, survived by his wife Barbara, four children, and nine grandchildren. He was laid to rest with full military honours on 22 October 2015 at Pinaroo Cemetery, Albany Creek Brisbane.

Early Years

William James was born on 14 May 1930 in Shepparton, Victoria, the son of Thomas James, a local orchardist, who had emigrated from Ireland. William was educated at Grahamvale State School and Shepparton High School. His lifelong nickname "Digger" pre-dated his military career, having been applied when his father placed a slouch hat on his head at the age of ten months.

On leaving school he joined the Army in 1948 and graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1951.

Korean War

Lieutenant James served as a junior officer with the 1st Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) in Korea. He was awarded the Military Cross for his actions during the Second Battle of Maryang San (Hill 355) while leading a twelve man patrol on the night of 7-8 November 1952.

One soldier was killed after stepping on a mine and four others, including Lieutenant James, were wounded. Although severely wounded, with the loss of his left foot and damage to his right leg, using a bootlace as a tourniquet, he remained conscious and in command of the patrol, organising the evacuation of casualties back to the battalion and insisting that he was moved last, more than three hours later.

He underwent surgery at an American MASH unit in Korea, before being flown to Kure, Japan where he spent four months being treated at the British Commonwealth Hospital.

Lieutenant James was evacuated home to Australia and spent 14 months in rehabilitation at the Royal General Hospital, Heidelberg.



Lieutenant James during the Korean War, November 1952

On 3 March 1953, James was awarded the Military Cross for gallant and distinguished service in Korea.

The citation for his award of a Military Cross read:

The example set by Lieutenant James and his leadership, devotion to duty, self-sacrifice and extreme fortitude when in great personal distress was an inspiration to members of his battalion."

Digger and Barbara James were married in 1954.

Digger transferred to the Royal Australian Armoured Corps (RAAC) and served as adjutant at the Armoured School and the 12th/16th Hunter River Lancers at Muswellbrook.

His experiences in military medical facilities sparked an interest in the field of medicine, so in 1957 James left the Army to undertake medical studies at Sydney University. After graduating in December 1963 and serving his hospital residency, he rejoined the Army as a medical officer in the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps (RAAMC).

Vietnam War

Promoted to Major, Digger James commanded 8th Field Ambulance in South Vietnam and at the same time was the Senior Medical Officer of the 1st Australian Task Force at Nui Dat for twelve months from January 1968 to January 1969. He was inspirational for the encouragement and personal example he provided to soldiers wounded by anti-personnel mines.

In his book *The Battle of Coral*, Lex McAulay writes:

Neville O'Connor [a doctor from 8th Field Ambulance who had been deployed forward to Fire Support Base Coral during the famous battle there in 1968] recalled that his biggest problem...was keeping the redoubtable medical officer from 8 Field Ambulance out of the field. Digger James, known to all, had been told not to go into the field, but did persist in 'visiting'...James was admired by all who met him, for triumphing over the loss of both legs, and insisting on living an active life.

For his outstanding service in Vietnam he was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in April 1969.

Nigeria

In 1971 Digger served with a British St John's Ambulance medical relief team at the conclusion of the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria for which he was awarded the Order of St John. Returning to Australia, James was subsequently appointed Director Army Medical Services in Queensland between 1971 and 1975, Director of Army Medical Services, Army Headquarters from 1975 to 1981.

Promoted to Major General in 1981, he was appointed the Director General of Army Health Services until he retired from the Army in 1985.

Post Army

Digger was appointed a Director of Visy Industries Queensland in 1986.

In 1991 Major General James opened the Soldiers' Chapel at the Army Recruit Training Centre (then called the 1st Recruit Training Battalion, Kapooka) with the Rehabilitation and Remedial Training platoon also named in his honour. As well as serving as the National President of the Returned Services League from 1993 to 1997, Major-General James served on the Council of the Australian War Memorial from 1993; he was appointed Chairman in 1999 and served in that capacity until 2000. Digger was also chairman of the Australian Light Horse Association and his face was used as the model for one of the soldiers on the Light Horse Memorial in Beersheba, Israel which was unveiled in 2008. The memorial was funded by his childhood friend Richard Pratt.







Major General James at the unveiling of the Light Horse Memorial Beersheba 2008

Digger was a tireless advocate for veterans' issues and other medical and military causes. He was Patron of:

- 1st Battalion RAR 1985 -2015;
- Amputees & Families Support Group Queensland 1992-2015;
- Korean, South East Asian, Vietnam Veterans Association, Ballina & Districts 1997-2015;
- International Society Prosthetics & Orthotics 1992-2015;
- Australian Light Horse Association 2005;
- Australian Family Association 1996-2015;
- Australian Flag Association (Queensland) 1995-2015;
- Australian Constitution Monarchy 1998-2015; and Festival of Light 2004 -2015;

Honours and Awards



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|  | Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) | 1998 Australia Day Honours |
|  | Officer of the Order of Australia (military) (AO [Mil]) | 1985 Queen's Birthday Honours |
|  | Member of the Order of the British Empire (military) (MBE [Mil]) | ANZAC Day 1969 |
|  | Military Cross (MC) | 3 March 1953 |

United Service Club Queensland

Major General James joined the United Service Club in 1972 and was elected to the Club Committee in 1986. He was Club President in 1990 and 1991. Digger was the President for the Centenary of the Club.

He was appointed Life Member in 2004.



Club President Major General 'Digger' James hosting a visit by HRH The Duchess of Kent on 25 February 1992