



## WO2 (RQMS) Matthew "Matt" McBirney 1945-2008

Matt was born in Glasgow in 1945, and raised in the Gorbals. He started his Army career in 1962 with Minden Platoon, D Coy, AAJLR Tonfanau. In 1963, he was trained as a Radio Telegraphist at 24 Sig Regt in Catterick.

Seeking adventure and excitement Matt volunteered for Airborne Forces. He survived the inevitable 'P' Coy at Maida Barracks, Aldershot, and in common with many before him, found the subsequent Para Course at RAF Abingdon a welcome relief.



In 1964 he joined 216 Para Signal Sqn at Ellis Barracks, Farnborough. He hardly had time to unpack before the Sqn deployed to Cyprus for Operational Duty with UNFICYP. 1964 was to prove a busy year with another Operational Deployment to Borneo with Patrol Coy, 2 PARA. In 1965, he joined 2 PARA again, this time for active service in the Radfan - adventure and excitement indeed.

Those of us fortunate to know him will remember Matt as a complete rascal with a legendary sense of humour. Nothing and no-one was sacred - from his early antics in Aldershot, impersonating "Dr Kildare" whenever he encountered young QARANC recruits on their first foray into the NAAFI Club - through to the penultimate prize-winning performance that earned him a permanent place in Corps folklore. Not many ride a horse through a Sergeants Mess and come away unscathed by injury or official retribution, let alone with First Prize and a coveted Blue Rosette.

Some would say it was this sense of fun, and a few days unauthorised leave (AWOL) in Blackpool with the late John Angus, (the two of them should have been on a 216 Sqn parachuting exercise), that combined, not in his downfall as you might expect, but in his redemption. How so? Well, following the "Blackpool" incident the powers-that-be decided Matt needed to "broaden his horizons", and he was posted to Air Support Troop, 249 Signal Sqn (FARELF). There he met Jan Walkinshaw of 4 Coy WRAC, a fellow Scot, his future life partner, and given this was exotic Singapore in the 1960s, his undoubted saviour.

Having, some would say "fortuitously", survived the exotic Far East, Matt, new wife Jan, and first child Lorraine, returned to 216 Para in 1971. There followed a N Ireland tour to Lurgan with 16 Para Bde, a Drill Course at Pirbright, and numerous para/radio exercises in UK, Norway, Cyprus, Turkey, Sardinia, and Germany. Throughout this time he firmly established himself as an outstanding NCO and a highly experienced Radio Det commander. Matt excelled at sport, particularly football, and represented the Sqn at Brigade level, and the Corps at Army level. He was a fanatical Rangers FC supporter, a viewpoint he shared with the late John Angus.

While in Aldershot, Matt and Jan were further blessed with a son, Gary. In 1976, when 16 Para Bde disbanded, Matt went as a Staff-Sergeant to 7 Sig Regt in BAOR. Promoted WO2 in 1979, he joined Queen's (Belfast) UOTC as Signals PSI. There he endeared himself to his Officer Cadets by hand-painting his ½ ton Land Rover primrose-yellow - "to disguise it from the IRA," he said! In addition, a memorable prize-winning sketch, during the UOTC's Ex Northern Lights of 1978, saw the debut performance of S'arnt Major Stan Dateese.

His artistically successful UOTC tour was followed in 1981 by a posting as SSM to the newly-formed Junior R Signals Regt at Ousten, where he swapped stage footlights for the Drill Square. His last move was to Cyprus in 1983, as RQMS with 9 Sig Regt at Ayios Nikolias. The aforementioned escapade of Matt on horseback took place there, in the Sgts' Mess, prior to his farewell. Matt retired from the Army in 1985, having completed 24 years regular service. He was a recipient of the UNFICYP medal, and the GSM (1962) with clasps for Borneo, Radfan, and N Ireland.

On leaving the army, Matt, Jan and family moved back to Scotland, to Cumbernauld and a job with Tennant's Brewery. The perfect job, initially driving a beer tanker before moving into Aladdin's Cave itself - a plum job in the Beer Depot! In later years he served briefly with 32 Signal Regt (V) in Glasgow. In 2007, mobility problems forced him to retire early from full-time work. Both his knees were knackered by years of parachuting and football, and he found it both difficult and painful to walk. In spite of this, Matt found time to offer comfort and support to Myrtle and Steve Marshall during Steve's final months, at home and late the Marie Curie Hospice. Myrtle was very grateful for Matt's kindness at this distressing time.

By the end of 2007, NHS Scotland had scheduled Matt for knee-replacement surgery. In early February 2008, he had a successful operation on one knee. A week later, as he was recovering at home, he suffered a burst bowel, which led to peritonitis, septicemia and Intensive Care, where Jan was told he might not survive. Ever a fighter he did recover, and after five weeks in hospital he was sent home to recuperate. Some days later, on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup>

March, he and Jan made tentative plans for a summer cruise. Tragically, when Jan awoke the next morning she found Matt had died peacefully in his sleep ... his heart, weakened by the trauma of previous weeks, had finally given up.

A funeral service was held at Falkirk Crematorium on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, attended by his family, and scores of friends and work-colleagues. Some of Matt's comrades from 216, 244, and 249 Sig Sqn's helped fill the chapel to capacity. There were many floral tributes from near and far, and numerous messages of condolence posted on the 216 website at <http://www.216parasigs.org.uk/guestbook>.

Matt was a devoted husband to Jan, with whom he shared 39 happily married years. He was a fond father to Lorraine and Gary, and in latter years a tremendously proud Granddad to Linzie, Dan, and Georgia. Matt will be fondly remembered by his countless friends and comrades throughout R Signals and the Airborne Brotherhood. Deepest sympathies are extended to his loving family.

RIP, Matt McBirney - a wonderful brother-in-arms - sorely missed, never forgotten.

Written in 2008 by Dick Hamilton in collaboration with Pete Thornton.

Pete, a great friend of Matt's from 216 and 249 Sig Sqn's, lived in New Zealand so could not attend the funeral. Pete himself died in 2011; his Obituary can be found at [www.249sigsqn.org](http://www.249sigsqn.org).

Edited in 2012 by RAH.