



remembrance ni



## **Clandestine operations in HMS Fidelity, the war's most secret ship**

**A Naval Reserve officer who had played rugby at Inst and Malone and two Royal Marines from Northern Ireland serving in an elite Commando died in HMS Fidelity which perhaps is the vessel with the rarest**

**background in World War 2. HMS Fidelity was the title given to a French ship called Le Rhin or Le Rhone.**



**Costa from Corsica -  
Claude Andre Peri -alias  
Jack Anglais**

The naval officer was William Bell White from Belfast. The Marine commandos were William Joseph Bradley from Londonderry and John Francis Kelly from Armagh.

The vessel was originally staffed by French officers. The skipper was Costa, a Corsican. The second in command was a woman. The crew were a mixed bag of French, Belgium, Arabs and anyone else the chief officer could lay his hands on. Costa had already got rid of many of its original crew as he only wanted those personnel that would fight against the Germans and axis armies. One example of this is that of a French plane that crashed into the sea near



Gibraltar. Costa went out rescued the pilot and co-pilot and they became members of Le Rhone's crew.

The ship had arrived at Gibraltar from Indo-China, with a totally mixed cargo, as well as a top secret explosive. The explosive was code named 'Plastic' that had been smuggled out of France and that Costa was to bring to England.

Eventually the Royal Navy in Gibraltar gave permission to let the Rhone sail to England. When they left Gibraltar for England in June 1940 Le Rhin sailed under the command of Lieutenant de Vaisseau Claude Andre Michel Peri, and was turned over to the Royal Navy at Barry Docks, South Wales.

Whilst there Costa handed over the Plastic, and through his negotiations was able to persuade the Royal Navy and the British Government to agree to the crew and the ship to become part of the British Navy and so HMS Fidelity was born. She was converted to a Q ship. In this role the ship frequently changed identity to carry out its missions. On one occasion she actually sailed past the vessel she was pretending to be.

HMS Fidelity was a merchant ship or freighter. The 2,456 ton ship was built by H & C Grayson Its, of Garston, Liverpool, and completed in 1920 for *Compagnie de Navigation Paquet*, Marseilles.

Now that the ship was part of the Royal Navy it meant that the crew had to have British names or 'noms de guerre', Costa became Langlais, Madeleine Guesclin became Barclay, and Soigné was re-branded as Pat O'Leary. HMS. Fidelity would also be the only ship that would have the only sea-serving female officer (Madeleine Guesclin/ Barclay) under the White Ensign.

Fidelity went into dry dock and was overhauled and armaments fitted and became a special service vessel, a 'Q' ship. She was commissioned on 24/09/1940 as HMS *Fidelity* (D57) under the command of Lt. Peri, serving as Lieutenant Commander Jack Langlais RNVR. Her officers included Lt-Cmdr. Patrick Albert O'Leary RNVR and First Officer Madeleine Barclay WRNS.

### **Clandestine operations with SOE**

In 1941 Fidelity operated off the coast of Southern France under the direction of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Her roles were to sail to the French coast and drop of and pick up personnel on clandestine and secret missions as well as picking up escapees and return them to England.

HMS Fidelity's role was in clandestine operations on behalf of the SOE in the Western Mediterranean and it was while he was in charge of a skiff launched from Fidelity on 25/04/1941 in an operation coded "Operation Fidelity" that O'Leary was nearly drowned whilst landing two agents.





**Memorial to the ranks of 40 Commando RM including those of 'T' Company, who lost their lives when HMS 'Fidelity' was sunk by German U Boat 435 on 30 December, 1942. There is also a Memorial in St. Andrew's Church, Chale, Isle of Wight.**

Captured by Vichy coastguards, O'Leary presented himself as a French Canadian airman and was then imprisoned in the British internment camp at St Hippolyte du Fort near Nimes. From here he escaped to form the Pat O'Leary escape line, giving clandestine war history an interesting account of his activities.

It was a hard life for the crew as during these sorties in the middle of the night they would have to repaint the ship and make modifications to make it look like a Spanish or a Portuguese freighter.

In 1942 *Fidelity* was refitted to operate as a commando carrier for operations in south-east Asia. She was armed

with four 4-inch guns, four 21-inch torpedo tubes, and carried two OS2U Kingfisher floatplanes, the motor torpedo boat MTB-105, and the landing craft HMS LCV - 752 and LCV - 754.

### **‘T’ Company 40 Royal Marine commando**

Whilst on training exercises in Scotland, Lieutenant Tod RM, was summoned to London for a special briefing. On his return to Scotland he was to handpick, only the best Officers, NCOs and men and these Marines would form ‘T’ Company 40 Royal Marine Commando.

They assembled on 23/04/1942. As a group they were never to return to the main unit of the Royal Marines. They went for specialist training and the name ‘T’ company was never to reoccur in 40 Commando’s War Diary.

‘T’ company trained all over Scotland and in May 1942 moved down to Penally near Tenby.

In June 1942 ‘T’ company became officially part of HMS Fidelity. This the Corsican Langlais had always wished for and had persuaded the Admiralty to act in his favour to assist in his master plan.

The Marines then moved to their final training ground on the Isle of Wight with the address Chine View Cottage, Chale. They slept under canvas, two marines sharing a one man tent and they also had to provide for themselves. Now they became part of Langlais plan and training was intense. Barclay, an explosives expert, also trained with the men.

By this time Fidelity was refitted, and now had the two

landing craft, two motor torpedo boats, and two aircraft, as well as bristling with all manner of guns and explosives.

Time was short and soon the men embarked on their fateful mission following out with a convoy.

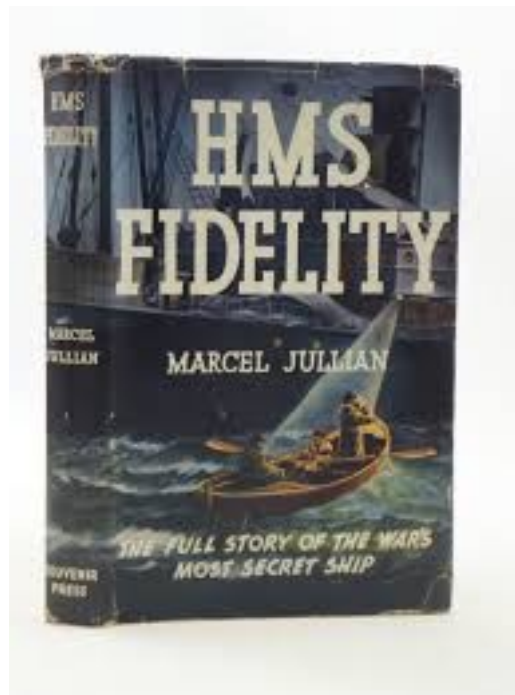
In December 1942 Fidelity, with T Company, 40 Commando aboard, joined Convoy ON 154 which was bound for Colombo, India. The convoy was attacked by German U-boats from 27th December while north of the Azores and soon many merchant ships were being sunk by the U-boats. The rescue ship was one of those sunk and so Fidelity was requested to assume that role. However, Fidelity, suffering from engine problems, was left behind by the convoy. She was ordered to make for Gibraltar.

On 30 December at 1638hrs she was torpedoed and sunk by U-435 under the command of Siegfried Strelow with the loss of 274 crew, 51 Marines and 44 survivors from SS Empire Shackleton. The only survivors were the eight crew of a motor torpedo boat, detached on anti-submarine patrol, who were later picked up by HMCS Woodstock (K238), and two crewmen of a seaplane that had crashed on take off on 28 December and been picked up by HMCS St. Laurent (H83).

## **Books on HMS Fidelity**

**The Convoy that Nearly Died : The Story of ONS154**, by Henry Revely, (London: Wm.Kimber 1979). Second hand only.

**Fidelity Will Haunt Me 'Till I Die**, by Peter Kingswell. This book has been reprinted and is



obtainable from The Royal Marines Historical Society.

**HMS Fidelity** by Marcel Jullian, see above.

**The Tragedy of HMS Fidelity**, Special Publications, Royal Marines Museum. A complete list of all the publications so far issued can be obtained by writing to the RMHS Office, Royal Marines Museum, Eastney, Southsea, Hants PO4 9PX.

**Claude and Madeleine: A True Story** by Edward Marriott , published August 2005. Hardcover 250 pages. Publisher: Picador. ISBN: 0330419161. This is mainly the story of Claude and Madeleine but it also gives insight into life aboard the Fidelity. Claude and Madeleine were trained SOE operatives.



# On this Day – December 30

## 1918

William Leefe Robinson VC died. He was the first to shoot down a German airship over Britain

## 1939

Finnish troops at Suomussalmi completely destroy the Russian 163rd Infantry Division.

## 1940

California's first freeway, the Arroyo Seco Parkway, opens between Los Angeles and Pasadena.

U.S. Vice Admiral Claude C. Bloch writes a letter to the Navy Department complaining of inadequate defenses at Pearl Harbor

## 1941

The Russian success in the Crimea continues as the Germans make a hurried evacuation of Kerch.

German Gen. Rommel retreats to El Agheila, Libya and the positions held before his April offensive against the British.

The Congress Party in India supports the British war effort, while Gandhi resigns his leadership in protest.

Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, CA launches its first Liberty-class cargo ship.

Operation Crusader ends in Allied victory.

The Battle of Kampar begins in Malaya.

Japanese forces occupy Kuantan.

Ernest King assumes command of the United States Fleet.

Soviet troops make amphibious landings in the eastern Crimea and took Kerch and Feodosia. The Germans pause their assault on Sevastopol in order to deal with these forces.

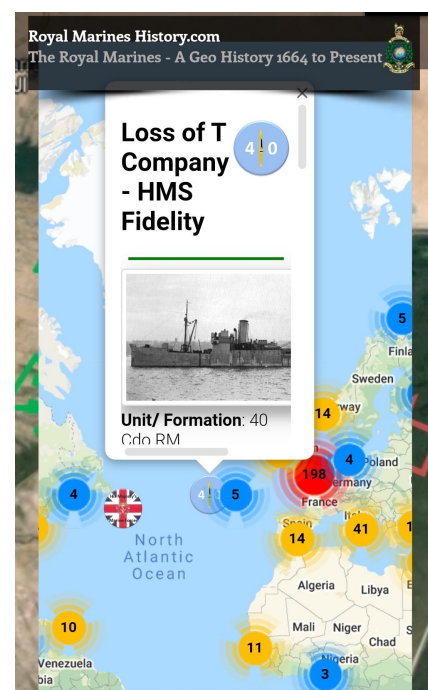
Winston Churchill makes the “Chicken Speech” to Canadian Parliament. In reference to a comment made by Philippe Pétain that Britain would be invaded and “have its neck wrung like a chicken” by the Germans in three weeks, Churchill exclaimed, “Some chicken! Some neck!”

German submarines U-705 and U-756 are commissioned.

## 1942

Loss of 53 members of T Company 40 Commando - torpedoed on special services ship HMS Fidelity 30/12/1942. The letter 'T' was never used again by 40 RM Commando for a Company. See article above and Roll of Honour below.

The allies cut Japanese forces in two at Buna.



The German pocket battleship LÃ¼tzow, cruiser Admiral Hipper and 6 destroyers leave Altenfjord and head north to intercept convoy JW-51B.

Henry Kaiser opens Kaiser steel plant in Fontana, CA.

Eighth Air Force first uses "combat box" formation to better protect bombers from German fighters.

## 1943



**38 (Irish) Brigade.** at Vasto: General Montgomery said farewell to the 8th Army to become C-in-C of the British Group of Armies under General Eisenhower. A Guard of Honour of the 2nd Bn London Irish Rifles, 'Present Arms' as he emerges from his quarters.



**6 Innisks at Capracotta:** Heavy snow all night produced drifts of 12 feet. Snow reduced visibility to zero & Bn OP closed down. 2300 Patrol returned from Castel del Guidre.

The Russians report 30-60 mile advances from the Kiev salient along a 180-mile front.

British/Indians launch Second Arakan Campaign toward Akyab, Burma.

US Marines secure crucial airfield at Cape Gloucester, New Britain in the Solomons.

General Eisenhower traveled to the headquarters of France's General Charles de Gaulle at Algiers, and agreed to de Gaulle's request that French troops be allowed to accompany the other Allied forces during the liberation of Paris.



The Soviets continued to advance in the Ukrainian sector as the 1st Tank Army drove the German XLVIII Panzer Korps out of Koziatyn.

## 1944

The Germans launch a heavy attack on the Bastogne, Belgium, corridor in the Ardennes.

The British attack on Houffalize is halted by bitter German resistance.

Second German spy (Erich Gimpel) who landed in Maine by U-boat on 29/11/1944 is arrested by FBI in New York City; William Colepaugh had turned himself in on 26/12/1944.

# Roll of Honour – December 30

*Representing their comrades who died on this day*

## 1914

### +SMYTH, George

Royal Irish Rifles 1st & 2nd Btns. Rifleman. 9001  
Died 30/12/1914. Rifleman Smyth died after the Christmas truce at a time when conditions in the waterlogged and muddy trenches were very bad. Husband of Elizabeth Smyth (nee McCallum). Elizabeth re-married. William Evans (aged 26) was a Private in the Royal Irish Fusiliers serving in Victoria Barracks, Belfast. They married in Holy Trinity C of I Parish Church Belfast which then was adjacent to the

Barracks. Elizabeth was living at 6 George St,  
Newtownards, Laventie Cemetery, France

## 1915

### **+STRATTON, John W.**

RN. HMS Natal. Armourer. M/4210. Died 30/12/1915. Son of  
William and Mary Jane Stratton of 31 Castle Street,  
Portadown Co. Armagh  
Chatham Naval Memorial, Chatham, Kent

## 1916

### **+McCLEAN, Robert**

Highland Light Infantry, 10th/11th Btn. Private. 7419. Died  
30/12/1916. Member of a Lewis Gun section hit by a shell  
burst while in the front line trench on 08/10/1915 near  
Armentieres. Son of James and Ellen McClean. Theipval  
Memorial, Somme, France. Seapatrik Parish Church WM,  
Banbridge

## 1917

### **+McKEOWN, Charles (No. 11395)**

Royal Irish Rifles. 6<sup>th</sup> Btn. Rifleman. 11395. Died  
30/12/1917. Born in Newtownards and enlisted in Belfast.  
He was lost at sea when the troopship, HMT *Aragon* (built in  
Belfast) was torpedoed off the coast of Egypt by the  
German submarine *UC-34*. That he was missing was  
reported in the 23/02/1918 issue of the *Newtownards*

*Chronicle.* Charles McKeown was born on 20/10/1893 in Mill Street, Newtownards. A son of William and Elizabeth (nee McGuinness) McKeown who were married on 04/06/1886 in Greenwell Street Presbyterian Church, Newtownards. The McKeown family lived in Newtownards, in South Street and Mill Street. Chatby Memorial, Egypt. Newtownards and District WM. Greenwell Street Presbyterian Church Newtownards RH

**1918**

**+SKELTON, William**

Royal Irish Rifles, 12th Btn. Rifleman. 6116. Died 30/12/1918. Age 44. Captured on the 21/03/1918 during the Spring Offensive. Pre-war he was a saltmaker. Husband to Mary Skelton (nee Smyth), 28 Davey Street, Carrickfergus. Hamburg cemetery, Germany.

**+WOODSIDE, David**

RN. Stoker I. K/19058. HMS Hannibal. Died 30/12/1918. Died after accident while coaling ship at Alexandra on Armistice Day. Enrolled 10/03/1908 for 12 years. War service in Goliath, Pembroke, Mars, and Hannibal in which he served three periods, the last being 16/01/1916 - 30/12/1918. Born Islandmagee 20/03/1889. Son of the late James and Sarah Woodside, Ballykeel, Islandmagee. Brother of Thomas. Alexandria (Hadra) War Memorial Cemetery. Islandmagee WM First Islandmagee - PCI RH. ADM 188/905/19058

**1939**

**+CRAWFORD, John**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 2nd Btn. Fusilier. 6976709. Died 30/12/1939. Age 26. The Battalion was patrolling the front line between Comines and Deulemont in late December 1939. During this time Fusilier Crawford is thought to have taken ill with hypothermia and was taken to a General Hospital in France where he died later. Born on 19/05/1913 in Cookstown. He was the son of Mrs McMahon, Orritor Street, Cookstown. Le Grand-Luce Cemetery, Le Grand-Luce, Sarthe, France. Cookstown WM

**1942**

## **HMS FIDELITY**

### **+BRADLEY, William Jospeh**

RM. Marine. PLY/X 3580. Died 01/01/1943. Age 22. HMS Fidelity. Son of Mr and Mrs John Bradley, Queen St., Londonderry. "He was reported missing in March last and his parents were informed officially that "it has become necessary to presume his death". Aged 22 and unmarried he joined the RM at the outbreak of war and had been serving with a Commando unit. Before the war he had been in business in London, having been previously in the employment of the Northern Counties Hotel, Londonderry, with his father who was a member of staff of the American Red Cross Club. Marine William Bradley's medals were on display in a bar owned by the Bradley family in Butcher Street, Londonderry. In 1971 the bar was bombed by terrorists and the medals were lost. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 09/04/1943, Derry Standard 03/09/1943).  
Plymouth Naval Memorial Panel 8

### **+KELLY, John Francis**



RM. CH/X 2555. Died 30/12/1943. Age 21. HMS Fidelity. Son of John and Mary Kelly, Armagh. Chatham Naval Memorial, Panel 73

### **+WHITE, William Bell**

RNR. Lieutenant - Commander (E). RD. MiD. Died 01/01/1943. Age 42. HMS Fidelity. RBAI. Malone RFC. Earlier he was in a ship torpedoed in the North Africa landings and he was mentioned in despatches for efficiency and devotion to duty on that occasion. Served an apprenticeship with Harland & Wolff, joined P & O and whilst with the latter held a commission in the RNR. Second son of Commander William Bell White, RD, RNR. and of Amelia Bell White; husband to Lilli Bell White, Christchurch, Hampshire. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 15/10/1943). Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Panel 79 Lieutenant - Commander White was an uncle of Dr Dennis White of Dunmurry who kindly responded to remembrance ni enquiries.

## **1942**

### **+ORR, John Samuel**

RAFVR. Sergeant (Pilot). 978191. Died 30/12/1942. Aged 21. Based at the largest flying-boat base in WW2 at Castle Archdale in County Fermanagh. Catalina Mark 1 B, FP239, of 131 Operational Training Unit of Coastal Command flew into Reaghan Hill in bad weather and greatly reduced visibility, 17 miles north-west of Omagh at 5:15pm. All on board the aircraft were killed. Son of Samuel and Evelyn May Orr of Armagh. Irvinestown C of I Churchyard, Irvinestown, Co Fermanagh. Dungannon WM

## **1943**

### **+MARSHALL, David**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 6th Btn. Corporal. 7020110. Died 30/12/1943. Age 25. Captain Joseph Beglin from Dublin also died this day. Corporal Marshall came from Omagh. Husband of Lillian Marshall, of South Shields, Co. Durham. Moro River Canadian War Cemetery, Italy

### **+QUIGLEY, Henry**

Royal Army Ordnance Corps. 32 Base Ordnance Depot. Private. 1522991. Died 30/12/1943. Son of William Alexander Quigley and Margaret Quigley; husband of Margaret Quigley, of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Massicault War Cemetery, Tunisia. Belmont Presbyterian Church, Belfast, RH

## **1944**

### **+FLACK, George Gaston**

RAFVR. Flying Officer. 164836. Died 30/12/1944. Born and lived on the family farm between Loup and Ballyeglish, Moneymore, Co. Londonderry. The family worshipped at Saltersland Presbyterian Church. Beckenham Crematorium and Cemetery, Kent

## **1945**

### **+CONNOR, James Lawrence**

RAFVR. Flight Lieutenant. 104184. Died 30/12/1945. MB, BCh, BAO, 1940 QUB. Hereford Cemetery, UK. QUB RH

## **VETERANS**

### **BLACKBURN, Harry A**

RNAS. Armoured Car Division. Enlisted Nov.1914.

Stationed at Wormwood Scrubs, London. Well-known Ulster motorist. Worked for Workman Clarke and British Westinghouse Company. Son of AA Blackburn, Engineer of Belfast City Transport. Belfast Mercantile College, later Belfast High School, and the Municipal Technical Institute, Belfast. (Belfast Telegraph 30/12/1914).

### **BRANN, William Norman**

Royal Artillery, Lt. Col. OBE., ERD., JP, DL. During the Second World War he was among more than 300,000 British troops evacuated from Dunkirk, and he later saw combat in the Far East during that same conflict before returning to run a successful food importing business while rationing was still in force.

He was regarded as a hugely compassionate and good-natured man, qualities he attributed to his parents - it was remarked that all four of his sisters shared the same good-natured humour yet single-minded sense of duty.

Born William Norman Brann on August 16, 1915, the son of Rev. William and Francesca Brann, he spent his childhood in his father's Manse at Ballyeaston before being sent to board at Campbell College where he excelled as a school prefect, fullback and captain of both the rugby XV and boxing team.

After leaving school in 1933, he took a position with food importers Beck & Scott. Three years later, the firm sent him to America with £100 spending money and within two months he returned with a contract from the company now known as Del Monte Agency and £80 still unspent.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the 8th (Belfast) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery (Supplementary Reserve), with whom he was sent to France to join the British Expeditionary Force in December of 1939.

Whilst trying to get to Dunkirk in 1940, the 8th Belfast received a command to 'spike' - blow up - all guns and get themselves out. Disobeying orders, he and his troop successfully brought back three of its artillery guns and some vital gunnery instruments despite almost capsizing their vessel in the process.

Back on British soil, the regiment was soon in action again during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, first in London and then on Teeside. In 1942, the regiment embarked for the Far East, driving some 2,000 miles in convoy from their landing point in Bombay down the Grand Turk Road to Calcutta. Action stations were taken up there, and later in East Bengal, before moving south to join XV Corps in Burma.

For two and a half years the regiment took part in the Arakan campaigns, firing effectively against the Japanese Air Force and even more extensively against ground targets when their accuracy at long range earned them the nickname "The Twelve Mile Snipers".



Although he suffered the loss of his father only six weeks after returning from the army in the spring of 1946, he soon returned to Beck & Scott and on May 9, 1950, married Anne Elizabeth Hughes, to whom he remained devoted until her death in June 2005. The couple had three children within five years.

In addition to his business commitments he served as a Belfast Harbour Commissioner for 19 years and in 1952 achieved the position of Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Down.

In his leisure time he was a keen hunter, regularly riding with the North Down Harriers and the County Down Staghounds, and frequently holidayed in Donegal. He advanced to the position of Lord Lieutenant of County Down in 1979, a position he held for 11 years, shortly after becoming chairman of the Somme Hospital for Ex-Service Men and Women near Holywood and President of the Burma Star Association.

The following year saw his retirement from Beck & Scott - although he remained chairman for a further 15 years and a non-executive director until his death - and his appointment as a Justice of the Peace. In retirement he continued to enjoy his farm and garden, though he was known to have been upset when ill health forced his wife into the Somme Hospital, where in 2003 his deteriorating hearing forces him to join her.

He was survived by his children Victoria, Stephen and Caroline and six grand children.

16th August 1915 - 30th December 2005

**BROWN, George**

RN. Leading Seaman. J25498. HMS Marlborough, Jutland. Enrolled 04/05/1916. Served to 30/12/1927. War service in Endymion, Vivid I, and Marlborough (16/06/1914 - 08/06/1918). Born Belfast 04/04/1898. ADM 188/697/25498

**SHORTT, James Alexander Dickson**

RNVR. Sub-Lieutenant. Joined Northern Bank at Head Office 01/04/1937, served at several branches prior to naval service 30/12/1939 - 1946. Served in an armed cruiser. In 1941 he was gazetted as a Temporary Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant (RNVR). Born 02/12/1917. MCB. Son of James Shortt, Stranmillis Road, Belfast. Post war Group Secretary, Western Hospital Management Committee. Orchard Road, Sion Mills, Co.Tyrone. Northern Bank WM

# Every day is a Remembrance Day

***We will remember them***

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**Information about individuals who served - please forward to remembrance ni at email below**

## remembrance ni

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at [houstonmckelvey@mac.com](mailto:houstonmckelvey@mac.com)

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**Please forward** - information about those who served - names, regiment, ship or unit, date of death to [houstonmckelvey@mac.com](mailto:houstonmckelvey@mac.com)

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