Date of interview: 22nd April 2026

Location: Brynaman

Interviewer: Neil Davies

Camera: Hugh Morgan

James Mason

British Army

Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Brynaman, Carmarthenshire

Methodology

James' story of service in the British Army was gleaned from an interview with him at his home in Carmarthenshire. James was 86 years of age at the time of the interview. The Author has cross-check checked James' recollections with additional sources of information and conducted research in order to create an enhanced picture of his military career. Some details rely solely on James' memory.

This narrative is compiled from 3 films, covering an interview with James. The video recording of the full interview can be viewed online by visiting the James Mason collection in the West Wales Veterans Archive on People's Collection Wales.

The Author has summarized some of the conversation from the interview, where James is quoted in this narrative.

Background

James was born during in 1940, at Rowley Regis, a town in the borough of Sandwell, West Midlands. His father joined the Royal Corps of Signals and like many British father's during World War Two, he was away from home for a long period. James recalls that after the war, his father talked about his role working for the Special Operations Executive. James' father was an expert in radio equipment and communications. He trained wartime ' Special Agents' who were inserted into France and Belgium during the German occupation.

James spent his early years at school in Rowley Regis and gained his 11 plus examination. He attended a local grammar school but was not enjoying it. By now his father was back home and understanding his son was not enjoying grammar school, he took James to see a boarding school in Stourbridge, Worcestershire. This school was an altogether different proposition. James liked the school's emphasis on practical skills and believes it was the first school in England to offer metalworking as a subject.

"*That would have been 1953. It was known as the 'Bluecoat school' I learnt to weld there."*

After graduating from the Bluecoat school, James' began an apprenticeship at a metal fabricating business in Stourbridge.

"*At fourteen and a half my dad found me an apprenticeship at 'Weldall and Assembly'. It was a huge factory. It must have covered a couple of square miles. I learned to build structures. I built boilers. The bay that I was in, operated 200 tonne gantry cranes."*

James estimates that he worked at the factory for about 4 years. In addition to working, he also attended college. It was at college that he was introduced to the idea of a career in the military.

"*I met a Professor who convinced me to move on from being a boiler maker. He said to me that if I was going into the army, there was only one trade to go into and that was*

instrumentation. He said that he'd seen me working with watches and things and I was really clever. He felt that instrumentation was the thing of the future. I thought, right that's it, I'm going to go, that's what I'll do."

In fact, he excelled at metalwork and this was recognized by his employer. The Professor identified a skill in James that, given the correct environment to learn, he could make a career out of.

A period photograph of a 750 tonne Hydraulic press at the Weldall and Assembly factory, Stourbridge. In his interview, James talks about these massive presses.

Courtesy of Grace'sguide.co.uk

Hydraulic press of 750-ton capacity for cold extrusion research

"*In my second year there I was apprentice of the year. I was building 40-foot ship's Davits* on my own."

James is referring to the crane mounted on the ship's deck, which is used to raise and lower small boats and tenders over the side.

As it happened, fabricating metal structures for ships had drawn James' interest towards the Royal Navy. He was still only 15 years of age at this time.

"*I suppose because of that, I was keen on the navy, so I signed up. I went to Birmingham and signed up in the Royal Navy as an' Instrument Technician'. Then, they couldn't give me a course for a year. They said because I was well qualified in being a boiler maker, welder, I'd get promoted straight away*."

However, James wasn't prepared to wait around for a year in order to start a course.

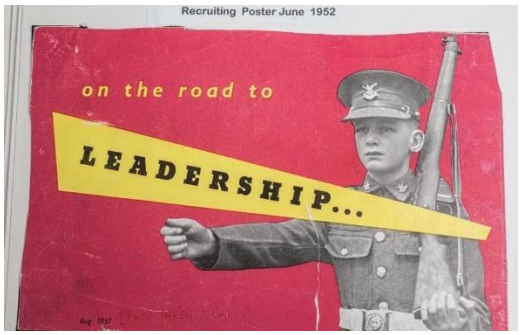
"*I said no and went to see my dad. He said because I was still under 16, I could change. He said go and join the Royal Signals or the REME. That was it, I transferred into the REME. That was 1956."*

In addition to school, James had spent a number of years with the army cadets. He continued with the cadets whilst he was an apprentice and gained useful trade knowledge and certificates. The years in the cadets provided experience, which became useful when he began his career in the regular army.

Joining the Army

"*Because of my age I had a choice. There was a REME college down in Wales, but they weren't doing instrumentation. So, I went in as a Junior Leader. Junior Leaders were based st Deepcut barracks, Blackdown, Hampshire*."

Junior Leaders had to be over 16 to join the army, so when James eventually started at Deepcut, he was a little over 16 years of age. His career in the British Army had begun.



A 1950's advertisement poster for the Junior Leaders. James may have seen something similar.

Courtesy of ijlb.com

Junior Leader training

The years spent in the army cadets prepared him well for the Junior Leaders. He recalls the training course with a sense of pride and achievement.

"*Junior Leaders training was brilliant. The instructors were pretty good, You were being taught to be a soldier. I had a Sergeant called Wally Chin and he got it out of me that I had been in the Cadets and a Sergeant Major. My main instructor Sergeant Meeker* was REME and SAS. We did all sorts of things*."

*Spelling may be incorrect.

Having an instructor with experience of the special forces was a real advantage. James remembers his methods and encouragement built up his self-confidence.

"*I remember we travelled up to Bowness to do a thing called a 'Roman holiday', under canvas. The TV people were due to meet us. There was 30 Junior Leaders, and our job was to walk Hadrian's wall in 7 days. The only trouble was it was January. When we woke up in the morning there was a foot of snow. The TV people couldn't do it. So, my SAS guy said, 'We're going anyway'. So, that was it, we went."*

Walking across the north of England in the snow in January is a challenge in itself, but sleeping under canvas added considerably to the task ahead.

"*Alot of the leaders hadn't been in the cadets and hadn't much of a clue. In conditions like that, when the snow was falling and you camped out overnight, you don't take your boots off. A lot took them off and went into their sleeping bags. Of course, the leather boots froze. When they put them over the stove to dry out they cracked. So, they leaked!"*

The adventure turned into a test of endurance that claimed many victims.

"*By the time we got to Carlisle, there was only 2 of us left. Our SAS guy took us through it. He was very good*."

REME career

After passing Junior Leaders training, James found himself posted to the REME training centre at Bordon in Hampshire.

"*It was where they did all the mechanical side of instrumentation, binoculars, compasses, tank sights. We had to learn how to use the equipment, strip it down, clean it and put it all back together, including the optics. It was a pretty intense course, about 10 months to a year."*

This was the late 1950's and with the benefit of hindsight, some of the working practices and conditions the soldiers operated in, falls well short of todays strict health and safety standards.

"*The other bit you had to learn was the compound on most of the instruments. It was radioactive and lethal. They don't use it anymore. We used to touch the paint brushes on our tongue and dip them in the radioactive compound, which was a powder you had to mix up with resin. We had to paint the instrument dials. Nowadays it wouldn't be allowed*."

Having survived the mechanical side of the training, James now had to learnt eh electrical side. The clue being in the title. Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

"*I had to go to REME Arborfield for that. The school of electronic engineering. I think it was 3 or 4 months. It was a long period, longer than all the others. There were 3 trades in REME, classified as 'X' trade and instruments was classified as 'X' trade. So, we were paid higher. You had to go in depth into electrics."*

The REME students learnt how to use, service and repair different types of electrical equipment, which was operated throughout the British Army.

"*That was the time of the Dansette radio. We learnt about valves and then the transistor. It was in depth stuff*."

There was a wide variety of subjects that REME soldiers could specialize in.

"*With instruments, there was 2 types of technician, field and workshop. The workshop technicians worked in big workshops at bases around the world. They are factories in a way. Singapore was a big workshop. I did field. You had to learn how to make a part, if it came to it. So, if an officer came to me with a watch, I had a lathe and could make watch parts."*

Being a Field Technician, James was posted to various units and operations as a lone soldier and would be attached to that unit. So, having completed all the necessary training and reaching a level of competence, James received his first operational posting. He soon began to understand the transient nature of a REME specialist in the British Army.

Operational career

"*My first posting was to a Command workshop at Ashford in Kent. I was only there for about 3 months, and they posted me to Morwenstow near Bude in Cornwall. That was interesting as it was right on top of the cliffs."*

James is recalling the former RAF station named Cleave in north Cornwall, which is about 4 miles from Bude. After World War Two, it was used as an emplacement where aeroplanes would take off and tow drogues, allowing anti-aircraft gunners to practice firing at moving aerial targets. It later became a HM Government signals station and later still a GCHQ installation.

"*We'd taken it over to train the TA, Territorial Army. We used to get up to 2,000 TA coming in every month in trucks. You can imagine what those lanes were like. There was about 40 REME soldiers and I was the only instrument technician. My job was on the L47 anti-aircraft gun. They used to shoot at the drogues*."

James explains what his regular job at the base entailed.

"*I had a staff sergeant come and join me. They gave us some little 12-volt cameras, that they'd taken out of the aeroplanes from World War Two. They had little heaters on the sides. They said we had to mount these on the anti-aircraft guns, so they could see where the shell explodes. I had to fit these on all the guns."*

Before long, it was time for James to move on.

"*The problem with my trade was because we were so few, they moved us here, there and everywhere. I was never in one place longer than 10 months or a year."*

1960 heralded James' first overseas posting. He was sent to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea.

Cyprus

"*I was stationed at a place called four-mile point. It was in the old city of Famagusta. It was a listening point, and the RAF and Royal Signals had these huge masts all over the place. My job was all the instrumentation, and my title was 'Assistant Director of Mechanical Engineering'. I was stationed with the Ordnance Corps. There was a bout 3 or 4 of us REME there and we were in tents at first.*"

In 1960 the conflict over British Crown rule was drawing to an end, and Cyprus declared independence in the August. However, hostility towards British subjects and interests continued. There was also tension between the Turkish and Greek communities. This eventually led to armed conflict and the United Nations peacekeeping force being deployed to maintain the peace.

"*We were pretty busy there. We had lots of problems with Makarius and that*."

James is referring to the main political protagonist of the Cypriot independence movement, Archbishop Makarius 3rd. Makarius had once been exiled but returned to the island, where he garnered increasing support and eventually became president of an independent Cyprus. Another notorious figure during the struggle for independence from Britain was General Grevas, who founded the EOKA organization. EOKA launched the armed struggle against British forces on the island.

"*One night I was Guard Commander, and we got called out to an RAF woman that had been attacked, which was to do with EOKA. I got the guys in the 3-tonne truck and went straight down into Famagusta. We arrested some men but had to pull out, as it was classed as an international incident. It was a funny old time*."

He recalls how he and his colleagues felt about the situation at the time.

"*It was a bit harried. We'd go into villages in the back of a 3-tonne truck with our SLR's*. There was a lot of guys killed put there."*

**SLR - Self Loading Rifle; standard issue personnel weapon carried by British soldiers.*

However, despite the problems with EOKA, James and his friends managed to make the best if things and enjoyed the island as best they could.

"*I loved it. Most of us did. You could go up into the Troodos mountains and go Skiing. We used to go over to North Africa and do car rallies. Not as the army but private individuals. We drove a Simca and I was the Navigator because I was good at map reading. I had a Lambretta scooter out there and we used to drive all over the island exploring. It's a beautiful island. We had to be careful because of EOKA*."

National Servicemen

James recalls that he served alongside National Servicemen in Cyprus.

" *We had about 20 or 30 of the last National Servicemen with us. They were all about 28 to 30 years of age, because they'd been deferred because of their trade or apprenticeships. National Servicemen only got paid National Service money. Some were REME and some were Ordnance Corps."*

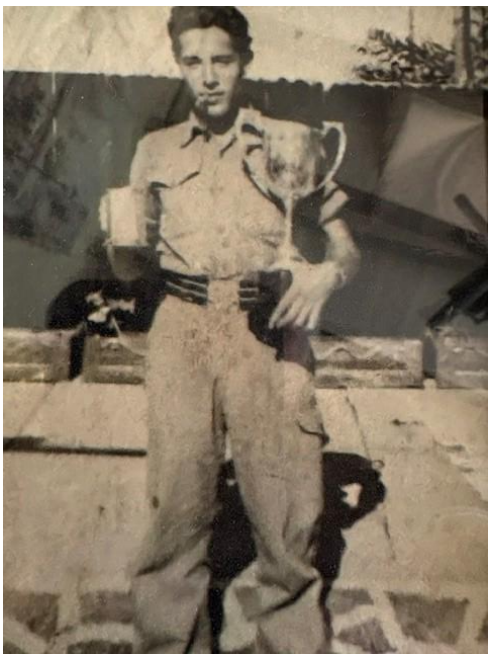
Marksmanship and Shooting competition

"*The Green Jackets* were out there at Dhekelia, and we had the army shooting championships at Dhekelia ranges. I was selected by the Ordnance Corps to represent them and I won it. I was British Army rifle shot champion 1960, with the SLR*."

*Royal Green Jackets, British Army infantry regiment. Now part of 'The Rifles'.

James was clearly a good shot with a rifle. To win a shooting trophy as a REME tradesman in the army was uncommon and wasn't appreciated by the Green Jackets.

"*The Ordnance Corps thought I was the bees' knees. I was a full Corporal and waiting to become a Sergeant. I have a picture of the major general presenting me with the cup. The base fell off onto the Brigadiers foot, and you can see both of us laughing in the photo*."



James enjoys a fun photograph holding the cup for winning the British Army Cyprus shooting competition 1960.

James' photograph

Injury in Cyprus

"*When I was out in Cyprus I had to teach the local Cypriot's. I got moved into the command workshop in Dhekelia, where they were doing their training. I had to teach them how to use the Radioactive equipment. There was a huge cabinet with gloves attached to the inside. You put your hands inside because of the Radioactive stuff.*

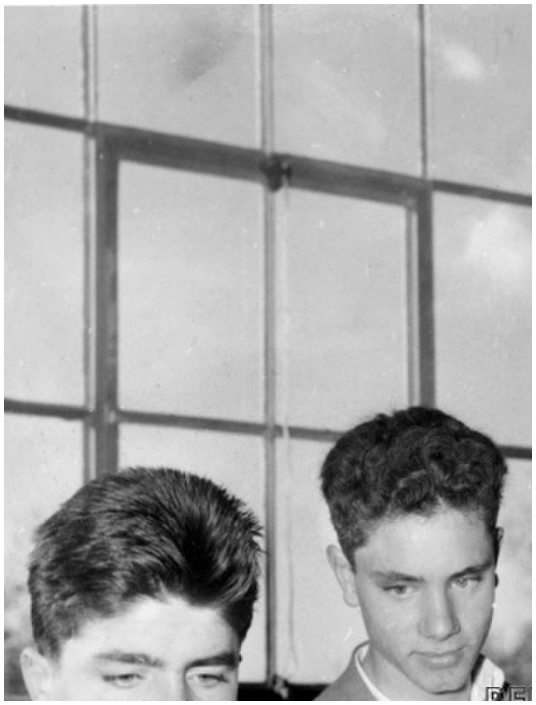
I was teaching four youngsters and one of them knocked over the lead container with the Radioactive material in. All the alarms went off, and my job was to get them out first and contain the radioactive stuff. Then go back in. After I had done all this, they took me to the 'Sick Bay' to get checked over with the Dosimeter. They sent me to the British military hospital at Dhekelia, who checked my blood and said my white blood cells were very low. They said I'd been exposed to a very high dose of radiation."

The medical personnel didn't hold back on a prognosis.

"You're going to get Cancer and you'll never have children."

This was certainly a terrible incident and had dire repercussions.

"*I ended up in a RAF military hospital. A top Surgeon, a Wing Commander, operated on my hands. He was going to take all my fingers off, but he did skin grafts and things like that. He did two ops and it went okay. I've still got them! I was in there for nearly a year getting it done."*

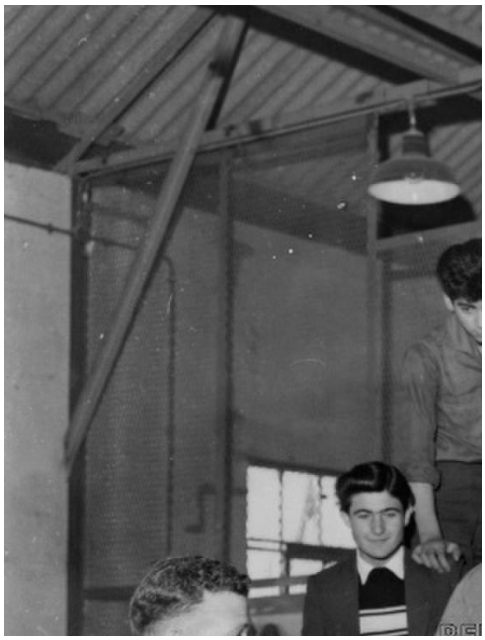


A 1960's photograph of a REME Instructor teaching local apprentices in the Command workshop at Dhekelia, Cyprus. James instructed at this establishment.

Courtesy of REME museum

Another photograph of a Corporal REME instructor showing Cypriot apprentices around an engine at the Dhekelia workshop in the 1960s.

Courtesy of REME museum



James was soon on the move again, bidding farewell to Cyprus.

Return to United Kingdom

This was a period of the 20th century, where the United Kingdom and its NATO allies, were facing down the threat presented by the mighty Soviet Union, with Russia at its beating heart. Both eastern and western armies had built a vast array of weaponry, and the nuclear age was reaching a critical point. This period would become known as the 'Cold War' and there was no hiding from the reality of mutual destruction. James was about to discover what this potentially meant.

"*I came back to England in 1962 to do a Nuclear Biological and Chemical warfare course. It was down near Warminster. As part of our training, we had to experience this stuff. They'd take you out on the ranges, dab you on the wrist with a blob of mustard gas and walk you around this field. We had to experience all this to become an NBC officer. The end result was you got issued with special maps, a compass and the location of these nuclear shelters. If war broke out, you had to take readings. That was yours and you couldn't tell anybody about it."*

BAOR Germany

James was posted to 'West Germany' to the British Army barracks at Detmold. This was a key base in the defence network built up by the British Army of the Rhine and was known as Hobart barracks. In 1962 it was home to the 20th Armoured brigade and 200 Signal squadron.

"*The REME, about 60 of us, took over the old SS barracks. There was a thousand or so guys from a Brummie regiment in the main camp itself. Detmold was only a little village, but the camp was big*."

British forces in 'West Germany', along with its NATO allies, regularly trained for the potential of war breaking out across the eastern borderland. The idea was to maintain a high state of capability and readiness, in order to deter the Soviet Union from attacking.

"*Because it was the Cold War we would get crash outs regularly, As soon as the siren went, you had to get your gear and be out of the camp on the trucks within 10 minutes. We'd disperse in the countryside, and we'd be away for a fortnight. You had to go through all the stages of a nuclear war*."

REME workshops at Hobart barracks pictured top left and the REME LAD area right - 1953

James recalls some memories from one of many NATO exercises practised across 'West Germany' during the Cold War.

"*We'd camp out in the countryside. The REME would deal with any instances where equipment was playing up. Any instruments that were playing up on the tanks or the Howitzers. I had a thing called a Z wagon. A Bedford 3 tonner with a big back on it. We had equipment inside like a mini lathe. It was a mobile workshop."*

A REME mobile workshop. James worked from a similar truck in the BAOR.

Courtesy Pinterest

During these exercises, commanders tried to mimic battle like conditions. This made for an uncomfortable life for the soldiers living out in the open air.

"*We had to bivouac. It was a groundsheet that you used and slept under for 2 weeks. This happened in the winter as well, in the snow. You wouldn't just do it in the sunny weather! We used to sleep under the tanks. They'd been out all day and were still warm. But we had one or two 2 guys that lost their lives doing it. The tanks could sink down overnight."*

When regiment, camp or corps deployed on exercise, the soldiers entered a state of being incognito with the outside world. This was a fact of life for the Cold War soldier, and it could have consequences for their personal or family life.

"*When I was on one of these crash outs, my first wife was still in England and pregnant with our first daughter. So, when we came back in from the field the post room would be piled high with mail. I had a Telegram that my wife had had my first daughter the day after we crashed out. So, she couldn't get an answer back from me and I didn't know my first daughter was born for nearly three weeks*."

Return to United Kingdom 2

Next on the agenda was a return to the UK and an introduction to army aviation.

"*Then I got sent to Middle Wallop to do a helicopter course. This was a course for ranks above Sergeant. There weren't enough married quarters, but I had a caravan. I was allowed to use my caravan and nearby was a campsite. So, I had my wife and 'nipper' there, just outside Middle Wallop in Wiltshire. We started and there was about 30 of us on the course."*

The course was being held at the Army flying station, located in Northwest Wiltshire. Originally a World War Two RAF flying station, the Army took over the base in 1958. The Army Air Corps operated the base and there was a significant REME presence, with technicians assigned to support helicopter flying operations.

An aerial view of Middle Wallop army flying base.

Courtesy of waddamsfamilyhistory.co.uk

James remembers that there was a significant neighbour next to the Army base and this helps date the time of the course.

"*TSR 2, was the most up to date fighter bomber in the world at the time. It was taking off just above us. It was a bit like Concorde when it took off, and it was low level. Every time TSR wanted to take off, they had to ground everything at Middle Wallop. It used to hedge hop, 150 feet above the ground. It was an absolutely brilliant plane, like Concorde*."

The TSR 2 prototype aircraft which so impressed James and his colleagues

Courtesy of Air Power Australian

The TSR aircraft was being developed to arm the RAF with a tactical nuclear platform, to modernize the NATO capability of counterattacking the threat from the Soviet Union. Another reminder of the Cold War. The TSR programme operated from Boscombe Down and was eventually cancelled due to spiralling costs. The last test flight occurred on 31st March 1965.

What happened next may seem crazy, but loyalty to a soldier's regiment or corps is deeply ingrained and a fact that one decision maker at Whitehall failed to take account of.

"*Anyway, with the helicopter course and edict came down from the War Office saying all trainees have to wear the Army Air Corps badge. We said no, we're REME, we're not going to change our badge. But they said, no, you're doing the course and have to change your badge. So, 28 REME guys got RTU'd* and 2 guys carried on doing the course!"*

*Returned to Unit

So, James was on the move again.

"*I went down to Lulworth Cove. They were setting off a new missile called 'Swing-fire'. We did a lot of missile firing at Lulworth Cove, testing and then they sent us up to Scotland."*

James is referring to Lulworth ranges. This is a large military installation in Dorset, situated near the coast. The Army continues to lease this site, which has been used as a safe venue to test fire from mobile and static platforms for a long time. Bovingdon military camp had a significant REME presence. James was attached to 22 TU (Trials Unit).

A photograph of Bovingdon military camp in the 1970s illustrates the size of the camp.

Courtesy of REME museum

The Swing-fire missile was an anti-tank wire guided missile, and was still under development in1965, when James joined the development programme. Swing-fire would eventually become commissioned for operational service and became a main weapon in the anti-tank armoury between 1966 and 1993.

A Swing-fire missile being launched from a British Army mobile launch pad.

Courtesy of Wikipedia.com

Scotland

"*It was an old artillery base from the last war and in mothballs. There were 60 of us up there. They had 2 guys who would fire the missile, and my job was to sort out a Simulator. It was a Camera that was operating as a Simulator.*"

James found working on the development programme enjoyable and an opportunity soon came, where he could put his skills and experience to good use.

"*I remember the Colonel saying 'We got a problem Mason. We haven't anything that will light up the night sky'.*

He'd managed to obtain a Carl Gustav anti-tank gun, but it hadn't got any sights on it.

He said, 'Can you make something up, so we can fire the flares from it to light up the night sky?'

James jumped at the chance to showcase his fabrication skills.

"*I went back into the workshop and sorted out this 'Field Clinometer'. I strapped it onto this Carl Gustav and set it off, graduating it to all the different angles, to give them the right firing height. All the night firings were done using this thing I had set up."*

A military field clinometer is an instrument used to measure vertical angles, slopes, and elevation. On artillery pieces, it sets barrel angles for indirect fire, calculating slope and terrain gradients.

Pictured above are examples of a WW2 vintage Clinometer and the Carl Gustav Re-coiless rifle.

An exciting opportunity arose from James' involvement with the Swing-fire missile programme.

"*At the back end of my service, I got a chance to go out on board ship with the Royal Navy, because of the missile. When Swing-fire was finished they used it on the ship and they needed people to teach them how it worked. I went to HMS Ariel."*

It was a new experience for James, boarding a Royal Navy ship and working alongside the naval officers and ratings.

"When I went on board a ship, this guy said,

'Now, I'm in charge of this ship and you call me Master',

I said 'Pardon ?

'I'm the Master at Arms and you will call me Master'.

I said 'I won't. You're equivalent to a WO1 and I'll call you sir'.

Well we went in front of the Captain and he said things are a bit different on a ship but I'm happy if you call him sir."

HMS Ariel was a shore establishment at Lee on Solent, Hampshire.

James had reached the rank of a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer and classed as a Sergeant Instrument Field Technician. He was encouraged to apply for a Commission. At the time, with 7 years trade experience, he would start his officer career with a pay grade of Captain.

"*I was about to go, when the Colonel called me in and said that somethings changed. The War office has just passed, that you have to have a degree to have a technical commission in the workshop. You haven't quite got it, so you have to go into admin. So, I said I'm not going behind a desk, so I'm coming out*."

James was keen to advance his career and progress into a workshop managerial role, but the Colonel had mapped out a career path, which involved transferring to an administration role. This wasn't something James was happy about. He was eager for progress but had always enjoyed using his hands, knowledge and experience with tools. The thought of switching spanner for pen, was too much to contemplate.

"*It was 1970 and I was 30 years old. There and then I decided, I wasn't going to sit behind a desk*."

This development spelt the end of James' military career, and he left the Army as a Sergeant.

Life after the REME

James did indeed continue to work with tools and enjoyed a long and successful career fabricating products from metals and wood. Looking back to that accident in Cyprus, the RAF Surgeon contributed more than he could know, to James' full and enjoyable life.