

Lives Remembered – A military doctor and a chaplain at Kohima



Reverend Gus Claxton's chapel in the Burma jungle, 1944
([Harold Claude 'Jock' Murrills \(1915–2006\)](#), artist, platoon commander in 2 DORSET)
(reproduced by permission of the Murrills family)

The extract below (reproduced with permission) is from a new book by Christopher Jary, *'Who's Afear'd?'*, due publication in May 2026, which tells the story of the Dorsetshire Regiment's triumph on Garrison Hill, Kohima, on 13th May 1944.¹ This extract focuses on the remarkable relationship between the Regimental Medical Officer, Captain Joe Chamberlin [sic] RAMC, and the Dorsets' military chaplain, Reverend Gus Claxton, who together saved so many lives.

....

First among these was the position of the Regimental Aid Post, which Joe Chamberlin established within a hundred yards of the enemy. Men wounded in most of the Battalion's positions around the club square and on Garrison Hill could receive treatment very rapidly. It was a brave decision on Joe's part because grenades and mortar bombs were bursting all around and the club square was under constant sniping; his RAP could easily have been overrun by an enemy who shot and bayoneted medical teams and casualties with equal enthusiasm.

¹ Christopher Jary is a military historian and author of twelve books, including eight about the Hampshire, Devonshire and Dorsetshire Regiments. To mention just one series, his 231 Malta Brigade trilogy tells the story of the 2nd Devons, 1st Hampshires and 1st Dorsets in Malta, Sicily & Italy, and on D-Day. Christopher is the curator at The Keep Military Museum, in Dorchester, <https://www.keepmilitarymuseum.org/>.

Second was the quality and quantity of care available not only from Joe and his Dorset team but also from Captain Norman Swallow's team of the 5th Field Ambulance of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Twice the number of wounded men could be treated and passed on rapidly for further attention six miles away at Jotsoma.

Third was the very effective system the Dorsets set up from the outset whereby an armoured ambulance could make its way past the Japanese positions to retrieve wounded men from the three companies who took it in turn to hold the worst position at the end of the spur overlooking the road.

Finally, there was the astonishing team that Joe Chamberlin and Gus Claxton led and fostered. Sergeant Osmond, described by Knocker White, as *a redoubtable veteran*, was snatched from them during the Kohima battle and promoted to become company sergeant-major of Headquarters Company. Corporal John Plantard, half-French, half-Dorset, was another stalwart of Joe's team but was killed doing his vital job on 6th May. Lance-Corporal Walter Davies from the streets near Euston Station, a pre-war horseman driver and porter, became a tireless stretcher-bearer. Davies, Osmond and Chamberlin himself were all mentioned in Despatches and in any other theatre of war would probably have received a Military Cross or a Military Medal. All these, plus Bandsman Fred Fowles (Joe's batman) and Private Kingston, who drove the Jeep, working with the sixteen stretcher-bearers across the four rifle companies, were the men who saved the lives of so many wounded at Kohima. Theirs was a proud record. They continually risked their lives rescuing casualties from the battlefield, tending the wounded, comforting the living and burying and praying for the dead.

At the heart of this was a remarkable relationship between two outstanding men: Doctor Joe and The Reverend Gus. Born in London in 1915, Joe attended Merchant Taylor's School before training as a doctor at St Thomas's Hospital. After graduating in 1938 he remained at St Thomas's as a houseman, specialising in obstetrics, until he was commissioned into the Royal Army Medical Corps and sent to France with the BEF in 1939. Here he met Gus, the Padre of the 2nd Dorsets and – as we have seen – they joined forces to evacuate a convoy of wounded to the beaches of Dunkirk. This fortuitous and fortunate encounter persuaded Joe to swap jobs and to become the 2nd Dorsets' Medical Officer.

Gus Claxton was four years older, born a child of the Indian Raj and educated at St Paul's School and Peterhouse, Cambridge. His obituary when he died in 2003 describes what his half of the partnership achieved at Kohima:²

Throughout three weeks of bitter exchanges in which the Dorsets took heavy casualties, Claxton was always where the fighting was heaviest... At the height of the battle he was to be found with the stretcher-bearers or at the regimental aid post, where the Medical Officer calmly dispensed sweet tea and morphine. However dangerous or arduous the mission, Claxton was always the first to volunteer to accompany the party; and there were many casualties who owed their lives to his prompt, decisive and courageous action.

Joe and Gus each received the Military Cross, which both earned several times over. Joe's award came through first while Gus remained undecorated until the end of the campaign when Knocker White – a man of powerful character and considerable powers of expression – drafted what was probably the

² Colonel the Reverend Gus Claxton served as chaplain to the Dorsetshire Regiment throughout the Second World War and was awarded the Military Cross for his actions in Kohima. He died, age 92, in 2003. His obituary in *The Telegraph*, 26 March 2003, is available to subscribers only:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1425634/Colonel-the-Reverend-Gus-Claxton.html?msocid=0b069dedb18c6c6d2d518eb2b01b6d54>

Similarly, the obituary 'The Rev Gus Claxton' in *The Times*, 25 March 2003, is subscriber-only.

longest MC citation ever written. It rang the bell and on 6th June 1946 Gus's gallantry was at last formally recognised.

In the proud tradition of the Dorset Regiment, Gus was in reality Leslie Edward Mitchell Claxton and Joe was John Alexander Chamberlin. Renamed in honour respectively of one of T S Eliot's *Practical Cats* and a prominent Victorian politician, both were adopted into the Dorsetshire Regiment. Whatever they did and wherever they went, they would never be anything but proud Dorsets. And together at Kohima, with their gallant band of orderlies and stretcher-bearers, they came as close to achieving miracles as normal mortals can.



The Battle for the District Commissioners' Bungalow, Kohima Ridge, India, 13 May 1944

Artist: [Harold Claude 'Jock' Murrills \(1915–2006\)](#); © the Murrills family, reproduced with permission.

The original is at The Keep Military Museum ([link](#))([Facebook](#))



[Memorial image](#) courtesy of the Kohima Museum, York

Lives Remembered

Wednesday April 02 2003,
1.00am, The Times

Patrick Shervington writes: The Rev Gus Claxton (obituary, March 25) was an honorary chaplain to The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. He was greatly respected for his reassuring feel for a situation — none more so than when conducting the annual remembrance service at the regimental memorial in the City of London. In our museum at the Tower of London there is a splendid oil painting by Jack Russell, *We Will Remember Them*. It shows Gus on parade at Holborn in full robes, leaning on his walking stick in characteristically determined pose.

Leslie Houlden writes: In 1948 Gus Claxton was warden of the Army Church House which occupied a medieval nunnery at Preetz, near Hamburg, where I was during National Service. He preached a sermon on the conversion of St Augustine which affected me deeply. More than 40 years later, when I was teaching at King's College London, I discovered he lived near by and belatedly thanked him. I was invited to a merry, even uproarious, tea party with him and his wife. He claimed to be amazed that any sermon of his had made any difference to anybody.

Screenshot 'Lives Remembered' from The Times, 2 April 2003 ([link](#))



Reverend Gus Claxton, conducting annual remembrance ceremony, Fusilier Memorial, London

© Jack Russell (artist). Image credit: The Fusilier Museum London ([link](#))

We will remember them