

100th birthday tribute to Pat Higgins (born 15 September 1926)

Founder and first Chairman of Friends of Millbank

Nickname: 'Jupiter' (see below)

Ad multos annos



*Pat Higgins (centre) with Mihaela (née Gheorghe) and the late Frank Davis,
at Royal Hospital Chelsea, 2022*

Introductory note by Col (retd) David Vassallo, current Chairman, Friends of Millbank

I am deeply grateful to three very close friends of Pat Higgins, namely Julia Harden-Wells (daughter of L/Cpl Eric Harden VC), Peter Roufs from the Netherlands, and Colin Dean (Pat's fellow Honorary Vice-President, International Military Music Society), who have kindly sent me the following tributes in celebration of Pat's 100th birthday on Tuesday 15 September 2026. Colin, fittingly, reveals the very apt meaning of Pat's nickname, *Jupiter*. I am also deeply grateful to many other Friends of Millbank who have sent birthday greetings for inclusion in our personalised 100th birthday card, to be hand-delivered to Pat on his special day. I have included below the greetings from Russ Parkes, former AMS Corps RSM, as an example.

Pat is one of only eight current In-Pensioners at Royal Hospital Chelsea who served in the Second World War (he served from October 1944 to 1952). He has used his many talents wisely. He was the founder of Friends of Millbank in 2006, soon after the RAMC moved out of the Royal Army Medical College, and our first Chairman, from 2006-2010. Pat aimed to ensure that the ethos and spirit of Millbank, the Alma Mater of British military medicine from 1907-1999, its motto '*Ever to Excel*', would continue to inspire current and future generations of military medics. He outlined this aim in his first newsletter, in December 2006, '*Keeping Alive the Memory of Millbank*', available on our website's Resources; the link is https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/downloads/News_Dec_2006.pdf. His immediate successor, Col (retd) Frank Davis (Chairman 2010-2020), provided continuity and growth in his inimitable and lovable style. Our website's strapline '*Celebrating the heritage, achievements and ongoing relevance of military medicine [to global healthcare]*' re-affirms Pat's aim.

Pat has also been whole-heartedly involved for many years in commemorating Lance Corporal Eric Harden VC, medical orderly attached to the Royal Marines, who was the last RAMC recipient of the UK's most prestigious military decoration, awarded posthumously to Harden '*for valour in the presence of the enemy*' at Brachterbeek in the Netherlands on 23 January 1945. See below.

A tribute by Peter Roufs: Pat Higgins and commemoration of L/Cpl Eric Harden VC



Pat Higgins reading the Dedication at the Commemorative Service for Eric Harden VC in 2007

Tribute by Peter Roufs: *In Brachterbeek, where Eric Harden lost his life during the liberation, I was a primary school teacher. We often took the pupils to the area just outside the village where all those terrible events took place in January 1945. To pay tribute to those exceptionally brave men who restored freedom to our region and its inhabitants.*

In 1995, the British war veterans from No. 3 Commando and the Royal Marines (led by John White – 3 Cdo) visited our region and our school for the first time. It was a huge success for all of us. Since then, they have returned every year, and we have welcomed them with great enthusiasm and given them the honour they deserve. From that time onwards, I was a member of the 'Maasbracht-Linne British Liberators Welcome Committee'. We organised the programme to ensure these people also enjoyed a few wonderful and special days.

At one point, Pat Higgins also became part of this group of veterans. And that is how we met. A very warm, very kind, committed and enthusiastic person! In 2007, as a Committee, we helped ensure that the plaque on the bridge over the Vlootbeek in Linne – which had been erected to commemorate Eric Harden's heroic deed – was restored. This was done in consultation with the RAMC. The formal unveiling took place that year, and Pat Higgins was present at the ceremony, proudly taking on the role of reading out the Dedication. Julie Harden, Eric's daughter, also came into our lives for the first time that year. Together with her, Pat Higgins, Sergeant Major Malcolm J. Ratcliffe and a few other RAMC members, we also visited the spot in the field where Harden lost his life and the house from which he had carried out his actions. It was one of the first times Julie Harden had been there. She placed a small wooden memorial cross in the field. Very emotional!

Not long afterwards, in consultation with the local Mr Henk Welters, we erected a metal commemorative cross at that spot, along with a plaque detailing the full history of that dramatic 23 January 1945.

Not long after that, working closely with Pat Higgins, we decided to extend the memorial with a plot of land on which a large black memorial stone was erected, featuring a portrait of Eric Harden and the insignia of the RAMC and the Commandos, as well as a motto and a sketch depicting the situation in 1945. That was in January 2013. Pat funded the majority of this new memorial and peace garden. Together, we were very proud of our collaboration and called it the 'P & P Partnership'. (Patrick and Peter). Whilst we were in London, we also presented Pat with an official certificate marking that partnership. He was absolutely delighted with it.

Whenever we visited London with our family, Pat would arrange our accommodation and was usually already waiting for us at the hotel with guidebooks, maps and tips. As a guide, he gave us a few excellent tours at Westminster Abbey and showed us rooms and chambers there that the general public could only dream of seeing. We were also allowed to attend the 'page-turning' ceremony for the RAMC commemorative book. Later, when he was living at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, we visited him there several times as well.

When the British veterans were eventually no longer able to come to the Netherlands, it was Pat, together with Julie Harden and her husband Bob Wells, who took over the honours and attended the school commemoration at the monument in the field every year around 23 January. The schoolchildren always looked forward to these very special guests, and during the convivial get-together with singing and dancing, Pat was also completely in his element. And so did we all, of

course. In the days surrounding that official commemoration, we had a programme with these guests, ranging from visits to cemeteries and monuments to pay our respects, to more relaxing activities such as sightseeing trips and dinners.

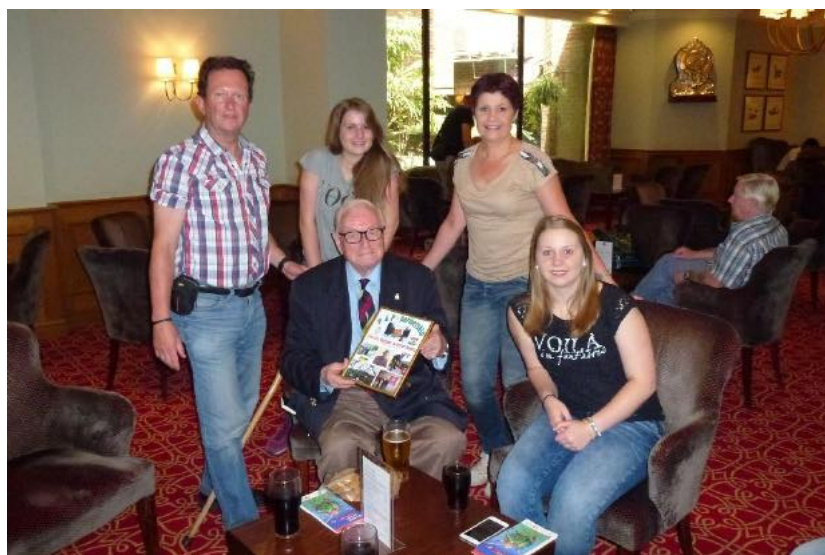
Pat was always very meticulous and precise in everything he did. A small example: at the refurbished plaque on the bridge and at the new monument in the field in Brachterbeek, we had to ensure, above all, that the 'King's Crown' was placed on the RAMC crest, because that was how it was during the war and not otherwise!

My wife, our two daughters, myself and the members of our Remembrance Committee still have very warm and fond memories of our many wonderful moments with our big friend Pat Higgins. Pat made our lives – and those of so many others – even more special and meaningful! May God bless him!!

Echt NL 9th September 2026 – Peter Roufs



The new memorial (2013) to Eric Harden VC at Brachterbeek



Presentation of 'P & P Partnership' certificate to Pat Higgins, 2013



Pat Higgins, Julia Harden-Wells and colleague at Harden bridge, 2015



Peter Roufs and family visiting Pat Higgins at Royal Hospital Chelsea (2022)

Tribute by Julia Harden-Wells (daughter of Lance Corporal Eric Harden VC)

Dear David & Friends

It is my privilege to write about what Pat means to me.

In 2000, when my mother was seriously ill, Pat wrote to my brother sending his best wishes & this was followed by a treasured letter from HM Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. Because of her connection to the Corps, Pat felt HM should be informed that my mother, as the widow of a holder of the VC, was very unwell.

After the death of my mother Pat arranged for floral tributes at her funeral &, sadly, her death was quickly followed by the death of my brother, when I received condolences from Pat.

From then on Pat became a very dear friend of my family & I learned a lot more from him about my father's legacy. Very early on he told me about his plan to try to establish a 'Friends of Millbank' as he knew about the display there of my father's (& others') medals & also the history of the Corps at the hospital. He felt deeply that this history should be saved. (I remember being overawed as a child when my mother & I were invited to tea with Major General Barnsley & others at Millbank to see the medals displayed in a case!).

Later, as Pat developed his interest in my father, he became 'adopted' as a commando by the comrades of my father who had survived the war & we had many interesting outings together, including to The Netherlands. There we met Peter Roufs & others who keep alive the names of my father & his comrades who helped in the Liberation. Together we visited the battlefield where my father died, it was the first time I had been there. I know how moved Pat was by this visit as he was heavily involved in the acquisition of the site & the raising of a memorial there. I treasure photos of us together both here & at my father's grave in Nederweert.

Pat spent a long time researching & recording military history. I admired his tenacity in searching out truths but he said it was just because he was a nosey parker! His research into The Unknown Warrior is fascinating & he tied it to his connection with Westminster Abbey.

My life has been enriched by my friendship with Pat, I have learnt a lot & had many adventures with him. Bob & I send him many congratulations on his century & thank him for his love, generosity & all the happy memories.

Bob & Julie xxx

(Julia Harden Wells)

**Tribute by Colin Dean (Pat Higgins' fellow Honorary Vice President,
International Military Music Society)**

Holst, Planets, fourth movement

Enjoy: Gustav Holst: The Planets 'Jupiter' // Sir Antonio Pappano & London Symphony Orchestra.

Read below for an explanation of Pat's nickname 'Jupiter'.

Pat Higgins is one of that small band of members to whom the International Military Music Society (IMMS) owes so much, not just from his tenure as secretary but ever since with a succession of ideas, advice and generosity. The UK Newsletter was originally produced using a proverbial battered typewriter and it was Pat who arranged for one of his work colleagues to advise on the society acquiring a new gadget called a computer to enable the editor to retain the high quality editorially while bringing about a considerable improvement in the presentation. Much of the society's publicity material has been based on Pat's advice and his friendly and helpful personality achieved great things in enhancing our image.

Always interested in bands and pageantry, Pat was looking round the Kneller Hall Museum one evening prior to a summer concert in the mid-1980s, and got into conversation with the curator, Lieutenant Colonel George Evans OBE, politely suggesting that the presentation could be improved with better quality labelling and offering to get some produced, an offer gratefully accepted.

When Rose Griffiths decided to retire as IMMS Secretary in November 1988, Colonel George, wearing a different hat as an IMMS Vice President, thought of Pat as an ideal replacement and he was persuaded to apply. Eileen Pearson also applied and they both underwent a thorough grilling from a panel including Colonel George and Sir Vivian Dunn, the conclusion being that both were too good to reject so an agreement was made to split the duties. Pat relinquished the position three years later but continued to help and advise in 101 different ways for the remainder of his active life, being invited to become an Honorary Vice President of the UK Branch on 17th November 2001.

Pat was born and brought up in Brighton, not the ideal place to undergo your education with the regular bombing raids during the war years. As soon as he was old enough he presented himself at the local recruiting office asking to see the Royal Marines' recruiter, having decided that was the unit for him. The gruff army recruiting sergeant told him very tersely that his RM colleague was out and he would have to wait, so Pat took a seat, fully aware that he would be there until closing time at the nearby watering hole. Pat being Pat wasn't put off by the unfriendly welcome and started chatting to the sergeant, mentioning that his nephew was Pat's best friend at school.

When he heard this, the sergeant's attitude completely changed and softened with a "come over here laddie and have a chat", explaining that while the Royal Marines might appear glamorous, he would be better off joining the army and learning a trade that he could continue with once the war was over, something that proved solid advice. By the time the Royal Marines recruiter returned, suitably refreshed, Pat had signed up to join the Royal Army Medical Corps.

He joined up and soon qualified as a dispenser, completing a form stating a preference for being posted near home at Brighton, but the clerk mis-copied the information and Pat instead found himself on his way a bit further afield - to Fort George, near Inverness. Once he got there, he loved the place and his friends in later years would spend many an hour listening to Pat's reminiscences from

those times. Pat remained in the army after the war and, with so many being de-mobilised, he found himself promoted to sergeant at what seemed a ridiculously young age.

One of my very happy memories is of visiting Fort George with Pat in 1996 as he was in his element re-living his experiences there. The museum curator very helpfully started telling us about the place but ended up learning a whole host of things from Pat that he didn't know himself. For example, Pat pointed to a small section of brickwork which did not match the remainder of the wall behind the chapel, recalling that the repairs were necessary after someone used too much explosive in the charge to signal the start of the silence during the memorial service held as King George VI's funeral was taking place.

The main bonus of the posting was meeting his future wife, Myra, and they were married in Inverness Cathedral. Pat was able to attend the very first Edinburgh Tattoo in 1950 and probably set something of a record as he went every year for about the next fifty years. As usual he had many a tale to tell, his favourite being of a performance in the 1950s when the massed pipes and drums were led by a clearly well-refreshed senior drum major, the man depicted on the whisky bottle, weaving his way unsteadily down the esplanade. As they returned towards the castle, the lights were dimmed and two redcaps emerged from the drawbridge to discreetly take the drum major away, the Camerons' drum major moving to the centre on the counter march with few people realising what had happened. Fifty or so years later, Pat visited the redcaps' museum and was relating this incident to the curator - small world, he had been one of those who had recovered the drum major!

True to the promise of the recruiting sergeant, Pat's experience with medicines did indeed help him settle into civilian life, working initially at Boot's where, in addition to his day job, he helped to establish their historical archive. By 1977 he was at Bentall's department store in Kingston and persuaded the management to hire the Kneller Hall Trumpeters to sound a fanfare in the store every day during Silver Jubilee week, something that caused quite a stir and was very popular with the customers.

Pat later went into teaching and became a lecturer at the College for the Retail Trade at Leicester Square, where his practical experience was clearly a refreshing change for the students from the more academically-minded staff. He had firm views about customer service and was saddened by the declining standards now evident.

I once asked Pat about his nickname - all teachers have nicknames, after all. Pat went uncharacteristically coy so I persisted and after much cajoling and persuasion he rather reluctantly admitted that he had been aware of being referred to as 'Jupiter'. "Why Jupiter?" says I, and after much more reticence he admitted that he too had been puzzled so once asked one of the students. His reply was brief: "Holst, Planets, fourth movement". Still none the wiser, Pat popped into the local record shop and found the Holst section, discovering that the fourth movement of The Planets suite was called '*Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity*'.

After Myra died, Pat moved from his home at Woking to a flat in Battersea to be close to his many interests in London, including acting as a host in Westminster Abbey, maintaining an involvement with the RAMC Association and becoming an honorary member of the Commando Association in recognition of the good work he had done for them.

He had long made regular visits to the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, to meet chums and in 2017 took up residence there himself as an In-Pensioner, under the care of his Captain of Invalids, Major Phil Shannon MBE, recently retired as Director of Music, Irish Guards, so he and Pat had much interest in common. Pat's only regret about taking this step was that he hadn't done it ten years before.

How different Pat's life would have been had the Royal Marines recruiter been less thirsty and the RAMC clerk had more diligently completed Pat's posting preference, which just goes to show how the little things shape our lives so much. The Bringer of Jollity indeed, Pat made a massive contribution to the development of IMMS and enhanced the lives of so many people with his kindness and generosity so we wish him all the very best for completing his first hundred years.

**Greetings from Russ Parkes,
former Army Medical Services Corps RSM**

To my dear friend Pat,

Happy 100th birthday to a true hero and a lifelong brother-in-arms. A century of grace, fun, style and excellence. You are a living legend, that taught me so much and influenced my time as the Army Medical Service Corps RSM. You have highlighted our Corps history with unmatched determination. Wishing you a peaceful, joyful 100th birthday surrounded by the people who love you.

**With heartfelt 100th birthday wishes to Pat Higgins
from all Friends of Millbank
*Ad Multos Annos***