Lance Cpl Ian Malone, the Irish Guardsman from Ballyfermot who was killed in Iraq a year ago, was more than a good soldier. He was also a gifted chess player, musician and academic, whose tragic death helped many people see Ireland's relationship with the British military in a new light. **Philip Watson** speaks to those who remember him

A MICK TO REME

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Lance Corporal Ian Malone died in an ambush on the streets of Basra on April 6th 2003 – a year ago on Tuesday. Throughout a long, hot Sunday, he and his armoured brigade had been part of a vanguard group pushing through the southern suburbs of Iraq's second city, flushing out enemy soldiers. While most of the regular Iraqi Army had fled, the streets and houses contained pockets of determined Fedayeen fighters, paramilitaries who remained loyal to Saddam Hussein.

Having reached the edge of the old city and achieved their objective of securing a university campus, Ian Malone and his colleagues had left their Warrior armoured personnel carrier, and were regrouping. They had scoured the area and, in the dusty shade of dusk, all seemed quiet and safe. Some of the crew of 10 soldiers even felt confident enough to remove their helmets.

In an instant, however, two Fedayeen in civilian clothes broke cover and sprayed the men with automatic fire from their AK47 rifles. Four soldiers were hit. Ian Malone took two bullets – one through the neck, the other in the head – and died instantly, becoming one of 55 British Army soldiers killed in Iraq during the past year.

What made the 28-year-old Lance Corporal remarkable, though, apart from the peerless qualities that all who knew him instantly recognised – he was a thinker and philosopher; courteous and religious; a talented chess player and musician; an exceptional soldier; and, as his school chaplain said at his funeral, "not macho but manly; he was a very manly man" – was that Ian Malone was an Irishman fighting for the British Army.

His story certainly stands in stark contrast to the propaganda and distortion that has surrounded the much-reported Iraqi war experiences of another soldier with an Irish surname: Private Jessica Lynch, who was "rescued" from an Iraqi hospital by US Special Forces.

In fact, many have found in Ian Malone's life and death something profoundly symbolic: the notion that he represents the continuing spirit of progress and reconciliation that exists between Ireland and Britain.

Ian Malone grew up in Ballyfermot, an area not known for its pro-British allegiances. It's the sort of marginalised city area in which expectations can be low and opportunities limited. Many go under or lose their way; drugs and crime are not uncommon. Ballyfermot has always, however, been an area of strong family ties, resilient community spirit, good schools and committed teachers – and from an early age Ian, the eldest of five, did well. Clever and curious, and both physically active and a keen reader, he raced ahead of his fellow primary school pupils and had to be kept occupied at all times.

He began to play chess at the age of six, later joining the local chess club; in tournaments in his teens he could beat men several times his age. It was a pursuit that he would enjoy and succeed at throughout his life. In the army, he would often win matches against his commanding officers, until he was told, only half-jokingly, not to do it too often because it was bad for morale. Perhaps the ancient war game suited his quiet confidence and very logical intelligence.

At the local Christian Brothers secondary school, he continued to shine academically. Father David Lumsden, who was the school chaplain and taught religion, says Ian thought an awful lot more than was common for his age.

"He was a deep young fella, and it was only when he asked a question that you'd realise he'd done his reading, thought through his position, and was putting an awful lot more into the discussion than you were. You'd love someone like that in a class because there's nothing worse than lads whose heads are down all the time. I would always go in better prepared if I knew Ian was in the class – he would challenge you all the way."

Yet his more stubborn, non-conformist sensibilities also began to surface. For one mock exam for his Leaving Certificate, he was given a zero mark for writing one-sentence answers to questions, later claiming it was a waste of time. Shortly afterwards, he refused to sit his final exams, insisting that he would take them a year later, which he did, with some success.

For the next three years, however, he worked in an assortment of manual jobs, driving forklift trucks, working in factories, and packing goods in warehouses. He was mostly restless and unsettled; sometimes he would stay in a job for just a few days.

His waywardness was reined in by various compensatory disciplines. In his teens he briefly took up boxing, but he found greater fulfilment in the controlled power of martial arts, becoming the local under-16s karate champion. Although Ian Malone was tall and skinny for his age, he also had great strength and stamina.

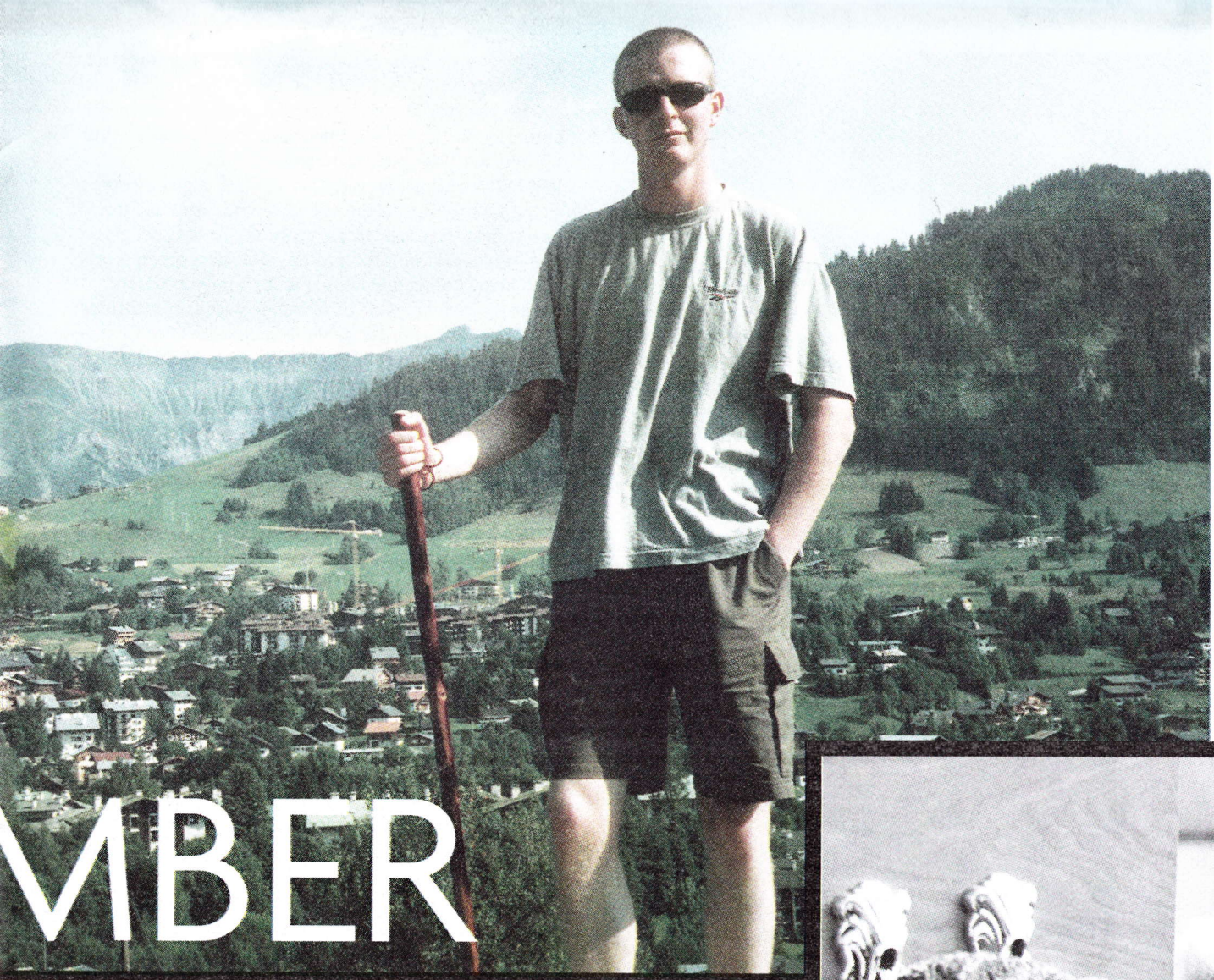
His dedication was primarily reserved, though, for the FCA. Having joined the Reserve Forces when he was 15, he would spend one night a week and every Sunday morning training at Rathmines Barracks, four miles away. He would also go on three-week summer camps, for which he got paid a small amount. "The FCA required a reasonable level of commitment, and it gave Ian that initial sense of adventure," says Father Lumsden. "It sowed the seeds of his decision to join the army."

Ian Malone's first choice was a career in the Irish Defence Forces. His maternal grandfather had served in the Irish Army and it seemed a logical progression from the Reserves. He was to be bitterly disappointed. At that time, in the mid-1990s, Ireland's Defence Forces were only recruiting school-leavers up to the age of 18. Ian was 21.

Undeterred, he considered careers in the French Foreign Legion and the British Army, and discussed opportunities with Father Lumsden. Both options presented difficulties. "I remember that we'd both seen the Laurel and Hardy film, where they go off and join the French Foreign Legion, so we instantly rejected that option," says Father Lumsden.

"We knew how tough it would be. But Ian was also being a bit sluggish about joining the British Army. I think he was worried about what others might say and how it might affect his family. I encouraged him to join up, though, because I felt the lifestyle would suit him and I knew that it was a very good job."

In 1997, Ian Malone applied to the Irish Guards, a regiment with a long and proud history within the British Army. Formed in 1900 by order of Queen Victoria to mark the conspicuous bravery of the Irish soldiers who



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APPRECIATION

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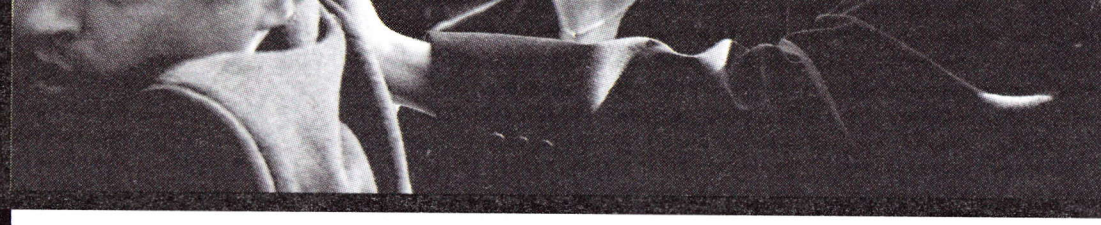

Top: Ian Malone during training in Switzerland. Left: his passing out parade (second from left) with the Irish Guards at Wellington Barracks, London. Photographs courtesy of the Malone family. Above: Ian Malone's brother, Edward, at the removal of Ian's coffin from the Church of the Assumption, Ballyfermot. Photograph: Bryan Brophy/Allpix

fought in the Boer War, the "Micks", as the Guards are widely and affectionately known, played an important role in both world wars, winning an impressive six Victoria Crosses. Until recently the battalion was presented with shamrock on St Patrick's Day by the queen mother; at her funeral eight members of the Irish Guards – two of whom were from the Republic – carried the royal coffin.

Ian Malone's decision also had a long historical precedent. While Irish regiments had been prohibited from joining the British army up to the end of the 18th century, by 1850, after a crudely pragmatic recruitment drive, half of the men serving in the army were of Irish descent. Almost 150,000 Irish soldiers fought in the first World War; 49,000 died. More than 60,000 Irishmen also saw action in the second World War; like their compatriots in the Great War, all were volunteers.

As one of 400 or more men from the Republic then serving in the British army, some of them stationed in Northern Ireland, Ian Malone was part of a familiar Irish story of economic emigration – he was seeking work abroad when there was little at home. And never having left the country, he was no doubt seeking travel and experience, too.

It took him three attempts at the army recruitment centre in Belfast to be accepted; there were problems with his weight (too thin), eyesight (he needed contact lenses), and academic qualifications (he actually had to improve his Irish). Yet in one army test, Ian was found to have an IQ of 130 and he was offered the possibility of officer training or joining the RAF. He declined both, saying that foot soldiering and the Irish Guards were for him.

In 1997 he travelled to England for training. That winter, he sent Father Lumsden a Christmas card in which he wrote how much he was enjoying himself. "He was bubbling over with enthusiasm and finished by saying that we had made the right decision." Ian Malone would send the chaplain a Christmas card every year after.

His family also noted a change in him. "I half expected Ian to come straight back – I didn't think that he'd last – but when he came home for the first time I sensed that he'd discovered what he was looking for," says his mother, May. "He was happier in himself and had definitely found his calling. Ian enjoyed every minute of being in the army."

He soon joined 1st Battalion in its base at Munster in Germany, and over the next five years he was sent on tours to more than 20 countries, including Canada, Poland, Oman, Afghanistan and Korea. After completing a pipers' course in 1999 he joined the Pipe Band; just as he was a born soldier, Ian Malone was a natural musician. Promoted to lance corporal, Ian saw action in Kosovo in 2000. Just before he was sent to Iraq, he had begun his lance-sergeant's course.

"Ian was a very well-known and highly regarded

Left: The Malone family since Ian's death in Iraq – Michelle, Debbie, his mother May, Edward and Carol. The gap in the middle is deliberate as they intend to insert Ian's image at a later stage. Photograph courtesy of the Malone family.
Below: Ian Malone (second from right) with his fellow pipers

fellow in the battalion and a soldier of great potential," says Charlie Knaggs, commanding officer of 1st Battalion. "He was much more than an ordinary soldier – he was a very special man."

A keen short story writer and an avid reader of books on history, military history and archaeology, he had also persuaded the army to fund his Open University degree course in English and History. It was a horrific irony, therefore, that Ian Malone was killed in the grounds of Basra's College of Literature.

Throughout all this time, Ian Malone cleverly negotiated the prisms and paradoxes of being an Irishman in the British army. He swore fealty to the Queen of England and learned to sing the British national anthem. Yet in the barracks and pubs, he stayed resolutely and proudly Irish and, along with most of his regiment, would sing noisy renditions of songs such as *The Fields of Athenry*.

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fied in pro-Government newspapers and it was reported that his grieving mother's sister was raped as punishment for the boy serving in an "imperialist" army. He was finally laid to rest in his native city of Gweru, but his grave was later desecrated.

While Ian Malone would have been accused by some of being a similar traitor, most who witnessed his funeral saw it in starkly contrasting tones. The respect given to the brave Irish soldier and the welcome given to his British army colleagues was seen by many as an end to old, anti-British ways of thinking. It was as if attitudes towards his life and death represented a sense of Ireland maturing as a republic, that its post-colonial history was in the past and no longer shameful.

"People in Ireland go on saying men died for our freedom, and that's a fair one – they did," Ian Malone once told a RTÉ documentary, summing up his feelings both historically and personally about being in the British army. "But they died to give men like me the freedom to choose what I want to do."

He paid the ultimate price for that freedom, and his sacrifice has hit his family and friends very hard. "When Ian's mum told me I think I nearly got sick from the news," says Barry Mangan, Ian's closest friend and the executor of his will. "All I remember is May saying to me, 'I'll never get over this' and 'I don't know how I'm going to go on', and I couldn't really reply – my voice had just completely left me."

"Ian made a strong impression on everybody he met – he was the kind of guy you always wanted to see and when you saw him coming you'd raise a smile," says Tony Finlay. "Even now it's hard to believe. We'd got so used to him going away and coming back that we're kind of still waiting to see him again."

"You never think you're going to bury one of your children, and at the beginning I was so angry that he died, and that nothing could bring him back, that I just wanted to smash everything in the house," says Ian's mother. "It's still a terrible shock because Ian was such a good man and a good son. He had great friends and always attracted good people to him, and he never caused me any trouble. He was just special I suppose –

proudly Irish and, along with most of his regiment, would sing noisy renditions of songs such as *The Fields of Athenry*.

British army life could have been an isolated and lonely place for an Irishman to have found himself; a national no-man's-land. Yet Ian Malone seemed too self-possessed and self-aware to let such challenges affect him. Standing six-foot four inches tall, it was probably difficult for him not to stand out. Nonetheless, he seemed to thrive on the perceived conflict.

It was only at home in Dublin, on leave, that he might need to be more careful. Although there was a universal acceptance of his career choice within his family and close friends, Ian Malone would be aware of the potential for criticism in his wider community. "He was always guarded and extra careful about telling strangers what he was doing," says friend Tony Finlay. "He'd prefer to use such expressions as 'on the job', 'at work' and 'in Germany'."

Another close friend, Paul Harraghy, agrees: "There would be people who we'd know who, on principle, would hate an Irishman being in the British army. But Ian didn't see it as any diversion or conflict with how he felt as an Irish person. He could also handle himself and I never experienced him getting into any trouble because of what he was doing."

"People looked up to him and he had great respect for all people," says his mother, May. "He was also very proud of where he came from; Ian walked with his head high in Ballyfermot."

Two years after Ian had signed up to the Pipers, another non-Briton joined the regiment: a soldier from Zimbabwe named Christopher Muzvuru. He was the first black piper in the Irish Guards, and he and Ian Malone became friends. Both loved Guinness; both were gifted pipers. At dawn on the day of the ambush in Basra, Ian Malone and Christopher Muzvuru were spotted playing traditional Irish tunes on their chanters, small pipes kept for practice. Christopher Muzvuru, 21, was to die alongside his friend and colleague in the attack.

At the end of April last year, Guardsman Malone was given a huge funeral in Ballyfermot, during which – after special permission was granted by the Irish Government – British soldiers in uniform were seen on the streets of Dublin for the first time since the Civil War in 1922. His funeral was marked by intense emotion and dignity. During the removal of the coffin from the funeral home to the church, Ian's 20-year-old brother Edward, who was one of six people carrying the coffin, became so distressed that another bearer had to quickly step in. As the coffin passed, local policemen were seen saluting.

At the funeral Mass, several men wore British military blazers, ties, uniforms and medals; it was the first time many in the local congregation had felt free to do so in public. In his oration, a British army chaplain talked about the tortuous relationship between Britain and Ireland, its tragedies and heroics, and the way the Irish Guards had always brought people from differing traditions together. The 1,000-strong congregation gave him a long and spontaneous round of applause.

As the coffin was taken up by a bearer party of Irish Guardsmen and led out of the church, two pipers played traditional laments; one was from the British army, the other from the Irish Defence Forces. At the family's request, no national or regimental flags were draped over the coffin or hearse. Among the many wreaths was one that simply read "Molly", the nickname that stuck firm to Ian from the moment he joined his regiment.

And finally, at the cemetery, after one of Ian's best friends in the Guards, fellow Irishman Paul Teague from Co Donegal, struggled against the sorrow and the bitter wind to play *The Last Post* on his bugle, the regimental colonel, the Duke of Abercorn, stepped forward to present May Malone with her son's piper's cap. Ian Malone went to his grave an honoured and honourable man.

In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe refused to allow Christopher Muzvuru's body to be returned home for burial, denouncing him as "a British mercenary". He was vilia good man and a good son. He had great friends and always attracted good people to him, and he never caused me any trouble. He was just special I suppose – maybe I was given a special child."

While May Malone received many letters of sympathy from soldiers and officers in the British army, and hundreds from people in Ireland, Britain and around the world, there was one letter, she says, that was notably absent.

"We received nothing from Bertie Ahern after Ian died," she says. "I was so annoyed with him, not just because it was disrespectful, but because it felt like he was hiding from the part he played in the war – in a war I feel was totally unnecessary. I was very bitter for some time."

It was not until five months later, after media and political lobbying of the Taoiseach, that a letter of condolence finally arrived. "It came in at lunchtime on the day I was going to talk about Ian on *The Late Late Show,*" says May. "He only sent it because he was under pressure and he shouldn't have bothered at all. If I ever meet Bertie, I'm telling ya now ... "

The Taoiseach's oversight is all the more curious when you consider that many in Ireland think Ian Malone's death may have unexpectedly created some political goodwill. One of Ian's friends, Paul Harraghy, believes it may even have beneficially affected the relationship between Ireland and Britain.

"Ian died for what he believed in and gave his life not for a country but for an ideal – the ideal that freedom is more important than any particular patriotism," he says. "I think the reason the British army chaplain received such an ovation was because he reminded us of that, and of the notion that what unifies people in Ireland and Britain is far greater than what divides us, or what we think divides us."

It is a sentiment echoed at the foot of Ian Malone's gravestone in bleak, windswept Palmerstown cemetery in Dublin. Beneath an engraved chess piece (a king, naturally) and a photograph of him in jacket and tie – his kind eyes looking out plaintively from between his high forehead and fine features – is the Latin phrase "Quis separabit". It was Ian Malone's regimental motto. It means, "who shall separate us". ◆