



A HISTORY OF

THE ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS STAFF BAND (1898-1984)

The British Army must be unique in the number of its Regimental Bands, almost every Regiment and Corps boasted one. This tradition stems from the days when Officers dipped into their pockets to provide the Instruments and the necessary instruction for the musicians. In this respect the Officers of the Army's Medical Services were no less forthcoming than their contemporaries.

The earliest record of music in the Corps is in the 1880's when Cpl. Lunney of the Medical Staff Corps was sent to Kneller Hall to be trained as a bugler. In 1892 Major Haynes, himself a cello player, started an orchestra at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, and when the Depot moved to Aldershot came under the conductorship of Mr. Wylie of the Aldershot Theatre Royal.

But the event which marked the formation of the Band took place in February 1894 when a Bugle Sergeant who played the cello and seven Boys forming a string and wind instrument Band played in the Medical Staff Corps Officers Mess in Aldershot. The efforts of Surgeon Major Grier, who had a love for music and tremendous enthusiasm, helped considerably in the early training of these boys on musical instruments. In 1893 the Surgeon major had formed a Musical Society with a monthly subscription of two shillings and sixpence each from Officer members of the Corps. A loan from mess funds financed the purchase of instruments, others were collected from efforts which had been made earlier at Netley, and so the Band got under way. Surgeon Major Grier was also a persuasive administrator and in 1897 had succeeded in ensuring that the Band would survive by getting 600 Officers of or connected with the Corps to pay an annual subscription to Band funds of Five Shillings. These funds remained up to 1939 but grants obviously had to be made from Corps funds. It is recorded that in 1920 the Band was costing £400 per annum, the Bandmasters salary of £250 being included in that figure.

In 1894 the band practised in a disused Hut in Stanhope Lines in Aldershot under the tutelage of Bugle Major Johnson assisted by a kindly Bandmaster named Anderson of the Highland Light Infantry. Its young members were learning string and brass instruments and later Bugles.

In 1895 the General Officer Commanding at Aldershot, HRH The Duke of Connaught, gave permission for a Bugle Band to play on parade. Later that year drums were added and then sufficient volunteers were found from soldiers in the Depot to form a Military Band of reed and brass. In 1896 Mr. Bennett, a retired Bandmaster of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, became the first Bandmaster of the Corps. In 1898 when the Royal Army Medical Corps was formed, official permission for the Band was given by HRH The Duke of Connaught, first Colonel-in Chief of the RAMC.

By 1902 the Band had progressed enough to take part in the Coronation Procession of King Edward VII. The First World War was as difficult for the Band as for all units of the Regular Army at that time, and in 1918 war and demobilisation had reduced the Band to four members. But those remaining realised that the show must go on and in 1920, by dedication and perseverance, had increased the numbers to thirty.

The years of peace to 1939 saw a steady maintenance of the strength and playing ability of the Band, which enabled it to take a prominent part in local military affairs, particularly the famous Aldershot Military Tattoo. Aldershot Command was a large Military complex with a host of Regiments and Corps, all of whom took pride in their Military Bands and set the highest standards amongst themselves. On 1st January 1939, the RAMC Band was taken over by the Army Council; and was officially recognised with a permitted establishment which included the appointment of a serving Bandmaster-Warrant Officer Harry Johnson. The drain on the Officer's pockets was over after 45 years of unselfish subscription !!

Conscription and World War Two brought many fine musicians from classical, light and Dance orchestras of fame to the Band. Woolf Phillips, who was a member of Jack Hylton's Big Dance Orchestra of the Thirties, who joined the RAMC Band at the outbreak of the War in 1939 recalls that the field in which they excelled was the Concert Orchestra. They built up an excellent show which gave much joy to the troops in the United Kingdom, Middle East, Persia and Iraq Commands, and later in Holland, Belgium and Germany. At one time they recorded background music for the Famous Pathe News and several times played under the baton of the famous George Melachrino who was the Conductor of the Allied Expeditionary Forces British Band.

During this period two incidents are recalled by Prof. Ronald Girdwood Professor of Therapeutics and Clinical Pharmacology, Royal Infirmary Edinburgh, in an article he wrote in the British Medical Journal in December 1978 on "How the RAMC nearly lost its Band". In October 1943, he was among a group of RAMC Officers who alighted at Greenock to proceed to an unknown destination in the Middle or Far East. They found themselves on HMT G6, which was the Highland Princess. To their delight they were joined by a Stars in

Battledress Company and the RAMC Dance Orchestra. They sailed westwards into the Atlantic, zig-zagging to avoid submarines. Boat Stations were allocated for alarm drills and assigned to him was a RAMC Sergeant, Oscar Grasso, who was a leader of a world famous Dance Orchestra. We entered the Straits of Gibraltar and off the coast of Oran on 26th November a few other ships joined the convoy. A few hours afterwards and while we were listening to a concert given by the RAMC Band, the alarm bells sounded and we dashed to our stations. We saw about thirty enemy aircraft approaching. The guns on ships with escorts opened up. Bombs exploded all around the convoy. We saw a Bomb drop on the "Rhona" filled with American Troops, and the ship exploded and was engulfed in flames. The Sergeant and I saw a bomb dropping on our ship and indeed coming straight to where we stood on the port side aft. It missed the ship by a few yards. There were no casualties and the bomb failed to explode but we were soaked as it hit the water. Casualties on the Rhona numbered 1,170 ; over half were killed. The next attack was off Crete on 29th November. Again, a ships concert was in full swing with the RAMC Orchestra providing the music. Alarm bells sounded again and we went to our stations. We saw a bomb drop on the Orion; but it did not explode. The RAMC Orchestra reached Port Said safely. It was clearly good fortune that we did not sustain casualties comparable to the Rhona as many members of the band on return to civilian life became household names in the world of entertainment.

At the end of the Second World War the band was in disarray and, except for four or five of their number, all its members were demobilised including the Bandmaster, Mr. Johnson. This was a bitter blow but fortunately for the Band help was on the way and in 1945 Bandmaster Lewis Brown from the East Yorkshire Regiment took over. His sterling efforts were reflected in the fact that the Band took part in the Victory Parade and in 1947 provided the music for a Guard of Honour for Field Marshal Montgomery in Aldershot, and in the same year played with distinction at the Corps Memorial Service in Westminster Abbey before the Colonel-in Chief, Her Majesty the Queen. In August 1947 the Bandmaster, in common with other Bandmasters of Staff Bands was granted a Commission as Director of Music.

In 1962 the first official Drum Major, Derek Waterhouse, was appointed to the Band. He was trained at the Royal Marines Barracks at Portsmouth and was the senior Drum Major in the Aldershot Army Display massed Bands from 1963-70, as indeed were Lt-Col. Lewis Brown and Major George Hurst Senior Directors of Music in their day. 1963 saw the band participate in the Edinburgh Tattoo.

The Regimental March was originally Her Bright Smile Haunts me Still reputed to be a tribute to Florence Nightingale, followed by Washington Post and Bonnie Nell. In 1948, to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the Corps and as a tribute to HM the Queen (later the Queen Mother), Here's a Health Unto His Majesty was very appropriately adopted.

With the Band now firmly established, minds return to the great perseverance and efforts of Surgeon Major Grier. I wonder if he knew the band would go on for Ninety Years, until in 1984, the Band was one of the first to go in the Defence cuts/restructuring of the Army. The musical tradition in the Forces at this date is down to 53% of its former strength. With nearly all of the Corps Staff Bands now gone, as we used to know them. We in the RAMC were lucky and managed to salvage a lot of musical ability with the formation of the Army Medical Services TA Band at the Duke of Yorks HG in Chelsea under the guidance of the Staff Band's last Band Sergeant Major Mick Feehily. The AMS TA Band moved to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in October 2002.

Mick Feehily has retired after 44 years service to the Corps. A great time was had by all who attended his formal leaving presentation/retirement party at the AMS Officers Mess Sandhurst on the 7th March 2009. Former members of the RAMC Staff Band surprised Mick by playing "Roast Beef" as he arrived! Festivities continued in the evening at the Sgts Mess Keogh Barracks. With members of the AMS TA Band entertaining with an Ompah style Band. The furthest travelled attendee was former Ramc Staff Band Cornet Player Mike Leyland who came over with his wife Olivia from Australia. Photos of this event can be seen on the links part of this web site.

List Of Bandmaster and Directors of Music.

RAMC Staff Band

Before RAMC :-1892 Major Hayes

Mr. Wylie Mr. Anderson Mr. Bennett

RAMC :-1898 Mr. Bennett

Mr. Robertson

Mr Bradley

Mr. Loftus Mr. Carotti WO1 (BM) H. Johnson WO1 (BM) L.D. Brown MBE

1947 First DOM Capt. L.D. Brown MBE (finished as Lt. Col.). 1964 Major G.H.J. Hurst MBE 1977 Major P.W. Parkes

1979 Major D. Carson MBE till disbandment in 1984

Famous Name Musicians RAMC Band

War Time RAMC Dance Orchestra article by Woolf Phillips

Arthur Wilkinson: Pianist, Arranger for the ITMA Series

Woolf Phillips : Trombone, Had is own Orchestra Brother of Sid Phillips. [**See This Link for Further Info on Woolf Phillips.**](#)

Oscar Grasso : Violinist, Leader of the Victor Sylvester Orchestra. Dick James : Singer with Geraldo, First agent of the Beatles. Keith Whitmore Principal Horn London Philharmonic Orchestra. Les Gilbert : Saxophone, Lead Saxophonist with Geraldo. Jimmy Shepherd : Cornet Black Dyke Mills Band and James Shepherd Versatile Brass.

RAMC Musicians who became other Bands DOM and Bandmasters.

Lt.Col M. Lane Irish Guards Band. Lt.Col. K.Boulding Royal Signals Band. Maj. Don Carson after disbandment moved to The Scots Guards Band as Director of Music WO1 (BM) R.Falshaw Bandmaster Royal Scots Dragoon Guards.(Now Dom The Royal Yeomanry TA Band)

Post War Band Sergeant Majors

WO II Edwards E. 1947-52 WO II Meeres C. 1952-66 WO II Waterhouse D. 1966-71 WO II Howard G. 1971-73 WO II Taylor B. 1973-75 WO II Fielder M. 1975-77 WO II Tresidder W. 1977-79 WO II Feehily M. 1979-Disbandment in 1984

Post War Drum Majors

Drum Major D. Waterhouse 1963-71 (held two posts from 1966) Drum Major M. Fielder 1971-77 (held two posts from 1975) Drum Major A. Fox 1977-79 Drum Major D. Stevenson 1979-Disbandment in 1984

Overseas Tours

British Army of the Rhine: -1954,56,60,62,64,66,68,70,72,74,76,77,78,80,81,83. Cyprus: -1958,74,81. Middle East: -1943 Hong Kong & Malaya : -1965 Hong Kong : -1983 The Band was resident Band at the Royal Tournament in 1965, 1971 and 1978. The Band marched in the Massed bands arena display in 1982.

Some Sporting Achievements RAMC Band Members

Director of Music Lt.Col. L.D. Brown was Chairman of the Army Hockey Umpires Association and Hampshire County Umpires Association. Mick Feehily won the Grand Slam Army Badminton Championship in 1975 and represented the Army at Football, Badminton and Cricket.

Derek Waterhouse has earned Cup Winners medals for Corps Soccer, Hockey, Rugby, Cricket and Basketball . He was Soccer Coach to Aldershot Services and the Army Soccer Team for three years. Acknowledgements to Lt-Col I.G. Thomas and Professor Ronald H. Girdwood And past DOM's and Band Sergeant Majors RAMC Band for most of this Article..

Keith Leonard ex. RAMC Band 1967-84.

GRAND SHIPS CONCERT

Held in

THE OFFICERS DINING SALOON

By kind permission of Captain A E Jones, Master HMT G6 And Lt-Col M.Robb, OC Troops Central Pool of Artistes
Presents

"STARS IN BATTLEDRESS"

assisted by the **DANCE ORCHESTRA** of the **Royal Army Medical Corps**

Produced by Capt.George Black

1. Opening Chorus Full Company
 2. "A Spot of Bother" Alfie Dean & Roy Kemp
 3. Al Weir-Variety's Craziest Comic Dancer
 4. "Nelson and the Bear" Bert Denver, Alfie Dean and Slick Snelling
 5. Creating an Impression David Delmonte
 6. "An Egyptian Nightmare" Al Weir, Slick Snelling Roy Kemp
 7. "A Wee Drop of Scotch" Bert Denver & Derek Ware.
 8. "The Beefeaters" Alfie Dean, Roy Kemp, David Delmonte, Bert Firman
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Intermission

1. "Drinking memories" Bert Denver Alfie Dean
2. Bert Firman and his Violin (late casino Café and Café De Paris)
3. Roy Kemp Telling the tale
4. Derek Ware The Pocket Light Comedian
5. The Sentry Bert Denver, Alfie Dean, Bert Firman

Finale

Closing Remarks by Major General VHB Majendie CB DSO Capt. A.E. Jones FRGS Master Lt-Col.

Mathew Robb OC Troops

GOD SAVE THE KING

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