**THE CORONATION, JUNE,1953**

At the time, I was a serving soldier in the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI). As everyone knew, the Coronation was due to take place, and a contingent of all the six Light Infantry regiments (about 100 soldiers) were going to be represented. As the Oxford was the closest Lt Inf. Barracks to London they were billeted in our barracks for about one week. I was one of the lucky few to be chosen to represent the OBLI. Mind you, there were not many of our regiment to choose from as they were in Cyprus at the time, but I think they had the best to choose from, even though I say it myself.

We were all gathered together for a pep talk by the CO of the depot, about our role in the Coronation Parade. Along with a few thousand more from the combined services, we were going to line the route, and we were all issued with what was called the No. 1 Uniform. As we were light infantry our No 1 uniform was a green coloured material comprising a jacket, trousers and a peaked cap, and of course for the parade our normal uniform boots. Previously only the Guards Regiments were issued with a dress uniform because of the Royal duties they carried out in London, so this was special.

We moved to London and ended up camping in Kensington Park Gardens, 8 men to a tent, and that is where we lived for the next couple of weeks. We had all the facilities you required, mess tents, barbers shop (free haircuts), ironing tents which contained about 20 ironing boards, plus our own small NAAFI tent. What more could you ask for. You could not fault the place. We shared the camp with men from the two other services, the Navy and the RAF. Other parks throughout London were also used to house thousands of troops from all over the British Commonwealth. When you saw all the different types of uniforms they were wearing, it was quite a sight to see. We had constant music played throughout the day, as the various bands practised. There were quite a few bands sharing our park, so you were never out of earshot of some kind of music, but it did get a bit boring after a while.

We were amazed when we arrived in London, the whole place was a hive of activity. Everywhere people were decorating their respective places, whether it was their home, or their place of business, the streets were a mass of colour and it was out of this world. The main route where the Royal carriages would pass along were absolutely like an Alice in Wonderland scene, arches leaning towards the centre of the road, banners hanging across with all kinds of messages printed on them, then huge prints which had portraits of the future Queen, and Phillip, topped with huge golden crowns. It was wonderful to see.

Every day we rehearsed, we would be on both sides of the road, about 3 feet between each person, so you can see why it required thousands of troops to perform this part of the parade. This entailed covering the whole of the route from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey and back to the Palace via a circular route. This was planned to allow the millions of people in London, and around the world to see the Coronation Procession as it proceeded along its way both to Westminster Abbey and, after the inauguration, back to the Palace.

We practiced lining the route every morning. We would march, accompanied by our own Regimental Band to our respective areas at about 5.30am each day. We were on part of the return route the coronation procession would be using. The roads were closed to all traffic for a few hours each day to carry out a full dress rehearsal. This included the horse drawn carriages, the same number that would be present on the big day. This did not include the Queens carriage itself, it had a stand in. The interval timing between each carriage leaving Westminster Abbey was timed to the minute and to perfection, nothing was left to chance, the split second timing was so accurate that on each rehearsal the same carriage would stop at exactly the same place each time right opposite where we were standing, so we would see who was being carried in that particular carriage. Every day along would come the RAF, spot on time and give everyone a nice flying demonstration, with the latest fighter planes accompanied by a number of World War 2 aircraft. As they flew overhead along the route it was always followed by loud cheering and clapping from the crowds, it was a wonderful sound. I have never heard anything like it since, and it is imprinted in my memory for ever.

As we marched through the streets with our Regimental Bands playing, it made you feel someone special. I don’t suppose anyone on that parade would have changed places for a £1000, in fact it would have been the other way round. The people we met along the way would often give us a cheer. As we stood on parade , the people behind us talked to us as we stood at our station and we would talk back to them as long as no one in authority was about, as it was against the rules. This happened each day, and it was always the same people. We dare not turn round to talk back to them, so no one was any the wiser. We made quite a few friends during those few days; it was wonderful over a short period of time.

The atmosphere around us was so friendly, as we marched away after each days rehearsal, we would hear them calling us by our names -- see you tomorrow – so you can tell we were always at the same place each day. The next day we would be greeted by the same people. They had been camping out in the street for a few days by this time. There were thousands of visitors around all the time, they were camping out on the other side of the footpath, on the grass verge, they had staked their claim close to where they were going to be standing on that great day. They had been out there for days even before we had our first rehearsal, as someone said to me, it may never happen again in our lives, so they were making it a memorable occasion, something to remember for the rest of their lives, and I could understand their feelings because that is my feeling at the present time. Even after all this time, and we are talking 67 years since that great experience I shared with many, many thousands of people, I cannot explain the feeling it gives me.

THE BIG DAY

On THE day we marched out to our respective places to the sound of our band. There were thousands of people as far as you could see, cheering as we went past, it made you feel great, then we took up our positions, and there we would remain for the next few hours. Once you stood at ease, you were not allowed to move from your position (When nature called then you just had to go, we even had our own toilets guarded by the police, we could not stand and queue up with all the spectators when we were expecting royalty, could we?) The atmosphere was fantastic, our band was close by and they were playing popular tunes and the people were singing their heads off. The people around us were certainly enjoying themselves.

During all his time the people around us had their radios tuned in, nice and loud so we could all hear what was happening at Westminster Abbey, we had a running commentary of the service as it progressed. Then we heard the church bells start to ring out all over the place, and we knew then that the procession would soon be coming along, and we were all keyed up, ready to play our little part in this celebration.

The horse drawn carriages then started to appear. They would stop every so often. We had been explained the reason for this, which was to allow the different parties leaving Westminster Abbey to board their carriages, these would then move forward so far, then halt to allow the next party following to board their carriage, and so on, and this would happen until the Queen and Prince Phillip were installed in the Royal Coach. Then the carriages following the Royal Coach would play catch up, making up the correct distance between them. This had been rehearsed with all the carriages time and time again, so all the moves were timed to the split second.

 It so happened that one of the covered carriages which always stopped directly in front of our position on every rehearsal, suddenly appeared as an open topped carriage, conveying the Queen of Tonga. What made her outstanding was the lovely short sleeved dress, and lovely large hat she wore. She looked a picture from what I can remember, and everyone around thought the same. I remember she received a wonderful welcome from the crowds, and at the same time she acknowledged everyone around by returning a hand wave and a lovely smile, she went down a treat.

The parade was moving steadily along now, and as the different dignitaries passed by you could hear people saying who that person was, who that was sitting next to so-and-so, and so on. This went on all the time, the people around were certainly well informed, where they got their information from I don’t know, but it was certainly good to hear them.

Then in the far distance we heard the National Anthem being played. This happened as the Queen’s coach approached a particular area, so the bands became louder as the Royal Coach approached, this gave us some idea of the progress the Royal Party was making and how far away they were. Then the order was given, Present Arms, and our own band struck up and played the National Anthem as the Queen’s coach passed by at a slow trot. This was the moment that all those thousands of people (myself included) had been waiting for, when the National Anthem was played. You cannot now imagine the feeling by this time, the crowds were going mad, cheering, calling out, the atmosphere was fantastic, the crowds were getting more excited by the minute.

THE QUEENS COACH was the most famous one that had been used for many many years. The coach appears to be made of gold, and has glass surrounds, and if I remember correctly, had concealed lights inside so you could get a good view. Many of the people around were disappointed as they thought the Queen should have been in an open carriage similar to the one the Queen of Tonga travelled in. They could have been correct as thinking back now, everyone would have had the opportunity to see the Queen in all her splendour. The crowds were going mad, cheering, waving flags and the Queen (and Prince Phillip) were giving the usual hand waves as she passed by.

Then to top this marvellous day, right on time came the RAF with their flying display, flying very low then they started trailing red ,white and blue smoke filling the sky, and of course the noise from the aircraft as they disappeared in the distance, a wonderful sight indeed.

Now the time had arrived for our last march back to camp. We fell in and the band played loud cheerful music, and so we marched off with the crowds cheering. It was I suppose a good send off to us all, it was like leaving your friends behind. We had got to know them over the last few days, and it was a wonderful feeling which made your spine tingle and made you feel as though you were part of the actual parade. We certainly marched back to our camp with our heads held high.

I will always remember what happened over those few days on that very special occasion. It was an experience which I am glad I had the opportunity to witness. I would not have missed ti for a thousand pounds, and was something I will never forget if I live to be 100 yrs old.

During our last few hours free time we toured all over the place to see the sites. The Mall was a wonderful sight to see, it was out of this world, decorations all over the Mall with thousands of people wandering along, all mainly going towards the Palace.

At night time it was just magic, the place was just aglow with colour everywhere you looked. It was amazing to see such wonderful illuminations, the Palace was just like a scene from one of those fairy stories we read when we were small children, but at that point in time I was more or less living in this fantasy. It will remain for ever a high point in my memory, along with a magnificent firework display, which put the finishing touch to a wonderful visit to London, and meeting all those wonderful people, something I shall treasure for the rest of my life.

The time came for the parting of all the forces to return to their bases, some in this country but many more to places all over the world. I will always remember what happened over those few days. It was not very nice saying goodbye to so many people I had come to know and share experiences with, but the time had come to part and as the different forces were leaving the bands played them off to a rather loud but fitting farewell, a happy ending to a great occasion.

As a little reminder of this experience I received a Coronation Medal. Not every soldier received this medal, as they were issued to only so many Officers, Senior NCOs, Cpls and Pte soldiers. There were thousands issued throughout the forces so depending who you were, or if you were in the right place at the right time, you received one. I considered myself lucky, and when I see it all these memories come flooding back.

Stan Timmiss

  