

100 Years of Maritime Music - Making

Marcher

(Contributed by Lieutenant Mick Dowrick Royal Marines)

The Blue Band Magazine is the Journal of the Royal Marines Band Service. The most recent edition contained an article written to begin a whole host of events to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the formation of the Royal Naval School of Music. The article was composed by two well-known Royal Marines Band Service historians, the late John Trendell and John Ambler.

To mark the forthcoming 100th Anniversary of the Royal Marines Band Service 'Marcher' updates the article written by 'Nebuchadnezzar' twenty-five years ago.

"There has for some time past been a strong feeling that the appearance, system of training and standard of efficiency of Naval bandsmen are unsatisfactory."

This damning statement appeared in an Admiralty memorandum presented to Parliament at Christmas 1902.

For almost a century, Italian and Maltese musicians whose respect for naval tradition was questionable largely made up the complements of Naval Bands. Continuous-service bandsmen, following a basic musical tuition in one of the Boys' Training Ships supplemented these foreign musicians in manning the bands of the Fleet from about 1870.

Five months after publication of the memorandum, an Admiralty plan for reforming Naval Bands received the



approval of King Edward VII. Bandsmen would in future be entered as Royal Marines whilst existing Band Ratings would be progressively transferred to the Corps or discharged. The plan also established, under Royal Marines Management, the Royal Naval School of Music. Thirty-four Naval Bandboys from the Training Ship Impregnable provided music for the School's opening ceremony on the 22nd July 1903 and then remained within the portals of Eastney Barracks to become the founder members of the Royal Marines Band Service, a totally separate organisation from the Divisional Bands of the Corps whose history dates back to the 18th Century.

Towards the end of 1904 the first RM Band from the School was drafted and in the following autumn a band of forty-one performers joined HMS Renown to accompany the Prince and Princess of Wales on a tour of India, Burma and Greece. Further honours came during the summer of 1911 when one hundred and eighty musicians from ships of the Fleet accompanied King George V and Queen Mary on the Coronation year State visit to Dublin. By 1913 the Band Service had grown to 1400 all ranks with fifty-three bands in commission.

During the First World War the Band Service was involved in actions fought on land and sea. A RM Band attached to the Royal Naval Division took part in the Defence of Antwerp and later



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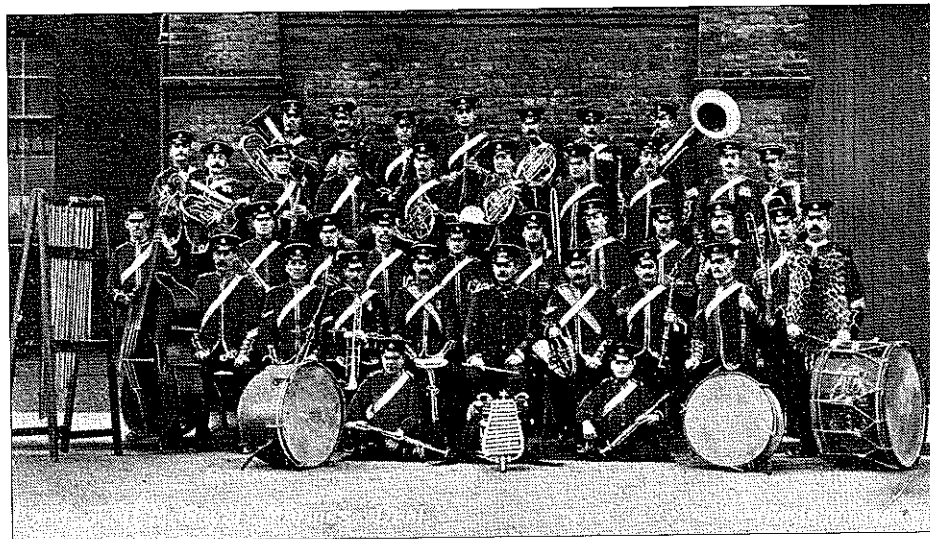
distinguished itself as a Medical Unit during the Gallipoli Campaign. At the Battle of Jutland in May 1916, the sinking of three British capital ships carrying RM Bands resulted in forty-eight fatal casualties being added to the list of band ranks who made the supreme sacrifice during hostilities.

A drastic reorganisation of the Service took place during the immediate post-war years which included 'self-management' for the School of Music and a new personnel structure making commissioned rank possible for Bandmasters. During 1921/22, the RM Band of HMS Renown supported the Prince of Wales on his tour of India and Japan and in 1925, whilst on a visit to Canada, the Band of HMS Calcutta became the first RNSM unit to go 'on the air'.

After twenty-seven years at Portsmouth the School moved en masse to the RM Depot, Deal, in October 1930. In the early 1930's RM Bands of the Mediterranean Fleet staged their own version of the ancient ceremony of 'Beating Retreat' which introduced the now evergreen arrangement of 'Sunset' made by the Fleet Bandmaster, A C Green. The long overdue arrival of Bands on the London ceremonial scene trained at the RNSM occurred during 1937; a Band from Nore Command provided music on the Coronation processional route and a week later an orchestra from the School played at a Guildhall luncheon given in honour of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. The mobilisation exercise effected during the Munich crisis of 1938 demonstrated the immediate availability of fifty-four RM Bands for sea service.

Unquestionably the Second World War presented the RM Bands with their greatest challenge; Bands were involved in most of the major naval actions - River Plate, Cape Matapan, pursuit of the Bismarck, Malta Convoys, etc. The 'action station' of the RM Band was invariably in the Transmitting Station (gunnery control), located in the bowels of the ship. The story concerning HMS Cleopatra typically demonstrates the conduct of RM Bands under fire; the ship was torpedoed during the Sicily Landings of 1943, with the whole band trapped in the TS Eleven musicians were injured or killed but the remaining five fell in on the quarter-deck to dispense lively music as the ship limped back into Malta. Thirty-eight members of the Service received decorations during the

war whilst two hundred and twenty-five of their comrades made the Supreme Sacrifice - one of the highest casualty rates in any branch of the Armed Forces. At home the School of Music led a nomadic life; after leaving Deal in 1940, a short stay in Devon (Boys at Exton and Seniors at Plymouth) was followed by a long period at Malvern. In 1942 the Seniors moved to Scarborough and the Juniors settled in the Isle of Man. More than two thousand Band ranks, including pensioners and 'hostilities only'



personnel, served during the war, at one period of which ninety-five Bands were in commission, including seventy serving at sea.

The appointment of Sir Malcolm Sargent as Honorary Adviser in Music to the Corps, the unification of both wings of the School at Burford, Oxfordshire, in May 1946 and the employment of expert civilian instrumental tutors were factors which assisted in the improvement of musical standards in the immediate post-war period. On the London ceremonial front a Band from the School attended at the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip in November 1947 and a year later Massed Bands supported at the unveiling of the Jellicoe and Beatty Memorials in Trafalgar Square.

Resulting from a critical review of the Corps' post-war role, an amalgamation of the RN Band Service with the three divisional bands of the Royal Marines became effective on the 1st September 1950. The integrated service had a manpower strength of one thousand, one hundred and fifty and thirty-six bands in commission of which twenty-one were sea-going. As a prelude to this long overdue and logical union the School returned to Deal in January 1950 and in

the following June the first Beating Retreat Ceremony on Horse Guards Parade was presented by Massed Divisional and Ships Bands in the presence of Queen Mary. On amalgamation the School was renamed 'The Royal Marines School of Music'.

1953 proved to be an important year for RM Bands. Three Staff Bands participated in the Coronation procession and the 50th Anniversary of the Service was celebrated at Deal with a Festival Week of Music Aided by television,

radio and numerous recordings during the following three decades, the music of the Royal Marines was placed in the public eye. Regular participation of RM Bands in popular events include the Lord Mayor's Show in London, the Royal Tournament and the FA Cup Final. Millions of television viewers witnessed the Massed Bands display at the 1966 World Cup final.

Few ships in Britain's developing Navy have the facilities for carrying a band and this factor has dictated a progressive change in the role of the Band Service. In 1952 seventeen RM Bands were serving in ships, by 1977 only the 'Ark Royal' had a permanent sea-going commission. The strength of the Service was just in excess of five hundred all ranks with thirteen commissioned Directors of Music. For the 1977 Jubilee Day the RMBS was chosen to lead the celebrations by supporting Royal Guards from all three Services at Buckingham Palace. With the added closure of overseas shore stations the RMBS became exclusively UK based although engagements continue to be undertaken throughout the world.

During the late 1970s and the 1980s the RMBS, along with other Service band organisations, resisted attempts to close,



reduce or amalgamate. One of the major factors for their continuation was the 1982 Falklands War. This saw two RM Bands deployed throughout the conflict; one on board a hospital ship and the second on board the SS Canberra. In both instances the Bands were able to demonstrate their adaptability, their skills in areas ranging from guarding prisoners to unloading helicopters, their military medical role and their primary role of providing morale raising music and entertainment for the troops. This

campaign reinforced, in the minds of the public as well as their colleagues in the Corps, the need for a Band Service.

The other major event of the 1980s was one that was neither musical nor military. IRA terrorists gave proof of their cowardice by rallying world opinion against them when they planted a bomb at the

School of Music, Deal, killing 11 Royal Marines Musicians.

Tri-Service events became the theme of the 1990's as the country paid tribute to those who took part in the conflicts of World War II. The RMBS took the lead in these high-profile events and later, with the loss of the Royal Tournament, also took the lead in new events such as the Royal Military Tournament 2000, the International Festivals of the Sea and Royal and Ceremonial Events on Horse

Guards Parade.

The loss of the Royal Yacht Britannia has meant that there are no longer any Royal Marines Bands serving afloat on permanent commissions. However Military Training is constantly honed and RM Bands are often on stand-by to cover military or civilian needs. As this article is being written many are ready to cover, as they did in 1977, a strike by Fire fighters. During the past decade or so Bands have been deployed to many places including the Gulf and Kosovo, all in addition to the normal Military Training and Exercises, not to mention an increasingly heavier musical programme for the five RM Bands.

A recent major landmark was the closure of Deal and, more importantly, the opening of the new Royal Marines School of Music at Portsmouth. This both streamlined the organisation and increased its efficiency. As the RMBS approaches its centenary it is well placed, through its organisation, its musical ability and its military expertise and adaptability, to face with confidence and enthusiasm its second century.



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