



An Abbreviated History of Music in the Royal Army Medical Corps

The origins of a military band within the Royal Army Medical Corps stem from its foundation in 1898, although photographic evidence exists that the antecedent Medical Staff Corps had regular and volunteer bands. Certainly Mr Thomas Bennett, a retired Bandmaster (BM) of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, became the first official civilian BM of the regular army RAMC Band, and in 1902 he led them in the Coronation celebrations of King Edward VII. Seeking to establish its new identity, the first regimental quick march adopted by the Corps was John Philip Sousa's *The Washington Post*. Nearer to home, and honouring the sacrifice of the fallen, the Band was present at the unveiling of the RAMC Boer War Memorial at Gun Hill, Aldershot in May 1905. With the outbreak of the Great War many members were drafted overseas with the British Expeditionary Force, and for more than a year the Band was placed in suspended animation. It re-formed in December 1915 and supported the war effort on the Home Front stimulating recruiting and morale by marching drafts to the local station and performing to the wounded in military and civilian hospitals. Following the mass demobilisation after the end of the War, just four members were left to rebuild itself. However, this new band went on to become regular participants in the Aldershot Tattoo during the 1920s and 1930s often leading the pre-show community singing.

In 1938, the RAMC Band was taken over by the Army Council and publicly funded after many years of subscription from the officers of the Corps. Warrant Officer Harry Johnson became the first BM appointed by the Royal Military School of Music, (Kneller Hall) as opposed to a civilian. Conscription and World War Two brought many fine musicians from classical, light and dance orchestras of fame to the Band. Trombonist Woolf Phillips, who was a member of Jack Hylton's Dance Orchestra, joined at the outbreak of War and recalled that the field in which they excelled was the Concert Orchestra. They undertook a tour of the Middle East embracing Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Syria between August 1943 and November 1944. Covering 20,000 miles, some 200 shows were given, 30 of which were at hospitals or for medical personnel. At one time they recorded background music for the famous *Pathe News* and completed five broadcasts.

At the end of the War, despite the demobilisation of many members, the Band was kept going with an influx of transfers, new entrants posted in from Kneller Hall now that the Band was officially established and National Servicemen who were primarily string players. BM Johnson retired to become the Professor of Trombone at Kneller Hall and in 1945 WO1 (BM) Lewis Brown from the East Yorkshire Regiment took over as conductor. He was commissioned as a Director of Music (DoM) in 1947 with the upgrade in status to a Minor Staff Band. Under his leadership it went from strength to strength attracting many high calibre players. During the Golden Jubilee of the Corps in 1948 many prolific events, such as a Westminster Abbey Service, were supported. At the same time a competition for a new regimental quick march was organised by Kneller Hall. The winning arrangement of *Here's a Health unto His Majesty* by Jeremiah Savile was submitted by Maj Joseph Thornburrow, Director of Music of the Royal Horse Guards. The Band performed a central role at the inaugural Drumhead Service held at the RAMC Depot, Church Crookham on Corps Sunday in June 1951. This became an annual event supported every year, with one exception, until 2003 when the commemoration transferred to the Royal Garrison Church, Aldershot. A high profile event of the 1950s was the Queen's Coronation procession where the Band joined with the Canadian Royal 22nd Regiment Band, to lead the RAF

contingent.

The 1960s saw the abolition of National Service and the cessation of string players, resulting in the disbandment of the orchestra. Recruitment was a big challenge in the years ahead for all trades, musicians included. No doubt the participation in the 1963 Edinburgh Tattoo, where Lt Col Brown was Senior DoM, did much to showcase Army music. Lt George Hurst became the DoM in 1964 overseeing the relocation from Church Crookham to Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale and stayed until retirement. During this time he was often in charge of the massed bands at the Aldershot Army Display, a huge responsibility conducting over 400 musicians. Another high profile massed bands event that the Band were regular participants in was the Military Musical Pageant at Wembley Stadium. First held in 1969 and then biennially, it featured every Band in the British Army and the Band last performed there in 1981. Maj Peter Parkes succeeded Maj Hurst in October 1977 and, coming from the Grenadier Guards, maintained the high standards he had achieved both there and with the Black Dyke Mills Brass Band. Two notable events during his tenure were being the house band at the Royal Tournament the following year and the opening of the Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital, Woolwich in November 1978.

Capt Donald Carson became the Staff Band's final DoM in May 1979. Sadly for him, the newly elected Conservative Government were keen to trim back military expenditure and their defence programme *The Way Forward* was published in June 1981. As a result, a reduction of 550 posts (over 20%) across army music was proposed and it was decided that the RAMC Staff Band was to be disbanded by 1 April 1984. Despite this closure hanging over them the Band soldiered on maintaining its support to medical units in West Germany, Berlin and Hong Kong and also took part in the massed bands arena display at the 1982 Royal Tournament. The final farewell occurred on 28 March 1984 when the Band held its last parade on the Keogh Barracks' drill square. The RAMC Training Centre Commandant took the salute and the Band trooped through the ranks of 30 officers and men playing the Corps' slow march, *Her Bright Smile Haunts me still*. They marched off into history to *Auld Lang Syne*, and were given three cheers by the assembled troops. Many personnel were dispersed to other staff bands or in many cases, took voluntary redundancy.

It would have been easy for the Army Medical Services to have relied on other Corps for musical support following the disbandment of the RAMC Staff Band but, a persevering decision was made to form a Territorial Army Band. The venue chosen to host the new band was the Duke of York's HQ in Chelsea, operating as a detachment of 257 (Southern) General Hospital. It was in close proximity to the Royal Army Medical College, Millbank where the annual round of functions still required musical support. The Staff Band's last Band Sergeant Major (BSM), WO2 Michael Feehily, became the inaugural Bandmaster and the Non-Regular Permanent Staff (NRPS). He oversaw the transfer of all the assets, stores and library of the former Staff Band. Recruiting musicians for the fledgling band began in June and WO2 Feehily and his team produced the necessary volunteers through local contacts and some ex-members of the Staff Band. Unlike its predecessors, this was to be a mixed unit and the women recruited became members of the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC). Although uniforms posed a bit of a problem, the Band were able to function and indeed to the delight of Lt Gen Sir Alan Reay, Director General AMS, performed at a regimental dinner at Millbank on 22 November 1984, six months ahead of schedule. The first annual camp was held in June the following year at Keogh Barracks, where everyone qualified as a Combat Medical Technician Class Three (Volunteer) to fulfill their secondary role.

After two years of hard work raising the Band from scratch and developing standards, authority was given by Kneller Hall for an official establishment from 1 April 1986. At its first Kneller Hall Inspection in May 1991 a grading of 'Very Good' was awarded. To strengthen its identity, the Band adopted a formal

concert dress uniform of dull cherry mess jackets and cummerbunds in early 1995. Previously white shirts and bow ties had been worn with black trousers and skirts on dinner nights, so the new uniforms gave a better impression for these occasions. During the same year, the female members, having rebadged from the QARANC to the RAMC, were issued with new No. 1 dress. This was seen in public for the first time at the Lord Mayor's Show where the Band participated as a marching contingent. October was to see the amalgamation of 257 (Southern) General Hospital into the new 256 (London) Field Hospital. A large parade was held at Saighton Camp, Chester where the unit marched off the square, led by its own Band, into history.

In September 1995, the Kneller Hall Commandant, Col Tim Hoggarth, and Principal Director of Music, Lt Col Cliff Ross, made an informal visit to the Band. Much favourable comment was given by them, particularly on our turn out in the new mess dress. This brought forth an invitation to take part in a Kneller Hall bandstand open air concert the following July. The first appearance of the TA Band at this long established event was a new and enjoyable experience for many members. The same month, annual camp was held in Germany at the British Military Hospital Rinteln. A key event was the unit exercising its Freedom marching through the town centre led by the Band. The following October saw a second Kneller Hall Inspection where a grading in the upper bracket of 'Very Good' was once again obtained. In 1997, the Band returned to Kneller Hall for a second open air summer concert, the only TA Band to appear that year.

Following the return of a Labour Government in 1997, their *Strategic Defence Review* was published on 8 July 1998. Nine out of the twenty four established TA bands were to be disbanded by 31 July 1999. Geography appeared to be the deciding factor on which bands were kept – one per military district except for London where two bands were retained. Disappointingly the AMS Band was listed to be cut despite a huge infusion of posts into the Defence Medical Services. For example, 256 Fd Hosp were authorised to expand their number of squadrons from three to five. History was to repeat itself for the AMS as it decided to retain its own dedicated musical support with sponsorship from 2nd Medical Brigade, every TA Hospital taking members onto their respective strengths.

Meanwhile, following the announcement of the administrative disbandment, the 'show must go on' and 1998 saw many high profile events supporting the RAMC Centenary such as the service in Westminster Abbey, the Centennial Banquet and a Freedom parade in Maidstone. Annual camp in 1999 was undertaken with 256 Fd Hosp in Leer, Germany where all members took part in Exercise FORGED SHIELD. This presented the opportunity to work alongside medical professionals undertaking basic and general duties in a mock operational environment. A sad occasion in August 2000 was the final dinner night at the Royal Defence Medical College, Millbank, prior to its closure. Performing from a dedicated Musician's Gallery in the Officers' Mess, this had been a regular venue since it opened in 1907. Its replacement was the Former Army Staff College at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, a consequence for the Band was a larger venue to perform in and an expansion of engagements for more members. With the forthcoming disposal of the Duke of York's HQ, the Band relocated to the FASC in October 2002. From here, the same level of musical support has been provided as before to many events year after year, examples being the annual Corps Sunday and Remembrance events.

A link with the distant past was forged when a brass group played at the re-dedication of the RAMC Boer War Memorial at Gun Hill, Aldershot in June 2005. Whilst at annual camp that year, the Band recorded its first CD, *Medics in Concert*, showcasing the versatility of a modern TA Band. A change of bandmaster took place in 2006 with WO1 Feehily handing over the baton to WO2 (BSM) Robert Ghigi. Following the *Future Army Structures* review of 2004, two new TA bands were raised and two re-established. Having operated 'out of the loop' for nine years; the AMS Band became officially recognised once more in 2008, the Territorial Army's centennial year. It became a sub-unit of 306 Hospital Field Hospital, a nationally

recruited specialist unit. That year saw a high profile charity concert undertaken at the Anvil Theatre, Basingstoke to over 900 people. The Band took to the stage resplendent in full RAMC mess dress, the new concert uniform being generously sponsored by the Corps. Closer to home at the Royal Military Academy, the Band teamed up with its former neighbours, the Royal Yeomanry Band, to perform at *Music on Fire*, a huge musical fundraising event for the Army Benevolent Fund. The year ended with a visit from the Kneller Hall Staff Advisory Team where the Band's performances were commended and passed the new grading of 'Fit for Purpose'.

In February 2009 WO2 Michael Feehily finally retired after nearly 45 years' service to the Corps and its bands. This was marked with a reunion of the Staff Band 25 years after its disbandment at his farewell function. With the launch of an official webpage in March 2010, a higher profile was adopted within the present day AMS and grateful assistance from the UK (Founder) Branch of the International Military Music Society.

In recent years, celebrating Armed Forces Day and Medal presentation parades have entered the annual schedule of engagements as a means of supporting our operational front line. Activities undertaken by personnel have widened to include Skiing in France as part of Exercise COLD SOLDIER. In 2011 a high profile engagement was *Heroes at Highclere* held at Highclere Castle, Newbury. Present was Lord Carey of Clifton, (the former Archbishop of Canterbury), who commended the Band on their performance at the church service. About 8,000 members of the public attended with entertainment from various re-enactment groups, the King's Troop RHA and the RBL Riders Branch to name just three. Our triennial Kneller Hall Staff Advisory Visit took place on 27 November at our home in RMA Sandhurst. Preparations were spread over three weekends devising a short marching routine, ensemble rehearsals and a full band performance during which a high level of commitment was achieved. We were all happy to learn that we are still 'Fit for Purpose'. In September 2012, the first DoM was appointed with Maj Ian Peaple, who had held previous posts with the REME and The Rifles' Salamanca Band & Bugles (V).

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