

A Day to Remember

by Peter Everett

It was 10th July and I had been invited to attend the Buckingham Palace Lunch and the Commemorative Event of Reflection and Remembrance on Horseguards Parade together with Fred Hayo. Fred had served with the 94th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, Guards Armoured Division, landing on Arramanche beach during the Normandy landings. I accepted this privilege to be a VIP guest of the Kier Group as it also enabled me to represent the 1st Army which, together with our American allies, carried out the very formidable and successful sea-borne invasion of Tunisia, leading eventually to our joining up with the 8th Army in North Africa and completely defeating the German forces, so allowing us to invade Europe via Sicily and Italy. The Tunisian campaign lasted from November 1942 to May 1943. Bearing in mind that the British forces came from the UK and the American forces from America this sea-borne invasion was a wonderful achievement.

The day, which proved to be very warm and sunny, ideal for the occasion, commenced for me at just before 7.00am when Brian Hill collected me from Shepshed in Leicestershire to take me to the coach leaving from Rushden. We had a good journey down and reached the coach in good time. It was when I met members of the coach party, mainly Kier employees, that any apprehension I might have had of how the day might fare was quickly dispelled by the warm and friendly way I was greeted although they had not met me previously. We left Rushden at 8.30am. The coach was very comfortable and air-conditioned which we all appreciated on that very warm day. I was quite used to local bus travelling but this was a quite different and pleasant experience. The ease with which the driver handled such a large vehicle in the heavy volume of traffic going into London quite amazed me. We reached our destination quite near to Buckingham Palace at about 10.50am and alighted.

Brian then took Fred and I immediately to the main Palace entry gates and, although we were early, after showing our identification papers the police on the gate let us pass. We passed two motionless, immaculately dressed and Busby-headed Guards, then we entered the Palace stepping onto the red carpet laid, I am sure, for we VIPs and eventually reached the garden where we were to have lunch in a huge marquee with 200 tables each accommodating 10 persons as well as the Queen's party. As we arrived on the green we were aware of a row of young people holding trays of iced orange juice and iced water which we were very pleased to drink. From time to time attendants would ask if we required anything and hoped we were enjoying ourselves, which of course we were. Music was provided by two bands: the Band of the Royal Marines and the Band of the Queen's Division. Eventually we made our way to the table in the marquee and awaited the arrival of the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and other members of the Royal party. Grace was said by the Right Reverend Mark Green and lunch was served. The lunch consisted of Ballotine of Salmon with herb mayonnaise, new potatoes and salad, followed by Gooseberry Shortbread which was delicious and finally coffee. There was champagne, red and white wines to enjoy with the meal. It was a very enjoyable lunch. There were 10 seats to each table and everyone was very friendly, in particular two of the ladies who were quite interested to know from where we had come and in which units we had served.

Before the Queen and party left there was a very warm speech thanking the Queen given by The Right Honourable Sir Tasker Watkins V.C. Fred and I relaxed for a few minutes then decided that we should make our way to the coach which would take us to Horseguards Parade. However one of the ladies thought we should accompany them in their coach to Horseguards Parade but, after much discussion which occupied several minutes, Fred and I decided that we should keep to our original instructions. We excused ourselves, said goodbye and then proceeded to the exit. The attendants were obviously surprised to see the two of us alone and asked if we needed assistance. We explained that we were expecting to catch the coach to Horseguards Parade and they pointed to the exit and we were relieved to see a coach standing in the courtyard. As we reached the last step from the palace the coach moved off. The attendant immediately saw our plight and two tried to stop the coach but were unsuccessful. We were instantly shown to a car a few yards away and told that the driver would take us to the event. As we entered Bird Cage Walk I was aware of the crowds of people on both sides of the road. Then temptation decided to play his hand. What were these spectators thinking? Who were these two VIPs? Perhaps they were intending to wave so should we? Was this an opportunity for a moment of ephemeral glory? I consulted Fred but we decided against waving to the crowd.

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Arriving at the Northern VIP stand we were quickly ushered to our seats which were available on the front row of the stand. Cold drinks were offered to us and we settled down to watch the event. We had an excellent view of the stage and were able to watch and hear everything clearly. Simon Callow commenced as Commemorative Host with the speech broadcast by Neville Chamberlain declaring war on Germany. Robert Hardy was excellent as Churchill and the remaining contributors brought back poignant nostalgic memories for those of us who had lived and served at home and abroad during those fateful war years. How can we ever forget Gracie Fields' "Sing As You Go", Flanagan and Allan with their "Underneath the Arches" and "Strolling", the ever popular "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree". The children of Bladon School sang "The White Cliffs of Dover".

The Commemoration began with the march of the Standards which was very impressive, followed by Penelope Keith's reading of "Simplify Me" and John Williams' "Schindler's List" performed by Tasmin Little on the violin. Then followed prayers and Act of Remembrance led by Dr David Croner and finally The Last Post from Normandy given by the Buglers of the Royal Marines. Then followed two minutes silence giving us all time to reflect on what we had all been through and to remember (not that we would ever forget) relatives, friends and comrades who did not return home. The Jaguar Flypast in "missing man formation" was followed by a gun salute by HMS Belfast, Reveille from Kohima by the Indian Army and the reading of the Kohima Epitaph by Viscount Slim.

The Commemoration finished with everyone joining in singing "Jerusalem" and Bruce Forsyth and the Company leading us with "We'll Meet Again".

After the singing the Queen gave her address expressing the gratitude of the Nation to all those who had played their part in bringing the war to a successful conclusion. Then the Queen met some of the veterans and in the presence of the Queen the Standards marched off. The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh left Horseguards and as Fred and I were on the front row of our stand we had an excellent view of the open car in which they were travelling and when they waved we were convinced it was to the two of us.

Everyone now left the parade and Fred and I contacted the coach party using our mobile phone and were glad to know that Brian and a friend were already on the way to find us which they very soon did. We were able to watch the Vintage aircraft passing overhead including the giant B17 and our Lancaster Bomber which we saw dropping a million poppies. Brian immediately took the two of us into St James' Park and we had a very welcome cold drink. We then met the rest of the coach party and made our way back to the waiting coach. The traffic was very heavy and it took a long time to leave the city behind but eventually we were well on our way to Rushden where we arrived at about 9.15pm. I said goodbye to Fred and his wife and the rest of the party then Brian took me under his wing and back to Shepshed which we reached at 10.15pm.

It had been a wonderful day and I thank the Kier Group for enabling me to take part in this Festival of Commemoration and to give my very special thanks to Brian who ensured that for me this was a "Red Letter" day.