

Distinctive Cap Badges of the Royal Marines Band Service Part 1

By Marcher

English Sovereigns have long exercised their prerogative of granting honours, titles and badges to military units. Many are given to mark notable feats carried out in the heat of battle whilst others are for more peaceful activities. The twentieth century has been no different and the bands of the Royal Marines have done particularly well with regard to the honours they have received directly from the Monarch. King Edward VII, during his comparatively short reign of just over nine years, recognised particularly the value of Royal Marines Bands.

No less than five (possibly six) adornments to cap badges and/or helmet plates have been specifically awarded for services to the Crown, so why are only three still to be seen?

THE FIRST PRINCE OF WALES PLUMES

On the 7 September 1875 the modified troopship HMS Serapis left Portsmouth bound for India and Ceylon. On board was HRH The Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) who, despite the reluctance of his mother Queen Victoria, was about to participate in affairs of State. The Royal party included Sub Lieutenant Prince Louis of Battenberg RN whose son would become Admiral of the Fleet The Earl Mountbatten of Burma. Musical support was to be provided by great favourites of Queen Victoria - The Band of Portsmouth Division RMLI under its Bandmaster, Mr J F C Kreyer. This was the first recorded instance of a Royal Marines band going to sea on what, to the Royal Navy, was a normal commission. Since the musicians still wore the Light Infantry scarlet tunics they would have found the heat of the Indian continent at times difficult to endure. White topees had replaced their black sealskin hats but this appears to have been the only change to the uniform worn in England.

Nine months later HMS Serapis returned to Portsmouth. The Prince had been so delighted with the band's music-making that he prevailed upon his mother to allow the Portsmouth Band RMLI to wear his personal emblem, the Prince of Wales' Plumes, upon their head-dress as a permanent reminder of the Royal Tour to India.

Throughout the period when Kreyer's successor, Major George Miller, was bandmaster, and into the time when Bandmaster B W O'Donnell was leading them, the Forton based Portsmouth Division RMLI Band continued to wear the Prince of Wales' plumes above the RMLI cap badge and on the helmet plate. As part of the amalgamation of the RMLI and the RMA in 1923, Forton Barracks at Gosport ceased to be a Royal Marines establishment and the former RMA Band, under Bandmaster R P O'Donnell, became the new RM Portsmouth Divisional Band. Members of the RMLI Band at Forton were transferred to Deal and amalgamated with the existing band to form a larger Depot Band under Bandmaster B W O'Donnell. The privilege of wearing the Prince of Wales' plumes, granted to the Portsmouth RMLI Band in 1876, was transferred to the Depot Band at Deal. Perhaps a transfer of the badge to the newly formed RM Portsmouth Divisional Band had been considered but it is doubtful, since this would have meant an 'RMA Band' wearing an 'RMLI Band' honour. If the transfer to the RM Portsmouth Divisional Band was considered then the fact that the RMA Band Royal Cypher was already being worn might well have rendered this impractical. So, to prevent the loss of the badge and the honour, sideways lineage between the band was utilised and it was transferred to the Depot Band. A reason given for this has been the fact that many of the Forton bandsmen had transferred to Deal. However, if those bandsmen had transferred to the Guards or the RAF would the badge still have gone with the men? No, it was the connection between bands that was important.

A round of defence cuts resulted in the disbandment, in 1930, of the band at Deal. At this time it was under Lieutenant F J Ricketts. During the period 1920 to 1930 two bands had worn the Prince of Wales' plumes for different reasons. The only way to tell the difference between men from Plymouth Divisional Band and the Depot Band was to look at the position of the plumes on the helmet plate. Plymouth wore theirs immediately below the crown whilst the Depot had theirs below the anchor.

At this time Portsmouth had the Royal Cypher, Plymouth had their own Prince of Wales' Plumes and Chatham had the White Rose of York. Tragically there was no Divisional Band available to become the holder of the original Prince of Wales' Plumes, the oldest badge awarded by the Royal Family to a Royal Marines Band, and so, with what must have been a great deal of regret, the badge could not be passed on.

THE WHITE ROSE OF YORK

Queen Victoria died on 22 January 1901 and the Prince of Wales assumed the throne as King Edward VII. Just prior to the Queen's death the Royal Family had been planning a Royal Visit to Australia to mark the recent inauguration of the Federal administration. Prince George and Princess Mary, the Duke and Duchess of York and the new heirs to the throne were given the task. The Duke was Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Marines and, having already served fifteen years with the Royal Navy, was very interested in all things connected with the Services. At this time 'Victoria and Albert II' was a fairly ancient paddle-steamer that was totally unsuitable for a trip to the other side of the world. The Government duly chartered the almost new steamship 'Ophir' for temporary use as a Royal Yacht. Included in her complement of 410 officers and men was the Band of Chatham Division RMLI under Bandmaster John Wright. This nine-month commission was to be a unique experience for most of the band. As the sea-going Royal Marines Band Service would not be established until two years later very few of the band would have been to sea and probably none of them had ever been under naval discipline. The 'Ophir' sailed on the 16 March 1901 with the RN Band playing martial music on the boat deck. The journey was long and tiring. During passage of the Suez Canal the pipe 'Hands change into tropical clothing' was heard. For the band this meant a change into white tunic with gold badges, white trousers, white canvas shoes and white helmet or white cap. This was the first time that this uniform had been worn and it was to set the style for all RM bands serving in the Royal Yachts until the decommissioning of HMY Britannia, ninety-six years later. The journey to Australia, the celebrations in that country and a visit to New Zealand were followed by the return journey via South Africa and Canada. The 'Ophir' was met by the newly commissioned Royal Yacht 'Victoria and Albert III' as she sailed into Portsmouth in November 1901 at the end of the longest Royal Tour, almost 40,000 miles, undertaken by a Royal Marines Band before, or since - and this was two years before a permanent Royal Yacht Band was appointed.

A few days later the King honoured the Band of the Chatham Division RMLI by the award of the White Rose of York, the personal emblem of the Duke of Cornwall and York. This was to be worn as part of the cap badge and on the helmet plate as a permanent reminder of the band's important role during this momentous tour of the Empire as promulgated in General Order RM 31/1902.

In August 1950 the Chatham Group Band found itself a sacrificial lamb as the Corps began fighting for survival during post-war Government cutbacks. The Royal Navy insisted upon the continuance of the Royal Marines but had to accept savage cuts. The Chatham Group had to go, and with it, the Band. At that time it was wearing the oldest surviving 'Royal' head-dress badge - the White Rose of York, which it had worn since 1902. Portsmouth and Plymouth group Bands retained their distinctive badges when the Divisions were changed to Groups in 1949. Whether by design or default the White Rose of York was lost when, by following the example of the RMLI Plumes, it could have been passed sideways to the newly created Royal Marines School of Music Staff Band which, geographically, was very close. Now the two oldest Royal awards had been lost although an attempt was made to transfer the badge to the Western Fleet Band in 1969 but, sadly, the attempt founded.

THE FIRST AND SECOND ROYAL YACHT BADGE

King Edward undertook, as part of his convalescence, an excursion to the Channel Islands and the Scilly Isles in the RY Victoria and Albert in 1902 and a comparatively short cruise through Irish waters with a State visit to Dublin in the summer of 1903. In early November 1903 the King gazetted the Royal Marine Artillery Band as the permanent Royal Yacht Band. It would appear that, in order to identify the RMA Royal Yacht musicians, the King ordered the wearing of a special helmet plate and cap badge. Confusion surrounds the design of this badge. Some believe that the cap badge was very similar to those worn by the present Portsmouth Band but having the Royal Cypher of Edward VII instead of that of George V. Whatever the design, it was only issued when the band went onboard and then withdrawn on completion of the voyage, since it was to be worn only whilst serving on the Royal Yacht. This arrangement would have warranted only a few being produced which could account for the fact that the author has never seen this badge, nor has anyone known to him. Its existence would appear to be confirmed by the authoritative work on head-dress badges, Kipling and King's 'Head-Dress Badges of the British Army' (Volume 1) although it is believed that the evidence for this is a rather poor photograph of questionable value.

If this badge existed than it would have been superseded following the voyage of King George V to India on board HMS Medina. Once again the Band of the RMA were selected to accompany him. On their return the King conferred upon the whole Band of the RMA a special badge consisting of a gilt grenade,

on which was mounted the Royal Cypher 'GRV' and Crown in silver, surrounded by a gilt laurel wreath. This was, according to General Order RM 44/1912, 'to be worn on a Forage cap by all Non-Commissioned Officers and men of the Royal Marine Artillery Band at all times in lieu of the present grenade'. This could be a reference to the reputed badge bearing the Royal Cypher of King Edward VII since, if not, it would have been an addition to the present grenade'. (It should be noted that the reference to NCOs and men of the RMA does not preclude Officers from wearing it. At that time there were no Officers in the RMA Band - Bandmaster B S Green was granted a Commission by the King two months later. It should also be recognised that all of these awards were made to the Band but not the Buglers.).

General Order RM 44/1912 also stated that the Royal Cypher 'GRV' in silver would be worn on the helmet plate of the RMA Band (all ranks) over the anchor and below the globe.

THE QUEEN ELIZABETH AND PRINCE PHILIP CYpher

The fifth and final award occurred thirty-three years after the award of the Prince of Wales' Plumes to the Plymouth Division RMLI Band. A seven month world tour by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh took place during 1953/54. Whilst the TSS Gothic bore the brunt of this tour the Royal Standard was transferred from her to the brand new HMY Britannia when they met in Tobruk. The official Royal Yacht Band from Portsmouth Group Band accompanied Her Majesty on this tour and, upon their return, the Band was rewarded for its outstanding service by an additional device to be worn in conjunction with its cap badge and helmet plate. This was, 'The Royal Cypher of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, surmounted by St Edward's Crown above the existing Cap Badge and, in the Helmet Plate, the Royal Cypher only above the Globe and below the Crown, the device in each case to be silver' (Royal Marines Routine Order 369/55). This description is rather misleading, since the silver entwined Royal Cyphers of Elizabeth and Philip surmounted by St Edwards Crown is worn on the cap above the flaming grenade. The same adornment but without the crown is worn on the Helmet Plate mounted between the globe and the crown.

THE SECOND PRINCE OF WALES' PLUMES

Despite the fact that the RMA Band had been appointed as the permanent Royal Yacht Band, the Plymouth Division RMLI Band was acknowledged for its musicianship and dedication to duty whilst on active service in 1918 and 1919. The Band had been chosen to accompany the Prince of Wales (later to be King Edward VIII and then the Duke of Windsor) on a post -WW1 morale boosting tour. The battle-cruiser HMS Renown was used for this visit to Canada. At that time the band was under Bandmaster P S G O'Donnell. Four months later the Renown returned. The Prince was so impressed with the band that he asked for them to accompany him once again on HMS Renown, on his visit to Australia. The ship left Portsmouth on March 16 1920 and amongst the personal staff was a Sub Lieutenant who was later to become the first Life Colonel-Commandant of the Royal Marines, Earl Mountbatten of Burma. The two successful tours and the band's hard work were acknowledged by King George V when, in October 1920, he authorised the wearing of the Prince of Wales' plumes in their caps. It is interesting to note that General Order RM 206/1920 only refers to caps. Helmet plates are not mentioned. This award was inherited by its successors up to, and including, the current wearers - the Band of Commando Training Centre Royal Marines.

As the Royal Marines Band Service moves through the Millennium then, towards its 100th Anniversary in 2003, it is appropriate to reflect upon the awards and decorations so graciously conferred by previous monarchs. They are, after all, part of the inheritance of the Band Service. They are as important a part of the history, ceremonial and custom of the Royal Marines Band Service as the Silver Bugles, the Silver Drums and the Memorial Fanfare Trumpets. For today's Band Service, they serve as a reminder of our history and as an indication of pride in the service and efforts of our predecessors in bands long gone but not forgotten.