

Red Faced

By Tony Eley



In 1989, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2nd presented her Sovereign's Colour to the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, - I know, - I was there, but all was not as it seemed.

Contingents from all Units of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force gathered at Royal Air Force Brize Norton on the day before the parade, to rehearse, to practice and to ensure there were no errors on the big day itself.

One of the difficulties of being a middle ranking, middle aged Medical Officer is that one poses a problem in terms of parade organisation. Too senior to be found a role on the parade, - too senior to be ignored.

But there is always a function for a Medical Officer!!

During rehearsal one can be usefully employed in dealing with minor injuries, falls, fainting and all the usual day to day traumas associated with a major parade – and on the day of the parade itself – well - the crash team always need another medical officer – especially when there is to be a major flypast at a Royal event using almost every fixed wing aircraft in current service

Friday was a blistering day and the medical team was fully employed. The rehearsal, as was to be expected was prolonged and I realised by the end of the day that my face was severely sunburnt. Ah well - not a problem!

The day of the parade dawned bright and clear and whilst the entire Royal Auxiliary Air Force gathered on the parade-ground I mounted a trusty, four wheel drive crash ambulance and headed for the centre of the airfield.

The flypast was impressive. On time, perfectly marshalled, noisy and impeccable. I understand that the parade was as well – but of course I have only the video and second hand reports !!

I was however privileged to be present at the formal luncheon in the Officers Mess in the presence of Her Majesty.

She must have seen me – I stood out like a sore thumb.

Remember my sun tan? On Friday I had been wearing my beret, and I am bald. The top of my polished head was pure white, my face a brilliant crimson red, and of course I was wearing my best blue uniform.

I looked like an England football supporter in full face paint, Patriotic, pathetic and embarrassed. (Although since all the stripes were horizontal I looked more Gallic than British!!)

But that was only the beginning of an awful day! Indeed I live in fear of a visit from a Yeoman Gaoler to haul me off to incarcerate me in the Tower of London.

Since I had been employed productively elsewhere during the parade it had been decreed that I should be the first Officer to greet Her Majesty after lunch and present the members of the medical team to her.

The programme was tight, the timing critical. It was clear that as soon as the top table guests had left the dining room both I and my deputy would have to leave and move swiftly to be in our appointed places by the time the Royal Party arrived back on the airfield for the presentations and the walk-about that was planned for the afternoon.

Clearly thanks would need to be expressed – and farewells made, in the main hall of the Officers Mess and this would take a few moments.

The plan was simple – as soon as the Royal Party left the dining room, my deputy and I would leave through the dining room service doors into the kitchen, out through the preparation area and the service yard and into our car which we had positioned behind the Mess. A swift drive would then have us in position for the formal presentations to the Royal Party a matter of moments later.

Nothing could go wrong!!

Before the dining room doors closed behind the top table guests we were away from our chairs and out through the kitchen – and straight into the arms of a stolid and un-moveable RAF Corporal policeman.

“ No-one can leave the Mess until the Royal Party has left” he said

and nothing would move him

Jobsworth!!!

A full explanation fell on totally deaf ears. We did not plead – but we did point out that it was probable that Someone would probably remark on our absence - but to no avail

We watched the Royal motorcade move sedately away from the Mess and onto the airfield and towards the planned appointment with us!!

Again, I cannot report at first hand what followed!!!

I'm told – and would prefer to forget – that a Senior Officer of the Royal Auxiliary Air force said

“Your Majesty, may I present Squadron Leader Eley who has been in command of the medical facilities here today”

- and my deputy's deputy – a Flight Lieutenant stepped smartly forward and accepted the proffered hand!!!

He introduced the medical team, who were all present, exchanged some polite comments and the Royal Party moved on.

There is no way that Her Majesty, the Honorary Air Commodore in Chief of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force could not have noticed my absence – but so far – no summons by the Yeoman Gaoler for an inquisition in the Tower

Perhaps, just perhaps, I may have been forgiven