



By **Tim Kitching** 20 Group Standard Bearer



I was honoured to be asked to carry the Association's Standard at the 70th Anniversary of VE Day Commemorative Events held over the weekend of 8th-10th May 2015. As promised I have put together an account of what happened and, just as importantly I think, what it felt like to be there. I have not attempted to describe what you may have seen on TV (as you will find, I actually saw very little of it in any event), but to describe personal experience.

The "forewarning" of the events was not long. At relatively short notice arrangements had to be put in hand to collect the Standard and to complete the necessary formalities with regard to security clearances. Gradually more detail became available. Three main events were planned, a memorial service at the Cenotaph on the Friday afternoon, a Beacon lighting at Windsor Castle on Friday evening at which Standard Bearers may be required and a parade along Whitehall on Sunday. On Thursday, 7th May, Her Majesty gave the order for Standard Bearers to stand-down for the Windsor event, but extended an invitation for them to attend as members of the public.

Friday morning offered time for preparation and trying to relax prior to the first big event. It was trying to relax too. This was a big event and the thought of getting something very obviously wrong in front of such a large audience when you were the focus of attention was something I found more than a little testing. In the early afternoon, the Standard Bearers were bussed as a group to the mustering point, a side street off Whitehall. There we were to rehearse simply the march on, necessary because the standards were to form an arc beyond the Cenotaph. I can remember the instructions still. March off from the start line, left wheel once on Whitehall, eyes right as we pass the Cenotaph (Standard Bearers remain eyes front), three paces beyond the end of the row of seats for the veterans on the left begin a right wheel, left hand column to begin to short step, right hand column continue to step out until reaching the mid-point of the arc, then to short step until over our individual markers, before coming to the halt together on the command.

Then an inward dress, including a glance down to ensure we were on our markers, small crosses chalked on Whitehall. What sounded simple proved anything but to get right in the three or four rehearsals we had time for, the main problem being to see relatively faint chalk crosses on a road surface when your forward view is impeded by a standard! Needless to say the rehearsals, under the keen eye and expert tuition of a Garrison Sergeant Major of the Guards (the very same one who oversees drill for the Queen's Birthday Parade, aka Trooping the Colour) failed to nail it. But then, time up. One more go, this time for real. Strange, but at this point the nerves which had built up faded away as my tiny brain could only deal with concentrating on what I should be doing. The order given, we march on to Whitehall and begin our left wheel. We are in time and feel correctly 'dressed'.

All too soon we begin that simple sounding manoeuvre, with a wheel to the right as the column next to us slows down and we begin to overtake. At the order to halt it sounds like all the heels go down together. Then the moment of truth as the inward dress order is

given. A glance down and I can't believe it. Right there between my toes is a chalk cross. A sudden flight of panic, that's fine, but is it *my* chalk cross? There followed very little shuffling of feet, then the eyes front. We got it right! Original feelings of nerves had now been replaced by one akin to euphoria.



The service itself proceeded to plan. I found myself in a prime position to watch the VIPs arrive, a curious sensation as the leaders (and/or former leaders) of the main political parties stepped out to take up their places. A difficulty occurred at the two points at which we were to dip standards. We were to take our lead on timing from the Union Flag at the centre. The only problem was that because of the shape of the arc most of us could not see it! All too soon the service was over and it was time to march off Whitehall. Another key moment was as we reversed our original manoeuvre, without the added complication of finding a white cross. Crucially, we managed to keep in step. I needed to adjust the standard slightly to keep it in the vertical. As we disappeared into the side street again, followed by the band, we could hear the crowd offering three cheers. Combined with the relief, that was quite an emotional moment.

Attendance was now required at a reception in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where restorative drinks were available. Quite some "brass" was present, including the very recently announced Foreign Secretary and some very senior officers, all in very ornate surroundings. We had relatively little time and left immediately after the speech, given by Lord Astor. Brief time then to relax, before checking the Standard and kit was ready for Sunday's event.

Early on Friday evening, those Standard Bearers attending the Beacon lighting at Windsor Castle had dinner together, before being taken out by coach. It proved quite a walk to the event once parked in Windsor, by which time it was raining again. Arriving at the event we went first to the public viewing area. Having shown our identity cards we were quickly ushered back and into a seating area within the crowd barriers. What a fantastic gesture, we were literally being given 'front row' seats. Soon the band of the Household Cavalry could be heard approaching from the town and they entered the fenced enclosure through a gate immediately to our left. Within minutes the gates into the Castle itself opened, and in swept the cars carrying Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Phillip. The two cars left and the beacon lighting ceremony was held.



The significance of watching a beacon being lit by Queen Elizabeth II was not lost on me and I have to confess I was hit by a wave of pride in our Corps, our Association and our connection with our former Air Commodore in Chief and now Royal Patron. Both cars returned, out of the second two figures emerged immediately in front of us, which we assumed to be the security detail. How wrong can you be? They proved to be Prince Andrew and his daughter Eugene. Once the ceremony was over, an all too brief opportunity for a quick restorative pint in a (very nice!) local presented itself before arriving back at the coach at the appointed hour. On the return to London, my plans for a night in the nation's capital were quickly overtaken by an over-whelming need to sleep. I really must be getting old!

After a free day on Saturday, Sunday dawned relatively bright. I have to confess that I hadn't quite appreciated just how big a deal Sunday's parade was planned to be. As I switched on the TV for the news before breakfast I was quickly disabused; crowds were already gathering on Whitehall. Once again, and rapidly, nervous anticipation began to build. It didn't stop me though, doing justice to the cooked breakfast. Another kit check and another "bull" of the shoes and it was onto the coach. What a journey, we ended up taking quite a complex route to dodge all the traffic. It did though, offer time for a run through of the sequence of events with our British Legion Parade Marshal. Security all weekend was tight, no less so on Sunday; we found shade at our muster point, topped up on water and settled in for a long wait.



As the service in Westminster Abbey proceeded, the veteran's element of the parade began to form. First, the Welsh Guards Band and the Standard Bearers at about 1150 hrs. To our left the tri-service detachments formed up behind the Royal Marines Band. After the service ended the veterans began to form up behind us. After what seemed like an eternity it was time for the service contingent to step off from the start line. Then we received the order "Carry Standards" and up they went, only to come down soon after on the command to "Order Standards". A false start. What do they say about the best laid plans? Then it really was the off and as we crossed the start line, planned to be at 1232 hrs, all the feet I could see in front of me were in step with our Life Guard markers and on the right drum beat. As we entered into Broad Sanctuary we were hit by an unexpectedly strong breeze which caught the Standards. It dropped before gusting strongly again as we rounded the south-east corner of Parliament Square. The next few minutes were telling on right shoulders as the Standards were

kept in the vertical. Nothing could prepare us for the sheer volume of the shouting, clapping and cheering from the crowds on Whitehall. Having watched the parade since on television, it did not do justice to that wall of sound which we hit. I think the memory of that march up Whitehall will remain with me forever. The strains of the pipe band, the beat of the drum, the rhythmic but relatively faint "click" of heels hitting the street, all wrapped within the noise of the crowd.

After the Monument to the Women of World War II, so outrageously vandalised the day before, came a left wheel into Horse Guards and past a Household Cavalry guard of honour. The main parade was to pass through the central arch, Standard Bearers through two, smaller, side arches. We had been warned that these side arches each contained a lantern which we had to try to avoid hitting. I had just congratulated myself on having remembered and done so, when the top of my standard “dinged” the key stone in the arch! (I gathered after that I was not alone in achieving that hit.) That didn’t do my shoulder too much good, but I survived intact to form up in line with the other Standards forming a guard of honour for the veterans to pass through. We just had time for a quick left/right dress before the first veterans appeared. As they did so many were taken aback, some overwhelmed, by the sight of Horse Guards Parade which greeted them; the cheering and the clapping. There now followed probably the simplest, but most testing time for the Standard Bearers. Having marched past Westminster Abbey, round Parliament Square and up Whitehall at the carry, from time to time fighting a stiff breeze, we had to remain at the carry, at attention, for what seemed like a very long time. The feeling in right shoulders went from sore, through stiff, then painful to numb, despite more or less obvious attempts to relax at intervals.



We heard the sound of the flypast by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight and the Red Arrows, but maintaining our position and “eyes front” saw nothing of it. At the conclusion of the veteran’s parade and flypast we turned right and left before re-forming as two columns to march off, past the saluting dias. As we came to the edge of Horse Guards, I am sure we all felt a sense of relief at a duty complete, together with eager anticipation of being able to drop our right arms. It was not to be –

the march continued further into St James’ Park than we had appreciated, all the time the paths lined by well-wishers. Still we kept in step, no music now, just the beat of our heels. Finally, the halt, dismissal and heaven sent opportunity to move our right arms! As I removed my gauntlets and let my arms fall moisture literally dripped to the floor from the ends of my sleeves.



British Legion organisation of the weekend as a whole was exceptional, and we were welcomed into the secure reception area. There, we deprived the bar of a few (genuinely very much needed) cold beers as various VIPs circulated the marquees. These included in my vicinity, the Duchess of Cornwall, the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Air Staff and Jilly Cooper (who said a cheery “hello” accompanied by a charming smile). No account of a British event would be complete without a

weather report and I am pleased to say that Sunday’s weather was warm and sunny. The whole afternoon had the feel of one of those summer garden parties which in my experience seem to have all but disappeared, with music from band stands, dancing, singing and picnics on the grass.

Truly, a remarkable and memorable weekend. In conclusion, I must say that the Standard Bearers of the various associations were a fantastic, friendly group with an unflinching sense of humour and a fine spirit of mutual support and encouragement. I am glad I made their acquaintance. Most importantly, I hope those of you who watched the service at the Cenotaph on 8th May and the parade along Whitehall on 10th May, either at the events themselves or on television, felt that the Association was well represented. I can only assure you that I gave it my best on your behalf.

Tim Kitching