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The RAF's Coronation Day

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Introduction

All ranks and every command of the RAF, at home and overseas, were represented in the great procession through Central London which followed the crowning of Queen Elizabeth II. The Service provided elements in the Guards of Honour at Buckingham Palace and at Westminster Abbey. Several thousand officers, airmen, cadets and apprentices lined parts of the route. Eleven RAF bands took their various parts. All the Marshals of the RAF, except the Duke of Windsor, were in the procession. The Chief of Air Staff rode with the Chiefs of the other Services; the Vice-Chief of Air Staff with the other principal Service ADCs. In the Abbey, Marshal of the RAF Lord Portal of Hungerford, in charge of the Sceptre with Cross, was in close attendance on the Queen during most of the ceremony. The final salute of the day was given by fighter aircraft of the RAF and the RCAF, flying in wings line astern across the front of Buckingham Palace while Her Majesty stood on the balcony.

A distinguished part in the proceedings from start to finish was borne by the RAF. At the beginning of the day, the Queen's Colour was paraded at Buckingham Palace and the RAF Central Band helped to provide the music there. At the end of the day two RAF bands and a great column of men and women 1,886 strong, followed by two more bands, led the now rain-soaked procession back to Buckingham Palace.

All told, nearly 8,000 officers, airmen and airwomen were on duty in Central London. Of that number, 4,540 were engaged in lining the route and a further 624 were held in readiness for disposal by the police if required. The whole turnout was a credit to the Service in appearance and bearing and to the thorough training in drill and endurance which had prepared it for its share in the day's duties. This applies equally to the 114 officers and other ranks of the WRAF who appeared for the first time in their smart new service dress caps and were marching, at the end of the long, damp journey, with all the precision, briskness and vigour which had throughout evoked admiring comment. In the same leading wing were the bigger contingents of the RAF Volunteer Reserve and the RAuxAF and a small detachment of Princess Mary's RAF Nursing Service. Its rear was brought up by a unit of the RAF Regiment which displayed its customary skill in ceremonial both in the procession and in its guard mounting with the Queen's Colour at Westminster.

The day had begun in reasonable good weather and the procession to the Abbey, including senior officers from the Air Ministry, AOCs-in-C, and RAF members of the Air Council all mounted, besides the Marshals of the RAF in carriages, was warmly cheered, especially by the thousands of children on the Embankment. When Her Majesty had been crowned and the big parade set out on its longer route, rain was falling heavily. To the RAF section at the head, led by No 1 Regional Band from Cosford and No 2 Regional Band from Wyton, came the first of the cheers from the immense drenched crowds, as it led the way up Whitehall, along Pall Mall, up St James's Street and westwards along Piccadilly to Hyde Park Corner and thence through Hyde Park to Marble Arch and Oxford Street. From the middle of Oxford Street, for about forty

minutes it led the way through the open-order ranks of other RAF men lining the roads, almost to the edge of Trafalgar Square.

In the second wing were small parties from overseas, from Rhodesia, Germany, the Far East, Malaya, the Middle East and Malta – including a few locally-enlisted airmen – and then bigger contingents from No 90 (Signals) Group, Home Command and Maintenance Command. The third wing consisted of three big parties from Transport Command, Technical Training Command and Flying Training Command with a sprinkling of cadets from the two latter commands. The three combatant commands made up the fourth wing – 150 officers and airmen each from Coastal, Fighter and Bomber – and their broad columns of smartly-marching men set a splendid standard for the rest of the procession. Behind them came the RAF College Band from Cranwell and the RAF Regiment Band from Catterick. Much farther behind, in the carriage procession, were the nine Marshals of the RAF, among them Lord Trenchard. They shared the drenching with the younger men, for no carriage hood was raised.

While this fine parade was in progress under low clouds, the fate of the fly-past had been in doubt. When rain ceased in London, the cloud base remained low, both on the line of approach and near the saluting base. With the prospect of some slight improvement in the late afternoon, the fly-past was first set back half an hour. Then, for the sake of safety, the ambitious plan of flying three wings in arrowhead formation at the head and the rear with a wing of the RCAF in box formation between them, was abandoned. This form of salute had been magnificently accomplished in rehearsal. Now it had to be changed so that the wings flew in line astern, still with the Canadian wing in the centre of the stream. The intervals between wings was also greatly increased. Whereas the whole parade of 144 Meteors of the RAF and 24 Sabres of the RCAF was originally due to pass across the Mall in fifteen seconds, the procession on the day occupied three minutes in passing the saluting base, an interval of thirty seconds being allowed between wings.

Fighter Command provided all the Meteors in the fly-past. They came from Squadrons 1, 41, 54, 56, 63, 64, 65, 74, 245, 257 and 263. The RCAF Sabres were from Squadrons 410, 439 and 441. The wings, flying independently from Duxford, Tangmere, Biggin Hill, North Luffenham, Wattisham, Horsham St Faith and Waterbeach, made their rendezvous near Canterbury and thence passed over Dungeness to Bexhill, where they turned north for their first checkpoint at Biggin Hill, closing up as they approached. Course from there to the Mall was held with the help of a succession of orange flares set on the ground and also of a responder beacon placed in Regent's Park beyond the Mall. In its modified shape, the fly-past was beautifully done. Each wing in excellent formation passed over the prescribed spot in the Mall, some 600 yards east of Buckingham Palace. Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh sighted each wing while it was still well to the south of Westminster and followed it until it disappeared to the north. The young Duke of Cornwall, with his parents, evinced a keen interest in each renewal of the air salute.

For all concerned in these celebrations, duty was made more arduous by unpleasant weather, yet training and fine spirit gave to the share taken by the RAF a competence, vigour and zest which contributed much to the satisfaction of the crowds and, no doubt, to the gratification of Her Majesty. The Service, on this showing, deserved to lead the procession and to conclude the salutes. Air Vice-Marshal Lord Bandon, who commanded the fly-past, and Air Commodore B C Yarde, who was in command of the procession contingents, earned the warm congratulations they received; and every officer, airman, cadet, apprentice and boy entrant, on the march, on guard, lining the streets and playing in the bands, behaved worthily.

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