

1953 MILITARY FUNERAL RYDE CEMETERY

By Tony Gale

In February 1953 I was a National Service 2nd Lieutenant posted to the 76th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment stationed at Albany Barracks Parkhurst. I had a compassionate posting as my Father had died suddenly in October 1952. I had just returned from a course at the School of Ack-Ack in Manorbier South Wales where I had trained as a Regimental Radar Instructor. I was waiting for the next intake to be posted and was a “spare” very junior officer.

The Adjutant received a message from the 21st HAA Regiment at Chester to say that a Gunner Keith Punter had been killed by a train and he came from Ryde and his widowed Mother had requested that he be buried with military honours. He told me with the guidance of the Regimental Sergeant Major, I was in charge of the funeral party and its training. I was to arrange to detail the soldiers from my Battery No 227 and could ask the Battery Commander for the assistance of a Bombardier. I should also liaise with the Funeral Director, a Mr Purkis from Ryde, concerning the number of Bearers needed to carry the coffin.

There was another problem; we found there were no Buglers in the Regiment who were competent to sound the “Last Post” and “Reveille”. The Adjutant managed to persuade the RASC Water Training Company at Golden Hill Fort, Freshwater, to send a Bugler for the funeral.

The next problem was the Firing Party of, I think 8 Gunners, with rifles who would fire 3 volleys of blank cartridges after the coffin had been lowered into the grave. Important to make sure they did not fall into the grave! We all had to march from All Saints Church after the funeral, to the Cemetery and this is where the problem started. Drills and Commands. Artillery Regiments are used to firing big guns and leave intricate drills to Infantry and Guards regiments... The Drill Book for rifles etc was complicated both for the RSM and me. We had to be at the Church door when the hearse arrived for the Bearer Party to remove the coffin, lift and place the coffin on the Bearers shoulders, then march up a few steps and into the West door of the Church. The Bearers had practised lifting a long box loaded with sandbags and removing it from the back of a small truck, marching at a slow march, lowering the box onto trestles, standing to attention, turning to the left and slow marching to seats towards the rear of the Church. The next drill was at the end of the Service, when the Bearers had to return to the coffin, lift and then turn the coffin 180 degrees to slow march out of the Church to place the coffin in the hearse. The Police were notified of the funeral and that we would be marching from the Church along West Street to the Cemetery and I asked that traffic be stopped at the junctions to allow the Funeral Party to march without having to halt for traffic.

The Firing Party, should have been standing to attention when the coffin emerged in a position “Rest on your arms reversed” when the butt of the rifle points upwards and the “pointy end” rests on the Gunner’s boot. We could not work out how to reach this position and eventually it was decided that the Firing Party would assume the next position where the rifles were tucked under the left arm with the butt pointing at about 45 degrees – this was the marching position.

We were all inspected on the day of the funeral by the Adjutant before leaving for the Church in an Army Lorry. We arrived early so the Bearers could see the steps and how far they had to carry the coffin etc. Mourners started to arrive and we “fell in” to await the arrival of the hearse and the family. All went well; the Bearers did their job in carrying the coffin in and out of the Church. The Bombardier was in charge inside the Church, I remained at the back until the end of the Service, when I went out and formed up the Firing Party to awaiting the arrival of the coffin. The hearse had turned round and we marched to the front of the hearse. The hearse was loaded, the Bearers formed up behind the hearse, and I ordered “Slow March” to the parties. We marched from the Church into Queens Road, then right into West Street (you could in 1953) and after the hearse, funeral cars and the Troops were in West Street I ordered “Quick March” so we could progress

more quickly across the junctions. I think we returned to the Slow March once we were in the Cemetery, through the Chapels and halted where indicated by the Funeral Director. The coffin was unloaded and carried to the grave and placed on the rods across the grave. I do not remember who lowered the coffin into the grave after the short graveside Service. The Bombadier had issued the Firing Party Gunners with 3 blank rounds each and after the coffin was lowered the Bearers took a step back, turned and marched to the roadway. I then marched the Firing Party, 4 each side of the grave, ordered "Present Arms". Firing position or words to that effect, and ordered "Fire one", Reload, Fire Two and then Fire Three. Take one step to the rear (I did not want anyone to fall into the grave) left turn and quick march to the road. I think the Buglers played "Last Post" etc before the Firing Party marched away. Both groups were marched to the waiting Lorry in West Street, Family members came and thanked the Gunners for their presence at the funeral and their smart turn out.

So went my first independent command, a bit scary at times but with the original guidance of the RSM we managed to overcome the hurdles. It was the only military funeral with which I was ever involved, thereafter it was training regimental radar operators at Albany Barracks, Storrington and Weybourne.

Short reflection. Reading the newspaper reports helped the memory but I must admit that although I have a memory of taking part and some of the problems encountered there is also some surmise. One thing I do remember is the Bombadier tried to recover the spent cartridge cases from the Salute. I wonder if some finished up in the grave – in 500 years time someone might wonder how they got there!

Tony Gale 2022

With grateful thanks to Tony Gale, a valued member of RSHG, for his reminiscences of a duty well done.