Coronation Day 1953
by Gerald Jory, O.B.E., T.D.

Her Majesty recently celebrated at Westminster Abbey the 60th anniversary of Her Coronation and it may be interesting to recall one major aspect of that event in 1953, namely the military involvement. Much has been written about the Abbey ceremony itself, and rightly so, for this was of course the “raison d’être” of this great occasion, but the processions themselves, of which very little has been written, brought about a military involvement on a scale which is unlikely ever to be experienced again.

This description will bring nostalgic memories to those who actually recall the occasion, and may well astonish by its splendour and scale those who were not then born.

As many as 36,000 troops were involved, the main procession consisting of more than 12,000 participants and the street liners numbering 16,000 on a route 5 1/4 miles long through Westminster, the West End and The Mall. Reserves and support personnel of some 8,000 were also required.

The Central London barracks, namely Chelsea (since acquired by property developers), Wellington and Knightsbridge Cavalry Barracks were clearly too small to cope with the numbers involved. A major operation therefore took place to erect and/or adapt temporary accommodation. A large tented camp was erected in Kensington Gardens in spite of protests from local inhabitants claiming to have difficulty in exercising their dogs(!), for some 20 to 25,000 men (including a large contingent of 7,000 Police brought in from the provinces). In those days, men and women were not mixed; female military personnel were accommodated in Richmond Park.

Earls Court (8,500) and Olympia (5,500) were hired, but for a very limited number of days because of the cost involved. For this reason the Royal Engineers could not move until 23 May and begin construction two days later in order to provide dormitories, beds, eating halls and so on for the 14,000 troops who arrived at the end of the month (Coronation Day was on 2 June) requiring several days of rehearsals. Troops were then evacuated and everything had been dismantled, cleaned and returned to the owners by 5 June. This was an exceptional achievement.

The Clapham Deep Shelter, built as an air raid shelter during WWII, was adapted in order to lodge some 3,000 naval personnel.

A satellite camp was erected in Hyde Park, opposite the Knightsbridge Barracks, in order to accommodate a large number of horses. The Canadian Mounties brought over some 50 of them, and many more came from other Commonwealth countries. In all, some 600 horses took part in the processions, a spectacle unlikely ever to be seen again on such a scale. In the previous Coronation in 1937, the sight of the many splendid Indian Army cavalry regiments must have been even more awe-inspiring but there were none in 1953. The Empire had ceased, and Mr. Nehru of India was the only Prime Minister of the Commonwealth taking part in the main procession who did not wish to have a military escort accompanying his carriage.

28 horse-driven carriages took part, in additon of course to the State Coach in which travelled the Queen and Prince Philip; the Royal Mews could not altogether cope, and many carriages had to be hired from film companies !

The procession itself comprised representatives of each of the Infantry and Cavalry regiments then part of the British Army, and large numbers of Commonwealth and Colonial troops. All three Services took part, including many members of the T.A. and Reserves, and even a Home Guard detachment. These latter units were called up a fortnight before 2 June in order to undergo fitness and drill training. They had to be prepared for a 15 mile march on the day, including approach into and dispersal from the processional route, in full ceremonial dress and with their individual weapons. There were 50 bands to enliven the occasion, comprising over 2,000 musicians.

It was an astonishing feat of organisation. All went well and without a hitch except for the heavy uninterrupted downpour. This rain brought the State Coach itself to a halt in St. James Street, and Police and troops had to push it up into Piccadillyl! Sadly, all coaches were closed up except for that of the Queen of Tonga who insisted on keeping hers open. Drenched though she was throughout, she waved joyfully to the crowds along the route, and the crowds roared their delight. The poor Sultan who shared the carriage and whose plumed hat had become a sorry sight was distinctly less amused.

And so, this Coronation mey well turn out to be the last occasion on such a lavish scale. There is no certainty that the world of tomorrow would be prepared to accept such splendour and pageantry, even if the Armed Forces were able to provide it.

Even the ceremony in Westminster Abbey could also be profoundly affected, for would our next Monarch be the Defender of the Faith or that of the Faiths?