



Here's a Health unto His Majesty - the Regimental Quick March of the RAMC

ARMY

A piece of music that everybody in the RAMC will have marched to at one time or another during their career is *Here's a Health unto His Majesty*. It is nearly always played at the conclusion of RHQ Army Medical Services dinner nights and at every concert given by the AMS Band. But what is the story behind this piece of music?

The song *Here's a Health unto His Majesty* was very popular during the reign of King Charles II, 1660-85, the period which saw the creation of the modern army as we know it today. Jeremiah Savile was a composer of songs and glees and is well represented in the anthologies of these pieces that were published in the second half of the seventeenth century. His songs were also included in John Playford's *The Musical Companion*, 1667, compiled for and containing much of the repertoire of the Old Jewry Music Society, of which he and Playford were members. Savile composed the piece as an air and it may have been the Society's anthem. He is not listed as a member of the Society in *The Musical Companion*, suggesting that he had died by the time it was published, perhaps as a result of the plague of 1666.

Shadwell mentioned the song twice in his plays, *The Miser*, 1672, where Timothy says: "*We can be merry as the best of you – we can, i' faith - and sing A boat, a boat or Here's a Health unto His Majesty, with a fa, la, la, la, lero.*" In *Epsom Wells*, 1673, Bisket says: "*Come let's all be musitioners, and all roar and sing Here's a Health unto His Majesty, with a fa, la, la, la, lero.*"

*"Here's a health unto His Majesty,
With a fal lal lal la la la la,*

*Confusion to his enemies,
With a fal lal lal la la la la la.*

*And he that will not drink his health,
I wish him neither wit nor wealth,*

*Nor yet a rope to hang himself;
With a fal lal lal la la la la la la,
With a fal lal lal la la la la."*

It was to be nearly 300 years before the song took on a new identity and an official role within the British Army. In the autumn of 1947, the Commandant of the RAMC Depot and Training Establishment, Brigadier Glyn Hughes, felt that the Regimental March *Bonny Nell* seemed to lack the necessary rhythm and swing. A competition for a new march was opened to all serving

Directors of Music and Bandmasters of the Army, with a prize of £100 for the most suitable entry. A circular was issued stipulating that, if possible, the march should bear a title applicable to the RAMC and that it should be founded on one or more suitable national folk songs or popular airs. All entries were to be anonymous and independent judges, appointed by the Commandant of the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall, would eliminate those which were considered unsuitable. The remainder, were submitted to a Committee assembled by the RAMC Representative Colonel Commandant, who had the right of rejection of all or any part of the composition submitted. Twenty-four entries were submitted, and Sir George Dyson, Director of the Royal College of Music in conjunction with Kneller Hall, adjudged the best composition to be that by Major (Albert) Joseph Thornburrow, Director of Music of the Royal Horse Guards. Sadly, he died suddenly on 15 November 1947, aged 44, in Windsor Military Hospital after a short illness and before the result of the competition had been made known to him.

Sir George Dyson wrote the following note on the new march which appeared in the *Army Medical Services Magazine* of October 1948:

"In selecting a march for the Royal Army Medical Corps certain conditions were essential. It had to be good music and good for marching. When you have to live with a piece of music for a long time and repeat it often, it must wear well. And it is easily possible to choose something which seems very good at the moment, but soon begins to pall. Then we had to consider if there was any well-known song or melody that might be appropriate to the Corps. Lastly, it had to be well arranged for the band so that it would give the players interesting and skilful parts to play.

I think we have found all these qualities in the march we have selected. Nothing could be more fitting than the fine old song 'Here's a Health unto His Majesty', as the main theme of a Royal Army Medical Corps march, and to this the composer has added a dignified melody of his own and arranged both of them in a most effective and musicianly way. I am sure the march will be of lasting usefulness and pleasure to the Corps."

The proposed new march was premiered at Buckingham Palace before Her Majesty the Queen, the then Colonel-in-Chief, who expressed her unqualified approval. Formal authority of the new quick march was given in *Army Order 52/1948* dated 30 June 1948, coinciding with the Golden Jubilee of the RAMC. Like many marches of that era, it was published by Boosey & Hawkes of 295 Regent Street, London,

Following the adoption of *Here's A Health Unto His Majesty* in the UK, the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, who formed an alliance with the RAMC in 1919, also choose it for their march. Formally approved in *Canadian Army Order 175*, dated 24 April 1950, they initially used the Thornburrow arrangement. However, Captain Charles Adams, Director of Music of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals Band arranged a new version which was brought into use at an unknown date. It remained in use until 1 February 1968 when the RCAMC became the Canadian Forces Medical Branch. In 1975 a committee headed by the Surgeon General selected a new march by Chief Warrant Officer Brian Gossip to be the 'new' Regimental Quick March of the Branch. He used the old English folk song *The Farmer's Boy* with a short reference to *Here's A Health Unto His Majesty* in his march. This was authorised in *Canadian Forces Administrative Order 32-3 CL 26/77*, dated 2 September 1977.

The Royal Australian Army Medical Corps, adopted the Thornburrow arrangement and this was promulgated in *Australian Army Order 91/1953*. The neighbouring Royal New Zealand Army Medical Corps adopted same at an unknown date. Both Corps held alliances with the RAMC dating from 1919. Similarly the Northern Rhodesia Army Medical Corps made a formal request on 25 March 1964 to use the march. The RAMC Council of Colonels Commandant replied on 15 April that it could be used. (UK National Archives Ref: WO 32 / 14259). Whether the march was adopted or not is unknown.

Returning to the UK, over time Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Brown, the Corps' Director of Music 1947-64, felt that the trio of the original Thornburrow arrangement, in the style of his favourite composer Elgar, was not strong enough to use on parade and penned his own version in a new key with no introductory passage. This newer arrangement was used on the parade square by bands of the Corps for many years whilst the original was played at the end of every concert and dinner night. In 2008, the original, without the trio, was restored to the parade ground by the AMS Volunteer Band.

The current regimental quick march was first recorded by the RAMC Staff Band in 1949 on a 78 rpm disc alongside the *Eriskay Love Lilt*, the *National Anthem* and the *Corps Bugle Call*. Preserving the tradition and ethos of the RAMC into the 21st Century the present AMS Band recorded the march and other appropriate dinner night music in 2005 on their first CD, *Medics in Concert*.

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