

# ELEVEN EMPTY SPACES

PART OF AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT RECORDING AND REMEMBERING  
THE EVENTS OF THE IRA ATTACK ON THE ROYAL MARINES SCHOOL OF MUSIC, DEAL  
ON 22 SEPTEMBER 1989

*“You hear about the IRA on the news and what they’ve done ... but it’s always somewhere else ... nobody in Deal ever thought they would target us” – D Goodban*

The Royal Marines barracks was spread over a large area in Walmer and Deal and the personnel there had always had close links with the local community. They were such an important and integral part of the town that they were granted the Freedom of the Borough of Deal in 1945.



The Royal Marines School of Music on church parade leaves via Jubilee Gates, Walmer - Image provided by Mr M Pitcher

The Marines provided the community with employment, spent well in the local shops and provided excellent sporting facilities and training, including a pool where many local children learned to swim. They also took part in local activities and had pride of place marching in the annual Deal Carnival.



An aerial view of part of the barracks complex - Image provided by Mr M Pitcher



The Royal Marines School of Music takes part in Deal summer carnival - Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury



The swimming baths in the Barracks where Royal Marines and local children could learn to swim - Image provided by Dover Museum



The Globe Theatre in North Barracks Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

The Globe Theatre within the barracks was a place where the public as well as the Marines could perform. One of the main attractions was the annual Sergeants' Mess pantomime. Much of the profit this annual production raised was ploughed back into the community.

*“Way back in '76 ... Royal Marines presented us with a major donation from one of their winter pantomimes which allowed us to purchase emergency equipment to cut cars open ... far quicker than we would have got it through brigade” – M Gidman*

Over the generations many of the marines married local girls, cementing the links even further.

*“The local marines are like your family. A lot of the marines are married to a lot of our local girls ... it goes back from generation to generation ... there’s not many families in the town that haven’t got marines in the family” – P Hudson*



The Duke of Edinburgh takes the salute at the final trooping of the colour by 41 Commando in May 1981 Photograph provided by Lt Col R Dixon (Rtd)



41 Commando trooping the colour on the occasion of the disbandment of their unit. Picture provided by Lt Col R Dixon (Rtd)

For many years the barracks housed not only the School of Music but also other units including various Commando units. The last of these was 41 Commando who were disbanded in 1981. The Duke of Edinburgh, Captain-General of the Marines, took the salute at their final Trooping of the Colour. Their departure left just a small School of Music to occupy a large barracks, which at some points was intersected by civilian roadways.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was a constant threat of IRA action on mainland Britain. An attack on a band had taken place in Regents Park in 1982 and civilians had been killed and injured in the Harrods bombing. Attacks were chiefly but not exclusively taking place in London, as can be seen by the attacks in Brighton, Guildford and Birmingham. All UK military establishments were on the alert for threatened action.

*“18 months before the bombing we were warned that there might well be an attempt in this area by the IRA to cause mayhem ... certain arrangements were put into train to make it less easy ... all sorts of things which were meant to restrict the fact that a musician or anybody else could be targeted ... but after 18 months that ... had rather gone to the back of people’s minds and there was no real security as such at the barracks. It’s an immense piece of real estate ... and so there was little security and certainly none that would have meant that this event couldn’t take place. They merely had to hop over a wall and they were there” – G Hoskins*

Although plans were already underway for moving the School of Music to Portsmouth, numerous activities continued to take place in the barrack complex. Security existed, but many believed it was inadequate.

*“From the day that I arrived I had lobbied my headquarters in Portsmouth for more defences against people coming in ... and I was told no ... we were too far out on a limb ... I got no support at all and I was really depressed by it” – R Dixon*

*“Because we all knew Deal was closing, the Ministry of Defence had not spent any money on Deal for 5 years ... it was clear from the Commandants point of view ... that Deal was poorly defended” – J Perkins*

*“There was a civilian force ... Reliance Security ... Anything that happened on that day is not down to anything they did or anything they didn’t do ... they were very restricted in what they could do” – D Duxbury-Williams*

The night before the bombing, a number of the bandsmen performed at the barracks for a ceremonial dinner. There was also a disco and the first rehearsal for that year’s pantomime was held. For a number of senior marine personnel, Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> September was their last evening at Deal before going away on a short trip. They would leave early the next day.

*“The day before was quite important not because of only [the ceremonial dinner] but of course a lot of people who had the expertise to manage a situation like that were then on the train to Scotland and knew nothing about this until later on in the day when they arrived in Scotland and caught the news” – J Perkins*

*“You knew that there was high security on occasions but I don’t think anybody realised that one day the IRA would move in to Deal and try and kill lots of people. It just seemed inconceivable at the time” – S Briggs*

*“In those days security was only marginal. It was civilian organised people just checking passes to allow people through the gates in the various barracks” – R Dixon*