

## **Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War**

Saturday 29 June 2013, The Mansion House

### TRANSCRIPT

#### **Military Music in Operational Theatres – Lt Col Bob Meldrum**

**IAN RITCHIE:** Good afternoon, and welcome back from what I hope was a nice lunch-break and plenty of chance to discuss the really important and interesting matters that have been cropping up over the last day-and-a-half. I'm very proud to be in the position to introduce Lieutenant Colonel Bob Meldrum, Principal Director of Music (Army). In fact, he is the Army's most senior musician, and a fine musician in his own right. In his own words, he will introduce himself and the remarkable work that he has done throughout his military career as a musician. It leaves me only to say, Bob, over to you.

**BOB MELDRUM:** Thank you very much, Ian. Ladies and gentlemen good afternoon. It's a great privilege for me to talk to such a broad mix of professional people with such a strong interest in that wonderful thing we call music but I definitely got the graveyard shift didn't I - 2.00pm on the second day, following the young Guy Booth who I sent along to entertain and impress you with his stories yesterday. Well I've have got 35 minutes so I'll try to keep it interesting.

To begin with then, a little about me: I enlisted as a Junior Musician back in April 1975. I was an oboist through to about December 1985 after which I was a Bandmaster for a number of years. I've been a Director of Music since March 1994 and the Principal Director of Music for the British Army since March 2009 – some four-and-a-half years. I retire on the 27th of September, and today is my last in uniform, so I'm open to job offers! If you are looking for someone with a 'musical brain' and strong strategic and leadership skills, then I'm your man. My title 'Principal Director of Music' would suggest that I do lots of music such as this [photo conducting the finale at the 2012 Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo] or this [photo conducting an orchestra] but I actually do a lot of this [photo sitting at his desk]. My job focusses on strategic planning and I'm the custodian of the musical standards of all Army bands. I plan for the future and have had a lot to do with the reorganisation of Army music as we move forward into the new Army 2020 era, and how we are going to be configured.

Against that background and my personal experiences spanning 38 years, I'm going to talk to you about music and its effect on operations by looking at three phases: (1) the in-theatre build-up to battle, (2) the in-theatre post-conflict stabilisation period, which can be many years and (3) the back-home post-deployment period. A picture paints a thousand words so they say, so I'm going to show you photographs from the first Gulf War 1990/91, at which time I was a young fresh-faced Bandmaster; others from six months I spent in Kosovo as a junior Director of Music spanning the millennium New Year, and some from my most recent deployment back in 2006 with a pop group from the Royal Artillery Band. I would just like to emphasise that these

are my personal photos, views and observations based on personal experience and my recollection of the effect music had throughout those three phases.

Using photos from the first Gulf War – Op GRANBY, we are going to look at the role of music during the in-theatre build-up to battle – the mental, physical and tactical preparation for that which is going to happen when we engage with the enemy. Who is the audience? Well, obviously in an operational theatre such as the Middle East, the terrain (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq) is like a massive sheet of sandpaper and the audience was very much the service personnel preparing to go into battle. At the time, our music making very much filled a social and sensory void. We entertained and it was very effective, because those we performed for had nothing else to stimulate them - no pubs, clubs, alcohol, wives, girlfriends, children, television - nothing. We were pretty much it and we helped alleviate their boredom. What we provided became more important as the threat of combat grew along with the uncertainty of what was to come, bearing in mind that we were anticipating chemical attack at that time. An unusual correlation, but very much like religion, music became more important to some soldiers as the uncertainty and threat to life grew.

This photo taken in Fallingbommel in Germany shows one of the band members - a very fine cornet player – inoculating one of the soldiers deploying. As you may know, our operational role for many years has been to support the medical services and here you see it in action. We inoculated all of our soldiers before we deployed. This photo shows soldiers recently arrived in theatre temporarily housed in a dockside warehouse in Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia where the humidity was almost unbearable. There was quite a lot of sickness and diarrhoea during that early familiarisation stage. I was on one of the first flights out there and I slept in this warehouse. It was sleeping bag after sleeping bag - jam packed with soldiers. The padre did his thing and held church services. I pulled a chromatic harmonica out of my backpack and played the hymns for hundreds of soldiers. Isn't that interesting: do you think they would have listened to me playing the harmonica if they could have popped down the road to the pub? I don't think so. So, I was very quickly elevated to a position of stardom! As you can see from this next picture [musicians practising in the desert], once we moved into the desert, the humidity was a lot better, and our musicians practised because that is what musicians do. In this picture, you can see a soldier conducting during band practise with a big smile on his face. He had nothing else to do at that moment in time so we got him involved – remember, something is better than nothing.

In this picture, taken on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1990, you can see soldiers celebrating our main battle honour [1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Staffordshire Regiment]. We are out on that massive sheet of sandpaper in what you can see from the flag blowing in the background was a sandstorm, but notice that the soldiers don't seem to care and are getting involved with our music making. The guy who is facing the band is an American soldier attached to our battle group, so there was reach beyond our own people. Remember, this is the middle of the day and without the help of a few pints of beer, because there is no other form of entertainment or sensory stimulation. That same musician you saw doing the inoculations earlier had a serious role to play on this important day – he played the bugle calls during the commemorative service that took place in the field to remember those who had fallen during earlier campaigns.

This photo shows the front cover of the Stafford Knot - our regimental journal, in which you can see a Warrior - the infantry fighting vehicle - positioned behind the band, which is playing the hymns for the service. You can see the Union flag as well as our regimental flag. The band was always there on such occasions, because without the band it would have been much less effective. Soldiers don't sing well unless they have something to follow. As Christmas approached, my Commander Officer told me to get my musicians together so that we could go around the various locations to play Christmas carols and entertain, as well as for church services. Not easy as they were spread to the winds supporting various infantry companies and medical organisations but we did it as this photo showing us rehearsing in the desert demonstrates. We then teamed up with the padre and hit the road so to speak. It was quite moving to see how some soldiers, who probably would never go to church, really started questioning their faith. This marriage between music and religion, I felt was quite an amazing thing to witness.

As you might have noticed, I'm vertically challenged. In this picture, you can see the drum major who was very tall mimicking me as he conducted the band on Christmas Day back in Al Jubail. You can see his Corps of Drums in the background.

Moving forward to 24th February 1991, and this picture shows the battle group formed up at the start line. To explain, we are about to move through the cleared minefields and engage with the enemy. I'm commanding the 432 ambulance you can see, and in the coming days, we took casualties and fatalities. The focus was our medical role at this point in time and our instruments were stored in a container back in Al Jubail. This photo which I took once the fighting was over from the truck that is following the one you can see in the picture, shows the carnage on the Basra Road. You are probably more familiar with this next picture, as it featured in the news at the time. These pictures give you an idea of where we were, what we saw and what we were doing during those few days, days in which we lost a couple of soldiers from the battalion.

Turning now to the in-theatre post-conflict period - the fighting is over and there is less chance of soldiers getting killed or injured - a time of relief. The audience still comprises service personnel, but could also include native civilians, traumatised by everything that has gone on around them. It's a period of reflection during which time our music-making has a broad functional role. It could be ceremonial, perhaps in memory of those that might not have made it, or it could be celebratory, but no matter what, music always contributes to restoring some sense of order and normality. This photo shows me looking a little weary after the event, and this one shows what we describe as two million rivets flying in formation. It's the back of a Hercules aircraft packed with soldiers - amongst them many of my musicians. We were on route to mass with other bands in theatre to play solemn music as the dead were ceremonially moved from a hangar on to the back of a Hercules aircraft for the repatriation flight back to the UK. My musician had gone from recovering bodies and dealing with traumatic injuries to playing their instruments for those who didn't make it. I think it is really important to remember that whilst my musicians were working for other people, this particular event was very moving and had a big impact on them too - a time for them to think back over the previous days, a time to think about their dealing with some of the people they were now playing for.

And finally, we turn to post-deployment period, back home in the UK or in our case, Germany. Our music making still targeted service personnel but also their families and the wider civilian community in a variety of forms: celebratory regimental events (we got through it), concert tours, freedom parades, medal parades, and commemorative services remembering again those who didn't make it. In our case it included travelling around the county of Staffordshire and playing in the Potteries to thank people who supported the battalion whilst we were away. All part of an important process, which again helped restore some sense of order, acceptance and normality. This slide, which comes from a regimental journal at the time, is a collage of photos that says it all. The middle photo shows the first aircraft back from theatre as the soldiers disembark on the tarmac and my musicians were on that flight. My Commanding Officer sent us back early - brilliant, thinks we, but his thinking was a little bit broader than that. He wasn't being nice to the musicians, but wanted us back on the ground so that we could be there to be part of the celebratory welcome for every other unit returning to Fallingbommel, we are talking a brigade-strength of soldiers. Think for a moment about the musicians - I can tell you when I got off that flight, the media swamped us. I was overwhelmed by the noise, the children, the flag waving, the perfume the women were wearing, my senses were overloaded. And we as a band went through this time and time again. As the soldiers arrive back in coaches and fell into the arms of their loved ones the band played on. It was a long time ago but I can still feel it now - it really did have a massive effect on us whilst we were playing. This picture shows it as it was reported in the local Germany papers on the 13th of March 1991.

We move forward almost a decade now to the conflict in Kosovo and the lengthy stabilisation period that followed the combat phase. Our main audience remained UK service personnel but we also played for others including the Russians with whom we were on quite formal terms; wherever our pop band played, they seemed to gate-crash which helped break down those formal barriers. My band performed for the appointment of the first Kosovan Police men and women to have been trained by the international training team, which included police personnel from the UK. It was a big media event and we played for the graduation ceremony. We also supported Non-Governmental Organisations in their work - in this particular instance Vanessa Redgrave came over to do her bit, she's well known for doing this type of work. I can't remember exactly what it was, but she orchestrated some form of arts workshop in Pristina, working with native civilian performers. There was a parade through the capital; she was in an open-topped vehicle and the band marched behind. It was a fabulous sight and then we performed in the theatre too.

Through music, we were able to engage with the native civilians in a bridge building capacity, and to help restore some sense of order and normality. Here are some photos: this is Podujevo, north of Pristina and you can see me in the middle looking at the camera. My little band - the AGC Band which was here yesterday - was swamped like pop stars. The locals had been deprived of the arts and when we turned up, we could have played anything and they would still have gone berserk. It was overwhelming. You can't see here but they were being forced back by the security services. We also played in a shabby theatre, for want of a better description. Behind the band there is a big double barn door which provides access to the stage for equipment and instruments. At one point, I thought the door was going to be broken down as the local people were trying to get in to hear up play. The audience were

overwhelming – that’s me handing out basic percussion instruments to the young children and the smile on their faces says it all.

The photo is of an Albanian man in his sixties who stood on a Serb landmine. The woman at the rear of the picture is a French horn player and to her left just behind the doctor, is my Band Sergeant Major - a trombone player. They were working in the operating theatre assisting the experts in a non-technical sense, "hold this, pass me that". The victim lost his leg and they are repairing the damage. In this post-op picture, we see him with his son, and one of the nurses that looked after him. I had him in conducting the band from his wheelchair two days after surgery. He spoke a bit of German, I spoke even less German, we conversed and became friends and that’s how it happened. Music has this wonderful way of breaking down barriers, even if there isn't much language around to get you by. Quite amazing.

Somebody mentioned about working with young people. We took it upon ourselves to engage with two schools, one Serb, one Albanian and played for them at Christmas. We also ran a project whereby our families back home collected a container load of equipment; computers, chairs, books, pens, desks and so forth. We had them shipped out and delivered them, but our music making opened the doors to make this possible.

I’m sure you can all remember where you were on New Year’s Eve 1999. Well I can tell you that I wouldn’t have swapped places with any of you. This photo is a snapshot of that memorable Millennium New Year's Eve in Pristina. Our pop band played covers from across the decades and as you can see the soldiers had a great time dancing to the music. I was privileged beyond belief to witness what I saw on Millennium New Year; servicemen and woman, officers and soldiers, having a fantastic time – making the best of a bad situation and really letting their hair down. We are talking sub-zero temperatures, minus 20 some evenings; 50 soldiers to a Portaloo - so it’s easy to understand why we made a difference and why we performed at different locations for about 10 nights on the trot.

Leaping forward again, let’s take a look at Iraq in 2006. This again is a period of stabilisation. Soldiers are still losing their lives to sporadic enemy action but the main fighting is over. Our audience is almost exclusively service personnel. Our role: to stimulate the moral component of fighting power – in other words to engage with our soldiers and give them that uplifting sense of relief from what's going on in their everyday lives where they have little else to stimulate them. During lunch, one of you asked, "What difference has it made now that young soldiers have iPods and various other hand-held devices"? Well, I was staggered to see how much soldiers have changed during the short period since the Millennium New Year due mainly to such devices. They have become noticeably more insular and less dependent on external stimulation because it’s easier now so long as you have batteries or a power source. I took a pop band out to Iraq, and we played in a variety of locations ranging from what we affectionately call Slipper City – the supporting rear echelons which are well established with satellite TVs and satellite phones etc though to the FOBs – Forward Operating Bases – the front line. Few of those living and working in Slipper City turned out to see us, preferring instead to watch TV or play on their handheld games, whereas we were a huge source of relief at the FOBs where soldiers were still under attack and living conditions were at best sparse. A remarkable difference separated by just a just a few miles. What it also demonstrated is that we musicians have to be

very current in what we are playing for our soldiers and young officers. Our covers have to be up-to-date and we have to be on their level and identify with whatever they are listening to down the iPod wire. Whilst I don't always understand or like what they are listening to, I do understand the effect and that's important for a Director of Music.

So what you saw yesterday with Guy Booth and the musicians that performed for you is an example of us modernising and keeping up and therefore being effective. Whilst we sustain and protect that which is good – what we call "the golden thread" – for example Changing the Guard at Buckingham Palace and the Blues and the Royals and the Lifeguards who perform on horseback, we do need to modernise in other areas to be fully effective across the spectrum. What we provide in theatre needs to be flexible to suit the occasion – be it ceremonial, commemorative, or up to date popular entertainment.

This is us posing on an armoured vehicle in front of one of Saddam's just to give you a feel for the environment; it was very hot and we were supplied with issue sunglasses and sun cream. To recap then, the further forward we got and the tougher conditions became, the more effective we were - very simple like a sliding scale. A lot of movement in Iraq was by air because travel by road as we all know too well was too dangerous, so the helicopter became our kit truck. We loaded it and climbed on top of all the boxes. That [picture] is the Merlin helicopter we used to move around theatre to play for our soldiers.

Well ladies and gentlemen, I reckon that's pretty much 35 minutes on the money. You have actually got a little more than ten minutes in which to grill me with questions, I believe. I hope you found that interesting.

**IAN RITCHIE:** Thank you very much indeed, that was absolutely fascinating and there is now an opportunity to ask a few questions. I for one simply can't wait until later on to hear the Band of the Royal Artillery in full flight later on this afternoon, because it is so clear that their music-making is grounded not just within barracks but within the whole of society. It is going to be very exciting indeed. If I may ask the first question: I have the privilege of having talked with you about this before, about the roles that your father and your grandfather played as musicians in the Army previously and also the relationship between the musical role and the medical role, and has that actually changed through the generations?

**BOB MELDRUM:** It certainly has, my grandfather was a cornet player and a very fine singer. He served during the Second World War, was a stretcher-bearer at Dunkirk and a champion boxer in India - a strange sport for a musician, but he was a jock, I suppose! The medical role has a long history. Whilst I was in Kosovo, legislation was passed focussing on Clinical Governance. Basically as I understand it, it means that if you were not practising medicine at any level on a regular basis, then you shouldn't be doing it at all. In recent times, when military musicians have deployed, they have downed their instruments and undergone intense medical training but that has changed with change in legislation. We still work alongside the medical services, and are trained in the decontamination of casualties.

**FLOOR:** I think everybody here is to some degree aware of the benefits of the music and the therapy it provides for the soldiers when you perform. If the musicians are

providing some therapy to the soldiers, where do the musicians get their therapy from? Do you entertain each other, musically?

**BOB MELDRUM:** I said that when we came back from Iraq the first time we were on this emotional hamster wheel playing for other soldiers as they returned, and I think that process had value for us. Some of my musicians saw some pretty horrendous stuff and one or two of them took a little time to readjust when we got back but I'm convinced playing music was therapeutic. Obviously there is a programme of help available to all servicemen should they need it.

**FLOOR:** I wanted to ask you actually about the repertoire, because you have shown us nearly a 20-year period, you have shown us the band playing in the streets to civilians, you have shown us different stages of deployment and so on. Has, over the 20 years – the lay person just thinks of oompa oompa – has the repertoire changed or have you refreshed it? Is it classical, pop, rock, marching?

**BOB MELDRUM:** That's great question and very relevant. Soldiering is a young person's game, is it not? If you are going to play for young soldiers and officers then it needs to be current otherwise they won't listen to it. When I took the Royal Artillery Band to Iraq in 2006 we opened with *Let Me Entertain You* by Robbie Williams. I thought we are all over it; it was exciting and we performed it really well but it was already dated and the soldiers were asking 'do you know any such-and-such?' I didn't know what they were talking about but my younger musicians did. We thought we were quite current but as we found out, we weren't current enough. So to answer your question, we have tackled this and constantly update the repertoire. Obviously we do have concert wind bands and the orchestra you saw me conducting, but its horses for courses, the right product for the right occasion. And when we are on Ops it has to be very current for our soldiers. We are like the *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* troop of the day. You saw the AGC Band yesterday and that's an indication of the direction in which we are going with some of our bands – bands about 15-strong that focus solely on contemporary music. We are engaging with the Academy of Contemporary Music, Guildford, and hope to work with them as develop this expertise yet further. We aspire to get some of our people in to work with some of their youngsters and visa-versa - a two-way cross-pollination, which I think could be really productive. We also need to recruit more specialists with 'wonky genes' – you need 'wonky genes to feel and play this type of music in the same way that you have to be a certain type of musicians to paly orchestral music. As I said earlier, I'm of a certain vintage and whilst I don't necessarily understand or like the music these youngsters are playing and listening to today, I do understand the positive effect it can have. We also have one or two of our younger contemporary musicians writing their own material as well. We are current and we are certainly updating what we are doing and taking it forward with a positive outlook.

**FLOOR:** Thank you very much for an excellent presentation, I certainly look forward to your memoirs when they come out and the accompanying DVD. As a service musician myself you gave a very good overview of operational roles, because I think a lot of people you have mentioned, when they think of a military band, they think you are Trooping the Colour. If you mention to officers in the Army that you are a musician, people think, yes we know of them, we saw them at a dinner night. You have actually painted the other side of the coin, which I think is really, really good.

As you highlighted, we have seen more diversity within Army musicians in the last ten years. Something I was going to say is over the enduring operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, members of the Territorial Army have very much come to the fore in filling spare capacity in regular Army units, it is really good, we have five regular Army Bands deployed in the last four years. Why have our Territorial Army bands not been utilised for the wealth of talent they actually have? I think TA bands must be the only part of the TA that haven't been utilised on operations. To the bean counters at the MoD, and places like that, that is people who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing, as Oscar Wilde says, they will say, what is the TA band? Just a function band playing for officers' dinner nights.

**BOB MELDRUM:** The Territorial Army is a very important component of Army music. You have seen that Regular bands deploy on operations, though not always for the full six months as we did in Kosovo and Iraq. More often these days, in the stabilisation period, our regular bands deploy for about six weeks to cover Remembrance and then back out at Christmas and New Year, very important times in the calendar. The Queen's birthday in June is another time when bands play an important role. Where do TA bands fit in you might ask. Well they don't have a deployable role at the moment, but TA bands as a whole are being reviewed at the moment so that might change. More practical for TA musicians is deployment as individual augmentees in non-musical roles. This is where musicians deploy to do specific jobs because they want to taste some of the action and mix it up with other professional soldiers to give them a better understanding of what the broader Army does. Regular Army musicians have been doing this for several years and I know of one TA musician who is currently out on operations in Afghanistan. Getting TA Bands out en masse would be a challenge but it could possibly happen if there was a requirement. What I see as more effective and more easily achievable is for TA Bands to back fill a Regular Bands that have deployed. If a regular band needs a number of musicians to bring it up to strength for a period of time while we have some soldiers away that is how they can support and be part of the package.

**FLOOR:** One swift one, what is your relationship with your counterparts in the Navy and the RAF. Is it co-operation or healthy competition!

**BOB MELDRUM:** I get on really well with the Royal Marines because the Principal Director of Music is the same height as me. The Principal Director of Music for the Royal Air Force is six-and-a-half foot so I don't talk to him [joke]. Seriously, Wing Commander Duncan Stubbs from the Royal Air Force, and Lieutenant Colonel Nick Grace from the Royal Marines and myself have been in post for about the same length of time and have formed strong personal and professional relationships. We've closed ranks when we've been under threat of cuts and we support one another fantastically well. It hasn't always been the case and I'm very proud of the fact we have developed such a level of mutual trust and support. Having got through my presentation I will tell you now that last night was my dine-out, I have come straight from the party to here, which is why I'm drinking lots of water. I bring that up to emphasise the point that Wing Commander Duncan Stubbs and his wife came to my farewell bash last night, which is testament of the friendship we enjoy.

**FLOOR:** If I ask quickly I'm wondering how many bands there are all together in the Army? When I was in it in a long time ago, every infantry regiment had its own band, I don't know if that is the case now?

**BOB MELDRUM:** A summary of where we are at: when I joined the army in 1975 we had 73 regular Army Bands. Many of them were very small regimental bands of around 21 assuming every position was filled. All too often we were under-strength so it was difficult to be musically effective. The biggest reorganisation of Army bands came in 1994 as part of OPTIONS FOR CHANGE. We reduced from 68 to 29 Regular bands, but the bands we kept were bigger and more effective. A few years later in 2006, FUTURE ARMY STRUCTURES saw us reduce to 22 Regular Bands. We have 22 Regular Army Bands and 19 Territorial Army Bands, so when you think about it, with 800 Regulars and 650 in the TA serving in 41 bands, we are still the single biggest employer of musicians in this country.

**IAN RITCHIE:** On that note, Bob, thank you very much indeed.

**BOB MELDRUM:** Thank you... don't forget, I'm open to job offers!