

# **The Key**

## **By Patrick Derwent**

The Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers has not been around very long. It was formed during the Second World War from a rag-tag collection of farriers, metalsmiths and tinkerers with things (think Reuben from 'Our Yorkshire Farm'). Some enlightened senior officers, realising that new-fangled machinery like tanks and other weapons was becoming increasingly sophisticated and difficult to maintain, had decided that a more professional approach, with a proper trade structure, and officers who knew about engineering, was required. Hence: REME.

Our first Colonel-in-Chief was Princess Marina (The Colonel-in-Chief of a corps or regiment is a bit like being the queen of the UK - no real power but, potentially, a huge amount of influence, as well as being a focus for loyalty and affection). She was a very worthy woman but was perhaps not first choice for a fledgling technical corps. I remember once saying to a friend of mine at a dinner night, after we had toasted her, 'She's great but we really need someone like Prince Phillip'.

She died in 1968 and onto the stage, as if on cue, strode Prince Phillip like an *éclat*. He was a perfect choice. Back then, 'educated' people in the civil service, the diplomatic corps and other upper reaches of society had, almost invariably, read Classics at Oxford or Cambridge. Knowing the language, literature and history of the Ancient Greeks and Romans was, quite obviously, an essential prerequisite for governing and controlling a modern 20th Century country!!!! A knowledge of science and technology was not only deemed irrelevant but suggestive of consorting with 'trade'. It wasn't only the national establishment which viewed science and engineering with suspicion but the military hierarchy as well. In REME, we were regarded as little better than garage mechanics (soldiers with oily rags) by the Infantry, the Cavalry and The Guards.

But, overnight, all this changed. Here was a very, very senior 'Royal' taking over this bunch of 'tradesmen'. If a 'Royal' thought we were good enough to govern then we must be respectable. Other soldiers suddenly woke up to the fact that REME officers had university degrees in engineering and other scientific disciplines, that we were well-educated, and knew things about their equipment that they hadn't the foggiest notion about. Our Warrant Officers, NCOs and ordinary soldiers were highly skilled tradesmen and technicians as well as being competent fighting men. Prince Phillip embraced science and technology, delighted in knowing how things worked, and was supremely proud of being the Colonel-in-Chief of a technical corps. He astounded us, not only with his knowledge of The Corps and what we were doing, but by his enthusiasm. We were entranced and were proud to have him as our titular head for over 50 years - until the day he died.

I sit here on the settee allowing the waves of grief and nostalgia on the TV to wash over me, but I am far away. My mind wanders down the years to a sunny day in Fallingbostal (known

by generations of soldiers as ‘effing bee’) and a corps lunch. The ante-room is warm and filled with the happy sound of cheerful, animated officers meeting friends, swapping stories, relaxing in good company. But the loudest laughter, the liveliest debate rises from whichever group happens at that moment to surround the tall man dressed in a general’s uniform who grins over the assembled company. He was my hero then and has remained so for all my life. I have watched, and listened to, numerous commentators and famous people telling us of Prince Phillip’s incredible contribution to our national life. That he was ‘the key’ to the modernising of the monarchy. The REME motto is ‘Arte et Marte’ (by skill and by fighting) and he was a Colonel-in-Chief who, through his interpersonal skills, and by fighting our corner, established us as an essential and respected part of the military family. He was our key as well, and I am immensely proud of the fact that I once had the privilege of meeting him.