

THE CEREMONY OF BEATING RETREAT

The ceremony of Beating Retreat has its origins in the practicalities of early warfare when the drum was used for all signals on the battlefield. Beating the Retreat was a signal for troops to disengage from combat as light faded. This custom was also used to warn outlying troops to withdraw to the confines of the encampment before the picquets were set for the night.

One of the first references to the custom of Retreat is in the 'Rules and Ordynances for the Warre' dated 1554, where it is called 'Watch Setting'. In 1727 Humphrey Bland's 'Treatise of Military Discipline' stated: 'Half an hour before the gates are to be shut, generally at the setting of the sun, the Drummers of the Port Guard are to go upon the ramparts and beat a Retreat to give notice to those without that the gates are to be shut.'

There appeared to be some confusion between Retreat and another custom of 'Tattoo' which was a beating of drums within the billeting areas to order the troops to their quarters. Twenty years later, whilst in Flanders during the war of the Austrian succession, The Duke of Cumberland made the first clear distinction between Retreat and Tattoo, when he ordered 'The Retreat is to be daily at Sunset and the Tattoo is to be beat at a later hour as ordered by the Commandants of individual encampments'.

The original call of Retreat was beaten by drums alone, and it was some years before fifers were added to play tunes. The bugle came later still and the present ceremony of having a band parade is a modern innovation to add spectacle. This ceremony of Beating Retreat in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines rose to importance in the 1930s when the then Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Sir William Fisher KCB, CVO, chose it as an impressive spectacle to perform when his Fleet visited foreign ports. The Massed Bands of the Fleet were added to the Corps of Drums and the ceremony was concluded with the bugle call 'Sunset' as the White Ensign was lowered.

The Massed Bands have been Beating Retreat on Horse Guards Parade approximately every three years since 1960 to celebrate the birthday of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and Captain General Royal Marines.