

Highlight

Each year in the United Kingdom the Royal Family hosts a Diplomatic Corp night at Buckingham Palace. This event brings together representatives from all of the Embassies and High Commissions in the United Kingdom to enjoy an evening of liaison and unprecedented access to Buckingham Palace.

The Australian High Commissioner in London is able to nominate six members of his A-Based Staff each year who together with their spouses are able to enjoy what can only be described as one of the highlights of my time as the AFP Liaison Officer in London.

So, on 4 November 2003 along with the High Commissioner, several members from Defence and DFAT, my wife and I attended Buckingham Palace. Invitations had been sent out earlier and were strict to the point: for the gents it was a white tie suit

with tails, gloves and top hat were optional. For the ladies it was an evening gown with long sleeve gloves. Traditional attire was also acceptable.

On arrival at the Palace we proceeded via stringent security arrangements through to a magnificent lobby and upstairs where we were greeted by members of the Queens staff, all retired defence force men in full uniform and medals.

After a glass or two of champagne, we were shown to our nominated room where we mingled with diplomats from a variety of countries around the world. Many wore traditional dress uniforms as did their spouses which looked great, particularly some of the African nations and the Nepalese.

After several more champagnes we were instructed to stand in a particular area within the room designated to Australia, likewise for the other nationalities represented. All champagne glasses were removed and a short while later Her Majesty the Queen entered the room and began talking with each individual group. The Duke of Edinburgh followed a short distance behind also mingling with each group.

the highs and lows of our AFP



Each High Commissioner and Ambassador was able to nominate two people from each group who along with their spouse were personally introduced to, and allowed to shake hands with the Queen. This honour was bestowed to the two Australian Defence Force representatives as a week later the Queen was officially opening the new Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner.

It took the Queen about forty minutes to reach the Australian section and after a few words with the High Commissioner, handshakes with the chosen few, and an introduction to the rest of us, Her Majesty moved on to the next represented nation. In all she was in our room for over an hour and was then ushered out and into another room to do exactly the same thing all over again with the nationalities designated to that room.

We did not see the Queen or Duke again for the rest of the evening but from that point on things got decidedly less formal as we split up with the rest of the Australians and moved into the main dining hall where we feasted on roast guinea fowl and more champagne. On entering the hall we were greeted by the current UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and unbeknown to my wife and I at the time, sat next to the Archbishop of Canterbury while we ate and enjoyed the spectacle of hundreds of diplomats within such a magnificent dining hall.



Following dinner it was off to the main ballroom for some dancing to the tunes of the Queen's military band, after which we strolled around the many rooms and art galleries of the Palace that were opened up for the evening.

At 11pm sharp, and following a rousing rendition of God Save the Queen our evening at Buckingham Palace came to an end.

Lowlight

After feeling a bit special having been invited to and dining at Buckingham Palace, I was looking forward to Tuesday 11 November 2003 which in addition to Remembrance Day was also the official opening of the new Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner in London.

As an A-Based Staff member of the High Commission I was fortunate enough to receive a VIP seat toward the front of the memorial, however a few days out from the event I was nominated by the Australian High Commissioner to assist with coordinating the arrival of "official vehicles" into the area (payment, I was later informed for my invitation to Buckingham Palace the week before).

liaison officer in London

[Russel Smith]

In reality this translated to my standing in the middle of Constitution Hill Avenue which runs between Buckingham Palace and the War Memorial venue to ensure that all of the official vehicles did not arrive at the same time and clutter the entrance to the site. To make matters worse it was quite foggy and I was dressed in a dark suit. Hardly the sort of person anyone was going to stop for!

In the end I commandeered two UK bobbies who were hanging around the area with seemingly nothing to do and instructed them to stand in front of each of the vehicles as they approached until we had them all lined up on the edge of the road (Major General Cosgrove, The Lord Mayor of London, Baroness Thatcher, Head of the UK Defence Forces, Simon Crean etc). This was compounded by the fact that the Australian and British Prime Ministers, and the Queen and Duke's vehicles all had CPP, so in fact they weren't stopping for anyone (as was pointed out to me by my good friend in the PM's AFP Protection Team, Federal Agent Mick Howard—thanks mate)!

After an impressive march past by troops from the ADF into the site, we were able to allow each vehicle onto the venue to be met by the Australian High Commissioner, whilst forever keeping watch for the CPP motorcades to avoid being run over.



Top: Australia House, London

Bottom: FA Russel Smith at his London desk

Opposite Page Top: FA Russel Smith and wife Paula ready to meet the Queen

Opposite Page Bottom: Opening ceremony at the Australian War Memorial London. Photo by AusPic

So as the rest of the crowd enjoyed the magnificent military scenes, the arrival of the VIP's, speeches by the Queen, Prime Minister Howard and Prime Minister Blair, AFP LO London was left standing in the fog on Constitution Hill Avenue!

P.S. I would recommend anyone travelling to the UK to visit the Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner. It is an impressive structure and will remain a long-lasting legacy to those Australians who lost their lives during the great wars.