

Obituaries

Lt Col Sir John Miller

Equerry who ensured royal pageants passed off without a hitch

In his role as crown equerry, a post he held from 1961 to 1987, Lieutenant Colonel Sir John Miller, who has died aged 87, was a pivotal figure in organising the coach and horses element of royal pageantry for more than 20 years. His knowledge of horses and equestrianism rivalled that of his employer, the Queen, to whom he was a loyal friend and adviser on all things equine (as he was to most other members of the royal family). He was also a distinguished soldier, who had fought with daring and bravery in the fierce fighting in the north-west European campaign after D-day.

The regular high points in Miller's calendar were such events as the state opening of parliament, trooping the colour, visits by foreign heads of state and the procession down the course at Royal Ascot. He had to ensure that all the Queen's horses were ready and able to perform superbly amid the pressure of huge public occasions involving massive security.

During his tenure these included four royal wedding processions: those of Princess Alexandra to Angus Ogilvy in (1963); Princess Anne to Captain Mark Phillips (1973); the Prince of Wales to Lady Diana Spencer (1981) and Prince Andrew to Sarah Ferguson (1986). The story is told that having bowed the royals into their carriages at Buckingham palace, Miller, wearing his full dress uniform, would hitch a lift on the back of a police motorcycle, speed ahead of the procession by using back road routes, and be in position to bow his royal charges out of their carriages when they arrived at their destination. "I always got there first," he said. "I wanted to be sure there were no problems with the horses at both ends of the journey."

Miller had wide experience as a horseman; he had been a candidate for Britain's eventing team in the Helsinki Olympics in 1952, but a broken vertebra in a fall robbed him of the chance. No one was more aware of the risks involved in driving horses amid the crowds and dense traffic of central London, and when he became crown equerry he set out to ensure that he could personally drive horses in any configuration of harness as expertly as the Queen's professional coachmen.

The former editor of *Horse and Hound*, Michael Clayton, recalled: "Whether riding or driving [Miller] revealed a steely purpose. Crashing falls were dismissed as mere incidents. With his customary sang-froid he coped when a team of young horses in training bolted down the length of Oxford Street."

As well as his official duties, Miller played a crucial role in fostering the royal family's interests in equine sports, some of them containing substantial risks: Prince

Philip's competition and coach driving; Prince Charles's polo and hunting; and Princess Anne's three-day eventing. The princess's eventing career began on Purple Star, one of seven foals born to Miller's favourite mare Stella, and he went on to oversee her progress when she was given the chestnut gelding Doublet, her partner in winning the individual European three-day event championship at the Burghley Horse Trials in 1971.

After Prince Charles took up foxhunting, Miller found suitable horses for him, and arranged for him to explore the hunting field all over Britain. He accompanied the prince on visits to 40 different hunts, involving riding over a great variety of terrains and obstacles. Miller believed this was the best possible way of exploring the countryside on horseback, and feeling the pulse of rural communities.

As well as supervising the royal equestrian and motor transport from the Royal Mews, Miller ensured that the Mews survived as a centre for equestrian life in London. Disabled children and members of riding clubs rode regularly at its indoor riding school, and horse societies and equine charities held their meetings there.

As the third son of Brigadier General Alfred Miller, who commanded the Royal Scots Greys, Miller was born into a military family. A giant stuffed bear, a gift to his father from the last Tsar, Nicholas II, who had been colonel-in-chief of the regiment, stood in the hall of the family home, Shotover House, near Oxford. The bear was among Miller's earliest memories.

After Eton and Sandhurst he was commissioned into the Welsh Guards in January 1939, and following the outbreak of the second world war served with the British Expeditionary Force. As a major commanding the Prince of Wales company, 1st battalion Welsh Guards, in August 1944, he won the Military Cross, when, in the face of heavy shelling, he kept his beleaguered men together, continually exposing himself to enemy fire with complete disregard to his personal safety. The Distinguished Service Order followed a month later for his skill in re-establishing two companies of his regiment after a fierce tank attack had dislodged them.

When Brussels was liberated in September 1944, Miller was in command of the first British troops to enter the city. From November 1945 until August 1947, he was

ADC to Field Marshal Lord Wilson, who headed the British joint staff mission in Washington. His final military appointment was as commanding officer of the 1st battalion, Welsh Guards, a command he held from November 1958 until April 1961, when he joined the royal household. On his retirement as crown equerry, he remained an extra equerry to the Queen.

Tom Corby

John Mansel Miller, soldier and crown equerry, born February 4 1919; died May 17 2006



Miller outside the Royal Mews in Buckingham palace in 1987 with two of his charges Photograph: Kit