

## AN HISTORIC EVENT REMEMBERED

All the flags of the Commonwealth were flying in celebration outside the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington High Street. A single flagpole stood out against the rest. It was unadorned, a stark reminder that the giant Green Pennant of the Commonwealth Expedition, otherwise known as Comex, had arrived too late to take its place in the ranks of national flags *as the adventurous spirit among them*. It had been manufactured in Hong Kong in raw silk to mark an historic event - *the Inauguration of the Green Pennant Awards* - by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, and was still in the air over Heathrow when the celebrations began. The best thing to do therefore was to avoid any comment and let the world make up its own mind as to whose flag was missing.

*'Above all we must keep alive the spirit of adventure which is the finest quality of youth, and by youth I do not mean just those who are young in years but all who are young in heart no matter how old they may be.'*

Those inspiring words of Her Majesty the Queen, speaking as Head of the Commonwealth, had brought us to this place and here we were, having failed at the crucial hurdle, in full view of the passing world. But, although the spirit of adventure was absent on the outside, there was enough inside to warrant a royal pardon. The date was 18<sup>th</sup> December 1980.

Early that morning a group of friends, encouraged by my wife, Annie, had been waiting hopefully in our little flat on the Old Brompton Road for the flag to arrive. My leg was in plaster having been operated on by a Sikh surgeon in Amritsar a few weeks earlier. Taxis were waiting outside. One of our number, Habinder Kaur (Debbie), who had been earmarked for special duties - introducing individual recipients of the Green Pennant to His Royal Highness - decided that *allu parathas* were just the thing to steady nerves, despite Annie's protestations that there was no time. Undeterred, Debbie made her way to the kitchen and set to. She was dressed in a magnificent gold and green sari but that didn't seem to matter: the parathas were produced and consumed both on site and during the journey to the Commonwealth Institute.

There were several hundred people present, including the band of the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Goorkha Rifles, and the band and choir of The Chase High School in Malvern. Programmes were distributed and everyone escorted to a seat by Comex volunteers - bravely displaying their Comex ties and strategically deployed to meet any emergency. All was calm, thanks to Annie's good humour and gentle persuasion. There was to be some form of entertainment too and this had been rehearsed and put in place as naturally as though it was an everyday occurrence. I took my stand at the entrance to the building with Sir Denis Hamilton, Chairman of Times Newspapers who were hosting the event, Sir David Hunt, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Institute, and a piper. The latter was there to march ahead and announce the arrival of Prince Philip by making a noise loud enough to be heard in the auditorium. HRH was not entirely enthusiastic about this but conceded that it was probably the best way to proceed; besides, we had arranged a special tune in his honour. My leg being in plaster helped divert attention from more compelling matters. However, the steel heel fitted to the plaster under my left foot was not designed to cope with a carpet casually arranged in front of the seats set out for the Prince's party, and I slipped, very nearly prostrating myself before royal feet. There was much laughter and everyone relaxed.

His Royal Highness had arrived in a battery driven vehicle setting the tone for the proceedings to follow. That spirit caught on, soon to be demonstrated by Sir Denis Hamilton. He had taken a risk in supporting Comex from the time the Coldstream Guards had played *Together Unafraid*, the theme song of Comex 10, outside Buckingham Palace at the Changing of the Guard, and could now savour the relief of judgement vindicated by the success of the expedition.

Sir Denis rose with confidence to deliver his speech of welcome:

*'Your Royal Highness, ladies and gentlemen. Times Newspapers has played a very insignificant part in today's events, and the events that have led up to a morning we are looking forward to immensely. In publishing newspapers there are so many horror stories, so many terrible things we have to report; but there is the other side of it: to refer, to project and assist where we can the work of youth, and we are proud to have played a very small part in helping Colonel Gregory in this tremendous, inspirational story of the past fifteen years of Comex. But my duty is to welcome you sir, today, and it does enable me to*

*say something from my heart. I have been a journalist and editor for thirty years and I have seen you at work; the enormous way in which you have dedicated yourself to everything that is good and especially to events in the Commonwealth. Your involvement in Comex is just one more example of the extraordinary range of your activities; and here we are, looking forward to the part you are going to play this morning. Thank you sir for coming here and supporting us, and believe me, if Times Newspapers can do anything more, or The Thompson Organisation, or the other newspapers I am involved in to help in the future of Comex, let us do it, sir.'*

The applause that followed was richly deserved. Here was a man ready *to take the risk and adventure*. Now what would Prince Philip say?

*'Sir Denis Hamilton: thank you very much for your very kind welcome. I hope everyone appreciates how kind that is coming from a journalist (a little chuckle here and murmurs of approval from the audience)!*

*. I have watched the development of Comex since it started as a gleam in Colonel Gregory's eye. The Ten Tors expeditions he pioneered, I think made him realise just how much young people could learn by travelling and exploring together. Sixteen years ago Comex was a completely new idea. It was revolutionary in the best sense of the word. But as everybody who has tried to get a new idea accepted knows, you need very considerable powers of persuasion. Well those of you who know him realise that Colonel Gregory has such powers and that, together with his faith in the Commonwealth, he succeeded in convincing the right people that Comex would work; and work it has, ten times in fifteen years involving two and a half thousand young people of the Commonwealth in an experience of travelling together which I am sure they will never forget. Colonel Gregory has, of course, always been the moving spirit. But even he could not have succeeded without some help, and over the years he has been fortunate, or should I say persuasive enough, to find many people whose faith in the Commonwealth was as strong, or anyway almost as strong, as his own. And some of these people are being recognised today by the award of a green pennant, which has been the symbol of each of the ten Commonwealth Expeditions, and I am very pleased to have been asked to present them today. In a world being torn apart by men of narrow ideological and nationalist horizons, men who seem to believe that they can reform the world by violence and terrorism and the destruction of communications; in this sad and depressing situation, the Commonwealth ideal of the*

*brotherhood of man, of peace and co-operation, stands out like the beam from a lighthouse on a stormy night, and I hope that the spirit of Comex, represented by these little green flags, will help to keep that light shining brightly giving hope and encouragement to all who share the Commonwealth ideal.'*

By any measure this was a fine speech, and very well received. The final paragraph certainly made people sit up and think. In my view nothing clearer, or more concise, has been said about the Commonwealth or about violence and terrorism. The Green Pennant Awards would henceforth be identified with *the spirit of adventure crossing the barriers that divide people* - the first of its kind anywhere, identifying perhaps the greatest single challenge of our times. His mention of *little green flags* settled the matter of a name for the tune that led him into the Commonwealth Institute. It has since been recorded by the late Pipe Major Angus MacDonald MBE, at Edinburgh Castle, sung by The Heritage Singers in Lusaka for the Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation and, more adventurously, is going through the process of becoming a *raga* for the Commonwealth. Prince Philip also referred to Ten Tors, the success of which influenced the practical side of Comex. He was patron of both and so far over 200,000 young people have taken part in Ten Tors.

It was now my turn. Having very nearly fallen on my backside, I rose to the challenge with a stick clutched firmly in my right hand, to an audible murmur of sympathy. I had no thought of trying to impress, only of telling it as it was, and trusting in the all seeing, all understanding Almighty and Annie's reassuring smile.

*'Your Royal Highness, you have suffered many of the Comex problems, you have been patient, you have been kind; but most important you have always been encouraging, and it is very rare to get the kind of encouragement that we have had from you. I don't want to advance Comex as a great feat, a great success, but I do claim that we have tried, and tried very hard, and my foot here is evidence of that (a few taps on the plaster cast to focus attention on the right spot). Those of you who looked out of your cars today probably saw an unblemished sky. Christmas is just round the corner and this is a very happy day, made all the happier because once again, after fifteen years, you have come to be identified with us. You have accepted the mistakes we made, you have quietly encouraged and advised, and I cannot thank you enough for that. I think it is only the truly great sir who can bend*

*low enough to touch the activities of humble folk, and when that happens there is hope for the world.*

*'We have come to this point helped by Times Newspapers. And that help has been enormous. (I was speaking without a script and had to tread cautiously. Even so, I felt obliged to acknowledge Denis Hamilton's bold offer of help.) Sir Denis, I have been in and out of your offices without being thrown out. You have always provided a little more and today an excellent luncheon as well. If that goes on, and you have just committed yourself in the presence of His Royal Highness to support us through the years, our problems are over, and I am very grateful to you. I am also grateful to Sir David Hunt who has come here today to welcome us into this home of the Commonwealth. Comex I began its journey from this very place fifteen or sixteen years ago; so the whole thing is exactly as it ought to be: it is a happy event. And now I want to announce the Green Pennant Awards step by step, and if there is a flaw here and there - either in the protocol or anything else - blame me, send me to the Tower if you will, but don't be unhappy at any moment. Let the next two hours be a celebration, something we can take into Christmas with us.*

*'And let me start with Comex 10. There were two things of particular importance. The first was that I wrote a letter to President Kaunda of Zambia. Mr President, I said, I heard you singing at the Prime Ministers' Conference in Lusaka and that was good stuff; so what about giving Comex 10 a hand by doing a little singing with us, and he promptly informed me that we would have a contingent from Zambia. And what is more, he actually sang with them and recorded a song, Tiyende Pamodzi, which means forward together, and another written for Zambia called Faith, Hope and Charity. And that little record, sold in the streets of Zambia, helped to mount the Zambian contingent of Comex 10.*

*'And second, we agreed to take with us three young people aged 13 and 14, young Indians born in this country, to emphasise the importance of improving relations between the country from which they came, the country of their origins, and the country of their adoption. These three young men were an outstanding success and I have asked His Royal Highness if he would have a little word with them at the end of these proceedings, and this he has very kindly consented to do.*

*'Unfortunately, President Kaunda could not be here himself, so I have asked the High Commissioner, Her Excellency, Chimba Sicumba, if she would very kindly receive, on behalf of her President, the first Green Pennant Award. And because The Sunday Times had the courage to step forward and support us throughout the year, I think it is right and proper that Sir Denis Hamilton should also receive a Green Pennant right here and now.*

*'Your Royal Highness, we once said of Comex, that there is as much adventure in singing a song - if you have never sung in public before - as in climbing a mountain. So, to demonstrate this business of no adventure without risk, Celia Congdon, who was on Comex 9, is going to sing Gaon Ki Jyoti, which means Village Lights, and she is going to try and do it in Hindi.*

*'Regrettably, New Zealand, represented on Comex 1 and 2, is not present. So, as it is near Christmas, we might just sing a special song, for our friends in New Zealand. Brenda Stephens, who was on Comex 5 as well as Comex 6, and Chris Nichols, on Comex 3 and Comex 5, who have sung the Comex songs in diverse places on the long dusty road are here to sing On Wings of Love.*

*'Now this is a very special moment because I have yet to thank The Chase High School properly for all the support that they have given us. Sometimes we don't pay enough attention to the efforts of children, those marvellous children who gave up three months of their spare time to rehearse and record a song to inspire Comex 10. Their Headmaster, Frank Mullinger, invited me to come and talk to them and distribute some prizes. He asked me because he saw a picture in the newspapers of Sir Peter Parker naming locomotive 47555 The Commonwealth Spirit after Comex 9, and he and Sir Peter had played rugby together at Oxford. So he thought he had better have this chap along and get the form on his distinguished friend now so elevated in life. I asked those children to sing a song for the millions of young people in the Commonwealth, called Together Unafraid Yeah, they said, we'll do that, but you do something for us first: a bit of encouragement from London. I came back wondering if we might be able to persuade the Guards to play Together Unafraid at the Changing of the Guard, and make a recording for the children. It was a cold winter's morning when the Coldstream Guards played Together Unafraid at Buckingham Palace while I stood outside the gates with my small recorder picking up the notes to send to Frank Mullinger. Well, those 900 children, with their school band duly*

*recorded the song, and I have asked Ron Ward who rehearsed and conducted them to receive this award from His Royal Highness.'*

(Having started in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace, many voices in many countries along the length of the long dusty road have joined in the singing of Together Unafraid.)

*'Comex is full of little stories and they highlight the essence of Comex, which is that everyone helps and plays a small part within his or her own spheres of competence. In the Punjab, for instance, we've had immense help over the years, and for a long time I have known and watched a young man struggle to persuade his state to carry forward the spirit of Comex to the rest of the subcontinent. He was selected to represent his country on Comex 10. And when we discussed who in India best warranted a Green Pennant, we were unanimous in our decision that it should go to Kamaljit Singh Garewal, a young Sikh lawyer, and I am glad to say that we were able to fly him in to receive this award '*

(I would not claim that it has helped him in any way, but he is today known as His Justice K. S. Garewal of the Punjab High Court and it is good to feel that he is on our side!)

*'By coincidence, it was a Sikh surgeon in Amritsar, Pramjit Singh Grewal, who operated on my leg while Kamaljit Singh Garewal's mother, a distant relative of the surgeon, prayed for my speedy recovery in the Golden Temple. The damage to the leg was caused while attempting to teach some of the young women of Comex 10 a jig called Gregory's Frolic. A very special dance this, but not to be attempted on a concrete floor with puddles of beer dotted about - not intentionally I'm sure - so that when I did my beautiful turn and high kicks something like an explosion took place behind my left leg. I thought someone had kicked me but not so: it was just that my Achilles tendon had had enough. Therefore, Gregory's Frolic will now be performed without my participation.*

*'Your Royal Highness, we always had this ambitious idea of restoring old friendships eroded by time and neglect by means of an adventurous journey with some form of entertainment for our hosts. And it is not just a matter of singing any old song. For the Punjab for instance, we came up with a song identified with the peasants, the men who work in the fields. They have a saying there, 'ki kena', which means 'what can I say'. It is*

*an expression of excellence, of delight, so we turned it into 'kenaki' and Chris Nichols will now lead The Chase High School choir in singing it for you.*

*'Two more awards: one for Canada and the other for the United States. The first is to a young housewife in Toronto who has worked extremely hard without being a nuisance to encourage Canadians to have a go - having herself been on Comex 5. Her name is Bunty Bidie and I'm so sorry she's not here. But Lynda Tamm of Comex 10, who also comes from Canada and is a close friend of Bunty's, will receive this award and deliver it with our love. And now the United States. A girl came to Britain a few years ago to study for a while at Keele University and said she would like to be a part of Comex 3. She comes from Minneapolis and was so hooked on the idea that she came back to represent the United States on Comex 7, and again for the Queen's Silver Jubilee Comex 8 - Comex star and two bars! So Mary of Minneapolis who flew in from the United States the day before yesterday is here to receive her Green Pennant. Mary.*

*'You'll be seeing Mary again because she has a good singing voice. Meanwhile, we have a special song produced last year for The Chase High School to sing called The Living. It is about all living creatures that we take so much for granted. Marjory Lyon of Comex 9, who teaches at the Derbyshire School of Dramatic Art has arranged a dramatic presentation supported by The Chase High School led by Chris Nicholls.*

*'Your Royal Highness, one of the oldest friends of Comex is a postman, Nikola, who lives in Croatia. He comes from the village of Hudinci where they drink wine because it is too far to walk for water. He had aspirations of becoming a monk in Zagreb, but met a girl from the other side of the country called Milka, they fell in love and got married, and he didn't become a monk. He was always extremely good to us. To see fifty or sixty people entertained in this postman's house was quite something. Nikola's Song was written in his honour. It is a sentimental song - we'll brighten things up later - and Mary of Minneapolis is going to sing it for us.*

*'Looking for a way of getting into the BBC, I was by chance invited to take a little lunch with a charming Indian who wanted to make a film about Comex. Well, how about the Asian Service doing this. You could go to the Malvern Hills and 900 children would sing for you and so on. It was the first time that Comex had made a breakthrough on*

*television. His Royal Highness had fired a shot for us a few years ago but you can't get His Royal Highness every day - every second day perhaps but not every day! So, there it was, a programme done so beautifully, so sensitively, and it was a great pleasure for us to suggest that Mahendra Kaul, producer of the Asian service of the BBC, should receive a Green Pennant. Mahendra Kaul.*

*'There's a very charming lady called Mrs Margaret Spurr, who was sitting in her school in Lancashire (The Bolton School for Girls), not disturbing anyone, when we heard about her school. We wrote to her and said why don't you get your children to come along. Margaret Spurr got cracking, and that name Spurr is very significant. She began by saying we'll send some people from our school, and we'll continue to support the Commonwealth Expedition in the years to come. There are some twenty or thirty schools that work together and Margaret Spurr is right in the middle of them. So with that happy thought may I invite Margaret Spurr to come and receive a Green Pennant.*

*'Now we have an interesting song here and I ask you to listen to the words. Many of you may know that there are some 700,000 villages in India. That's a lot of villages. And each village has between five and twenty bullock-carts. Multiply those figures and you get several million people. And these simple men move about the subcontinent from village to village - a tradition that goes back a thousand years or more - so we thought a song written for the bullock-cart drivers of India would reach some of the humblest people in the remotest parts of that country. Once again, Chris Nicholls will sing for you, My Friend.*

*'My brother and I have both served with Gurkhas, so it is a special pleasure to have the band of 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Goorkhas playing in this Institute today. Many years ago - I think it was after Comex 5 - we came here to give a presentation. By way of entertainment, we had very little to offer. I spoke the odd verse, we sang a few songs and did a bit of clowning around; but I had taken the precaution of asking the Goorkhas (the 2nd KEO Goorkhas spell it that way) for help and they sent the entire band. The Director of Music, Major Ben Bently very kindly offered to make a military arrangement of Together Unafraid - in fact a Commonwealth March. That sort of support never failed, and I am glad to say that Ben Bently is here to receive a Green Pennant.*

*'As we are coming to the end of this celebration, I want to say, quite simply, that young men and women all over the Commonwealth are eager to make a contribution towards a better life for all - using the Commonwealth as the ideal starting point. The Green Pennant is a travelling trophy; it has covered over 200,000 miles through four continents and eighteen countries, and has always been there to identify the purposes of Comex. Having said that, may I now invite the Chairman of the Board of Governors of this wonderful Institute, Sir David Hunt, to receive a Green Pennant - after which the children will sing Together Unafraid.'*

*'Your Royal Highness, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Governors of the Commonwealth Institute it gives me great pleasure to accept this award from Comex. We have, for a long time now, been closely associated with Comex, and Colonel Gregory, like the elephant, never forgets. It is in fact fifteen years since the first expedition set out from this very building and has now turned into a thoroughly triumphant programme of ten different expeditions; each one doing out in the field the task that we here in the Institute do our best to further. I have great pleasure in being allowed to take the microphone with a vote of thanks on behalf of the Institute and staff. We are always delighted to have anything to do with Comex and would like to thank to begin with, Colonel Gregory whose engaging microphone manner and tuneful melodies have given very great pleasure to all of us. Finally, Your Royal Highness, I wish to express on behalf of everyone our loyal and devoted thanks to you for coming here and taking part in this celebration. It is only one instance, one of many hundreds, of your steadfast performance, of your duty and your pleasure in forwarding the objectives of the Commonwealth. You have been a very good patron of the Institute, and so have your younger family and Her Majesty the Queen, and on behalf of all of us, I wish to express our loyal and most sincere thanks to you.'*

And so, with the clarity and eloquence of a distinguished diplomat and BBC Brain of Britain, David Hunt brought the Inauguration to a close. Appropriately, the bands of the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Goorkha Rifles and The Chase High School struck up Ben Bently's adaptation of Together Unafraid, and the children sang. We had come a long way since Jawaharlal Nehru's initiative in 1965 calling on young people *'to organise a new consciousness in the Commonwealth through cultural and intellectual activities as well as in common adventure.'* The response to that was Comex 1, 210 strong from the universities of Edinburgh, Cambridge, Oxford, Cardiff and London under the patronage of Prince

Philip. The doctors (Colin Melville, Mike Stuckey and Murray Carmichael) came, the first two from Australia and the latter from Edinburgh. Training was supervised by the armed services and industry.

(In the thirteen Expeditions that followed, the largest was 500. The first Comex was routed through the Holy Land; three more through Iraq, including the Queen's Silver Jubilee Comex 8, crossing the Syrian Desert from Damascus to Baghdad by moonlight mounted in eleven silver vehicles; and four through Afghanistan. Comex 4 crossed from Calcutta to Malaysia and Singapore in the Landing Ships Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad - later lost in the Falklands War. Contingents are shown on the Comex map at Chapter 8. Although Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was no longer around to witness the outcome of his handiwork, it would have pleased him enormously that The Green Pennant Awards were endorsed by Heads of Government in New Zealand thirty years later.)

The hugely successful Inauguration had a positive spin-off. Devon County Council (for reason of its association with Ten Tors) decided to commission the permanent model designed by Alex Styles of Garrard, and to provide the administrative base for Comex (Ocean to Ocean) in North America, and (from Kitwe through the Copperbelt to Victoria Falls) in Zambia. At a simple ceremony in India, Green Pennants were presented to regional hosts in the north and south. These included: Pritam Singh Sandhu whose home and family always welcomed Comex. (Pritam helped to organise the Queen's Silver Jubilee Comex 8 programme in India, and insisted on accompanying the expedition back to Britain in order to represent his country at the celebrations in Wells Cathedral). The towns of Ooty in the Nilgiris, and Simla in Himachal, the All India Post Graduate Institute of Medicine in Chandigarh, and the Agricultural University of Ludhiana also received Green Pennants. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew headed the list for inviting Comex 4 to Singapore, and instructed his High Commissioner to receive the award on his behalf. Lee Kuan Yew wrote: *'Comex is an adventure with all the excitement with which the Commonwealth began. Long, may it continue.'*

The first instalment of the story of Comex (Crying Drums), with a foreword by Prince Philip, had already been published; the second (Together Unafraid), with a foreword by the first Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Professor Arnold Smith of Carleton University, was now on sale. (Arnold Smith subsequently presented a Green Pennant to the

Governor General of Canada on behalf of Comex.) Following a successful Comex 13/14, President Kaunda presented several Green Pennants at State House, Lusaka including one for Arnold Smith himself, received by the Canadian High Commissioner. Comex 13 was a trial run with Britain, India and Zambia - carried out at the behest of the President - followed by Comex 14 (the main body) shortly afterwards, involving 11 Commonwealth countries selected and sponsored by their respective governments.

Throughout his tenure of office Arnold Smith had been an unfailing friend, and it was appropriate that recognition for this should come from the hand of an African President. There was also a *Green Pennant* for the new Sir Galahad received by the British High Commissioner. (The latter may even have been on display in the wardroom when the ship docked at Umm Qasr with humanitarian aid during the conflict in Iraq.) Among others on the list were The Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation (for covering the whole of Comex 13/14), the Heritage Singers of Zambia, and John Mwesa, Director of Music at the Department of Higher Education, Lusaka.

Acknowledging President Kaunda's involvement, the master model for the *The Green Pennant Awards* was redesigned in copper by Hamilton and Inches of Edinburgh. Responding to this, in a remarkable gesture of solidarity, the Government of Zambia took the initiative in bringing the Awards to the attention of Commonwealth Heads of Government for endorsement at their 1995 summit in New Zealand. Thereafter the stands would be manufactured in Kitwe, *by African hands out of the soil of Africa*, and *the little green flags* embroidered in Malekotla, Punjab, *by Indian hands with gold thread imported from Pakistan*. The existing symbolism of Prince Philip's cypher and the Asoka wheel - representing the oldest and largest democracies in the world - was extended to embrace the African continent by the simple device of an eagle engraved on the base of the stand.

After 30 years and over 200,000 miles *The Green Pennant Awards* had been endorsed and received a modest mention in the New Zealand communique. The model produced in Edinburgh, and the Zambian copy, had been paraded before our leaders and much admired. We lesser mortals expected the Commonwealth Secretariat, or the Commonwealth Foundation to provide a suitable home for the Awards. Even more, that the Commonwealth itself might lead the world in crossing the barriers that divide people: whether on grounds of colour, class, creed, wealth or anything else. Alas, such romantic

notions may have a place in the hearts of fighting men (the Commonwealth armies of the Second World War for instance), but are unlikely to find a home in the consciousness of politicians.

Perhaps the barriers that divide people had become the prerogative of the Commission for Racial Equality. That hundreds of thousands of men from all over the Commonwealth who had fought together during the last war, sharing their triumphs and disasters, their tears and their laughter, had managed very nicely without one was an old fashioned concept – out of date in a brave new world. Surely the offspring of those brave men and women – some of whom have made their homes in what was once the *mother country* as the Queen's subjects – could be spared the indignity of a CRE!

In due course it was made clear that, despite *The Green Pennant Awards* being endorsed by Heads of Government no decision had been made as to its future. One view expressed by the Royal Commonwealth Society was that Comex had had its day and was no longer relevant – if it ever was! The grapes were certainly sour there. But I was inured to such remarks and found that the majority of people shared my view that the day for something like Comex had at last arrived. It had taken 32 years touching the lives of hundreds of thousands on the way. And what did Prince Philip, the founder patron of Comex have to say?

*'The media may prefer more newsworthy issues than the Commonwealth, but one thing Comex has proved is that for those who go looking for the Commonwealth, it is still the most remarkable exercise in human relations on a world scale mankind has ever witnessed.'*

Fortunately, Malcolm Rifkind (Comex 1) was Foreign Secretary, and it was his intervention that encouraged the FCO and the Lord Provost's Office to include the Green Pennant Awards in the reception for Commonwealth Heads of Government on the eve of the Edinburgh CHOGM in November 1997. Malcolm's letter informing me of this was dated 30 April 1997. So, the Comex mission was accomplished; its future now in the hands of our Commonwealth leaders. After all, it was President Kaunda who had invited his fellow Commonwealth Heads of Government to join him *'in setting in motion a tide of*

*goodwill from the Zambezi to reach people all over the world'* and Margaret Thatcher had supported him.

My task was to record these events in *Journey of a Lifetime* while the memory remained fresh, and to have it published to coincide with the Edinburgh CHOGM. Over a hundred organisations had staked a claim to be present at the reception - a tall order for the City Chambers - but to my great relief, the Lord Provost's Office chose *The Green Pennant Awards*. Time and space did not allow for the men and women who had raised friendship's banner (*the little green flags*) all over the Commonwealth - as well as in Turkey, Iran, Syria, the Holy Land, Iraq and Afghanistan - to be present. But that is the way of life; those who take the risk and do what needs to be done don't always get the credit.

Eight Green Pennants were destined for the Ministries of Youth of governments that had organised their own national contingents for Comex in Zambia. In all there were twenty-one awards: the first to Nelson Mandela for bringing South Africa back into the Commonwealth; the second to Malcolm Rifkind for his unfailing support over 32 years, and the 21<sup>st</sup> to the Lord Provost (Eric Milligan) – now on display in the Lord Provost's Office. Over the years, eighty-one Green Pennants had been presented to people, places and organisations on the Comex map. Had it been possible there would have been very many more but, modest though they are, these things cost money.

The drama of the week before the reception was *something else*'. I had already received *the little green flags* from Malerkotla (Punjab). But as yet no signs of the copper stands from Kitwe, or the message we had been promised from the new President of Zambia. The draft had been sent via the Zambian High Commission way back in May. What we didn't know at the time was that rumours of a coup had put a brake on all external activities. To make matters worse, Love Mtesa, the Zambian High Commissioner with whom we had been working closely over three years, was suddenly recalled to Lusaka. Annie and I went to London over the weekend to say goodbye.

On the Monday and Tuesday following, we made a series of telephone calls to every department in Lusaka likely to be dealing with the Green Pennants, reminding our friends that the reception for Heads of Government was due to take place the following week. The cost of that piece of work on the telephone was *big*; but it at least produced confirmation

that the President's message had been given *the green light* and would I fax another copy for final approval. I did; and it came back by return, signed, with an apology for the delay. The only change was that any reference to President Frederick Chiluba should read: Frederick J. T. Chiluba.

Message from His Excellency, President Frederick J. T. Chiluba of the Republic of Zambia.

*'Zambia was the gateway through which the spirit of Comex entered Africa, and it was the enthusiasm of children (from Kitwe, through the Copperbelt to Livingstone) that encouraged the organisers to have the model for the Green Pennant Awards redesigned in copper by Hamilton and Inches of Edinburgh. It incorporates the African continent in the existing symbolism of the oldest and largest democracies in the world. It was for the same reason that the Zambians were asked in 1992 to act as the custodian of the master model to be copied, as and when required, by coppersmiths in Kitwe. The Edinburgh model and the Kitwe version appeared together at the 1995 Commonwealth Heads of Government in Auckland, New Zealand, where they were much admired and brought to the attention of Heads of Government for endorsement. "The little green flags" have travelled far, and it is entirely appropriate that they should have been embroidered in the town of Malerkotla in Punjab, India. I am very proud that Zambia has been able to play its part in bringing about the Green Pennant Awards "identifying the spirit of adventure with crossing the barriers that divide people." It represents the supreme challenge of our times, and an opportunity to engage the idealism and energies of young people throughout the Commonwealth.*

STATE HOUSE  
LUSAKA  
15 October 1997

Meanwhile, the printers were waiting to get on with the brochure, and here another good friend, the late Ian McNee of MacDonald Lindsay Pindar, came to the rescue. At the time Annie was the Chief Executive of The Edinburgh Solicitors Property Centre and her secretary, the indefatigable Rosemary Hodgson, had put together the final draft of the message, as it would appear in the brochure, and faxed it to Lusaka. The response was immediate and courteous. The copy was then rushed to MLP who had asked for two weeks and in friendship's name got scarcely one.

There were still no signs of the copper stands. Would these be coming with the new Zambian High Commissioner, Professor Moses Musonda? No reply! Would President Chiluba be attending the CHOGM? Unlikely! It was now Friday. What if there were no Green Pennants to present? The alarm bells began ringing. On Saturday, the Zambian delegation arrived in London and deposited a large plywood box at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office without explanation. More alarm bells; but diplomacy obliged the FCO to accept it without sending for the bomb disposal squad, and to their obvious relief found nothing more sinister than the Green Pennants.

When I spoke to the FCO on the Sunday, the Duty Officer informed me that the box had accompanied an FCO official to Edinburgh and he would be in touch. I tracked him down on Monday morning. Yes, he had the box and I could collect it from the loading bay at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre. I set off by taxi, but there was a security cordon around the place. Was I a pass holder? No! Then I may not enter. The taxi driver had other ideas: he knew a way around the Sheraton Hotel, adjacent the EICC, and could get me to the loading bay that way. This is the kind of comradeship that wins battles. The box was waiting on a trolley ready for removal; the FCO offered to lend a hand but my own troops would have none of it. The box was loaded and we sped away - eureka!

As I opened the box, crumpled newspapers and bits of rubber foam did little to inspire confidence. But the stands were there and undamaged; the coppersmiths of Kitwe had followed the Edinburgh design faithfully but, sadly, they were in no condition for public viewing. It was now Monday, the reception was on Thursday, and Hamilton and Inches are not the sort of company that enjoys emergency requests against a deadline of forty-eight hours. However, advised by them I got in touch with one Robert Melvin of Gilmore Place (a polisher of antiques) and told him my story. 'Bring them here at 9 o'clock sharp and we'll see what can be done.' On Tuesday, at 9 o'clock sharp, I was on his doorstep. To get me there Annie had organised a taxi. The driver's name was Alastair James. Once the box had been handed over to Robert Melvin's we made our way back to Annie's Office in a more relaxed frame of mind.

It was now up to Robert Melvin and he, having examined the contents, reported as follows: *'We find the word "barriers" around the base misspelt in three instances. If we*

*simply tidied up the stems and bases it would make no real impression. A few of the engraved plates are glued on, leaving blobs of glue on the wood. Nails are slack in the name plates. The only sensible thing to do is to dismantle all parts, clean, polish and lacquer the copper, strip and revarnish the wood, restore the plates using high quality brass screws which will give a pleasing contrast, and overall a more professional presentation. As soon as you can get the three misspelt words corrected (work we cannot do here) please rush the base plates back to us for a final polishing.'*

Wednesday morning I was back in the taxi heading for Gilmore Place to collect the three *barriers* and find someone to cross them! Alastair informed me that he had a friend he had known for twenty years who could engrave anything. He ran a little shop called Links Engraving at 150 Duke Street in Leith. To that friend's shop we made haste. Derek Nicol was just the sort of man to have on your side in an emergency. He looked at me as a sergeant major might at a nervous recruit. 'When do you want these?' A blunt 'tomorrow' would hardly do, so I hummed and hawed a bit before murmuring 'whenever you can manage it - tomorrow?' He asked when the reception was and when told in the evening promised to have them ready by 12 o'clock.

The Lord Provost's Office was expecting us at one o'clock; thereafter 100 percent security would be in place and the likes of us barred from entry. We still had to find suitable boxes in which to pack the Green Pennants. If I could get the base plates back to Robert by half past twelve, he would probably have the lot ready by three o'clock. In the taxi again, this time heading for Unit 20 Sandport Industrial Estate in Leith docks with instructions to ask for Hannah, the public face of 'In-Boxes of Edinburgh'. I would be asking her to make twenty-one presentation boxes by the following morning. This was the last hurdle and she simply had to help me! '*Have a cup of coffee*' said the hospitable heart of Edinburgh. Hannah understood and was resolved to help. 'Eleven o'clock tomorrow, will that be alright?' '*O yes ma'am, thank you!*'

The sun began to shine as I set off on Thursday morning with my good friend A.J. at the helm. Hannah had the boxes ready and wished me well. Derek handed over the plates as promised, pointing out that he had copied the style of the original engraving – his way of assuring me that he was genuinely interested in the project. A delighted Robert was waiting to finish the job. He would have the Green Pennants boxed and delivered to

Annie's Office at 3 o'clock, and they arrived on time in three black bin bags. MacDonald Lindsay Pindar had already delivered the brochures, so we dispatched souvenir copies to Robert, Derek, Hannah and Alastair.

Meanwhile, Annie had telephoned the City Chambers and spoke to Lesley Ellen, personal assistant to the Lord Provost, to rearrange our arrival at the City Chambers from one to five o'clock, dressed for the party, and was warned that we would be subjected to security checks. Play was due to commence at seven and continue till ten. Annie, Rosemary and I set off on the final lap in the same taxi driven by the same driver. The quadrangle outside the City Chambers was crawling with security men. The policeman nearest the entrance looked suspiciously at the three black bags and thought it might be a good idea to examine them. It was drizzling, and the last thing I expected to hear was a loud voice calling for 'dogs'! The dogs arrived, cheerful and wagging their tails as they sniffed around the bags, and then looked up with a reassuring expression of pleasure – giving us the all clear. Their part in the operation was carried out without the slightest trace of hostility. And it may not be without significance that, at this final stage the Green Pennant touched its lowest point before ascending to its highest.

The reception itself had all the flavour and finish of a government sponsored event. Everything was in place; most notably, at the operational end of the great hall, a display of champagne the like of which I had never seen before, ready and waiting to nourish the spirits of our leaders before the battle of CHOGM. Eric Milligan, the Lord Provost, looked the part with his heavy armour: a chain of office that commanded instant respect and obedience. Government Heads moved around with the casual indifference that comes from years of practice - knowing that others would be doing all the work. The hundred organisations we were led to expect turned out to be just one: the much heralded *Children's Charter* for the Commonwealth to be presented by a group of children to the Secretary General - in the event received by his deputy.

There would have been room enough for a sizeable delegation of Comex men and women. It may be of course that they were not invited for fear of the place being swamped with boisterous young people (now in their forties and over!); a sad reflection on the barriers between leaders and led. It was up to me therefore to recall that the President of

India had taken the risk of inviting a thousand of these same young people (much younger then) to a reception at Rashtapathi Bhavan, and that no silver went missing.

Eric Milligan made the few Comex representatives - Murray Carmichael of Comex 1, Brenda Stevens of Comex 5, Michael Parish of Comex 5, Elisabeth Rowell of Comex 6 and of course Annie and myself - more than welcome, and those receiving *Green Pennants* were generous in their comments. Malcolm Rifkind of Comex 1, who was to receive a *Green Pennant* was detained elsewhere so Murray Carmichael of the same contingent of Comex 1 (Edinburgh) was hurriedly summoned from his holiday in the highlands to receive the award on his behalf. When invited to say a few words I approached the microphone with Annie's advice firmly embedded in my head. *This is neither the time nor place for histrionics; a few words means a few words, and no more.*

*'On behalf of the thousands of men and women of the Commonwealth Expedition, Comex, I would like to thank the Lord Provost's Office, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for including The Green Pennant Awards in this historic reception for Commonwealth leaders; that is to say, the leaders of 1,500,000,000 people all over the world. To me, the Commonwealth represents friendship on a global scale, and I was fortunate enough to discover that friendship early in life among the endless columns of brave men from many nations marching off the battlefields of the world triumphant in what was called 'their finest hour.' The debt we owe them can never be repaid - not even by a conference such as CHOGM. These little green flags - and there will be hundreds, even thousands in the years to come - are a guard of honour to their memory and will remain on parade here for your inspection. Their purpose is to identify the spirit of adventure with crossing the barriers that divide. Their future rests in your hands.'*

I was conscious that we were only able to make a few Awards and had to restrict the number presented to places and people who had helped actively (including a few individual members from each expedition) or by bravely endorsing what we were trying to do; and in retrospect hope that all who participated in Comex will understand this; and perhaps take comfort from the fact that without all of them there would have been no Green Pennant Awards.

The following day I was present when the opening salvos of CHOGM 1997 were fired, and from the fourth row I had a perfect view of our leaders in action. The Queen opened the conference for the first time and, of course, Prince Philip was there. He looked trim and well, and I took the liberty of saying so during a reception for assorted delegates at the Palace of Holyrood House the day after the opening. I had been talking to Malcolm Rifkind and he was about to introduce me to the new Foreign Secretary (Robin Cook) when I caught Prince Philip's eye, an unexpected opportunity to tell him about the *Green Pennant Awards*. When I asked why he had not been there, 'you didn't ask me' he replied - to which I had no answer. But I think he was pleased that all had gone well.

Every story has a postscript. This one concerns Nikola Vrbos, the Croatian postman who had shepherded Comex through the old Yugoslavia, then a Communist country, time and again, risking the displeasure of the authorities. He had allowed his daughter, Nena, then studying Indology at Zagreb University to represent her native Croatia as a member of the Cambridge University contingent of Comex 3. Nikola was nominated to receive a *Green Pennant* but was seriously ill with cancer and unable to attend the ceremony in Edinburgh. When Nena told him about the award his eyes lit up with pleasure and he smiled. 'They have not forgotten me,' he said. He died shortly afterwards and his Green Pennant was sent to his daughter, now teaching English in Jerusalem, with a personal letter from the Lord Provost. It seemed so appropriate that a Green Pennant should have found a place in the Holy Land, on the Comex 1 route (after 32 years) brought there by the courage of a postman whose kindness and hospitality knew no bounds, and who will always be remembered. But the story does not end there!

Nena, with her three children - Mihal, Noa Milka and Yair - (her husband, David, had recently died under tragic circumstances) came to Edinburgh to spend a week with us. The youngest, Yair, a boy of 14 years, brought with him a mandolin, which he plays tolerably well - and getting better! It happened to be Festival time and the fringe programme had on offer a concert featuring Alison Stephens, a distinguished mandolin player. So to that concert we duly went. The performance was excellent and Alison Stephens' talk about the mandolin was informative and interesting; to Yair, inspirational. That night, he gave us his own version of a mandolin concert in our dining room playing the songs of Comex he had taken pains to learn. Among them was *Little Green Flags*. My contribution was to

accompany him on a Gurkha Drum called a *madal* given to me some years ago by my regimental orderly, Purnaram Gurung.

Applauding Yair's performance I suggested to his mother that when Comex veterans return one day to visit the Holy Land in celebration of Comex 1, Yair, the mandolin player might top the bill, in token of which we presented him with a poem and a copy of the words and music of the Comex songs. It would have pleased his grandfather.

### THE MANDOLIN PLAYER

*Yair* old friend, play on; we like the sound,  
Rising and falling and whirling around  
Any old stage, on which you are playing,  
On pavement or street, wherever you're staying.  
Your hands, of course, deserve special attention  
And so does the score, though not in contention  
Is ready and waiting, in case you get lost,  
Reinforcement to hand whatever the cost!  
Before you begin, place your hat on the ground,  
Ignore any guns manoeuvring around.  
Then invite the audience to help you prolong  
The challenging theme of the mandolin's song.  
Play on while you can, keep the object in mind:  
The instrument, the score are both of a kind,  
Creating together those moments of joy:  
That rest at the heart of the mandolin's ploy!  
The fiddle I hear, accompanying the song,  
With viola and cello following on,  
Projecting a sound, unique in its way:  
All together as one and having their say.  
Yet the question remains, when all's said and done:  
How does the mandolin replace the gun?  
To solve that dilemma one can only try:  
*The mandolin to live; and the gun to die.*  
So bring on the drums, or a *tabla* will do,  
A striking addition of old, and yet new:  
The mandolin bows to a drummer's rhythm;  
And in military parlance, plays in step with him.  
The high notes, the low notes, carousing at will

All tastefully arranged, to blend and instil  
Harmonies, and sounds, and melodies intoned,  
Thus completing a structure tunefully honed.  
Play on my dear friend, set your mandolin free,  
Give pleasure to all, and spare a thought for me.  
Let your hands move swift like a bird on the wing,  
And as to the song, why, *hear the angels sing!*

It now fell to Annie and Judith Parkinson, Comex 5, 6 and 13, to sift through all the old tapes and to work on the idea of *The Story of Comex in Song*. The object was not only to preserve the voices and enthusiasm of those who had performed on the road and at the Inauguration, but as a reminder, around Christmas every year, of something worthwhile done. Malcolm Macgregor of Mactrak Duplicating in Edinburgh completed the job, and went on to make additional copies of the CD for Christmas 2002, with the evocative title *Distant Echoes* above a Comex picture of the desert between Damascus and Baghdad. Stephen Stewart of Comex 3 (now a computer consultant in Milton Keynes) enlivened the project by making a CD ROM with a gallery of pictures selected from the Comex archives, and went on to set up a website ([www.comex.org.uk](http://www.comex.org.uk)) before taking off on a world tour in a home made caravan.

Chris Brown-Syed PhD, Assistant Professor in the University of Buffalo School of Infomatics (and of the Queen's Silver Jubilee Comex 8), together with a musician, Darren Chase BA, pursuing a degree of Master of Science at the School of Informatics busied themselves with their own contribution to *The Green Pennant Awards* in the form of a film from the largest country of the Commonwealth entitled *Little Green Flags: Young Canadians and the Commonwealth Expedition, Comex*. The introduction to the synopsis addressed to the Canadian-American Studies Committee reads as follows:

*Canada's form of governance, and its international relations, remain points of curiosity to many Americans. In particular the nature and relevance of the Commonwealth, and Canada's role in that organisation, remain mysterious. Though it may conjure up images of a bygone empire, the Commonwealth is a voluntary association of nations with a living and growing history - of which Queen Elizabeth II is the symbolic head. Arnold Smith, a Canadian, was the first Secretary General of the Commonwealth. Aside from the sporting events of the Commonwealth Games, wider audiences are seldom*

*presented with working illustrations of the organization's vitality and relevance. This project highlights the participation of young Canadians in a series of Commonwealth Expeditions, Comex, commemorating its 40th anniversary in 2005. The film is based on an interview with Lionel Gregory OBE, the founder of Comex, and includes archival still and motion picture footage. Copies of the brochure and DVD would be housed in the UB libraries, and distributed to interested societies, UB and government departments and NGOs.*

When the war in Iraq is over, and peace returns to Afghanistan (both on the Comex map), our leaders might turn their thoughts to what Comex was about, and give the green light to a *rolling* expedition: starting from New Zealand and picking up contingents on the way in Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan - reinforced en route by other contingents flying in - before heading towards a rendezvous with our old friends on *the long dusty road*. It would be welcomed in all those lands where Comex, once described as *A Commonwealth Village on Wheels* (Kabul Times 1969), may still be remembered.

If it is acceptable to send young men and women to die in war - regardless of cost - surely they could also be sent with equal urgency, and infinitely less cost, to have a go at living in peace. *'Mountains have been climbed, deserts crossed, and man has been to the moon, but the barriers that divide people remain and grow more formidable every day'* (Crying Drums). This, at least, the young men and women of Comex have demonstrated, and they had many friends in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the course of this tale, *Little Green Flags* has been mentioned time and again - like some ancient mantra; yet one feels constrained to return to it once more; this time in the context of Yair and his sister, Mihal. Braving the elements and border guards they went to fulfil a promise to visit the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas eve, and to light candles for all our friends. This they did at no little risk to themselves and sent us some photographs, including one of Yair, on his knees, playing *Little Green Flags* - a gesture heaven could hardly ignore. It also completes the saga of a simple tune for bagpipes born in the imagination while walking past Buckingham Palace; dispatched by my brother (then working at the Ministry of Defence) to a fellow officer in Edinburgh (Alastair Rose, himself an accomplished piper); recorded by Pipe Major Angus

MacDonald MBE at the castle in Edinburgh; accompanying Prince Philip into the Commonwealth Institute in London at the inauguration of *The Green Pennant Awards* - and inadvertently named by him; picked up by our Indian friends as a suitable theme for a *Commonwealth Raga*, and performed by a 14 year old boy at the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas eve 2003. These are reasons enough to let the words speak for themselves:

*Little Green Flags 'cross barriers of class  
Colour and creed, of wealth and of caste  
Little Green Flags let everyone know  
Symbols of peace wherever you go  
Little Green Flags on ships or on 'planes  
On long dusty roads, on buses and trains  
Little Green Flags ever onward until  
The long journey ends on memory's hill  
Little Green Flags for the best things in life  
An end to our fears, an end to our strife  
Little Green Flags for the old and the young  
The lonely, the poor, for everyone  
Little Green Flags for many long years  
The sign of our laughter, our joy and our tears  
Little Green Flags like a light shining bright  
A lighthouse beam on a dark stormy night.  
Little Green Flags on ships or on 'planes  
On long dusty roads, on buses and trains  
Little Green Flags ever onward until  
The long journey ends on memory's hill.*

There is more reason today than ever before for the Commonwealth ideal of the brotherhood of man, of peace and co-operation, to shine out like the beam from a lighthouse on a stormy night; but thinking, talking, or even singing about it, is not enough.