

Poignant history to funeral right

THE Naval privilege of pulling the gun carriage at the funeral of Lord Mountbatten considered such an honour that 12 petty officers are wearing the uniforms of ordinary seamen to be in the team — has a history which seems particularly poignant this week.

When Queen Victoria was buried on a bitter February day in 1901, the coffin was taken off the train at Windsor and placed on the gun carriage. The six Royal Horse Artillery horses who were to draw it to St George's Chapel had become restless in the cold, reared and broke their traces, almost sending the coffin toppling to the ground.

According to Richard Hough, biographer of Lord Mountbatten's father, Prince Louis, there was "utter pandemonium." Lt (later Adml Sir) Percy Noble saw Prince Louis go up to King Edward, whisper something in his ear and receive a nod of assent. Prince Louis went over to Lt Noble and said: "Ground arms and stand by to drag the gun carriage."

Senior Army officers were outraged that sailors should take over where they had failed, but the King intervened, saying: "We shall never get on if there are two people giving contradictory orders." The Navy, using the remains of the traces and a length of railway communication cord, began their "stately, orderly march."