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The Swiss who guard the Pope

By Colin Farmer

ONLY one week before the dramatic attempt on his life, Pope John Paul II warned members of his Swiss Guard that they might one day have to sacrifice their own lives in order to save him.

Celebrating a special mass for newly-recruited members of the centuries old Guard, the Pope told them: "Some of your predecessors were called upon to sacrifice their lives in the fulfilment of their duties. Let us pray that the Lord may keep violence and fanaticism far from the Vatican walls. But the readiness to give life may become reality, also during your service . . ."

No members of the Swiss Guard were injured in the assassination attempt on the Pope. But they were only a few feet away and were among the first to rush to his aid after he was shot.

According to Guard Commander Franz Pfyffer: "It is impossible to protect Pope John Paul II. He is a man of the people and he wants the closest possible contact with the public."

On the afternoon of the attack on his life 45 Swiss Guards were on duty. The crowd was estimated at 30,000.

The Guards are the sole survivors of Swiss mercenary military units that played a notable role in European warfare from the 14th to the 19th century. The corps was instituted by Pope Julius II in 1505 and recruited originally from the founding cantons of the Swiss Confederation.

Now it recruits from many other cantons as well, although most come from the Valais, Lucerne and St. Gallen.

At full strength the Guard has 100 members; currently it has 92. Centuries ago the corps was much bigger, and in 1527 – when the Austrians invaded Rome – at

least 140 men died covering the flight of Pope Clement from the Vatican. Since 1927 they have been the only Swiss allowed to serve in any foreign army.

Members of the Guard have to be of Swiss nationality, Roman Catholic, single and at least 174cm (5ft 9in) in height. Recruits have to be 19 to 25 years of age. Minimum length of service is two years and the basic tax-free salary equals about Sfr 1,200 (nearly £300) a month.

Food and accommodation is free and members also receive a 13th month's salary, a bonus after every complete year of service, and extra payments for special duties.

These days the Swiss Guards are a big tourist attraction, keeping the curious out of the Vatican gates, accompanying the Pope wherever he goes (four would have escorted him on his visit to Switzerland) and lending their colourful presence to a variety of ceremonies.

They are still dressed in the billowy yellow, orange and blue uniforms designed for them by Michelangelo four centuries ago.

According to Commander Pfyffer, who has served at the Vatican for eight years: "The Pope will not allow us to carry real weapons." But the Swiss Guards are believed to be armed with teargas.

In this age of intercontinental ballistics the Pope's army looks like something on its way to a costume ball. But tradition outweighs any other considerations. And its doubtful that the millions of tourists who flock to see the Swiss Guards would stand for drastic change in the uniforms or weaponry of the world's smallest, most old-fashioned and most photographed army.



The Guards are always a popular tourist attraction



Visit unlikely this year

POPE John Paul II – still recovering from the May 13 attempt on his life in Rome – is unlikely to make his delayed visit to Switzerland before the end of this year.

Even if the Pope continues his satisfactory recovery, a tight schedule of other engagements would now almost certainly prevent him from making his Swiss tour during 1981. The indications are that the visit could now take place next year, possibly in spring or summer.

The Pope was to have flown to Switzerland on May 31 for a six-day visit.

Extensive preparations had already been made for the Papal tour, which was to have covered Lugano, Einsiedeln, Solothurn, Fribourg and Geneva. He was to have met all seven members of the Swiss government, Catholic and Protestant church leaders,

United Nations officials, youth delegates and foreign workers. Open-air masses in German, French and Italian had been planned.

More than a thousand journalists from throughout the world had been expected to cover the visit, and extensive arrangements to provide international telecommunications links were already well advanced.

Many private enterprises had also invested vast sums of money in commercialisation of the Pope's visit. In Einsiedeln – where the Pope was to have spent two days – souvenirs were already on sale, and one publisher alone had already printed 36,000 special postcards.

A Lucerne coin dealer had ordered the minting of more than 8,000 commemorative medallions worth from Sfr 50 to Sfr 1,250 each. The Swiss Post

Office had prepared a special franking stamp.

A Swiss record company had pressed thousands of special souvenir LPs. And a fleet of helicopters had been hired to fly the Pope and his entourage from venue to venue.

Throughout Switzerland there was widespread shock at the attempt on the Pope's life. President Kurt Furgler immediately sent a telegram on behalf of the Swiss government.

Protestant leaders – who were to have met the Pontiff at a major inter-faith encounter – expressed "deep shock and concern that violence does not spare even this ambassador of peace." Switzerland's three million Roman Catholics, stunned at the shooting, were immediately called to prayer.

And the Geneva-based World Council of Churches – uniting

300 non-Roman Catholic Churches worldwide – prayed that the Pope would soon be able to continue "his universal ministry of love and peace."

Swiss and Austrian press reports indicated that Turkish extremist Mehmet Ali Agca may have travelled through Switzerland on his way to Rome to shoot Pope John Paul. A Swiss government statement said there was no evidence to prove this, but did not exclude the possibility that Agca may have entered Switzerland with false documents or by-passed border checkpoints.

And the government confirmed that the gun used in the assassination attempt had been traded in Switzerland. An official Swiss statement said the weapon had been "legally imported from Belgium, legally traded in Switzerland, and legally exported again to Austria."