

## Bagpipes Forever



The above picture goes back to about 1989. It was sent to me by the gentleman on the right, Bryan Moorcroft, my drum sergeant for the Marmora Legion Pipe Band in Ontario, Canada. When he started with the band in 1988, he was a drummer for a country band. Moving to snare drum for a pipe band was a big step for him, especially since we didn't have an instructor for him at first. But with his drumming skills and my understanding of basic pipe band drumming, he got off the ground pretty quick. Today, he plays with the 8 Wing Pipes and Drums out of Trenton, Ontario. That band is moving up in the pipe band world. Like me, Bryan is a pipe band lifer. Once you get in, you never leave.

I cut a pretty fine figure as pipe major back then. The picture also makes me wonder whatever happen to the big dirk I had hanging from my belt. Haven't seen that in years.

The picture also got me thinking of how much bagpipes shaped my life. I picked up my first practice chanter to learn on February 8, 1973. Don't ask me why I remember that date. It just got stuck in my memory banks for some reason. I had just joined 200 Squadron Air Cadets in Sudbury, Ontario, at the behest of my father. It wasn't my choice to join, but at 13, my choice didn't matter. I remember standing high up above the parade square looking down on the cadets all formed up, wondering what I was going to do as an air cadet. On the far side, there was the pipe band. The next thing I remember is thinking *I'll get even*.

The practice chanter can have an irritating sound, especially when playing its musical scale over and over and over again for two hours. I know I drove my Dad nuts, but he never said anything. Then I

got to playing tunes, got my first set of bagpipes, became pretty proficient, and both my Dad and I liked them. Coming up to 47 years later, I'm still playing them.

It's been quite a journey. I outlined it briefly in my September 2018 blog, but upon rereading it, it didn't quite express the deep emotional ties I have to the music. Initially, I was just playing the standard march tunes. Later, I got into jigs, reels, hornpipes and strathspeys. A good march will make you feel grand playing down a street, but the other types of music can really make your feet tap. However, some of the most emotional music are the laments. I have made many a person weep playing a lament slowly. One of the most emotional experiences I've ever had was when I was in the play Brigadoon in 1987. It was opening night. There is the scene when Harry Beaton has died and is carried on stage during the wedding festival. I struck up the pipes and played Flowers of the Forest. The pipes were exquisitely tuned, the acoustics in the theatre perfect and I played beautifully. I felt this overwhelming wave of emotion from the audience. One of the actresses broke down and cried. She said later she wasn't acting. One of the stage hands said the hair on the back of his neck stood up. It took all my concentration not to choke up myself.

Now that is the true power of the pipes. I never got it that perfect again for the rest of the performances. There was always a drone just a smidgen off.

The best band I've ever played in was Celtic Frost out of Northern Ontario. They had an awesome drum corp and excellent pipers. It was pure joy playing amongst their ranks. I was sad when I had to move to Alberta in 1993 after being with them for a little less than a year.

Playing bagpipes has always been my defining characteristic. I strive for the perfection that I found on that Brigadoon stage every time I pick up my set to play. It upsets me when one of my drones drifts out of tune just a little. And I have contributed to the music by writing some tunes myself and publishing a book of harmonies with a couple of friends back in the late 90's. After playing a number of Burns dinners, as usual, over the past few weeks, it came to me that perhaps I should investigate publishing my tunes on Amazon.

It couldn't hurt. Playing pipes is one of my legacies. It shaped my musical character and no matter where I went, I knew I would have friends as soon as I joined the local band.

What passion defines your character?