

Drum Major John James (Jim) O'Halloran

On the 12th and 13th of March Te Kuiti and Districts Highland Pipe Bands Drum Major Jim O'Halloran led the Te Kuiti & Districts Highland Pipe Band to its first National Pipe band Championships in its 60 year existence, it just so happened that it was also Jim's 60th year as Te Kuiti's Drum Major.

It has always been something that I have wondered about, is actually how dad came to be the Drum Major; it was not something he has often talked about, he has never been one to blow his own trumpet, and has often fobbed it off by saying 'it was just something to do' or say that 'well we were all involved community things in those days', so I have really had to push to get dad to open up. Even his close friends who were in the band with Jim don't really open up much. I once asked City of Papakura's Pipe Major Jim Jamieson how dad got involved, he said 'Well he was hanging around doing nothing so we put him out front'; and many others have said basically the same thing. But it was not really the case.

Jim had attended Wanganui Collegiate during the late 40's, whilst there he had joined the schools Army Cadets then later transferring to the schools Air Training Corp so he gained the necessary drill experience needed when he became Te Kuiti's Drum Major on leaving school. Jim's father John (Jack) O'Halloran OBE along with a number of others, including George Jamieson (Pipe Major Jim Jamieson's father); within the Te Kuiti district decided to form a pipe band, Jim's father was not only one of the founding members but was also the bands patron so dad really had no choice, the founding members knew he could march, that was good enough, they needed a leader and he was it! The die was cast; pipe banding was not only to become an integral part of Jim's life but an abiding passion. Though, with a strong Celtic heritage from both parents and a high ideal of community involvement; it is not surprising.

From the very start the band needed funds and Jim like the other original members put his energy into attracting attention to the band and raising the funds needed to purchase instruments and uniforms. To start with the band wore white shirts and Gordon tartan (the bands original tartan) ties, men wearing grey slacks, women grey skirts. The 8 original pipers went so far to purchase their own pipes Jim bought his own kilt; therefore the funds raised bought drums and pipes for learners and kilts. The band was on its way.

In those days there were many parades and Jim led the band at Queen's carnival, A & P Shows, Winter Shows, Marching Girl Teams, Christmas & civic parades and of course the ANZAC parades of the area. Some of these involved special memories for Jim like leading the parade for the visit of Lord Cobham the Governor General at the time. Jim like others of his age had to complete his Compulsory Military Training during the 50's becoming a gunner in the 42nd Battery, 4th Medium Regiment and Jim took to it like a duck to water. Even so Jim did not give up on the band and still made it very much part of his life. Jim can still pretty much count the parades he's missed on one hand. I heard from one of Jim's friends that he threw the mace so high at one parade that the band stop playing to watch the mace wondering if he would catch it, which he apparently did; I wonder how many bets were made on that one.

In the early days the bands practises were held in Te Kuiti's old Civic Centre they shared it with the Te Kuiti Municipal Brass Band, the hall was small and as always there was a wee bit of friction between the pipe bandsmen and the 'spit and dribblers' as the pipers dubbed the brass bandsmen. Jim put in a considerable amount of time and effort in negotiations with the brass bands conductor Howard Walker and their Patron Jim Daniels and all reach an agreement to build a band rooms to house both bands on Te Kuiti's Centennial Park which was opened after much fund raising in 1969. The brass band has unfortunately folded so the hall is now solely the Pipe Bands.

In August of 1967 Jim married the love of his life Glenyss Crombie originally of Waitara but having moved with her family to Auckland of all place, Jim soon saved her from that fate and Glenyss spent 30 years as the bands Secretary/ Treasurer. Jim and Glenyss had 3 children Mary and her husband Conrad Simons both play the pipes as does their eldest daughter Jessica; their youngest, Emily plays the tenor. Jim's 2nd daughter Alison learnt the pipes but stopped playing after a drunken woman hurled a glass at the band on a New Years Eve, it hitting Alison on the back and cutting her shoulder. As Jim and Glenyss' youngest I learnt the pipes from the age of 8; in the mid 80's there was no video games, we had no video and only 2 TV channels and we weren't allowed to just come home and sit in front of the box to gain square eyes. We play sport, worked the farm and we could play any musical instrument we liked... as long as it was the pipes. Years later I asked dad why, he said we needed culture in our lives, it was part our culture for a start and it got us involved in something in the community that gave something to it, I jokingly asked what apart from the noise of an alley full of randy tomcats. His reply 'it makes people happy, just look at how many step forward to see when the band strikes up'.

Jim has not just confined his passion to just the Te Kuiti band, He has always, as long as I can remember, been one to drop everything and help other bands in need. Jim also led the Otorohanga Pipe band when their Drum Major Parker Hill was unavailable. Jim had the honour of leading them on parade down Hamilton's Victoria Street during a British Lions tour in the 50's. Jim has helped Taumarunui band in the past and is Drum Major and active member for the King Country Pipes and Drums. For Jim it has always been about Pipe Bands especially small country ones and when they need not only a leader but also numbers he does his best to round up as many as he can helping the likes of Cambridge and Districts parade on a Movie set.

Jim can be very persuasive and when it has come to getting new members or help, he would make an 18th century recruiting sergeant jealous; I got a phone call on the afternoon of the 24th April 2006, it was Jim, 'have you practised for ANZAC day?' 'Don't be silly dad, I work as a black water rafting guide, I work 5 to 30 days, 14 hours a day, I don't get time to practise, why?'

he informed me that the band needed a bass drummer and I was it and I spent the night before ANZAC getting a crash course on the bass and playing with the 92nd Gordon Highlanders; well a CD of theirs anyway. He would go out of his way to ring around friends in other bands to help fill the gaps for parades when the ranks were looking thin and very much happy to repay the help. As is well known and often the way members in bands come and go; Jim and Glenyss have worked constantly to keep the band going, and it has had some lean times, so much so that some have given it up for dead; about 12 years the band only had 5 members when Jim was approached by a number of locals wishing to learn, some with their children, and with the help of Lloyd FitzGerald as a tutor the band was once more at full strength also helped by the return of some old members. I must add that drummers were in short supply for the band a couple of years ago; at the Great New Zealand Muster, a lovely young lady came running up to Jim and gave him a hug, not that that is the first time I've seen that happen, it later transpired that it was the daughter of Te Kuiti's old Pipe Sergeant from the 80's An Thomas and she had asked Jim if there was any marching girl teams in the area, he said no and the young lady said 'I guess the next best thing is to join the band' Jim replied 'excellent, we need a side drummer, turn up on Monday'. I actually married that lovely young lady a year later and found myself having to take orders from her as drum sergeant as well as at home.

Though Jim has never played the pipes and is predominately a Drum Major, he is a bass drummer and has not only played for Te Kuiti when it has needed one in the past but also played the bass for many bands when they are in need, going so far as winning a bronze medal for the bass during the mini band contest days, competing with Drum Sergeant Lewis Gibson from Te Kuiti and an old member Drummer John Nicholson, who happened to be a side drummer in an Auckland brass band, yes one who had gone to the dark side, in a mini band started by Darrel Hillier.

As Jim will tell people he has had a lot of fun and made many good friends over the years and that for him that it is what it is about. He is very quietly proud of the band and it's achievements at the Masterton Nationals, he felt very honoured to led the band and felt that it's placement was due to the good musical leadership of Pipe Major Don McColl coupled with the fact that the band also has the experience of Pipe Sergeants David Powell and Fiona "Blondie the voice" Glass, her brother Gregor Lamont and the general camaraderie of the members in the band. Dads pride in the band has gone so far as him asking me, unbeknowns to any of the other band members, to design a Glengarry badge for the band then choosing one he had a number made whereby as patron of the band he and Glenyss gifted them to the band. It is also a very little known fact that as a life member of the band, for at least 35 years Jim has paid a full sub, though he is not obliged too and that he puts it down as a donation to the band. His belief, every little bit helps.

Jim is not unique in his commitment to the pipe band movement in New Zealand; there are of course many others who quietly keep up the same passion and dedication to the culture of the pipe bands. We as younger members often tend to brush them aside, dismissing, them as past it, old has beens and stuck in their ways, and remorselessly pushing them out of the bands without so much as a thank you; but we tend to forget that had it not been for their dedication, the culture would not be there for many of us today. It is my belief that it is high time that we started to record their contributions and histories to this part of the New Zealand culture and I would like to be so bold as to urge others to write the stories of those who like Jim have put their time and effort into the New Zealand pipe band movement; before it's too late.

By Ross O'Halloran (his son)