

Salute to Pipe Major Robert Collins of the Ingersoll Pipe Band

A lone piper stands tuning his bagpipes as taught to, long ago, by a great instructor. He begins to play a favourite set of tunes put together into a medley by that same man. He imagines his mentor playing along. Then his mind wanders off into the past...

* * * * *

There is a moment just before a Pipe Band plays when all goes quiet. The tune has been called. The band stands steady, or walks to a single drum tap to stay in step. The pipers breathe deeply about to begin. The drummers feel the cadence and await the signal that starts the drums to roll. And a voice calls out to all, loud and confident, proud and in command... “By the right. Quick. March.”

Pipe Major Robert Collins lived for that moment.

By “lived” think... literally.

Decades of weekly practices, weekend parades, summer competitions, band trips, Tartan Balls, annual meetings and the never-ending slow march of children through his office at the band hall being asked to follow the tip of his pencil as it moved from note to note across the same simple tunes. Year in. Year out.

By “proudly” don’t think selfishly... but rather “aware” of a significant accomplishment. He would sit after many of these events, in a lawn chair under a tree with Helen, or in a Legion after a chilly Remembrance Day Parade, with friends and be filled with satisfaction. His smile would say it all. This piping life brought him great joy.

* * * * *

There is a moment as the first tune ends in a pipe band medley when all eyes move to the Pipe Major’s foot as he stands there setting the tempo. The music will shift from a March to a Strathspey, or Jig, or Waltz and the change in timing is often subtle. But it is exact and in the Pipe Major’s control.

Pipe Major “Bob” Collins knew as much about time change as anyone alive.

He joined the band, when his father Alex was the Pipe Major, before the war and for nearly 70 years watched the shifting generations come and go through the Ingersoll Pipe Band Hall. It was a medley in itself, beginning with Military men and post-war soldiers making it a mostly male band in Bob’s early years. Then as times changed so did the I.P.B. Teaching became a focus and children took up the pipes and drums inheriting the inspiration from their parents. And men, then women too, attracted by the band’s strong reputation on parade, and in competition, began bringing their talents to Ingersoll from elsewhere. There was no better ambassador for the town than the pipe band on parade and no better man to lead it.

A different "time change" made Pipe Major Bob Collins' job more difficult perhaps than his father's before him. For Bob there was a cycle that saw years of investment in young players continually moving on - a sign of the times. People have become less and less about staying in their hometown and more about going "where the work is" and promising to "staying in touch." Bob saw his band grow through his teaching efforts only to then migrate away to school or careers leaving him to start fresh - a seasonal planting of seeds that are gone before a full harvest. No matter. Time and again on Thursday nights, if you followed Wonham Street down to the river, they'd be there: the next crop of young players waiting for their lessons. What Patience it must have taken to begin anew. What Commitment. The Dedication.

* * * * *

There is a moment at the end of a band's performance when the drum-line builds to a final crash of snares and the pipers stop blowing and squeeze every ounce of air from their pipes, to end as one in perfect unison. It is difficult to do. When done well, it is pleasing to the ear. No other instrument takes as much concentration to quit playing. Pipes will go on, and go on badly without some extra effort. What other instrument requires training and practice - to stop!

Bob Collins' medley as Pipe Major began ending in 2000. His failing health did not destroy his desire, but it did his ability, to begin again with another set of students. A Pipe Major's job is, after all, managing succession. From tune to tune in a medley. From generation to generation in the band itself. And eventually, from Pipe Major to Pipe Major in his life as a leader.

In 90 years there were but three men to have called themselves the Pipe Major of the Ingersoll Pipe Band; Tom Johnston, Alex Collins and Bob. In recent years his title has only been honorary - and I don't mean "only" as that Honour was well earned. But Bob also had a cycle of Pipe Sergeants moving through, unable to stay in Ingersoll or make the commitment as he had. Not able to live to run the band and in turn be run by it.

He may have worried about his successor, but it is doubtful he felt the IPB was in any risk because of it. That would have made "too much" of his role and of himself. He was not one to think the first 100 years of the band were his doing, so the next 100 would carry on as well. He did the only thing he could. He left a Legacy of people who care and gave them an example to follow. Because of Pipe Major Bob Collins, the I.P.B. is in good hands. Pipe Major James Mutterer is now in charge, but not alone, he too has the help of many capable hands.

* * * * *

There is a moment late in a Pipe Band performance when the mind may wander, when the blowing gets heavy and the playing is much harder than it appears. Bob coached hundreds of players through those struggles - as a piper, as a mentor and as a friend. He ran the band as he lived his life; with equal parts integrity, discipline and humour.

It could not have come easily. There was work and unthinkable time put into it. Every hour with the band was a gift to those of us who followed him. One given by his family who knew what it meant to “share” their father with us all and, I hope know how much it was appreciated.

Pipe Major Robert Collins has lived his Medley. Beginnings and Endings. Time changes and the changing times. A performance well played and a result of patient practice. He gave of himself to see that Ingersoll was known worldwide as a place of music and that generations of pipers would keep the IPB in their hearts wherever life took them - as member of Bob's band.

* * * * *

And so we formed up again, last Wednesday, lifetime members under the direction of Pipe Major Robert Collins one more time – in Spirit. Standing at attention under darkening skies, in rain driven by an icy wind on a hill South of town. All proudly ready to lead Bob on a final march as he had lead us for years before. Many could not remember a colder stand, fingers going white, and kilts not made for such conditions. But Bob’s example carried us: humour made light, complaints were not shared and each player “made do” waiting in that moment of quiet for the single voice to call us into action.

We could have stood there all day, despite the weather, if standing out of love, respect and appreciation would help Bob and his family to know the difference he made.

But no one has heard of a Pipe Band that did not play when called upon. Not Bob’s band.

So Drum Major Gail MacKay called the tune.
Not in Bob’s steady and familiar voice, but in his absence ... and in his Honour.

"By the right. Quick. March."

Chris Irwin