

THE BLACK BEAR.

by Tom Strickland

I thoroughly enjoyed the telecast of the 2015 Edinburgh Military Tattoo. It reminded me of a series of stalwart friends of Scottish birth whom I have had the privilege of knowing. I visited Scotland in December 1989. Memories of that magnificent sight of Edinburgh Castle from Princes Street came flooding back.

Peter was Scottish born. He came to Australia as a young man where he married and raised a family. The most memorable thing about Peter was his rich Scottish brogue. He had become a proud Aussie, but never forsook his birth heritage. Peter retained his mother tongue, which indeed distinguished him from the crowd.

It was when Peter's employer took up a workshop in the building where I worked that we were to become friends. He was an appliance mechanic who brought a broad experience to his chosen trade. Quietly spoken, but secure in his own technical knowledge of his industry, Peter was undoubtedly a valuable team player. Experience revealed that this trading location did not provide adequate customer exposure and the business was soon moved to a more prominent position. For a time Peter and I lost touch.

One day Peter rang and asked me to visit with him in his home. I was aware that Peter had not been well, so I went semi-prepared for what might be the reason. Peter, looking quite pale and drawn, was sitting in a corner chair when I arrived. After the usual greetings and chit-chat, Peter came to the point. "Tom, I have cancer which will be terminal. I may get a couple of years, but when that time comes I want you to conduct my funeral service if you would please?" My response was: "Peter my friend if that is what you wish, it will be an honour to do so."

For the next hour and a half, he told me of his life, his values and love for his family. Then he became quite specific about his arrangements. So intense was his expression that I quickly noted the importance of what he was about to share with me.

He told me of his pride in being born a Scott and the patriotic passion and emotion he had always felt when he heard the bagpipes play. Peter requested; "I want a Piper to play 'The Black Bear' at my funeral. It is the tune that the Scottish Regiment marches to when returning to home base. It will be appropriate for the occasion when I 'go home'." The significance of this symbolism was not lost on me.

Peter departed this life on the day before his 64th birthday. Fortunately, I was able to visit with him on several occasions in the weeks before he died. On our last meeting, Peter reinforced his request for a Piper to

play "The Black Bear". Again, I was deeply impressed by the importance he placed upon this request.

Peter went on to explain: "As a boy of 18 in 1948, I remember standing in Princes Street, Edinburgh for the Edinburgh International Festival when 3000 Pipers from around the world marched the full length of Princes Street. The music just continued in waves as they marched by". Displaying obvious emotional pride in his heritage, Peter continued: "The music of those pipes just filled your soul, I will never forget it! Even now the hair stands up on the back of my neck as I am telling you". Peter then fell silent, reliving that inspiring moment.

When planning his funeral service, my search for a Piper introduced me to Mr David Williamson. He was a man in his 60's who was well known for his piping skills that had been faithfully nurtured since childhood. He was most professional and happy to oblige.

The day of the funeral was chilly with light rain. As I approached the Karangi Chapel, I noticed wisps of cloud hanging below the Coramba mountain range. You could almost feel like you were in Scotland! A Regimentally dressed David Williamson arrived punctually, so I gave him the Order of Service and his cue for his musical contribution.

After the curtains had closed we all observed a time of silence, then Piper Williamson played "The Black Bear". He started in the vestibule and marched down the road away from the Chapel. The sound of the Piper faded off into the distance as he departed. It indeed created the feeling of the soldier returning to home base, exactly as Peter had requested. The family sincerely appreciated the beauty and significance of this musical contribution by their Piper, David Williamson.

It was not until I visited David to thank him for his kindness on behalf of Peter's family, that I knew he was the right one to play on that significant occasion. By way of expressing appreciation, I shared with him the significance that this music had held for Peter. I recounted Peter's story to David, sharing Peter's personal experience of the 3000 Pipers in Edinburgh and the deep emotion it had always evoked in him.

David Williamson fell silent for a moment of contemplation. His emotional response clearly identified his personal connection with Peter's story: "In 1948 I was just a teenage Piper when I visited Scotland with our local Pipe Band to play in the Edinburgh International Festival. On that day of which Peter spoke - I was one of those 3000 Pipers who marched down Princes Street, Edinburgh - 46 years ago".

