

Vancouver Police Pipe Band at the 2016 Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo

Michael MacNeil saw the Edinburgh Tattoo as a young boy and always dreamed of one day performing on the castle Esplanade himself.

The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo is like no other, it is the model on which all other tattoos are based. The thrill of marching through the Gatehouse and over the drawbridge in a massed band of over 200 musicians will raise the neck hairs of the most experienced piper or drummer.



Photo credit: The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo

As a civilian member of the Vancouver Police Pipe Band, Michael thought he might yet have a chance to experience the tattoo for himself. After all the band had performed there twice previously. At every opportunity Michael would suggest that the band return to the Castle Esplanade.

Performing at the Edinburgh Tattoo is no easy task. First off the band has to be invited and has to be of sufficient calibre to perform at the world-renowned event. The most difficult hurdle is the fact that the tattoo requires a four-week commitment, which proves challenging for a volunteer band and is the primary reason the band had not returned in 18 years. It was decided that the band had sufficient players within the organization that players could attend on a rotating schedule so not everyone had to commit for the entire four-week duration. This created new challenges as not everyone would be in attendance for the rehearsals and would have to arrive in Scotland ready to perform the show.

2016 seemed ideal for the band to make its return. The theme of the tattoo would be a celebration of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's 90th birthday. 2016 would also be the retiring year of Major Steven Small,

the Director of the Army School of Bagpipe Music and Highland Drumming. Major Small had played a key role in the Vancouver Police Pipe Band's participation in the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace in 2014. Final approval for the band's centennial celebration at the palace came from the Queen herself. The band felt indebted to these individuals for what was truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate its 100th anniversary. And so it was, Michael's childhood dream was about to become a reality.

The band began its preparations to perform in Scotland. New music had to be learned and, of course, the drill had to be polished up. Probably the most difficult task was learning how to slow march to Amazing Grace. It doesn't sound difficult but try it; it's like trying to pat your head while you rub your tummy.

Upon arriving in Scotland the band began an intensive week of rehearsals at Redford Barracks. The days were long and tiring. It is amazing how much work goes in behind the scenes to put the tattoo together. They only have a week to make it happen and the first show must be perfect. Once rehearsals are done it's 3 weeks of performing everyday and twice on Saturday.

It's not all work and no play though. The band took every opportunity to explore Edinburgh and the Edinburgh Festival. Some of the band members ventured up to Glasgow to see the World Pipe Band Championships. A round of golf was played at the Musselburgh Links, the oldest golf course in the world. To the surprise and delight of many tourists, the pipes were played high atop Arthur's Seat. And no trip to Edinburgh is complete without a game of Skittles at the Sheeps Heid Pub.

When asked what it's like to perform at the Edinburgh Tattoo, Michael responds with a boy-like twinkle in his eye: "Magical".



Photo credit: Vancouver Police Pipe Band