



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Interviewee Captain Stuart Samson MBE

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This is James Beaton for Noting the Tradition. It's Friday the 28th of April 2012 and I am speaking to Stuart Samson who was formerly the Director of Army Piping and is now a teacher at the National Piping Centre. Stuart, welcome to the interview.

Good morning James, I am looking forward to the interview and hopefully you don't ask me anything too difficult.

We'll try and see how things go over the course of it. I'd like really, Stuart, to take you back to the beginning of your piping career. You're from the North East and I take it you learnt piping when you were growing up there?

Yes, I started piping at the age of eight. I come from Laurencekirk in the North East of Scotland and I went to the local pipe band which was the Montrose Royal British Legion and that's where I started off my piping aged eight years old.

Ok, and was there any sort of history of piping in your family at all? Were your father, or uncles, or any other relatives involved in piping?

My cousin at the time who came from Arbroath, he started playing the pipes maybe about four or five years before myself and he was maybe a little bit of an inspiration for me to start piping but the musical side in my family was more from the fiddlers from the North East, going back my family history there were some famous fiddlers, the Hardies and the Dickies, in a distant way they were relatives of our family.

I see, so you started off in the Pipe Band. Was it mainly Pipe Band playing you did initially or did you get into the solo competing scene or anything like that?

The first Pipe Major of the Montrose British Legion was a guy called Jim Shepherd and then he retired from the Band and the Pipe Sergeant at that time, a guy called Norman MacLeod, who was a former Pipe

Sergeant with the Dundee City Police and he sort of became, I would say, my main sort of teacher who really brought me to where I was as a player before I went on to join the military. Norman was very, very strict, a good teacher and really made sure that I covered all the bases and the basics were done properly so I turned into being really quite a competent player for my age.

What was Norman's background? With a name like that, it sounds like he was probably a Highlander who had moved out of the Highlands?

Yes, of course, I think his family were away over from the Western Isles. Before he moved to Dundee he was actually from away further up beside Banffshire.

So he was from the North East, so in fact your piping tradition, it is very much a North East oriented?

Yes, pretty much.

Yes, absolutely. So, I mean the Pipe Band, did you do much competing with the Band or going away with the Band to compete or anything like that?

No, the Band was a good band, a community band, you know, it did local engagements, we did Armistice Remembrance Parade in Montrose, we also went to Arbroath and played there along with the Royal British Legion. I enjoyed my time in the Band but my main focus was really on, you know, I was doing junior competitions solo.

That was the next thing I was going to ask you. You obviously got into that scene sort of fairly early on in your piping career?

Probably from the age of about twelve or thirteen I started to do competitions.

Right, and was there much of a sort of competitions scene in the North East at that point for juniors?

One of the main competitions at that time was in Turriff and it was quite a big competition, it was Bill Hepburn Senior at that time sort of organised the competition and there were probably about thirty or forty competitors and there were good judges. I remember playing in front of John Burgess and Ian MacFadyen.

They would probably at that time playing competitively as well.

I remember playing against the other junior competitors at the time, Gordon Duncan, he was round about the same as myself and at that age he was a formidable player.

You did all of that throughout your teenage years with the Band and also with the Solo and then there was obviously the question of what to do for a living and you obviously went to the Army at quite a young age. Is that right?

Yes, I was actually signed up at the age of fifteen and I had already made up my mind probably from the age of thirteen that I wanted to join the Army. Lots of teachers at school sort of tried to tell me, you know, maybe you want to think of something else but my mind was made up. I think even just looking at, for example, the Scots Guards book and all the pictures and all that is quite influential when you're young and Pipe Major Angus MacDonald was someone who was, I would say, probably very influential on me wanting to join the Army. In fact, I wanted to join the Scots Guards and Angus had sort of arranged for me to go and do the interview and the medical and I was told I was too small to get into the Guards at that time. I was only about five foot two or three as a fifteen year old, so I was too small to get into the Scots Guards so I then decided to join my local regiment which was Gordon Highlanders.

How did you get into contact with Angus, I mean had it been through a kind of Army involvement in things like that?

Well, I knew him when I was competing in solo junior competitions because that's prime recruiting ground for the Army, then they can see who's piping at the solos and then they start talking to these people and they find out maybe that individual's interested in joining the Army, so for me I was quite keen to join the Scots Guards. My father was a Cameron Highlander, and I did think about maybe joining the Queen's Own and then I thought there's so many great players there trying to branch out a career, I was thinking about my career even then you know, so I decided to join my local regiment, you know the Gordon Highlanders and this turned out to be very good for me.

Yes, so you went in presumably at fifteen to sixteen, something like that, sort of boy soldiers level?

Yes, fifteen and ten months I went through the gates at Bridge of Don Barracks.

And you were there for how long?

The basic training lasted for ten weeks and then after that we, then anybody who was going to be doing piping or drumming or music and got sent to the Scottish Division School of Music, the junior school which was at Dreghorn Barracks, Edinburgh where I spent between a year and a half and two years there before going on to join the regiment.

That presumably became an influential part of your piping education, being there?

Probably, I look back and think how much it gave me as an individual, you know, musically, but also in leadership because you got promotion within the ranks as a junior and if you became a Lance

Corporal or a Corporal or a Sergeant it was up to you to go and tell everybody else what was happening. All the adult instructors just sort of stepped back and let you get on with it.

So you were given a lot of responsibility at an early age?

Yes, at a very young age.

Who was doing piping teaching there at that school at that time?

Well, the first Pipe Major that I had there was a guy called Pipe Major Jimmy Hood who was with the Argylls and he was then replaced and he got moved on somewhere else, he might have even retired from the military then and then Pipe Major Ian Morrison became the school Pipe Major. That was good obviously with his background, he was very influential.

And also at that point he would be in the midst of his solo career as well?

Yes, exactly, and the School Band, it was very, very strong. I think the military, the Army was going through up until that point a bad time for them with numbers in the bands.

Were they having trouble recruiting?

Yes, and then it was like in the late seventies, early eighties, things started to take off again for the Army and there were lots of pipers and drummers joining who could play already and the school band, there were a lot of good players. Alasdair Gillies was about a year behind me, he came into the band and another really good player was Brian Hutchison, and although he didn't stay that long in the military but he was a good player, a guy called Gillies Fyfe.

He was an excellent player, yes.

There were a lot of good players in the advanced class. There were maybe about twenty pipers and that was the quality of the bands, the

junior bands, probably better than the regular Army bands at that time because all of a sudden there was an influx of very good players.

And the focus would be on piping but also on developing your skills as a soldier as well?

Yes.

So, two years there and then back off to the Gordon Highlanders?

Yes, then I joined the regiment for real as it were and went on to the Drums and Pipes of the Gordon Highlanders.

Why drums and pipes, is that just a tradition in the regiment?

It was a tradition within the regiment and it was the only Scottish Regiment to have that title. I know that the Irish Guards, they use the same title as well.

So it was just a tradition, yes. So you went off to the Regiment and into the Pipe Band? How was that after Dreghorn?

Yes, well it was totally different because you were going into a regiment and you're a bit apprehensive as well. You're no longer a junior, it's the real thing. The regiment was posted at that time in Kirknewton near Edinburgh and I remember, I wouldn't say the band was that strong in numbers, it maybe had about twelve or thirteen pipers and I was made very, very welcome. I then realised that maybe on the piobaireachd side there was nobody there to actually help you develop in piobaireachd and they very kindly at that time they located, he later went on to be General Sir Peter Graham who actually went to Donald Macleod for lessons, he managed to organise for myself to go through to see Donald Macleod once a week from Edinburgh. I couldn't drive so one of the other pipers, he was quite a good player as well, he got to tag along to lessons and he did the driving. That was good and that all lasted for about six months but alas Donald then became ill.

Yes I was about to say that must have been at that point in Donald's life.

Yes, it was. I'd heard of Donald Macleod, his cassettes and his tapes that he'd done but as they go I mean getting the real thing is something quite special.

Do you remember what tunes you did with him and a wee bit about the way he taught, stuff like that?

Yes, it was very much like it was on the cassettes, the singing, he did some playing on the practice chanter but he liked to sing quite a lot, something that I've taught myself and now teaching the importance of singing you know and not being frightened to sing, you know when you're younger somebody asks you to sing and you sort of clam up. He tried to encourage people to actually sing their music and I feel it's a very, very important thing.

Yes, in piobaireachd, I think yes, absolutely. So that was you at the regiment, who was the Pipe Major at that point?

The Pipe Major was Ronnie Henderson. He'd just taken over from Pipe Major Brian Macrae who went on to be the Queen's Piper. Then, Ronnie was the Pipe Major for about five years and then it was Billy Rugg who came in and was the Pipe Major for about five years and then myself.

Then yourself, so after 10 years in the band you got to that level. What was the kind of daily work of a Piper in the Gordon Highlanders in the 1980s? Was it focused on the military or was it focused more on piping or a kind of mixture of both?

It was a mixture, yes but as a Piper and Drummer in the Scottish Regiments you're a soldier first and your musical/soldiering balance will be dictated by what your operational commitments are. At that time it was probably fifty-fifty, sometimes it could go as high as

eighty per cent music and twenty per cent soldiering and then very quickly that could change.

Yes, depending on what the regiment was doing presumably. I mean there would obviously be an opportunity for a bit of overseas travel and that kind of thing?

Yes, you had to do a lot of training and all my experience through the Pipe Bands and regiments is that the Pipe Bands took great pride their soldiering abilities. The difference between the Pipe Bands and the other platoons is that the Pipe Band as individuals stay together most of the time whereas in the platoons people come and go, changing all the time, so they've got a much tighter sort of group, community group and that sort of thing.

That's interesting. So you were off with the regiment, they were in Kirknewton you said first of all.

Then they went to Belize in Central America and that was a bit of a culture shock, you know, all of a sudden in the jungle at that age and we did Band jobs there and we were all kitted out in white tropical jackets, we did engagements, I remember even we did a couple of jobs in America close to the Pentagon and I played for a Bicentenary Parade in Yorktown on the East Coast of America and that was me, a seventeen, eighteen year old.

Yes, getting the opportunity to do these things.

Yes, all of a sudden you know, travelling overseas and seeing a bit of the world which was a big thing after growing up in a small village.

Yes, absolutely. So, in terms of the military side of your career at this point I mean are you encouraged to start looking at promotion and was there an exam structure or this kind of thing? Could you talk a little bit about that?

Yes there was a structure and for me my ambition when I joined the Gordon Highlanders was to be Pipe Major and that's actually as far as my ambition at that stage went. I didn't have any sort of thinking about Director of Army Bagpipe Music, you know, that came later on. First and foremost I wanted to be a Pipe Major of the regiment and luckily I went on to become the Pipe Major of the regiment and luckily enough even then to be the last Pipe Major of the regiment because of amalgamation. I'd have been really quite disappointed to not have been Pipe Major of the Gordon Highlanders, it was my chosen Regiment and you know it was my area and to have been Pipe Major of something that changed and then going to something else would have a little bit disappointing for me.

Sure, absolutely. So in terms of a Piper's career structure, is moving through the ranks of the Pipe Band, is that kind of based on examination or sort your own ability or a combination of both?

You've got to get qualifications both in military soldiering side and musical and there are certain courses that you went to at Edinburgh Castle at the time which you had to do. You had to do a Class One Course and a Piobaireachd Course which were three week courses. You had to do one of them to get a recommendation if you wanted to go on to do the Pipe Major's course. I never got to do the Class One Course, I did the Piobrach Course and I got a recommendation.

So who did you do the Piobaireachd Course with?

With Big Angus.

Big Angus, right, so he was obviously in the Castle at that point. You did that and then on to the Pipe Major's course. How much service did you have when you did that?

That was 1985 so I had been in the regiment about five years and I got promoted to a full Corporal during the course.

Right, so, tell me a little bit about the Pipe Major's Course. How long does it last?

At that time it was just over seven months.

And was it fairly full on every day?

It was pretty much full on. You had the class and you did your sort of muster parade in the morning, make sure everyone was there, you got briefed on what was happening that day and then you got on with your practicing and any lessons you would get which covers a lot of things, there's theory and it's not just all about learning the tunes, there's the wider aspects of piping and you got on with that for seven months and you had to learn a minimum of six marches, strathspeys and reels and six piobaireachds during that time and then you had to submit six marches, strathspeys and reels and six piobaireachds when you came to your final playoff.

Was it still Big Angus who was there?

The Director was Major John Allan and the Pipe Major at that time was from the Black Watch, Pipe Major Alan Tippie.

I take it there are other instructors along with them as well?

There are only the two but from time to time there may be people posted and they might be attached to them and they use if they can and then at that time Brian Donaldson was there as well, he spent a lot of time at the school so he would help out there and one thing I learnt from the course about Brian being there was the work he put in striving to the great sounding bagpipe. At that time it was cane drone reeds, and every day you could see him working away trying to get that extra little bit of mileage out of his pipes for tonal quality, and the next day the reed would go in the bin. He really worked hard to get the sound, but that paid off, if you listened to him. I don't think I ever saw Brian Donaldson with a bad set of pipes, he was very, very good.

That was the School of Piping. You leave that with your Pipe Major's Certificate and then I take that it is a question of moving on and seeing how you get on with being promoted to actually being the Pipe Major of the regiment.

I would say that during that time leading up to my Pipe Major's course and after my Pipe Major's course, because of the piobaireachd thing again nobody could actually give me what I was wanting for piobaireachd tuition. I was going to Jimmy McGregor for lessons and line music as well and Jimmy was very influential for me and being an ex-Gordon Highlander himself and the Bob Brown/Bob Nicol connection, so my piobaireachd's been very much in that line as it were, you know the Nicol and Brown, I try and listen to everything but for some reason I always seem to when I hear recordings of Nicol and Brown I feel sort of "that's the way to do it". I can sort of understand that, and I sort of take my style based on that, although I don't play exactly the same as them.

During this period did you get much of an opportunity to actually get on to the competition scene and develop things there in terms of solos?

Yes and no. Sometimes you had an opportunity to do so and then other times you had soldiering and then you couldn't actually go to certain competitions but I did try my best to get away as much as I could.

Was that something that was encouraged by the Regiment?

Yes, very much so. I mean the Regiment very much looked after my career in a way because they knew that I could play before I joined the military and that I had potential and they made sure that my potential was developed and I was given every opportunity to do that.

Did you get much opportunity to do any teaching during that point as well in terms of perhaps teaching younger soldiers?

Just within the Band. The first teaching stint was at Milton Bridge, Glencorse Barracks, Penicuik where I was after my Pipe Major's course I was posted two years after that to the school for Piping and Drumming Wing, just teaching the beginner Pipers and the Class Two Pipers and then once they got to Class One level then they went to the Army School at the Castle, so I was Pipe Sergeant there and I was involved in teaching probably for the first time in that sense.

And it was just bringing on people right from the very beginning who really hadn't picked up a chanter before?

And there were Corporal Instructors there as well but I never got put in to any of these posts. I think the regiments when they got some good players were quite reluctant to let you away because they wanted to keep them for themselves, it's getting the balance right between holding on to your good players but also letting them away to develop their careers.

So in terms of your own competing career, sort of in the Eighties and probably into the Nineties would it be fair to say that would be your main competing era or did you compete into the Two Thousands as well?

I can never remember to get the date right. It was in 1989 I won the Silver Medal and that was excellent and after that was the year because they were all talking about it now, what's going to happen in the Argyllshire Gathering, they had two groups of thirty and the silver medal and then the short leet and then I was lucky enough to get through to the final and won the final.

So that presumably qualified you for the Gold Medal at that point as well and you obviously played in the Gold Medal competitions?

Yes I did but then when I look back, you look back on your life, and you realise maybe did I do that right or did I do that wrong? In 1990 I became the Pipe Major of the Gordons and I decided that all my focus

had to be on the Band and the individuals within the Band and I walked away from competing for about five years and when I look back I think it was probably a mistake you know because you really need to keep yourself going. I won the Silver Medal and I should have really kept the concentration going on. I just felt that it was my responsibility to the Band and the individuals to really focus on that.

And this is a big responsibility as well because being the Pipe Major of the Regiment and you've got a lot of people under you? You did feature in the Glenfiddich at one point I think?

Yes, well I was Pipe Major of the Gordons for just under five years and when I came back, when I finished that sort of tenure as Pipe Major, I got posted back to the Piping and Drumming Wing as Pipe Major in charge of the school and I decided to start competing again, so, although I had still been going to Jimmy McGregor for lessons and he then passed away about a year after I became Pipe Major of the Gordons so I was pretty much on my own but I decided to get back into competing and after my two years at Milton Bridge I then went to Cameron Barracks in Inverness as Pipe Major sort of recruiting from the Highlanders. I really then got back into the Piping in big competition style by just going everywhere. I think I did thirty five games in one year...

That's a lot of games, yes.

...and that hardens you up and you're playing in the driving rain Durness next to the cliff, the sea and Greenland, and you see John MacDougall marching up and down the road, he must have been in the latter years his solo competition career, but boy the guy was tough – in the driving rain no problem. But for me that got me back into it and I then went on to win second in the gold medal in Inverness, that was 1995 and then I was second in the Gold Medal at the Argyllshire Gathering in 1998. Then that year because of the way things worked out I got an invitation to go to the Glenfiddich to play that year, 1998

was a big year for me, it's when I won a lot of competitions and that was really my peak 1995 to 1998 and I went on, I retired from competing about 2001, from 1995 to 2001, I was in that sort of select group in the Gold Medal competitions, on the short list, who's knocking on the door and you know it's very much on the day.

Absolutely, and you would have been A plus at that point in terms of the grading. What was your best light music performance do you think or the best result anyway?

Yes, around the games I did a lot, I think almost certainly Skye, I won the Strathspey and Reel, I won the A Grade Strathspey and Reel at the Scottish Pipers and you know it's the big event, for example, I got third in the A Grade marches once and then it's like I go to the games and I think I'm doing really well but it's on the day, whether it's nerves, you know, it affects everybody. The pipes as well, you know, I played a set of Glens and they were a fantastic set of bagpipes when you got them going but they're very, very difficult to keep going consistently.

Were you playing mainly cane at that point?

Yes, I had changed to synthetic drone reeds perhaps a week before playing the Glenfiddich. That was the first time I had ever played synthetic.

Did they work alright?

Yes, they were fine. I played the cane bass and two synthetic tenors. It was fine so I just stuck with that. The pipes I play, I got sentimentally attached to the Glens and really maybe should have played something else because they had different sizes of bores and they were very difficult to get going and I don't know if they were as stable as they could be. You need that stability to play. It's something that I've learned through my experience I would recommend to anybody now you've got to make sure that you have

got the right instrument. It's very, very important. If they're not exactly...don't let your heart rule what you're hearing. Nice set of pipes to look at...

When you're going in for a competition you want something I suppose that you know what's going to happen when you strike up.

But saying that what I've learnt by maintaining these pipes is really beneficial to me now in the job that I'm now in. I can fault find, troubleshoot no bother because of all the experiences I've had in the past.

So, just take a turn back for a minute to the Gordon Highlanders, you're appointed the Pipe Major and you do that for how long?

For five years.

That would take you up to the mid-nineties. Is that right?

It would be 1994. Four and a half years I was Pipe Major.

1994 and then you were away off back to Glencorse. Is that right?

Yes 1994 to 1996 I was Pipe Major at Glencorse, 1996 to 1998 I was Pipe Major at Cameron Barracks and then I got promoted to Warrant Officer Class 2, and then taken away from there as a Pipe Major and I had to go what they call mainstream and I was then put in charge of the recruiting team in Aberdeen for the Regiment and I was then in that job for maybe six weeks and then I got a phone call saying you've got to come back to the regiment, we want you to be Pipe Major of the Highlanders. So going back again to be a first battalion Pipe Major for the second stint is not common. I was a Pipe Major for the Gordons as Sergeant and I came back to be Pipe Major of the

Highlanders as a Warrant Officer Class 2. That was actually good for me because I had more power.

Is that sort of quite unusual?

It is quite unusual yes. Normally you just do one stint as battalion pipe major.

And to do it again at a higher rank?

I had more power as far as looking after my soldiers, pipers and drummers were concerned. You got to fight your corner more because you've got more of an opportunity to do that. I did that maybe about a year and a half before I then got promoted to WO1, a Class 1, and then I got put up into the Senior Pipe Major position.

How did you find your second stint back at the regiment, at the Highlanders? Was it a very different thing from being Pipe Major of the Gordons or had the Regiment changed? I suppose it was a different Regiment?

Well yes, it was different personalities, different regiments really, but I enjoyed both in different ways. When I was Pipe Major in the Gordons, for example, we were very lucky going back to the balance of workload which was probably about ninety per cent piping. We were stationed in Berlin, music was a big thing representing Britain in Berlin, you've got the French troops, you've got American troops, German troops, Russian troops and there's lots of musical things going on and the band was maybe out sometimes doing two or three jobs in one day, really, really busy time. The band was of a good standard, there were twenty-one pipers in the band, a very strong band.

That's a big band and you were taking all of them out all the time?

Prior to myself taking over as Pipe Major of the Gordons they got promoted to Grade One. It must have been 1988, round the games, and we played at fourteen Pipe Band competitions and they got fourteen firsts in piping and that was in Grade 2, we were third in the Scottish and I think we were fourth in the Worlds. But because of our consistency in piping they decided to put us up to Grade 1, maybe a step too far.

I was about to say that because that poses its own challenges.

I'll never forget we actually played at the Worlds in Grade One and we decided not to go for the big heavy competitions 2/4 march, we were playing Glen Caladh Castle, a lovely tune and Big Angus came up afterwards because he listened to the band and he says "It was the best march of the day", played by the band, just you know because of the tune, it wasn't the big heavy 2/4, it was a really nice musical tune and it came across with the band really, really good. So that was the only act of praise we got for being in Grade One. It was very, very difficult.

I can imagine yes, the kind of commitment that you require for that, first the soldiering and it must have been very difficult. Yes absolutely. So Highlanders and then Army School and then Director of Army Piping after that, was it? So you succeeded Gavin Stoddart?

Yes, I was Gavin's assistant as the Senior Pipe Major and I sort of talked about it earlier when I said my aspirations used only to be Pipe Major of the Gordons, and once I became Pipe Major of the Gordons in 1994, and I had finished that, I still had quite a bit of service and you've got to try to think, where do I go from here and that's in the Regiment very much at that time they try and make sure you do the right courses.

Sort of guide your career.

Then you can see yourself where you want to be going, do I want to do it, and that's the first thing you've got to ask yourself and I said yes and I went to be the Senior Pipe Major and once I knew they'd been knocking on that door I knew that in reality maybe I could be considered to be the Director.

How was working with Gavin?

Working with Gavin was really, really good. Gavin had a hard job and I found this myself when I went to the Director's post, it's a very hard position, you really get chained to your desk you know because when I did my Pipe Major's course, for example, my vision of the Director was you're in charge of all the piping but it's a fantastic job with lots of teaching but with way the Army had changed and computers came in and all that sort of stuff, everybody seemed to be spending more time doing administration and justifying their existence. Do we need an Army school apart from music? The question came in like twice a week. Does it need to move? You have to justify yourself all the time so I could see when I was a Senior Pipe Major I was trying to go into Gavin's office every morning saying "Sir, I've got you down to do some lessons today" you know trying to get out of the office which he loved. So I got him out and he really enjoyed teaching, he's a great teacher and he said that to me later. He said he really appreciated me literally dragging him out of the office and do some teaching and then he'd go back and he had to start working on all that stuff. I said to myself "I'll not be doing that, I'll be teaching" but you get a new job and you find that you're chained to your desk and you've got to try and teach as much as you can but really you're having to justify like other units within the Army, you've got to justify your existence and there's a lot of correspondence got to be done.

So the administrative load and managerial role is quite heavy?

I was quite good at that, you know I could do it but I would rather be actually ‘hands on’ and that was one of the reasons why I decided I’ll do my full stint as far as my contract is concerned for that, but while I’m still young enough I want to continue doing things in piping.

I suppose in some ways you talked about the change obviously of going to become the Director of the Army School, it also presumably took you out of the non-commissioned ranks into the commissioned ranks. Was that a big change for you? Was it a culture shock or was it kind of a natural progression?

Well, because you see a lot of people going through the ranks and getting promoted you know what to expect, you can see this happening to them, how they react to it and I didn’t really feel that myself. I thought I made that transition quite well so I could get on well communicating with fellow officers while going through the ranks or officers from the start. When you’re actually in charge of something, it is easy to communicate anyway because you’re protecting and taking over the responsibility of looking after your sort of empire as it were, so you just say what you’ve got to say to look after your empire. Somebody once said to me, Director of Army Bagpipe Music, you should be looked up on as, you either be a captain or a major and that’s as far as you’re going to get as Director of Army Bagpipe Music. In the bigger scheme of things that captain or major is the equivalent of actually being a general really in your field of expertise. You know you just can’t get any higher than that so for me and I am sure for my predecessors and Captain Stevie Small who I believe now they’ve promoted to Major, for them and myself you know it’s been a great privilege to have been the Director.

How long did you actually do the job for?

Five years. Six year contract as an officer and I did five years and it’s a three year posting and then you apply to extend and I applied to extend up to the end of my contract. They knew from about four

years beforehand that I wouldn't be going any further. If I'd stayed in the Army longer they wanted me to go away and be something else anyway, because they thought I had more to offer than just being the Director of Army Bagpipe Music. They thought I could go onto bigger things, become a Major or Colonel, you know if I did the right courses and did the right jobs but it didn't really interest me because piping has been my life. You know stick to what you're good at so that's why I decided to come out. Most Directors have gone on and retired from the Army and they can't stay any longer, they decide to get out a bit earlier.

So how long had you been in the Army by the time you left?

I did thirty years' service which is a long time.

But you're still a young man

I didn't really feel it difficult leaving the Army.

It just seemed like a natural thing to do at the time, did it?

It did seem natural at the time and I didn't really plan to come to where I am now but I just wanted to carry on some form of piping and then I was asked if I would be interested in coming and teaching here for the degree course.

You'd have left the Army when exactly?

In 2008, and here we are in 2012, four years later.

So turning to this part of your life and your career, when did you first become involved with the Piping Centre?

It was probably later in 2008. I think I've been here now for just over three years, maybe three and a half years. When I left the Army I decided to take a bit of time out, I went to Australia and got offered a couple of jobs in piping over there and before I'd left the Army I decided well if I don't go and look you don't know and then you look

back, so I went and had a look and it's a fantastic country. It was more to do with military and family ties and I decided to stay. It's a long way away. People say it's only 24 hours on a flight, but it's still a long way away. Then I decided to settle back in Inverness, I decided to go and live in Inverness, I had a home there anyway, me and my wife Wanda, and I am involved in the Tattoo in Basel. I decided to get involved in that a year before I left the Army. I was asked to see if I could help them out and I'm still involved in that. Being in Inverness it's a bit out of the way for getting myself to Switzerland so I was going to be moving anyway maybe further south. Then the opportunity arose to come and teach here.

The Basel Tattoo, is that a kind of annual thing that you're just over there for?

Yes, every July. It's exactly the same sort of idea as the Edinburgh Military Tattoo but in its early stages. Edinburgh has been going now for sixty years. Basel's been going now for seven years and it's a very big event now and I enjoy working with massed pipes and drums. I really enjoy the connection, dealing with large numbers, a lot of people wouldn't even go near that but for some reason I just seem to enjoy it and I've got a lot of respect for the Bands and the Pipe Majors that do get involved in these events and I've got a good rapport with everybody. Touch wood, as long as all these things go, it's fine.

How about your time here, were you to some extent I suppose a continuation of the work you were doing in the Army and to some extent not, it's a different organisation I suppose.

Yes, I must say that the job that I'm doing here, I think to myself, this must have been what it was like for Willie Ross, you just go in with your practice chanter and your briefcase, and you're go in and you teach all day. We've not very many other responsibilities administrative wise, but you can really get 'hands on' with teaching

and advising musically so it's a great job. You couldn't get a better job teaching these talented youngsters.

Do you do the whole spectrum with them, light music, piobaireachd, that kind of thing?

Both light music and piobaireachd, but at the same time they've got to find themselves musically, there's no like saying you will play this way and I could turn round and say well I personally play this tune the two Bobs style, but you don't have to go to play the two Bobs style, you can play it this way. You make them aware of the alternatives and they've got to then decide themselves how they really want to play it, they've got to make their own mark on it. So, unless they're really going away really off track to something that's not musical then you very much give them a free rein. For me personally, I am very open-minded to styles anyway. As long as someone comes up and gives me a style that I could play myself personally it doesn't worry me. I find I'm asking myself "do you like it?" and that's the main question.

Yes, I can see that in some ways when you hear a piece of music played on the pipes it's actually quite good if you can say at the end of it "well, I enjoyed that".

Someone could play something that's more close to the style that I play but maybe he's not going to like it because he's not connected with it. The phrasing is a big thing, I think if you phrase music it doesn't really matter which style you play in, if you phrase something it's going to be musical.

And you're actually putting music into it Well, I think really we've got through the whole thing.

There was one person I didn't mention who was also quite influential for me and that was Walter Drysdale. I went to him for many lessons and he was a really knowledgeable individual. He gave me a lot.

Yes, I didn't know Walter at all. What was his kind of piping pedigree if you like?

He was a career person. He actually competed until he was about his mid-thirties and he became in charge of something like thousands of people in an open cast mine, that was the industry and he was involved in the engineering side. He stopped competing but he showed his little black book with all the prizes he'd won and you'd actually see some of the other names that he had and was coming second and third to, and stuff like that. He was a really good player and a fantastic light music player and maybe not given the recognition with piobaireachd that he should have been because recognition is tied up with results at the end of the day but having known Walter, recognition should be given on knowledge, I've never known a guy more knowledgeable in piobaireachd. Certainly for all the time I've known him he would never even, the TV was never switched on, he would be listening to piobaireachd every day and he marked up his manuscripts, all the different styles, this is the way Reid played it, this is the way Nicol and Brown played it, Donald MacLeod, all in different colours and when he was judging, nobody would get past him as far as the style was concerned. He knew exactly what style was played because he just studied every tune. He was very knowledgeable and I'm very lucky that he passed all his manuscripts on to me and gave me copies of all his markings and I owe a huge debt to Walter for how he helped me and it's up to me to carry that forward. I feel that responsibility which is what it should be all about, passing on your knowledge.

Yes absolutely because there is a new generation coming along behind and there are some cracking players in amongst them. Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Stuart, it's been very illuminating to listen to your experiences both in the Army and in piping and since you've come to the National Piping

Centre so in conclusion all I would like to say to you is thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.
