

McDonald John

## World's best job

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STORY BY BILL HUNT THE INTELLIGENCER

### John MacDonald

**P**ipe Major John MacDonald has not only made a career out of his favourite hobby, but it's taken him all over the world. No wonder he feels he has the best job at CFB Trenton.

"I'm the resident military musician — professional musician. This is my trade," explains MacDonald, from his office in the 8 Wing Pipe and Drums Band headquarters off RCAF Road. MacDonald, 37, leads the 35-member band that represents the military at official functions, military banquets, and outside the military community at band tattoos, international competitions and local events such as Trenton's Irish-Scottish Festival and Belleville's waterfront festival. All members are volunteers, although not all are members of the Canadian Forces. "I love my work. It's more than just a job, it's a way of life. My two biggest passions have always been the military and music, so guess I have the best of both worlds," said MacDonald. He's been at CFB Trenton since 1997 and lives with his two daughters, Ruth and Audrey.

The main purpose of the band is to perform at military functions and parades. "It's the vernacular music of Canada's fighting forces and is heard on ships, air bases and in field units right up to the present day. They play for the morale and fighting spirit of their comrades, solemnize moments of emotion during operations, and warm the hearts of local populations," said MacDonald.

He comes by his interest in music and the military honestly. MacDonald's father served in the RCAF. The pipe major was born in London, Ont. but describes himself as a "displaced Cape Bretoner" who began playing the bagpipes in 1975 after hearing his sister play them. "I had no idea it was going to turn into a career," said MacDonald. He began his military experience with the Royal Canadian Regiment before attending the University of Ottawa where he earned a degree in music. Following that he joined the air force as a service musician. Since then his hobby-turned-career has taken him across Canada, to Europe, Japan and South Africa, and placed his face on a Canadian stamp.

"Travel is a rewarding and fascinating part of the job. I've played in 11 countries on four continents. No matter where you go, music is an internationally understood language and draws people of all backgrounds together," said MacDonald.

In 1990 he performed in Holland during the 45th anniversary of the Canadians' liberation of Holland.

"Perhaps the proudest moments for me have been performing for veterans' parades and memorial services. In my mind, the music not only honours our country's heroes, but reminds Canadians of the sacrifices and victories of the now 70-something generation. For me, and many Canadians I'm sure, these people represent the best generation Canada has ever produced — they fought for and won our freedom."

It was in Holland that he first thought of combining bagpipe music with poetry. He and journalist Peter Gzowski explored that avenue on the 8 Wing Pipes and Drums Band CD, *High Flight*. The combination of music and poetry will appear again on the band's next CD, which is in production now and should be released in early 2002. It will feature well-known Canadians John Allan Cameron (a Celtic singer/guitarist), Wayne Rostad (of the television program *On the Road Again*) and Celtic recording artist Loreena McKennit.

One of MacDonald's biggest achievements was competing in the World Pipe Band Championships in August, 2000. "It was a first for the (Canadian) military. The military had never fielded a band on the world stage and we took home an award for marching and deportment."

MacDonald's amiable personality belies the seriousness with which he approaches his trade, which demands precision and decorum. One role of the

band is to be a window on the armed forces for the community, said MacDonald, therefore it's imperative band members comport themselves professionally. But he's always surprised when following a public performance that people are surprised to find ordinary people behind the uniforms. "I guess what we do is put a human face on the institution, he said. "It's a vocation, it's not just a career, it's an adventure. I think I've got the best job on the base, I get to enjoy a rapport with the community (and) my own band members." The band cultivates a sense of civic and national pride in people, "and that's very gratifying."

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