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# An Ottawa Pipe Band in Vimy

by Bridget Duquette, Writer-Editor

April 9, 2017 marked a [defining moment](#) (Network B) in Canadian history: the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. This battle marked the first time all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought together as one army, and their victory solidified Canada's nationhood. Many Canadians made the trip to France to attend the commemorative ceremony at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial.



Gail Moran with her daughter Grace at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial.  
Photo: W. Mills.

Tickets for the event were in high demand: **Prime Minister Justin Trudeau**, as well as other world leaders, were in attendance. **Gail Moran**, a Classification Advisor at Compensation and Human Resources Management Solutions Division, participated in a more intimate ceremony just two days later, as part of a tour with the [Sons of Scotland Pipe Band of Ottawa](#) □ (Network B).

The Sons of Scotland band had a packed itinerary for their visit to France, playing at a number of commemorative ceremonies and marches, and visiting cemeteries where Canadian soldiers were laid to rest during the First World War. Having served in regiments since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Scottish pipe bands have a [strong link to the military](#) □ (Network B). In recognition of this, the Sons of Scotland also planned a special tribute for their tour of France's military graveyards.

Although this was the Sons of Scotland's first trip to France, the band is no stranger to travel. We had a chance to speak to one of the band's pipers, Gail Moran, to find out more about her trip and her many other adventures as a piper in Ottawa.

## The Royal Treatment

“This is all stuff I never thought I would be doing.” When Gail began playing bagpipes five years ago, she had no idea she would



The Sons of Scotland Pipe Band at the Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery. Photo: G. Moran.

soon be travelling the world, taking part in such important events and competitions. In fact, Gail was initially worried that she wouldn't even be able to find a pipe teacher in Ottawa. However, she soon discovered that there is a thriving pipe community in the nation's capital. “It was a bigger world than I thought it was.”

While there are several bagpipe bands within Ottawa, the Sons of Scotland has the unique distinction of being the oldest civilian pipe band in the city, their origins dating back to 1896. The Sons of Scotland Pipe Band explains their ethos on their website: “provide free instruction to those who wish to learn, and then go into the community to present that music.”

As such, the band keeps busy in and around Ottawa, participating in a wide variety of events throughout the year including National Tartan Day, the St. Patrick's Day parade, and Remembrance Day ceremonies.

Some notable events from past years have been Westfest and Beau's Oktoberfest – where Gail says the band was “treated like the artists,” offered free food and drink and mingling with the other performers on the bill.

Ottawa's pipe band scene is vibrant, but the Sons of Scotland make sure not to forget their roots. Every summer since 2003 they have travelled to Glasgow for the World Pipe Band Championships. There, they also participate in a parade with “bands from all over the world” and have even “played for the queen several times before.”

## Paying Tribute

This April the band further broadened their horizons by visiting France for the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. While they did not attend the main ceremony on April 9, they were able to play at the monument on April 12, when they marched a group of French veterans onto the site. “This made it much more personal for us and it felt like we were able to give back in some small way,” Gail says.

The band also performed at the Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery, Rosières

Cemetery, the Juno Beach Centre in Normandy, and the Pegasus Bridge, among other locations. Gail elaborates on the Pegasus Bridge performance: “guests from our group stopped traffic at both sides of the bridge in order to let the band march across while playing a few tunes. We were later greeted by very emotional locals who thanked us for being there as it meant a great deal to them”. The Sons of Scotland were also joined by three-time World Drum Major champion **Brian Wilson**, who led their marches throughout the trip.

The band had a fantastic time, but they did not ignore the gravity of the occasion. Last year, Pipe Major **Bethany Bisailion** had the idea of starting a collection of poppies from various schools and legions in Ottawa – an endeavour which proved very successful. “We collected over 10,000 poppies,” Gail says, explaining that each member of the group packed 150 of those poppies in their luggage. Once in France, they placed them on headstones as they toured cemeteries, as a way of commemorating fallen soldiers.

This trip was a family affair for Gail. Her daughter, 12, who has been a drummer with the Sons of Scotland for two years, was able to come along. Gail's father in law was also there, for very personal reasons. He



The Sons of Scotland Pipe Band at Beaumont-Hamel in France.  
Photo: G. Moran.

asked Gail to play her pipes at his uncle’s headstone at Rosières cemetery, one of the stops on the tour. “It was very emotional,” Gail says.

## A Teaching Organization

Gail never expected to become a member of a pipe band – let alone a pipe band that regularly travels the world, plays for royalty, and participates in international competitions. Luckily for aspiring pipers, the Sons of Scotland Pipe Band [is always accepting new members of all ages](#) (Network B). Lessons are even offered via Skype to people in out-of-the-way locations – such is the band’s commitment to carrying on the pipe band’s long tradition. “It’s a teaching organization,” Gail explains, adding that she had “no experience in music” when she joined. “There are a lot of opportunities for anyone who wants to learn.”

Gail has no plans to stop playing any time soon. “You either love piping or you really hate it,” she says. For those of us who love it, it’s so different and so special. If I pull out my pipes and start playing people always (...) come watch because it’s not something that you see everywhere.” Another benefit of being a piper is that it can easily become a side job. Pipers are frequently asked to play at weddings and other special events. “That’s my retirement plan,” Gail jokes.

The @StatCan team would like to congratulate Gail and the Sons of Scotland Pipe Band for their successful tour of France. We hope they will continue to share their music with the world for many years to come. We would also like to take time to remember the Canadian soldiers who fought at Vimy Ridge – and in all other battles. Lest we forget.

## Photo gallery

[Vimy Ridge and France](#)



Gail Moran at the Château de Dieppe.  
Photo: W. Mills.

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