

1. Thank the family

It falls to me to reflect on Bob's time with the Hawthorn Pipe Band.

I first met Bob in 1974. So, when we met, I was 16 and he was 53, nine years younger than I am now.

For the next 46 years we were friends and shared the band, with all the others, as equals.

The thing that separated Bob from the rest of us, is he was the glue that held us all together. He didn't make us do anything. We just wanted to do what Bob was doing.

The most common phrase in the band for many years was "where's Bob?". It was an unwritten rule that we couldn't start without him. He had another name, "last out Semple". It didn't matter what the occasion was, Bob stayed till the end.

Bob had the knack of turning the mundane into something everybody wanted to be involved in.

He was our front man. Our ornament. Our steady influence. Our conscience and our guide.

Bob loved quotations for their succinct way of describing a situation.

One of his favourites was

*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see ousels as ither see us.*

In plain English the longer version of the quote from Robbie Burns says

Oh, would some Power give us the gift
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress and gait would leave us,

He would pull this out whenever we began to sound too full of ourselves and remind us that vanity and false pride were unpleasant and unwarranted.

There is great truth in this verse. Bob had seen in the rawness of war how superficial the things we place so much store upon really are.

If Bob had one blind spot it was that he did not really understand how others saw him. He would often say to me, when some honour or recognition was bestowed upon him, "I don't know, why me? What did I do?" He took the recognition out of respect for those who had offered it or on behalf of those he felt had helped him. I don't think Bob took any award for himself.

I remember the first parade I did with the band. It was in the old city square. Now it's a construction site.

We had been parading up and down the square. After a time, we came to a halt and ceased playing. Then a half-strangled voice rang out across the band. "Bob, I've got an emergency". It was our Bass drummer, Davey Brown.

"What is it?" said Bob

"The elastics gone on my underpants", said Dave.

So, we all gathered around him whilst he wriggled his way out of a difficult situation and stowed the offending garment.

Then the huddle began to open like a blooming flower as we started to resume our positions.

Then another voice rang out. "I remember you! You were in the desert".

This time it came from a dishevelled man grasping a bottle wrapped in a paper bag. He was pointing at Bob.

In those days, people like that were called "derros". Indeed, that's what they were. The refuse cast aside by society. Unloved. Unwanted. Discarded. Derelict.

Bob ordered the band to fall out and rest. He wandered over to this man the world had rejected and we waited.

The two moved closer to each other and entered into a conversation. Being shallow and naïve, I wondered why this was happening. The rest of the band just waited.

Eventually, Bob gave the man a brotherly pat on the back and returned to us. The man, who no one cared about, had lost his tortured stare and stood more erect. He waved goodbye to Bob like an old mate and disappeared into the evening.

How did this man know Bob? Why did Bob stop everything to talk to him? I had never seen something like this. If only I had been a little older, a little less insular and a lot more rounded, I would have realised I was watching something magical.

Bob's life involved Pipe bands and music from a young age.

When he was around 12 years old, he began learning to play the pipes. By the time he was 16 he was a cadet in the Victorian Scottish regiment. Dick Hamer, the former Victorian Premier, had served in the same regiment. He adored Bob. He liked the band but he loved Bob. At every opportunity, Bob would call him into the middle of the band and make a small speech introducing each to the other.

He did this with many people. Bob Menzies loved Bob. His wife, Dame Pattie, referred to the Hawthorn Pipe Band as "my band". This was all due to Bob.

Both of those men belonged to a Scottish society called "The Melbourne Scots". For as long as I can remember, we played at their annual St Andrews day dinner. When he was in his late 70s, Bob became their official piper who played a closing set of tunes for the evening. He had long ago retired from playing in the band but despite gnarled old hands and fingers that did not move so quickly he would stay on to play when we had finished.

Bob had also been a violinist. When Bob piped these closing airs, he played with all the expression of a violinist. Each note had to be formed, its length gave emotion to the music. Each phrase sang out something that stirred up the feelings you keep hidden from the world.

All the lights would go out save a spotlight on Bob. He would play from one tune to the next and go on for some time. When he stopped, the room would be plunged into darkness. For a moment there would be silence. The stillness let you take in what you had just heard. When the lights came up, the room would erupt.

As our Drum Major, he excelled. On the 14 occasions, up to 1988, that we competed in the Australian Championships, he won seven times. The band went to New Zealand in 1979. We came third; but Bob was the champion Drum Major.

In many local competitions he was unassailable; but he was never anyone's foe. All the other Drum Majors looked up to Bob. He tutored them and guided them. The massed bands were under his control. His power of command when he spoke was unquestionable, yet he never dismissed a massed band without thanking them for their cooperation.

He was the champion for everyman. Each month he would report back to us what had happened at the state council. We were the dominant band but it was made clear that we would never do anything to weaken another band. It was important to Bob that the competition was fair.

All of us knew that ANZAC day was sacred in Bobs calendar. Every year, on that day, Bob was transformed. He threw off the burdens of normal life and always seemed years younger. It did not matter to him what the world at large thought of war or remembrance or ceremony. It was his day to be with his mates and remember the ones who had stayed behind.

One year, the shrine was defaced. Black painted letters screamed abuse at those who marched towards it. I asked Bob what he thought. So many people had complained and were offended. I thought Bob would be the same but he wasn't. He just thought the people who had done it were misguided.

The defacing of the shrine did not change things for Bob. For him, the monuments of stone were just a place to gather. The essence of the day was in the long march, in the ode and the bugle calls. It was in the words of "Abide with me". The rising and the setting of the sun did not trigger some clockwork reaction. Bobs whole life was a Remembrance Day.

He often told me that he chose to remember the funny things. As he grew older and his old mates passed away, he took up the mantle to tell people about what they had never known. His war was a tough war. When I saw him just ten days ago the only war reference he made was about seeing the POWs who had been under the Japanese. He just said, "Those poor bastards had it rough." His whole remembrance was never about him.

So why are we here today? You didn't come because Bob was a member and then life member of our Band for over 74 years. You are not here because he was our selfless secretary for 31 of those years. His life memberships of our Band, the Rats of Tobruk association and its band would have been the last thing on your mind. You may have correctly assumed he was a life member of the Australian Federation of Pipe Band Associations and the Victorian Highland Pipe Band Association and may have known he was the Chieftain of Pipe Bands Australia.

You didn't come here for any of those things.

There will always be a record that he held a British Empire Medal and a Medal of the Order of Australia but we know they would never supplant his war medals. He would swap all of them to see his old mates again.

You are here for the only reason that matters. You came here just for Bob.

The last time I saw him, what did he talk about? He remembered how his parents had shaped him. He remembered the influence of his Sunday school teacher, who gave him a small copy of the new testament to carry through the war.

I think he finally understood how other people saw him. His inability to control this service troubled him. He said to me, and I know he said it to his sister, Margaret- "Couldn't I just go down to the pub with half a dozen of my mates?"

He remembered his family and spoke kindly about Quentin Bryce and Kerry Stokes and Brendan Nelson as custodians of things he felt dearly about.

He looked forward to being next to his wife, Isobel.

In December 1999, five months after she had died, Bob wrote me a letter and it was to do with Isobel. He had found, in one of her purses, a cutting from an old newspaper that contained a verse made famous by King George VI in 1939. It was the introduction to a book called "The Desert".

I'm sure Bob knew one day I would fulfill this role and this was Isobel's message to him and I should repeat it.

It says,

"And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the years:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

So, Bob, now, Isobel's gift to you has been delivered.

And how will I remember Bob?

Over such a long time there are many things but it will be the lesson of how he would greet people. There was always a smile and a hand extended. Sometimes he grasped you with one hand and on other occasions he folded his left hand over the joined hands and looked at you. His eyes would dance and you knew he was thinking "Thank God, you're alive". That is how he felt about everybody. He had seen the alternative and was moved that you were still with him.

So, I will try to do the same. To value the essence of life in everybody. That is Bobs lesson to me.

He would want you to do the same. So next time you greet someone and reach out to them, think of them and in your mind say, "Thank God you're alive."

Will it make a difference?

As Bob would often say, "Try it. You never know."

I'm sure it will.

Thankyou