

Kiwi Fiddlers play in the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo!

By Anne-Marie Forsyth

It has all passed in much of a blur. The call came late last year for fiddlers to join a contingent from the Shetland Islands to perform at the Edinburgh Tattoo in Wellington. Nine members of the Auckland Scottish Fiddle Club responded - Anne-Marie Forsyth, Heather Laird, Lynn Pettit, Margaret Peace, Ruth Budden, Lorraine Bruce Charlotte Naden, Kai Liu and Kathy McDonald. Kai, a student from China, had been playing the violin for less than a year and couldn't read music, but was completely focussed on her goal and stunned us all with her progress!

Rehearsals had to fit around Summer School, summer camps, youth dances and the revamped Auckland Folk Festival. Lorraine practiced alone at her current base in the Shetland Islands, only joining her fellow Kiwis right at the last minute. There were uniforms to buy, flights to book, spare fiddles to find in case of wet weather, musicians' ear plugs to source and billets to organise, all at our own expense. Music arrived late and in impossibly dizzy ranges, so it all had to be adapted to fiddlers' fingers and then memorised, note for note. We practiced coordinating our marching and doing reels of three on the side while playing!

Meanwhile an equally stalwart band of musicians rehearsed in Wellington, drawn from Lynne Scott's group "Ceol Alba" as well as local sessions and even classical musicians with no previous fiddle experience at all. Lynne and Mary McDonald are already very well-known within the SCD community, but the group also included the two youngest players (Josh and Cassandra, both still at school) and the two eldest players (Ian Smith and Mike Curran). Under the guidance of Liz Auchinvole, the Wellington group coped admirably with an ever-changing array of fellow musicians as people's commitments changed from week to week. And of course we must not forget Margaret Bruce, the lone fiddler from Palmerston North!

Suddenly we were all together at last in Wellington and straight into rehearsals at the Westpac Stadium. We counted off around 30,000 steps per day, rain and shine, by walking around the vast stadium between the dressing rooms (corporate boxes), dining rooms (cricket nets) and parade ground (rugby pitch). We met other performers, liaison people, stadium staff and finally the Shetlanders themselves. Uniforms were handed out and pinned to best effect. Then suddenly, on only the second day there, we were ready for a full dress rehearsal.

Our fellow performers included the combined bands of the Royal New Zealand Navy, Army and Air Force, Police and pipe bands from all around New Zealand and Australia and kapa haka groups. The more exotic touches were added by the Top Secret Drum Corps from Switzerland, His Majesty's Guards from Norway and groups from Fiji and Tonga.

Amongst such disciplined and varied groups, we straightened our shoulders and did our best to stand to attention, but the powers that be clearly noticed that we had absolutely no idea how to march together. A Warrant Officer from the Scots Guards duly appeared to put us through our paces. Well, we must have been naturals, because after only 20 minutes we had completely mastered the concept (!) and the next night our lines and marching were vastly improved! In fact Brigadier David Allfrey, producer of all Edinburgh Tattoos, was heard to remark on the much-improved discipline of the fiddlers and to ask whether we were on drugs (steroids)!

We stood hidden behind the castle - a vast, looming, impressive frontage backed by scaffolding and held down by water drums and concrete blocks - awaiting our cues. There were four in all. We had to run on from each corner to the centre of the pitch to get the party

started, march across the main drawbridge for our own fiddle item, enter from the drawbridge again for a solemn version of Hector the Hero and finally march in from the two top corners for the massed cast finale. Timing was vital. We could hear the crowd response to other items, but we were unable to peer around the edges to see for ourselves what was going on. Once on the field it was eyes straight ahead and do not look around, particularly when the fiddles started countermarching back through the massed pipes and drums!

Then, just as suddenly as we had begun, it was all over. A week of rehearsals and four performances and we were all done, handing in our uniforms and heading downstairs for snacks and a drink or two. All I can say was that the Edinburgh Tattoo in Wellington was an incredible, team-building experience, and one I will remember for a life-time. But just don't ask me what it looked like from the audience!

See it for yourself on Youtube: Type [tattoo violaannie9](#) into the search bar (watch out for the two a's!) The fiddlers are the ones in blue coats.