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Pipe band salutes train-victim mate

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By Rachel Tiffen

Desmond White refused to let his poor eyesight hold him back.

Fit in body and mind, the 69-year-old bass drummer was frequently out with friends, family and fellow pipe band members – grateful for rides, but always eager for a "so-loved train ride".

It was a journey down the tracks that killed him. On July 1, Mr White almost took the bus, but decided to take the train instead.

Hopping off at the Kingdon St platform in Newmarket about 1pm, he leaned against the train for a moment. Horrified passengers watched and banged on the windows as the train moved off, taking the near-blind man with it, before the emergency brake kicked in.

Yesterday at his funeral in Henderson, friends and family were still in shock from the sudden death of "Des" or "Dessie".

"It's hard to imagine, with his interest in trains, why he should die in such a manner," a former workmate told those gathered.

Another recalled a teenaged "Dessie" being caught wagging school by his mother – because of train ticket stubs in his pockets.

The 200 or so mourners at the Morrison Funeral Home were urged "[not] to think of Dessie as gone away" but to "focus on the journey that had just begun".

"Des" had gone to join his wife Carole, who passed away three years ago after 44 years of marriage, officiant Margaret Sauvarin said.

Several speakers told of his avid appetite, and a friend said: "Dessie and Carole together again ... It will be Carole running around after him making sure he gets fed three times a day."

A much-loved father and grandfather who kept his emotions to himself, Mr White would have preferred those gathered to remember the good times.

Mr White joined the City of Auckland Pipe Band as a fresh-faced 15-year-old tenor drummer and graduated to the bass drum two years later.

Over half a century later, his talents were beyond reach, a fellow band member said.



Des White's coffin was adorned with the City of Auckland Pipe Band's tartan kilt, a plaque and drumsticks. Photo / Greg Bowker

"I don't think any bass drummer in the country is as good or has his style."

Mr White would drop anything to help out the band.

Two years ago, a bagpiper did not make it in time to lead a march. "Des said, 'Not to worry, just point me in the right direction ... make sure I'm heading straight and I will keep the beat so you can all march.'"

Although perpetually frustrated by his poor eyesight – which forced early retirement – the sheet metal worker turned taxi driver and dispatcher refused to let it get him down.

Whether it was a trip to the Henderson Returned and Services Association clubrooms for a couple of pints, a tot at the RSA's live music night or spending time with his grandsons, Mr White was always up for a laugh and a good time, mourners were told.

Last year, his piping mates honoured his devotion to the band with a surprise party, and yesterday the commemorative plaque given to him was placed on his coffin in front of a pair of drumsticks on the band's official tartan kilt.

Strains of Amazing Grace, played by the City of Auckland Pipe Band and other Auckland pipers, rang out as the mourners paid their last respects.

MORE INTERVIEWS IN BID TO EXPLAIN STATION FATALITY

Further interviews with train staff and passengers will be carried out next week as investigators try to piece together how Desmond White's death occurred.

Since the accident in Newmarket on July 1, the Transport Accident Investigation Commission has been "gathering information and doing research", a spokesman says, and will send an investigator to Auckland next week to continue inquiries.

Police were on-site at the Kingdon St platform immediately after the accident and conducted extensive inquiries before deeming it non-suspicious and handing the case over to the coroner.

"Police were investigating a sudden death on behalf of the coroner who [will] rule on cause of death in due course," spokeswoman Noreen Hegarty told the Weekend Herald.

Commission investigators spent two days at the station, assessing the site, interviewing witnesses and liaising with police.