

Veteran convocation bandsman trades sheet music for sheepskin

By Rob McKenzie
of The Free Press

Cecil Hillier figures Tuesday's convocation ceremony at the University of Western Ontario was at least his 301st.

This one was special, though. It was the first one at which Hillier received a diploma.

Hillier, 43 and now the proud bearer of a bachelor of arts degree, was a member for 10 years of a Royal Canadian Regiment band that played at dozens of university convocations each year.

Each time he saw the new graduates, he knew that some day he would be among them. "I always said 'I'm going to be there.'"

Tuesday he was, and he was ecstatic about it. "I'm so glad to be here... I can't describe how I feel," he said after the ceremony, grinning broadly and hugging his diploma to his chest.

"For 10 years I travelled around and every time I listened to that music... it (graduating from university) just seemed so far. But it can be done."

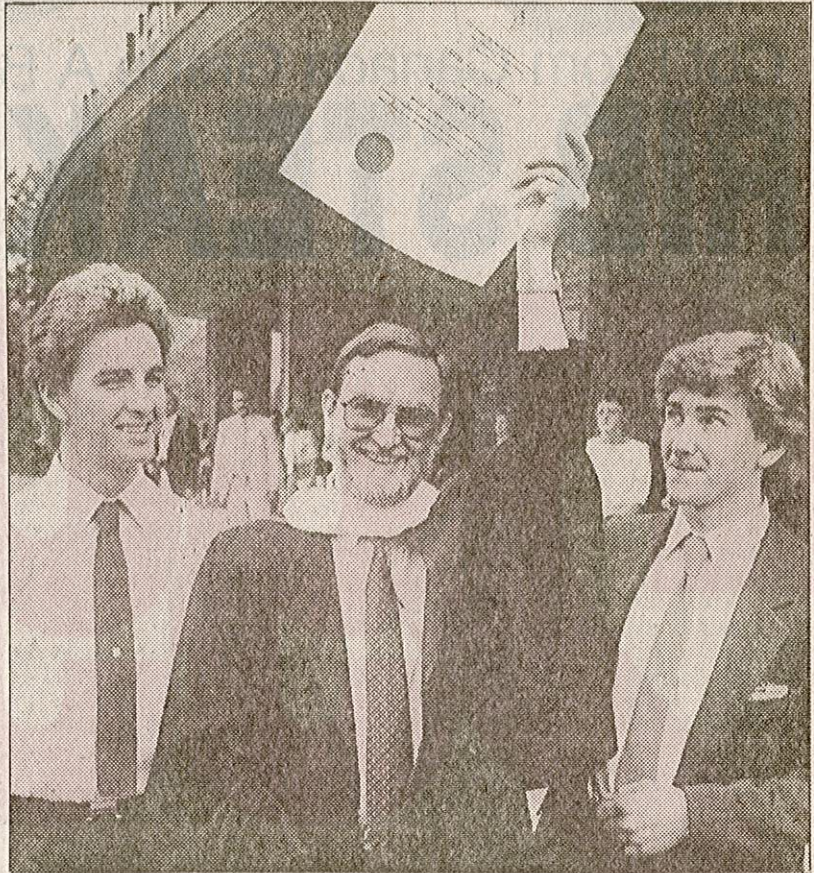
Hillier, a Newfoundland native who lives in Granton, entered the army in 1960 after completing Grade 9. He said his truncated education made him worry he wouldn't be able to handle the university workload.

"It was tough, learning how to study something I'd never touched on in my life. The first few courses I was completely bewildered. But as you do more, it gets easier."

And always, the convocation music was the siren pulling him to his goal.

"Every time I felt it was too hard I'd remember those times I sat watching convocations. I never thought of quitting."

Hillier covered the three-year program in four years so he would



Morris Lamont of The Free Press

Flanked by sons Steve, 20, left, and Doug, 19, Cecil Hillier of Granton holds high his diploma after graduating from UWO Tuesday.

still have time to run his insulation contracting business. He said he had to wait until the business was on solid ground before he could attend university.

Even then, there were times — especially during exams — when he had to leave the business to his wife and father. "It was a real family effort."

University courses won't help with his business, he said, but

they've done something more important:

"It's just made me more aware of what's going on around me." He especially enjoyed Canadian history because, "I found it fascinating and it's part of us."

Hillier may not be the last scholar in his family. His two sons are to enter Fanshawe College next year. Steve, 20, will study urban design, and Doug, 19, will study real estate.