

## Recollections of War of Piper John McAllister MM 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Canadian Scottish) C.E.F.

John McAllister, born in 1895, of Alberta's Antler Hill community, was a veteran of World War One. He served in the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Canadian Scottish) C.E.F. from 1916-1918.

The following are Mr. McAllister's recollections of his war service given to Miss Dixie Hodgson in June of 1973.

"I joined up at Horn Hill at a picnic at the end of June 1915, at the age of 20, volunteering along with such people as Doan Quantz, Les Olford and Frank Sanghirst. We trained all that winter in Edmonton, and were lucky to be billeted in the Northern Hotel. We later went to Calgary for summer training and then came back to Edmonton in the fall, but had taken Harvest Leave. I had some training in England and finally training in France in bayonet fighting and grenade throwing.

My official rank was simply a Piper, which held similar status to a Private, though we figured we had more authority than the Privates. I didn't really start playing the pipes until after I had been a ration carrier for a while. One time during the war I also had the job of giving out coal to the units of 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade for two weeks in the winter of 1916 in the village of Camblain l'Abbé.

I landed in France sometime around the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1916, after three months of intensive training at a camp near Westinghanger in England. I might mention it was quite a thrill to land in a lovely grass green country early in April when our Alberta still had some snow around and the prairie was all brown where it was clear of snow.

I can still remember my first night in France. We went by rail from Le Havre up toward the front line as far as the trains ran during wartime. The train stopped back on the track away from this village and the sergeant came along into the car where we were and said "All right, everyone pile out on the right side of the car", and it was dark. Luckily, the track grade was fairly level at that point and we had no problem getting 80 lbs of equipment mounted on our backs, along with a Lee Enfield rifle. The sergeant in charge said "Fall in men". We had quite some distance to go before we got to some place to bed down until morning, so we marched perhaps one-half mile along rough ground until we reached a good cobblestone road and later we learned it was the road running into St. Albert. However, we came into a little village and fell out. The sergeant told us "we will stay here until morning and then we will pick up the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Scottish Battalion somewhere out of the Somme Valley. In the meantime, grab a place to bed down". He asked me, "Are you lousy?" I said, "No". He then said, "Well you will be before morning". Sure enough in about one hour's time the little devils were eating me up. The troops said they knew green soldiers and liked the fresh blood. There were a lot of barns infested with lice and rats in France.

The next day we were on the march again and met the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion a short distance out of St. Albert. They had been relieved during darkness the night before, and were a very small unit. They looked bedraggled, their kilts all clay and mud. Their commanding officer gave the order to halt and fall out. When they resumed the march, we drafts fell in behind the battalion and we came into a village by the name of Petit Servon where we stayed for some months and just did relief work in the Loos and Lens sectors. During this stay there we made trips in and out of trenches. They called it 'holding the line'. The trenches had a lot of water on the bottoms which made it rather miserable and, of course, there were the usual snipers watching for someone moving past the holes in the trenches where the sandbags were blasted away by minenwerfers or trench mortars. I remember my first trip in the line. The corporal said "Now duck when you pass these holes", and he ducked in front of me. His legs and the seat of his fatigues dipped into the water, so I thought if I moved across quickly the snipers wouldn't get me, but he was pretty fast on the draw. His bullet either went past the front or rear of my head. I ducked at the next hole!

During the early days of joining the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Canadian Scottish), we were attached to some of the four companies which made up a unit. I was attached to 'A' Company and a part of the pipe band to replace a young piper by the name of James Richardson who was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously for leading 'A' Company into action in the Somme Valley attack.

For the remainder of that fall we did more training in the use of new implements of war and helped the farmer we were billeted with take off his crop. During that winter of 1916-17 there were a lot of guns coming through that village, from 6" field guns to ammunition of all sizes in preparation for our spring offensive on the Vimy Ridge sector. The most travelled road was through Camblain l'Abbé and past the ruins of St. Eloi and on to the Arras-Lens road. The Canadians occupied most of the ruins of Arras during that winter.

The first time I played was in Petit Servon, a small town about 8-10 minutes from Vimy Ridge. We would go up to the ridge daily in darkness and then come back to the village until the 9<sup>th</sup> of April when we moved into the trenches to stay. On our left was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and they didn't gain the Ridge until the next day at noon. It was all secured by the next evening. I might mention that there was a couple of Scottish and an English regiment on our right.

The next scrap was Hill 70 on the left of Loos-Lens, which is about twenty miles from Vimy Ridge. This was either in June or July of 1917. We made that all in one day too. My job was field dressing and carrying back the wounded for treatment who would later be moved at dark to a clearing station. There was an ambulance that would come up to maybe a quarter of a mile from the dugouts, depending upon how quiet it was at the time. Then, the wounded would be taken out under darkness. On this particular day I did not help take them to the ambulance for I was quite tired after packing wounded back some two and a half miles to our old front lines.

We began our attacks before daylight. At Vimy Ridge our attack was different, for it was the first time the Germans had used a big gun to fire the first shot and all our artillery would open up. We jumped out of the trenches with myself leading playing the pipes. Our artillery was placed behind us. They consisted of 6" field guns and trench mortars that fired shells which were similar to the German minenwerfers, with a lot of shrapnel in them. Then, of course, there was the overhead shrapnel which went along with all attacks. We didn't find the enemy's overhead shrapnel too bad. They usually had it set so that it would explode about twenty to thirty feet in the air. But we ran into our own shrapnel in the Bournal Wood scrap because we travelled too fast. See, we were trained to travel I think about 2 ½ miles per hour at the fastest in our advance and we overran this. I guess we got too anxious, and boy, oh boy were those gunners getting away from it. We suffered heavy casualties as a result. The 6" guns were 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery units and they would fire back about 6 to 8 miles over the enemy lines.

From the Bournal Wood scrap we took the enemy by surprise. We got to Lille and all the civilians had cleared out within minutes. For example, when we went in, their porridge was still in the bowls, the coffee had a little of it drunk and everything was still on the table. But the enemy never really reached Lille, for the Canadians turned them back. It was early in 1918 when the Germans launched their attack. That was the last kick. With the Germans, they were either going to win then or they were finished if they didn't push the Allied armies back into the sea. But it didn't work. That's the way war is.

In the winter of 1917-18, we were in Petit Servon and Camblain l'Abbé, that's 10-12 miles from Bruay. The main road from Bruay went up through there to the Ardish lands at the back of Vimy Ridge, way down below Vimy Ridge about 10-12 miles. From there we went down to Ypres, which would be about the third scrap around there, and a funny thing happened. On the way up to Ypres you would go up past the Menin Gate but before we reached it we turned left and went up Menin Road. I can still remember that road for it had big poplar trees about two feet in diameter which had been blown off down to the stumps. These trees were ten or fifteen feet apart. Anyway, we went to the railroad track that went to Ypres and then I guess down to the Somme Valley. We turned there and went across the track. This track was famous for a section known as Dead Horse Corner. There were a lot of limbers that went up there at night with rations. Many of the horses were killed there. As a result, there was always a pile of horses with no way of getting rid of them. The only way was to burn them up with phosphorous. Of course, that was dynamite at night. They would haul them back quite a piece because they did not want to expose that corner. This phosphorous would light up a distance of about a hundred yards all around it and this would expose the troop movement up this road. Of course the Germans knew we were going in there anyway, but they didn't know at what time for we would always keep changing our time when we would take the rations up. So, anyhow, these horses would burn steady. They didn't show up in the daytime but they sure did at night. This was bad for the overhead craft, the airplanes with bombs.

Oh, that was quite a do. There were water holes up there, some of them as deep as 10 feet. I remember one night we went up there with rations. We got pretty well along

and we were on these duck mats (they were 2x4s crossed with 1x4s spaced about 6" apart) that carry themselves through mud when a person walked on them. We were going up this night with rations and this area was always shelled because this was the first place they had put in heavy tanks similar to what the putats were later, except heavier. Well, anyhow, it was so soft up there, it had rained hard that year, and there were six of these tanks stuck in the mud and, of course, the German artillery shelled them all the time. It was of no use as they hardly ever hit them. Some of the bombs would explode, others wouldn't, because they were these percussion cap types. Anyway, one night about twelve of us were taking rations up and were walking on these duck mats when the shells came whizzing by our heads. We knew they were pretty blame close to us. It was only natural that you duck but you hate to be the only one who ducks. So afterwards, I peered around to see if anybody else had ducked. Sure enough, everybody was picking themselves back onto the duck mats. We never lost any of the rations but if the bomb had exploded I wouldn't have been here today. Those rations were the daily rations for the other fellows who were holding the line and they had to go up every night. They consisted of cheese and bread. One loaf would do for four people, for the loaves were usually about three or four pounds each. Every second day you would get a tin of jam which was usually for the most part apple and maybe some other fruit. There was always a lot of jam. We'd get so tired of it that we would give it to the French people.

We had our little heat units and our water bottle with a quart of water. Of course, you had to be pretty careful of that. You could heat your dixies with some water and tea on the heat unit, providing they didn't send over a minenwerfer and upset it. That happened more than once. But that old quart bottle of water didn't last too long if you got your tea upset too often. The water was supposed to last till the next evening but if it was a hot place it might be one or two days before you got any more. We were fairly fortunate at Ypres that the rations got through on a daily basis for it was fairly quiet outside of holding the line.

After we went back to the Somme Valley. This was the time that the German attack was pretty well broken up. After that we were supposed to get a month's rest so I had got a leave to Blighty at the time and when I got back I thought my company would be in Bruay for that's where I left them in an orchard. When I came back there was no sign of the troops so I started to enquire but nobody seemed to know, part of the reason being that the Army like to keep secret the movement of troops, for in those days there were so many spies. I ran into a trucker who was going right up to the Third Brigade, so I caught a ride up with him. But, as it turned out, we went right past where they were and practically ended up in enemy hands. The reason we knew this was that German machine guns started firing at us. So, we got ourselves turned around and we found Third Brigade.

I was in a kilt but the Battalion were in fatigue pants. They usually put their kilts under their ground sheets, to sleep on them to keep them pressed. On all parades and 'going over the top', we always wore our kilts. These kilts were in the MacKenzie tartan because the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion was made up mostly of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, who wore the MacKenzie of Seaforth tartan. The pipers wore the Lennox tartan, which was the clan tartan of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalions's first Commanding

Officer, Lt.-Col. R.G.E. Leckie. I still have my kilt that I used the last time I played my company over the top. The thing that struck me funny was that when all of the Third Brigade was dressed in kilts, the Germans thought we were some kind of wild animals. Their nickname for Highland regiments was “The Ladies from Hell”.

In most cases the civilians were not caught up in the fire, but they usually moved back, unless it was a sudden attack. The towns were not bombed very often. It was mostly on the ammunition dumps. Before we moved into a town, the cavalry would have already gone ahead and cleared out any German soldiers that might have still been around.

At the end of the war in 1918, Somain was where we finished the last attack.

The funny thing about the Armistice was that the people in Canada knew the day before we did and we were right there. I was Orderly Piper on the day the Armistice was signed. I can remember that night, it was raining a bit. I was walking down this street, this was in Somain after the Armistice was declared, and I had my ground sheet on and I was playing Lights Out. I came to the end of the street and the Police Sergeant, he was another fellow on duty, touched me on the shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my kilt! He said just a minute and I went ahead and finished playing. I was going to play back but it was too wet. He said, “I’ll walk you back” (to where the band was billeted in this convent). He said, “Did you know that there was an Armistice declared”? I said, “No”. He said, “Yep, we just got word about an hour ago, there was an Armistice declared at 11 o’clock this morning”. After that, everybody knew about it there, but we were not sure how long it would last.

After that we marched up through Belgium, through Brussels, where we found a train full of bedding that the Germans had taken from the French people. We went through to Waterloo and then on the third day to Cologne. We went down along the Rhine River where for three months we were billeted in a school house as occupation troops. When we left we returned to Cologne. We pulled out of Germany about February of 1919 and we stayed in Belgium for about two or three weeks. We then went back to England and were billeted in Bramshott. This place was kept neat as a pin by men who had got “in Dutch” with the authorities. We called them snipers. We were there about two or three weeks. I landed back in Winnipeg on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May and was there about 1 ½ days before we were discharged.

I might mention that I did not receive any serious injuries during the course of the war. Maybe one of the reasons was that I was one of the few pipers who also had my full military training besides being a piper. The only time we had to turn in our pipes was the German breakthrough. Then we had to take up our rifles again.

The reason for the military training was for our own safety because you had to know how to detonate the hand grenades as well as take up a machine gun and clean it. Quite often we had to do it in the dark so you had to know it inside and out. Also, we had to detonate hand grenades at night just prior to the attack and if you didn’t know how to set them you could blow yourself and everybody else apart. This was another advantage of

the military training. These things were set to go off 5 seconds after the pin was pulled, I think. That gave the enemy plenty of time to pick it up and throw it back, so you had to count about 3 seconds before you threw it”.

### ***Attitudes on War***

“Well I’ll tell you, it seems to be a necessity at times, like you wouldn’t let an enemy come in and take over your farm. You would fight before you would give it up. I think that’s all war is good for. I have no use for war. To go in and start a war with someone else, well there must be something wrong with their heads. Nobody wins in the end. Most wars we’ve had had to be thrashed out at a conference table in the end anyway. In this day and age there isn’t such a thing as winning a war. Should any of these large nations go to war, they would use the atomic bomb before they would give up their country.

I hope we never have a war in this country. It would ruin it”.