

Pipe Band of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) C.E.F.

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The Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's)

The 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) C.E.F. was formed in September, 1914, one month after Canada's entry into the Great War. It was an amalgamation of four infantry companies from the following regiments of the Non Permanent Active Militia: the 91st Canadian Highlanders (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders), the 79th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, the 72nd Seaforth Highlanders of Canada and the 50th Regiment (Gordon Highlanders). The new battalion was mobilized at Valcartier, Québec, under the command of Lt.-Col. RGE Leckie, with the various contingents arriving at camp on August 24th, 1914. From among the pipers and drummers who arrived with these contingents, a composite pipe band was immediately formed.

The unit trained at Valcartier very briefly until when, on September 28, at 4:30 a.m. the men were roused by the skirl of the pipes and by 8:00 a.m. that morning, were embarked for the long voyage to England. This period of rest gave the men an opportunity to get acquainted with their comrades in other contingents. They met them in the course of their daily routine; in sports, in the platoon tug-of-war competitions and boxing matches and at concerts. By these means esprit de corps was fostered and before the voyage was over, the men of the 16th had fought their first battle for the rights of their new Highland Battalion.

On board the troopship, the men of the 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment) interfered with the practice of one of the 16th Battalion pipers, James Richardson. The news spread quickly among the men of the 16th and soon men of all four companies, irrespective of tartan, gathered together. They called out the entire pipe band and escorted them to the quarters of the 14th Battalion, where they stood guard while the pipes and drums played to their hearts' content.

The battalion arrived in England on the 15th of October and proceeded immediately to Salisbury Plain for advanced training. On February 11, 1915, the 16th Battalion sailed for France, arriving off St. Nazaire on Sunday, February 14, the Pipes and Drums assembled on deck playing selections for the troops. The battalion had arrived in England with 17 pipers, for although this was a Canadian unit, it was the Commanding Officer's intention to continue the Highland tradition of having the pipers play the men into battle. A further tradition was the wearing by the pipers of a tartan chosen by the CO. On June 4th arrived the Lennox tartan kilts, the tartan of the sept, or extended family, to which belonged the wife of Lt.-Col. Leckie.¹

Upon arrival at the front, and for the rest of the war, few battles seem to have been fought by the 16th Battalion without the skirl of the pipes. Lt.-Col. Cy Peck, Commanding Officer of the 16th from November 1916 to the end of the war, wrote that:

¹ The rest of the battalion wore the McKenzie tartan as the largest contingent to the 16th Battalion came from the 72nd Regiment, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. Though in the field the men usually wore fatigue pants, they would put on their kilts for all parades and 'going over the top'.

"When I first proposed to take pipers into action, I met with a great deal of criticism. I persisted, and as I have no Scottish blood in my veins, no one had reason to accuse me of acting from racial prejudices. I believe that the purpose of war is to win victories, and if one can do this better by encouraging certain sentiments and traditions, why shouldn't it be done? The heroic and dramatic effect of a piper stoically playing his way across the modern battlefield, altogether oblivious of danger, has an extraordinary effect on the spirit of his comrades."

This practice resulted in extremely heavy casualties, as evidenced by the fact that of those original 17 pipers, only three remained by November, 1918. All but two of these casualties were incurred while the pipers were leading the advance into battle.

Lieutenant-Colonel Cy Peck, claimed that one piper was the equal to fifty men. Indeed, Lieutenant-Colonel Peck insisted that no less than five pipers accompany him into battle - one for each of his companies and one for himself. Each piper played two tunes, and two only; the company tune and one other. These tunes were made known to all ranks before a battle: "Cock of the North", "Pibroch of Donald Dhu", "The Campbells are Coming" and "The March of the Cameron Men" for 'A' to 'D' Companies respectively, reflecting each company's regimental origins. The Regimental March was "Scotland is my Ain Hame"

Interviewed after the war by Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. Urquhart for his book *History of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish)* Col. Peck stated:

"True, there were moments when there was a roar when nothing could be heard, but this was not for long. When you got under the enemy's barrage, which was only the work of a few moments, and when your own barrage got ahead of the advance, which generally happened after the first one or two lifts of the artillery, the skirl of the pipes could be heard for a considerable distance."

Regarding fatalities among the pipers, Col. Peck stated:

"Pipers are conspicuous," said the doubters. "Well," as Colonel Peck wrote in reply to this criticism, "that's part of the game. Officers, machine gunners and runners are conspicuous. People get killed in war because they are conspicuous; many get killed when they are not, and that's part of the game, too."

This 'conspicuousness' of the pipers also led to some tongue in cheek complaints by a neighbouring battalion of the 16th that German snipers were placed in their area for the purpose of sniping at their pipers, who could be heard playing most nights at company headquarters.

The way in which the pipers themselves carried out their duty proved that they were but being summoned to their old proud post of honour on the battlefield. They were again men of arms, Highland soldiers, possessing high soldierly qualities. So anxious were they to go forward with the battalion that before a battle lots had to be cast; and even then the disappointed ones made personal appeal to be allowed to go into the fray. Piper McGillivray, who was killed at Hill 70,

refused to draw lots; he would go in "anyway;" and another piper who had grounds for suspecting that he had been discriminated against in the ballot, cried foul, and insisted on accompanying the attacking troops. They were brave men, who met death when it came to them unflinchingly. Among the pipers who fell in battle were Pipers J. Thomson and Wm. McIver, killed while playing the charge at Ypres in April of 1915. In May, Pipers G. Birnie and A. Morrison were killed playing the charge at Festubert.

After a charge, the pipers became battalion runners carrying orders through the chaos of the battlefield, bringing up rations and ammunition and serving as stretcher-bearers to get the wounded to the rear. During the lull between battles, they were expected to pipe the duty calls and perform at all the various ceremonies behind the lines as well as pipe the battalion on the march. During the fighting at the Somme, however, the pipers were again playing them 'over the top.'

On 8th October, 1916, in the attack on the Regina trench, one piper, James Richardson, distinguished himself above all others. His brief, glorious deed is best summed up by an article which appeared in the *London Gazette*:

*"This piper performed deeds of extraordinary valour. He implored his Company Officer to allow him to play his company over the top. As the company approached the trench they were held up by very strong wire and came under terrific fire. Realizing the situation he strode up and down playing his pipes with great coolness. This inspired the troops. They reformed and sprang with such fury that they cut their way through. After entering the trench he asked for some bombs from the Company Sergeant Major and they together bombed the dugouts, capturing two prisoners. Piper Richardson was detailed to take these prisoners out along with the Company Sergeant Major, who had been wounded. After proceeding about 200 yards he remembered that he had left his pipes. He put the prisoners and the wounded C.S.M. in a shell hole, went back for his pipes and he has never been seen since."*¹

For this conspicuous bravery, Piper Richardson was posthumously awarded his country's highest decoration, the Victoria Cross. His Commanding Officer wrote of him:

"I really think his Victoria Cross performance was one of the great deeds of the war. The conditions were those of indescribable peril and terror. The lad's whole soul was bound up in the glory of piping, and he was only taken into action after imploring the colonel with tears in his eyes. Altogether a most wonderful example of high souled courage and enthusiasm."

Pipers Hugh McKellar, George Paul and John Park were the other three volunteers who played the Battalion into action that day. Piper Park also died in that action.

¹ Piper Richardson's body was in fact found and is buried at the Adanac cemetery on the Somme. Further to this story, a set of pipes were discovered in the late 1990's on display at a school in Scotland. These pipes, carrying the distinctive Lennox tartan bag cover, had been found on the battlefield near Courcellette in the spring of 1917.

The example of these pipers might not give coolness and judgement to men who were born without any trace of these qualities, but the bravery of the pipers was bound to assist in maintaining fighting morale in the Battalion as a whole. The impulse of the heart which all men alike, leaders and followers, require to carry them through the perils of the battlefield, could not fail to be quickened by the stirring strains of "*The Pipers' Onset*":

“What is the piper playing,
That battles in my blood?
Winds in it,
Waves in it,
Waters at the flood.
Sadness in it,
Madness in it,
Weeping mists and rain.
What is the piper playing
That beats within my brain?”

In the famous attack on Vimy Ridge, on April 9, 1917, the Battalion was led for over a mile to its objective by Pipe Major James Groat playing “We will take the Good Old Way” along with five other pipers, among whom was Allan McNab and Hugh McKellar. McKellar’s valour was reported in Seton & Grant's *The Pipes of War*:

"Subsequently in the attack on Hill 70 on 15th August, 1917, he again led the battalion and was awarded a bar to the Medal; and on 2nd September, 1918, at Arras, he got the Distinguished Conduct Medal for a similar action. He had played the battalion through five successful attacks when he was finally wounded."

At the battle of Passchendaele, the pipers came up to their usual standard of coolness and gallantry. Before the attack started, Piper Alexander McGillivray told the Sergeant-Major of the company to which he was attached, in confidence, that he felt "anxious." He was afraid that, burdened as he was with his pipes and equipment, there might be a chance of the company men scrambling out in front of him, and so -- to use his own words -- "Bring disgrace on a Highland piper." "Well, if you think that way," said the sergeant-major, "ask the company commander to allow you to climb out before us." This Piper McGillivray did, and when the barrage opened he led off the advance, well ahead of the attacking wave, playing his pipes.

Piper McGillivray's gallantry in the assault was a source of inspiration to the troops on a wider battle front than that of the 16th. At the "Blue Line" when the Brigade attack was reforming under fire for the further advance he played without ceasing. He marched up and down before the 16th companies and then strode off to the front of the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) where, as described in the following extract from the history of that battalion, he made a profound impression:--

"Just at this time," the story reads, "when all ranks were feeling the strain of remaining inactive under galling fire, and when the casualties had mounted to

over 100, a skirl of the bagpipes was heard, and along the 13th front came a piper of the 16th Canadian Scottish. This inspired individual, eyes blazing with excitement, and kilt proudly swinging to his measured tread, made his way along the line, piping as only a true Highlander can when men are dying, or facing death, all around him.

"Shell fire seemed to increase as the piper progressed and more than once it appeared that he was down, but the god of brave men was with him that hour, and he disappeared, unharmed, to the flank whence he had come."

Piper McGillivray was also one of the men who overshot the final objective. When well ahead of the rest of his comrades he was set upon by a German. To defend himself he dropped his pipes, and later, when his enemy had been disposed of, could not find them. He was very much worried over his loss and refused to go back to Battalion Headquarters, as all pipers had orders to do immediately the assault was over. Ultimately he was persuaded to return on the promise by the company sergeant-major that he personally would look for the pipes and take care of them. The sergeant-major found the pipes the next morning about forty to fifty yards in front of the final objective. He brought them back with him, but Alec McGillivray was not there to claim his beloved instrument. He was seen to start from the front line on his return journey and then disappeared entirely from view -- probably blown to bits by a shell.

In the same battle, once more Pipe Major Groat came to the fore. When Battalion Headquarters, lead by Groat, reached the dug-out allocated to them in the captured territory, they ran into severe enemy shelling. The CO shouted to the pipe major to take cover, but Groat pretending he had not heard the order, went on playing. Afterwards he confidentially explained to a comrade that, whilst, as a matter of fact, he had heard the Colonel's order, it was never proper for a piper to break off in the middle of a tune, adding "and no damned German will ever make me do it.

Throughout the day of the 16th and the night of the 16th/17th, the enemy shelled continuously. The relief of the Battalion, which was taking place that night, was greatly hampered. It was 0400 hrs of the 17th before it was completed, and the CO and Battalion HQ, a group of tired looking, mud-stained men, headed by the pipe major, were able to return to Mazingarbe. The pipe major played ceaselessly the whole way. When finally the little group reached the village bounds, the strains of the bagpipes attracted the attention of the company men who had reached billets some time before. They looked around and, discovering it was the Colonel returning from the field of victory, rushed out into the street, many of them without boots or puttees and some without kilts. They greeted the party with cheer upon cheer and, in a band, escorted the procession to Battalion HQ.

For his bravery at Passchendaele, the Pipe Major was awarded the Military Medal, as was Piper G. Paul.

Piper Paul was later killed at Amiens, on August 8, 1918. As the Battalion was groping its way over a slope, Piper Paul mounted one of the tanks, named "Dominion;" his pipes skirled out "All the Blue Bonnets are o'er the Border", and with this dramatic lead the troops on the right flank

moved towards the enemy. As the CO, with Piper Paul along side him, reached the crest of the ridge, an enemy machine gun opened fire at point blank range, killing Piper Paul.

By the end of the war, Pipe Major Groat had won the DCM, MM and Bar. In total, 16th Battalion pipers were awarded one VC, one DCM, and nine MMs. Lt.-Col Peck regarded his pipers as invaluable and recommended no piper for distinction unless he had played his company into action twice or in various attacks. Of Pipe Major Groat, Lt.-Col. Peck wrote:

"Groat was the soul of our pipers, full of zeal for the music; a grim, dark-visaged, silent man with a brave heart. He played in five actions".

Though the pipers are remembered most for their role in battle, there were many occasions when the pipers and drummers had the opportunity to play as a band. During the course of war, the battalion would be relieved from their positions at the front and moved into divisional rest areas, where all the pipers and drummers would be brought together.

In April, 1916, the battalion was moved to billets in Poperinghe. There, the massed pipes and drums of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade (which included the 16th Battalion) played in the town square with the massed bands of the Guards Regiments.

Following the great Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade moved back to the rear to rest and train. Billeted in Camplain l'Abbé, the pipes and drums took part in numerous ceremonies, which was in keeping with the spirit of those times following the triumph of Vimy Ridge. There were church parades in the presence of a galaxy of commanders, their red and gold tabs lending a splash of colour to the sombre khaki hue of the battalion uniform. The massed pipe bands of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade beating 'retreat' in the park at Camplain l'Abbé; and the same ceremony more impressively staged when the massed pipe bands of the Canadian Corps, over two hundred and sixty-five pipers and drummers, played in the presence of H.R.H. Prince Arthur of Connaught, their Commander-in-Chief. Thousands of men, spick and span as if from the training grounds of England, witnessed that evening the sight of the pipes and drums, ribbons fluttering, kilts swinging, marching and counter-marching up and down the slope of the Corps' trophy park, rows of captured guns, which were standing at the side of the parade ground as a fitting background to the ceremony.

The pipes and drums of the Brigade had an exceptional share in the events of those days. In addition to being on parade at Camplain l'Abbé, they were called upon to play at the First Army Headquarters at Ranchicourt Château. On this occasion, the massed band was stationed in the centre of a broad glade down which the old gray chateau, its terraces crowded with generals and staffs from all the armies of the Expeditionary Force, looked towards the church tower of Houdain which was set in the light of the evening sun at the end of the vista. The deliberate tones of the march tunes were caught up by the woods and taken back in mournful cadence into the distance; but when the pipers passed into the strathspey these echoes woke up from their reverie into brighter mood: and when the quick step came they raced each other wildly until there was such a medley of sound as if the clans were engaged in their old-time conflicts. The final call to Army Headquarters was on June 8th, when the 16th Battalion sent five pipers to play there.

Three days before the attack on Hill 70, which was set for August 15, 1917, the pipes and drums led the battalion to the Brigade Church Parade. On the evening of the 13th, the battalion was assembled on the parade ground for the pipe band to beat 'Retreat', preparatory to the move to the front lines.

On New Year's Eve, 1917, as on the three previous, the Last Post was blown, 'Auld Lang Syne' was sung, and the Pipe Band played in the New Year. This new year was to witness such stirring and critical battles and before its close, the end of the great struggle.

One of the more pleasant experiences of the Pipe Band during the war was its visit to Paris in January, 1918. On January 26, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Johnson and the Pipe Band (forty-two pipers and drummers) and Billy the Goat, the battalion mascot, set out for a four days' visit to Paris. Upon their arrival in Paris it was found that no arrangements had been made for the quartering of the band, but eventually the Colonel secured accomodation for it in one of the French barracks. On the following day, the band began its programme of performances. No music was permitted in the street, but various concerts were arranged at the British Embassy Church, the Army and Navy League Club, other soldiers' clubs and the Canadian Hospital at St. Cloud.

Their first performance was on the parade ground of the barracks where the band was quartered. This performance so excited the Parisiens in the street outside that they broke down the barrack gates and rushed in. The visit to the hospital at St. Cloud was made on the 30th.

On Dominion Day, 1918, the Canadian Corps held a sports' day at Tincques, west of Arras. Between forty and fifty thousand of all ranks attended. In the grand stand the Corps commander, Lieut.-General Sir Arthur Currie (first CO of 50th Regiment, Gordon Highlanders), entertained a distinguished company, including H.R.H. The Duke of Connaught, Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden and members of his cabinet, plus numerous generals and commanders, among them the U.S. commander, General J.J. Pershing. The massed pipe and brass bands played as the men cheered. The Canadian Corps was on holiday at the height of its glory.

On July 6th, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade became hosts at a Highland Gathering at Tincques to the Highland regiments of the British Army. Present were representatives from all the Highland battalions in the Canadian Corps as well as virtually all the battalions in the 15th (Scottish), 51st (Highland), and 52nd (Lowland) Divisions. It was a time for pipes and drums, massed bands, twinkling brass and polished boots.

During the day every competition proper to Highland Games was engaged in; piping competitions (both individual and regimental, in which twenty-two pipe bands and numerous individual pipers competed), Highland dancing, putting the stone, tossing the caber, tug-of-war; and when at the close of the day the massed pipe bands, two hundred and sixty-four pipers and one hundred and forty-eight drummers, under Drum Major Graham of the 16th Battalion and led by 'Flora' the pet goat of the 13th Battalion, played 'Retreat', the like which had not been seen before. Then, on July 15, the Canadians went back to the line. Battles would soon be fought at Amiens, the Drocourt-Quéant Line (where L/Cpl. Bill Metcalf of the 16th Battalion won the VC), Cambrai, the Canal du Nord and finally the Pursuit to Mons.

At noon on October 27, 1918, the battalion moved into corps reserve for the last time in Somain, one of the towns the Battalion had released from the enemy during its historic advance of October 19th. There it shared billets with the 3rd Brigade HQ, the 15th Battalion and the 1st Machine Gun Battalion.

On Monday, November 11th, the general service wagons of the three battalions in Somain were requisitioned and sent out to gather up all the wood and inflammable material available in the area, and carry it to a field near the town where it was piled high ready for lighting. In the evening the troops, headed by the 15th and 16th Battalions' pipe bands, marched out to the bonfire. The pipers formed a circle round the pile and at eight p.m. the bonfire was set alight; rockets and flares were discharged; and the flames and fireworks went skyward with a blaze. The Great War for Civilization had come to an end.

Sunday, November 17th, was a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing. At the request of the Mayor of Wasmuel, where the Battalion was quartered, the pipe band of the 16th was sent to the noon service at the village church, and the Battalion ended the day by celebrating in true 16th fashion the award of the Victoria Cross to its Commanding Officer.

At 2:30 p.m., December 6th, after a 36 day march, the Battalion reached the German frontier. The pipe band drew to one side, struck up "All the Blue Bonnets are o'er the Border"¹ and the 16th passed into the enemy's homeland.

The crowning symbol of victory was the crossing of the Rhine on Friday, December 13th, 1918. Lead by its pipe band playing "The Cock 'o the North", the 16th Battalion crossed the Hohenzollern Bridge.

One final December 31st was to be spent overseas. "At midnight," the War Diary records, "the 'gang' gathered round Battalion HQ, the bugles sounded the Last Post, and the pipe band played the New Year in."

The 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) C.E.F., which was formed in September, 1914, was demobilized on April 26, 1919.

¹During the Great War, the battalion played "Scotland is my ain Hame" as their march past. In 1918, however, as the unit crossed the German frontier, the band, on orders from the Commanding Officer played "All the Blue Bonnets are O'er the Border". This tune has remained the march past ever since.

PIPERS OF THE 16TH BATTALION (CANADIAN SCOTTISH) C.E.F.

During the period, 1914-1919, a total of 30 pipers served in the band. A list of 16th Battalion pipers & drummers follows (the initial of the regiment of origin, where known, follows the name).

S=Seaforths C=Cameron G=Gordons

P/M Donald MacLeod, Invalided 1915 (Pipe Major 1914-1915) (S)

P/M James Groat DCM MMM and Bar (Pipe Major 1915) (C)

P/M Ronald MacDonald (Pipe Major 1915-1919) (S)

Ppr C. Wilson. Wounded Ypres, 28.4.15 (S)

Ppr J. Thomson. Died of wounds. 23.4.15 (S)

Ppr W. MacIver. Died of wounds, 10.5.15

Ppr J. Lowe. Wounded, Ypres, 28.4.15 (G)

Ppr G. Birnie. Killed at Festubert, 18.5.15 (G)

Ppr A. Morrison. Killed at Festubert, 20.5.15 (C)

Ppr A. MacGillivray MM. Killed at Festubert, 15.8.15

Ppr A. MacNab MM (S)

Ppr H. Donald

Ppr G. Ingles (C)

Ppr G. Ross (S)

Ppr J. Richardson VC. Killed 8.10.16 (S)

Ppr J. Parks. Killed 8.10.16 (G)

Ppr H. MacKeller. Invalided 1917

Ppr J. Lighthear

Ppr G. Paul MM. Killed at Amiens, 8.8.18

Ppr A. Robertson MM

Ppr J. McAllister MM

Ppr W. Buchanan

Ppr H. MacBeth

Ppr D. Horn

Ppr J. MacLean. Wounded Amiens, 8.8.18

Ppr W. Goldie

Ppr N. MacIver

Ppr A. Duncan

Ppr G. Cruickshanks MM

Ppr D. MacKinnon. Wounded October, 1918 (S)

Ppr A. MacDonell MM (C)

Ppr L. MacGillivray

Ppr H. MacLean

Ppr W. Darlaw

Ppr J. Ried

Ppr J. MacDonald. Wounded September, 1918

Ppr D. Hunter

Ppr W. MacGregor
Ppr A. Robertson. Wounded October, 1918
Ppr R. MacDonald
Ppr G. MacLeod
Ppr D.M. MacKenzie
D/M James Graham (S)
Dmr Harold Harkness (S)
Dmr MacCreadie (S)
Dmr Mattocks (S)
Dmr Westall (S)
Dmr Westal (S)
Dmr Sutton

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