

From the mud of the Somme

Are these the bagpipes that one of B.C.'s greatest war heroes played before he was lost in the maelstrom of the First World War?

Stephen Hume

AT LARGE



More than 86 years ago, a quiet Chilliwack teenager stood up amid bursting shells, shrapnel and machinegun bullets, achieved a moment of unparalleled glory and then vanished like a ghost into the maelstrom of a great battle. All that remained of Piper James Clelland Richardson, one of British Columbia's greatest war heroes, was the vivid transit of his incredible courage across the dwindling ranks of men who witnessed it, then told and re-told his story.

But the mystery of Piper Richardson and the fate of one of Canada's most famous war artifacts has finally begun to unravel thanks to the patient work of Pipe Major Roger McGuire of the Canadian Scottish Regiment and his supporters on a committee of patriotic citizens associated with the Canadian Club of Vancouver.

The committee, which counts among its members Mike Heppell, the honorary colonel of the regiment's 16th Battalion; Andrew Winstanley, president of the Canadian Club; David Ferguson, a former commanding officer of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, and Pamela Bell-Irving, a former first lady of the province, is backing the pipe major's painstaking research.

It revolves around the discovery in a display case at Ardvreck School in the Scottish highlands of a tattered, mud-stained set of broken bagpipes deposited there as a battle souvenir by one of the school's teachers who had served in the First World War.

Major Edward Yeld Bate, an Oxford-educated chaplain with the British Army, presented them to Ardvreck when he retired from his teaching post at the school at Crieff, in Perthshire, in 1931. In the display case with the pipes he left a card explaining that they had been found on the battlefield at Courcelette in 1917 after lying four or five months in the open.

Tomas Christie, a parent with boys attending the school, also happens to be a piper. He became curious about the bagpipes with the mud of the Somme still on them and wondered whether he could track down the family of whoever had owned them.

In particular, he was curious about their unusual tartan — one for which he couldn't find an association with any known Scottish regiment — and posted a hopeful query on the Internet.

It was noticed by McGuire, one of the few people in the world who immediately recognized the important intersection of date, place, tartan and the fact that the pipes had remained unidentified for so long. But first, the back story. Piper Richardson had enlisted for the First World War at the age of 17 and suddenly there he was on Oct. 8, 1916, trapped in No Man's Land in the pouring rain in the pitch black of 4:30 a.m. The First Canadian Brigade was advancing on the German lines but the 16th Battalion was pinned before



The ivory-trimmed chanter of the bagpipes stained with what may be a soldier's blood.



PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

Lt.-Col. Cyrus Peck (right) described Piper Richardson's Victoria Cross-winning performance at Courcelette, "one of the great deeds of the war." Peck and Lance-Corporal William Metcalfe (left), both of Richardson's 16th Battalion, Canadian Scottish, also won the VC.

unbroken barbed wire and taking heavy casualties.

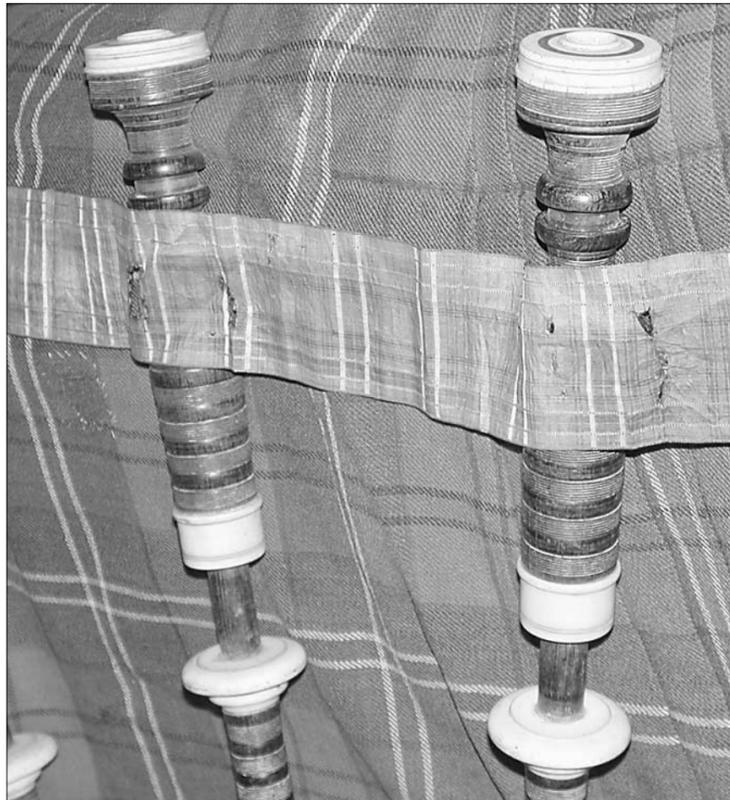
Richardson's commanding officer, Major George Lynch, lay dying — of the commissioned officers, all but one lieutenant would be slain. The Chilliwack kid decided his duty as a piper was to rally the battle-hardened soldiers of the 16th as though he were some tough old sergeant-major.

He put the wind in his bagpipes, stood up and played the *Reel of Tulloch*, walking back and forth under heavy fire for a quarter of a mile in front of the barbed wire until his comrades, watching the brave lad, began to rise like dirty apparitions from the shell-harrowed earth and advance behind him.

A middling quality high school runner can cover 700 paces in less than two minutes. For those soldiers, witnesses later said, leaning forward into the wicked zipping and zapping of machinegun bullets like men struggling against a stiff wind, the walk took an eternity.

At the other end, rifles bristling with bayonets, equally battle-hardened German marines waited in what was identified on the maps as Regina Trench and the Quadrilateral. That day, with a boy from small town B.C. leading the way, the Canadian Scottish swept through the fiercely defended German position before the ruined French village of Courcelette and cleared Regina Trench.

"One of the great deeds of the war," Lt.-Col. Cyrus Peck, would write of his



The bagpipes thought to belong to James Richardson and their ribbon are set against a kilt of the same tartan taken to Scotland for comparison.

young piper's bravery. "The conditions were those of indescribable peril and terror. The lad's whole soul was bound up in the glory of piping."

For his courage, Richardson was awarded the Victoria Cross, the British Empire's highest military decoration for valour. He was never to know it. Later that day, detailed to escort his wounded sergeant-major and several prisoners to the rear, Piper Richardson forgot his pipes and went back to the front line to get them. He vanished into the storm of shellfire and was never seen again.

Or so British Columbians thought. It turns out that what remained of Piper Richardson, one of the 8,000 Canadians killed and missing at Courcelette, was indeed found. We don't know when, but we do know he was found, says Andrew Winstanley, because a military service record indicates that on June 15, 1920, his body was exhumed from an obscure battlefield grave known only as 57c.M.17A. The remains were identified as Piper Richardson's and re-buried at the Adanac Cemetery where they now lie.

But what about the mysterious pipes? They were picked up at Courcelette in the spring of 1917, months after the Canadian Scottish had been withdrawn and re-deployed for the attack on Vimy

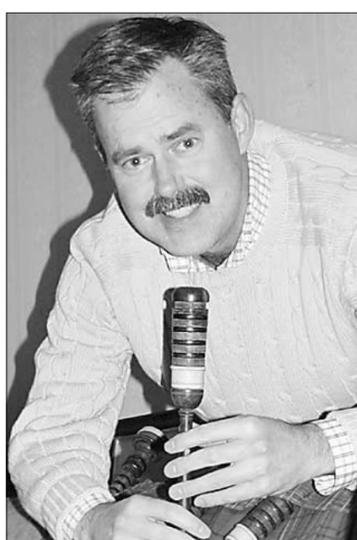
Ridge, never to return to the sector. Not for another 18 months would Richardson's Victoria Cross be formally announced.

The pipes' link to the hero of Regina Trench would have gone unremarked but they were passed to the safe hands of Major Bate, possibly until they could be returned to their regiment. But what regiment that was would not have been at all clear at the time.

As the carnage deepened on the Western Front — the Canadians alone would suffer 26,000 casualties in the bloodbath on the Somme — the 16th Battalion had been cobbled together from units in four other highland regiments.

They were companies drawn from Vancouver's Seaforth Highlanders, the regiment with which Richardson had enlisted, the Gordon Highlanders of Victoria, Winnipeg's Cameron Highlanders and Hamilton's Canadian Highlanders. Since all these regiments wore a different tartan and needed one in common, the new commanding officer decided it should be his wife's family tartan, Lennox.

In its wisdom, the army instead sent khaki kilts, which the troops refused to wear. So in 1916, Richardson would still have been wearing his Seaforth tartan, Mackenzie, but his regimental war



Pipe Major Roger McGuire of the Canadian Scottish Regiment with the bagpipes thought to belong to James Richardson, killed at Courcelette on Oct. 8, 1916.

pipes would have been decorated with the new battalion's tartan, Lennox.

That was the tip-off for McGuire. After Christie e-mailed him a poor polaroid snapshot of the pipes in their glass case, he became increasingly certain that the mysterious tartan that couldn't be linked to any British regiments might, in fact, be the obscure Lennox tartan of his own regiment.

With help from the Canadian Club and the committee established by Winstanley, he went to Scotland in early January to investigate.

He found Christie, the son of a colonel with the Royal Scots Fusiliers, living in a hunting lodge built in the highlands in 1820, and was invited to a supper of curried pheasant over which, he says, they discussed everything but Richardson and the mysterious pipes. Then Christie got up.

"He went out of the room and got the pipes and started laying them out," McGuire says. "I felt the hair on the back of my neck was standing up. All I could think was, 'My Gosh, these could really be Richardson's pipes!'"

"If they are, it can be said they are the most famous set of pipes in Canadian history," says McGuire. "Looking at them and realizing what they might be was an indescribable experience for a piper. The mud is still on them and holding the pieces my imagination ran wild as to what they had actually experienced."

While the cover on the pipes' bag is soiled with First World War mud and the ivory is still speckled with brown stains that might be blood, inside the cover the tartan is pristine, McGuire says. He laid it out with the Lennox tartan kilt he'd brought from Victoria.

The clincher was a narrow strip of ribbon with the same characteristic double white lines that show up strongly even in black-and-white photographs from the First World War. Without question, McGuire says, the broken pipes are from the 16th Battalion.

The distinctive tartan and the date and place of their discovery now point directly to Piper Richardson although absolute certainty remains to be established, McGuire says. That's because one other Canadian piper was killed the same day at Courcelette.

But the Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists a Piper John Park as being with the Manitoba Regiment and there's no record of him being in the rotation to pipe on that particular day while Richardson has such a record. Piper Park might have been attached to the highlanders but would his pipes also have had the Lennox tartan? That's another mystery that awaits further investigation, as does the question of how the broken pipes came to be in the custody of the long-dead Major Bate.

For now, McGuire says the important thing is to make sure that what seem likely to prove the most famous set of bagpipes in Canadian history are secured and protected. To that end, the National Museum of Scotland now appears to be involving itself. It is to be hoped museum authorities here soon will, too, and Piper Richardson's fate will cease to be a mystery and become a story that every Canadian school kid knows.

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