

“The pipes play on”

Canadian Pipers at War, 1914-1918

An Inspired Tradition

Tim Stewart

At 0532 hours on 9 April 1917, in a cold northwest wind and chilling sleet, the first wave of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, Canadian Expeditionary Force, went over the top at Vimy Ridge. Immediately in front of them was a mass of shell holes, craters, and mud. Some craters were more than twenty feet deep – all had slippery sides and icy, stagnant water at their bases. Led by six regimental pipers, the men of the 16th moved steadily forward along the narrow strips of land between the craters. The enemy opened up with heavy machine-gun fire and the leading companies took severe casualties. For over a mile the pipers continued to play the advance through terrific shell and small-arms fire. Playing “We’ll take the good old way,” Pipe Major James Groat and piper Allan McNab led the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Cyrus Peck, and his headquarters party up the ridge. Shortly after 0700 hours, the leading waves of the battalion had reached their objective, over a mile beyond the Canadian start line. Not for the first time, it had been the pipers of the 16th Battalion in the vanguard.

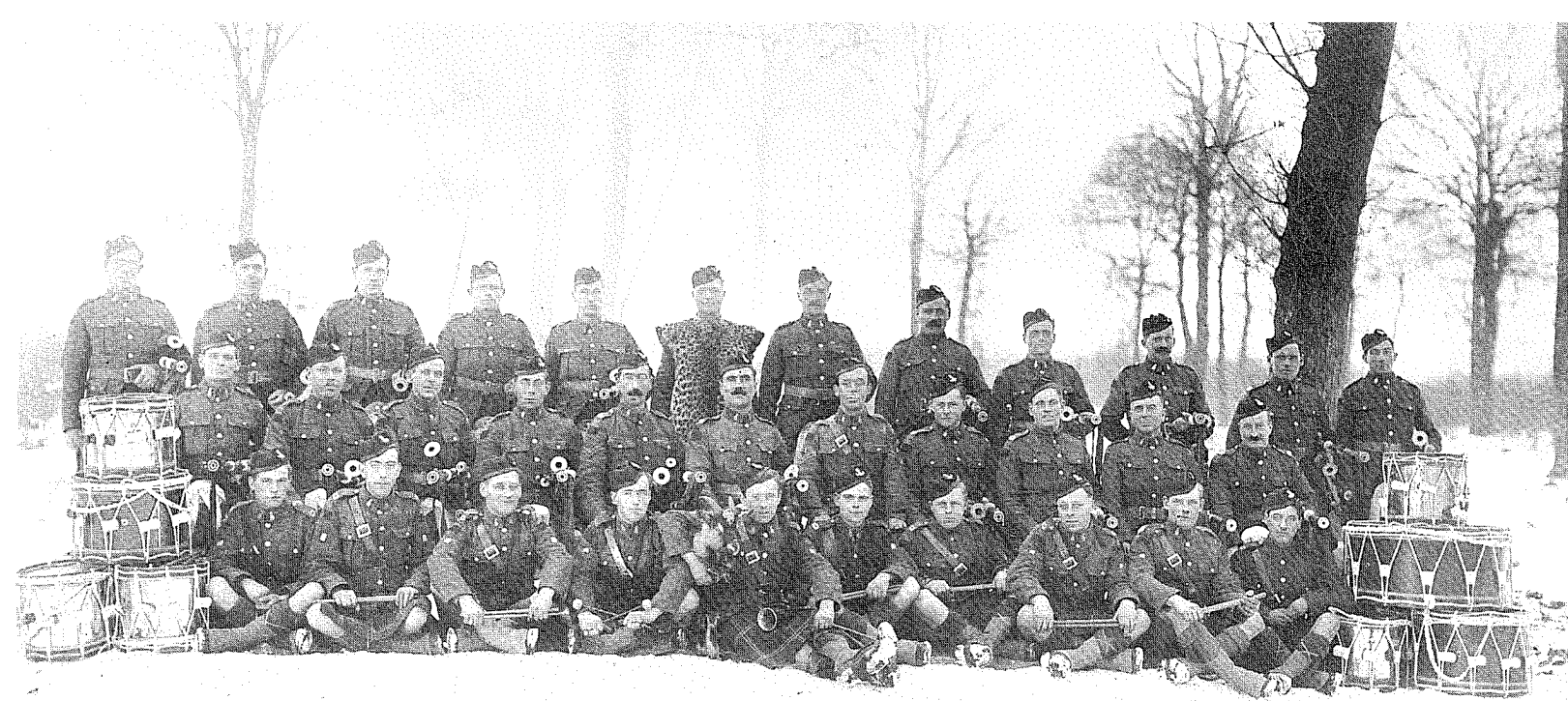
The direct association of bagpipes with the military goes back well over 400 years. Bagpipes themselves in all likelihood were introduced to

Scotland by the Celts between 500 and 400 BC, before the Roman invasion of Britain. The Celts may have brought to Scotland what are referred to as “indigenous pipes of ancient Egypt,” two single parallel pipes (each with holes) bound closely together and played as one.¹ It is, however, to the Highlanders of Scotland that the present great Highland pipe is due. Over the centuries the true home of the Highland bagpipe has been the lochsides, hills, and glens of Scotland. It was here that hereditary pipers played for their clan chiefs, weddings, festivals, and funerals; it was here that pipers honed the musical and martial talents they would demonstrate in rallying the Highlanders for war and accompanying them into battle. Many non-Scots perhaps had some patience for pipes in peace time, but they could see no value in the pipes during war. Their minds were changed after they witnessed the power of the bagpipes to motivate and inspire soldiers on the battlefield.



A Canadian Piper
by Sir William Rothenstein

The great Highland bagpipe has a long history in Canada. With the defeat of Scotland's Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden in 1746, the victorious English endeavoured to destroy Scottish culture and banned everything in the Highlands that was considered a part of that culture, including the bagpipes. At the trial



16th Battalion Pipes & Drums, France, November 1918. Pipe Major Groat is at the centre of the second row. The regimental mascot, goat Billy MacKenzie, is in the front.

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of one of the supporters of the Scottish Prince, the defendant, John Reid, claimed that he was a piper and a non-combatant, and therefore was not guilty of treason. The English judge ruled that, since no Highland Regiment ever marched without a piper, the pipes were an instrument of war, and that Reid should therefore be hanged for bearing arms against the King.²

A further aftermath of Culloden was that the Highlands were cleared of people. As a result of the Highland Clearances, tens of thousands of Scots made the journey to new beginnings in Canada's rugged eastern climes, a journey which they may not otherwise have made were it not for the Clearances. Bringing with them their culture, traditions, indomitable spirit, and their bagpipes, they left behind a life of political turmoil, inhospitable climate, and barren, harsh countryside to establish new homes in Canada.

To quell the fear of Scottish rebellion and to assist in depopulating the Highlands even further, the English government decided to employ loyal Scots (or, perhaps more accurately, to exploit the war-like attributes of Scottish males) in newly-raised Highland Regiments that would fly the King's Colours. Two of these regiments, Montgomery's Highlanders (77th)

and Fraser's Highlanders (78th), along with the Black Watch (42nd), saw service in North America; Fraser's Highlanders served exclusively in Canada. Pipers from that unit played at the front of their companies in some of the most significant battles in this country's history. They were the first to play "the great war pipe of the north" in battle on Canadian soil, when they took part in the siege and eventual capture of Louisbourg in 1758 and Quebec the following year. At the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, officers and men of Montgomery's Highlanders and Fraser's Highlanders were offered land in Canada, and many stayed to make this country their home.

During the American Revolution (1775-83), the British government again sought the help of the Scots, and issued orders to raise a Scottish regiment in Canada, to be called the Royal Highland Emigrants. It was thought that recruits would be plentiful among recent immigrants to Canada and among the many Scots who had settled here earlier and had previously found employment in the King's service. Two battalions were raised to defend against the American threat to British North America, and the Royal Highland Emigrants played a notable part in the successful defence of Quebec from American

invasion in December 1775. Other detachments of the 2nd Battalion garrisoned Saint John, Annapolis, and Halifax. They, too, were disbanded at the end of hostilities, many remaining in Canada to receive their promised land grants.³

It was this centuries-old tradition instilled in the descendants of those early Scottish settlers, combined with a sense of duty to country, that drove Scottish-Canadians to enlist when the call went out for men at the start of the First World War in 1914. Pipers were once again summoned to their old proud post of duty and honour on the battle front. However, the 16th Battalion was not the only Canadian unit with pipers. In the 1st Division, the 13th (Royal Highlanders of Canada) and 15th (48th Highlanders of Canada) Battalions also wore the kilt and employed pipers and drummers. Spread through the CEF were over 50 other battalions that maintained pipers and drummers, from all of Canada's provinces except Prince Edward Island.⁴ Not all of these units were Highland battalions. Pipers were also found in the 1st Pioneers, 107th (Canadian Pioneer) Battalion, the 1st and 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 224th (Canadian Forestry) Battalion, the 3rd, 5th, and 6th Canadian Railway Troops, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry

(PPCLI), and the 208th (Canadian Irish) Battalion from Toronto.⁵

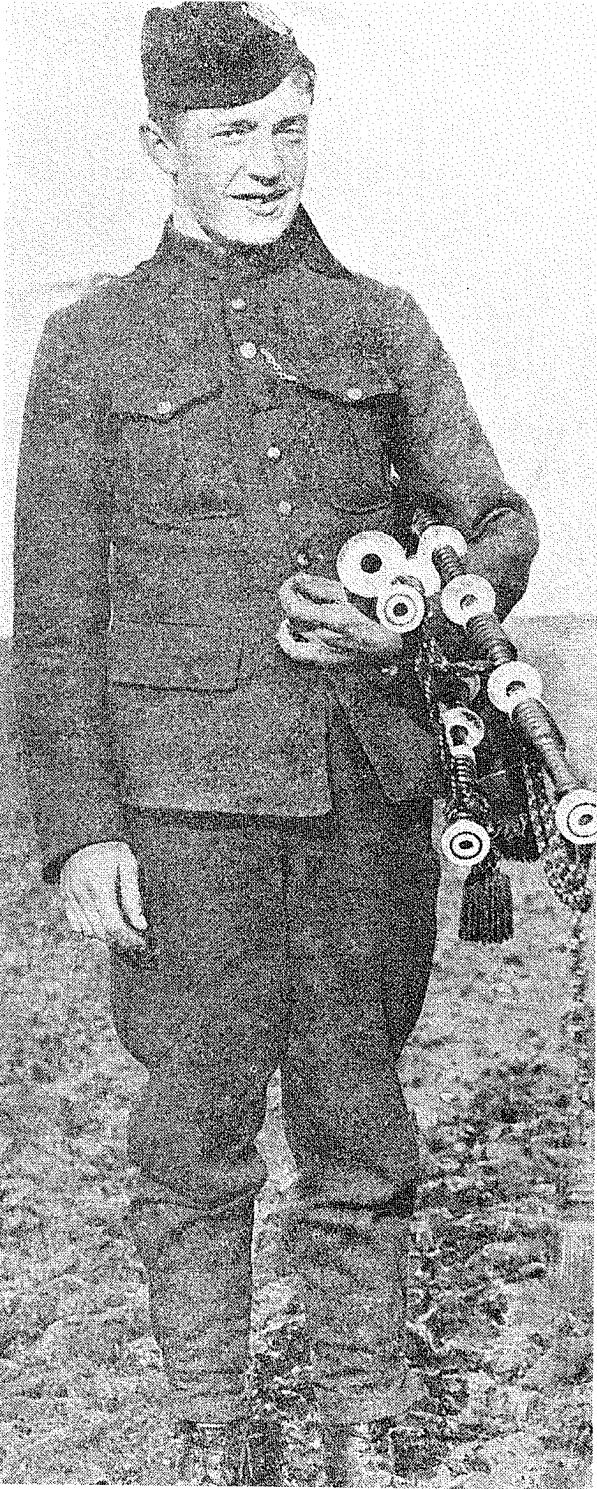
The pipers were quick to demonstrate their valour in battle. In April 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres, pipers James Thomson and William McIvor of the 16th Battalion were severely wounded while playing the battalion forward following the German gas attack at St. Julien. Both pipers later died of their wounds. Less than a month later, at Festubert, during a daring daylight assault by the 16th, pipers George Birnie and Angus Morrison stood upon the ruins of a farmhouse and played as their fellow Scots-Canadians advanced. The 16th met a hail of machine gun-fire but, despite their exposed position, pipers Birnie and Morrison kept the air flowing to the reeds until they were both hit by enemy fire. As they fell, the sound from their drones trailed off and the sounds of battle were everywhere once more.⁶

The following year, 18-year-old piper Jimmy Richardson and fellow pipers Hugh McKellar, John Parks, and George Paul played the advance in the assault on Regina Trench at the Somme River on 8 October 1916. On nearing the German position, No.4 Company of the 16th Battalion bogged down; the barbed wire to their front had not been destroyed, and casualties from enemy

*The Massed Pipes & Drums of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, France 1918.
Pipe Major Groat is at right front.*

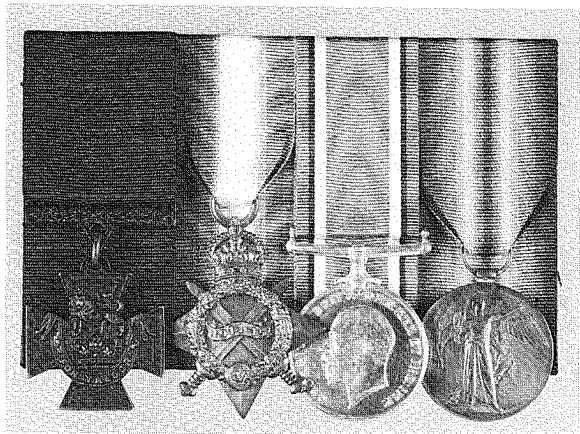
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bombs and machine guns began to mount. The Company Commander was hit and Jimmy Richardson asked Company Sergeant Major Mackie if he could help: "Wull I gie them wund [wind]?"⁷ On getting the nod he struck up and played back and forth outside the wire for a full ten minutes. The troops' reaction was instantaneous – on hearing the pipes, they sprang at the wire, succeeded in cutting through, and went on to take the objective. Later in the day piper Richardson was helping move the wounded back when he realized he had left his



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Left: Piper James Richardson.
Above: A frontal shot of Richardson's medals including (l. to r.) the Victoria Cross; the 1914/15 Star (awarded for service against the Central Powers between 5 August 1914 and 31 December 1915); the British War Medal (awarded for service in a theatre of war up to 11 November 1918); and the Allied Victory Medal (awarded to Canadians who actually served on the establishment of a unit in a war theatre up to 11 November 1918).

Above right: A rare shot of the reverse of Richardson's VC. It shows on the suspension bar: 28930 PTE (PIPER) J. RICHARDSON; LATE 16TH BN CAN. INFY. MANITOBA R. and on the reverse of the medal itself, the date on which the action that resulted in the award took place: 8 OCT 1916.

Above: The headstone marking Richardson's grave in Adanac cemetery on the Somme.



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Author's collection

pipes at the front. Although strongly urged to leave them, he refused to abandon his beloved pipes. He went back to retrieve them and was never seen again. He was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, the only VC to a Canadian piper.⁸ Piper John Parks was killed this same day, Hugh McKellar was invalided out in 1917, and George Paul, who would later receive a Military Medal at the operations around Hill 70 in 1917, was killed at Amiens on 8 August 1918 while playing the regimental march "Blue Bonnets over the Border" from atop the tank *Dominion*.

When Lieutenant-Colonel Cy Peck became commanding officer of the 16th Battalion in

November 1916, he was already fully aware of the value of the pipes in battle, and had made up his mind that pipers would accompany his battalion into action. "I believe that the purpose of war is to win victories," he said, "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, oblivious to danger, has an extraordinary effect on the spirit of his comrades."⁹

Peck met with opposition even from within his own unit, many of the doubters warning that there was too much noise and pipers would not be heard. There were also objections to the loss of life as pipers were so conspicuous. To these individuals Peck replied, "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."¹⁰ There was certainly no lack of volunteers within the pipe band for this duty. No man was forced to go, but that hardly mattered because everyone wanted to play in action. In fact, the competition for playing into battle was so stiff that it was the usual custom for lots to be drawn in order to determine who should play.

Clearly, the pipers of the 16th Battalion were a courageous lot. In addition to piper Jimmy Richardson's posthumous VC, battalion pipers were awarded one Distinguished Conduct Medal [DCM] and nine Military Medals [MM], all for piping in action. In July 1917, Pipe Major James Groat was awarded a Military Medal for his "gallant conduct during the month of April 1917" – his MM is impressed "Sjt Piper." This was followed by the announcement in November 1917 of a second Military Medal, for leading the advance at Hill 70 in August 1917. With kilt proudly swinging, he made his way through the wire piping as only a true Highlander can when men are facing death all around him. When the battalion headquarters party which he was leading reached the dug-out allocated to them in captured territory, they ran into heavy enemy shelling. Peck shouted to the Pipe Major to take cover, but Groat pretended that he had not heard the order and went on playing. Afterwards he explained, "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, and no damned German will ever make me do it."¹¹ Two other 16th pipers, Alec McGillivray and George Paul, were awarded Military Medals for this action. Piper McGillivray was later killed by a shell burst.

In September 1918, Pipe Major Groat played in his last action of the war, on the Drocourt-Quéant support line in the Second Battle of Arras. On 2 September, Groat brought further honour to himself and to his battalion. Leading Peck through the barbed wire under concentrated heavy machine-gun fire, Pipe Major Groat continued to play until he was wounded by shrapnel. Groat was awarded the DCM for his gallant conduct and his Colonel, Cyrus Peck, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his resourcefulness and courage in rallying his men under fire.

Pipe Major Groat's award citation states:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty on the 2nd September 1918 in the second battle of Arras (Drocourt-Quéant Line). For the fourth or fifth time during this war he played his battalion 'over the top' in a battle. He was continually under heavy machine gun fire and at one time was playing in the midst of furious hand-to-hand fighting. He was eventually wounded by shrapnel after adding a fine record to the courage of Highland pipers.¹²

Lieutenant-Colonel Peck said of his Pipe Major, "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."¹³ Pipe Major Groat's three gallantry awards for piping are unique to the Allied armies of the First World War. He ended the war with six medals – a DCM, two MMs, the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal, and the Allied Victory Medal. Of the three DCMs awarded to Canadian pipers in the First World War, only Pipe Major Groat's was for piping in action.

Indeed, unlike Peck, not all First World War commanding officers utilized their pipers' playing capacity at the front. Some COs ordered that the pipers were only to play the battalion on marches and to and from the front, not into action, for the simple reason that there were far too many piper casualties. After all, competent pipers were hard to replace and a CO did not want to leave himself devoid of pipers. Battalion



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Top: Pipe Major Groat meets the General Staff, France, 1918.

Above: Pipe Major James Groat, DCM, MM.

Above right: Medals of Pipe Major Groat, (l. to r.) Distinguished Conduct Medal; Military Medal and second award bar; 1914-1915 Star, British War Medal; and Allied Victory Medal for World War I.

COs who did use pipers in action often advanced with only five or six. There were exceptions to this of course – the PPCLI advanced with nine pipers at Vimy Ridge in 1917. In action most pipers were assigned other duties, primarily as stretcher-bearers and runners, and they assisted as well in the movement of supplies, especially ammunition and rations forward. Some even served in the ranks. Many piper casualties were a direct result of stretcher-bearer and other related duties. The 25th Battalion from Nova

Scotia employed its pipers in a stretcher-bearer role, although pipers Walter Telfer and W. Brand were both awarded Military Medals for playing their companies into the attack at Vimy in 1917. Telfer continued to play until he fell, but was so badly wounded that his leg would later be amputated.

Groat, Telfer, and Brand were not the only pipers decorated for gallantry. Piper J.M. Robertson of the PPCLI was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for digging two men out of a trench that had been destroyed by enemy shell fire at Hooge on 8 May 1915. In September 1916 he died of wounds. Lance Corporal J. Dyce of the 13th Battalion was awarded a Mention in Despatches while acting as a runner during the fighting around Ypres in 1915. Carrying an important message from one of the front-line companies to the CO at battalion headquarters, he had to cross ground heavily bombarded by the enemy. While making his way back he was shot through the chest and blacked out for a time. On regaining consciousness and knowing the importance of the despatch he was carrying, he crawled the rest of the way to battalion headquarters, delivered the message, and collapsed. Corporal William Currie of the 21st Battalion was awarded the Military Medal for continually bringing in wounded men from in front of the German wire; he was himself wounded on his last rescue. He was later commissioned, and won the Military Cross in 1918. Piper Hugh Mackenzie of the same unit was one of three men who volunteered to bring in a wounded comrade stranded in no-man's-land. Of the three who started out, only MacKenzie returned with the wounded man. He was awarded the Military Medal.¹⁴

As these stories suggest, casualties among pipers were high. In 1915 there were 17 pipers in the 16th Battalion, but only three remained on strength by 1918 – eight had been killed or died of wounds, and the remainder had been wounded. While piper casualty figures from some other battalions are known, there is no recorded number of total casualties to Canadian pipers as a group. However, the number would be considerable through four years of war. For example, the pipers of the PPCLI had heavy casualties – two died of wounds and eleven were wounded and invalided home. The 13th suffered four killed and four wounded; the 15th suffered two casualties, through gas and disease; the 21st

Battalion had one killed and seven wounded; the 25th Battalion, one killed and ten wounded; the 29th Battalion, two killed and four wounded; and the 1st Pioneers, one killed and four wounded. Speaking of Scottish regiments, Frank Adams claims that there were over 1,100 casualties to pipers during the war, of which 500 were fatal.¹⁵ He does not say if this number includes pipers from the colonial armies.

Perhaps the best way to describe the impact of pipe music on troops under fire is to relate what a war correspondent witnessed in France:

They look in the distance, tired and grim, and in formation they are straggling, owing to the appalling muddy state of the road. A shell bursts in the field to the left of the road along which they are coming. There is a heavy cloud of smoke, and streams of mud and slime are spewing upwards. For a moment the leader seems to hesitate and the party halts. Suddenly there is a sound as of tuning up and two pipers commence to play. They move off, the advancing men steady in formation and come slogging through the mud with step almost rhythmic to the music. Another shell bursts near them. The pipes play on.¹⁶

Canadian pipers of the First World War were an inspiring breed of men, and worthy successors of the pipers of Louisbourg and Quebec. The Scottish tradition in Canada's military continued and strengthened significantly following the Great War. Within 20 years, Scottish-Canadian Regiments and a younger generation of Canadian pipers would add another chapter of duty, tradition and honour when they embarked for Europe to defend freedom once again.

Notes

1. Francis Collinson, *The Bagpipe: The History of a Musical Instrument* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp.59-64.
2. C.A. Malcolm, *The Piper in Peace and War* (London: John Murray, 1927), p.31.
3. George F.G. Stanley, "The Scottish Military Tradition," in W. Stanford Reid, ed., *The Scottish Tradition in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp.141-147.
4. Charles H. Stewart, *Overseas: The Lineages and Insignia of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Little and Stewart, 1970), p. 51. The 105th Battalion was raised in PEI and called The Prince Edward Highlanders, but it served as a regular infantry

unit and had no Highland accoutrements or pipe band. The 105th was later absorbed into the 104th Battalion, which was broken up to provide reinforcements for the Canadian Corps in the field. See John F. Meek, *Over the Top: The Canadian Infantry in the First World War* (Orangeville, ON: privately printed, 1971), pp.94, 174.

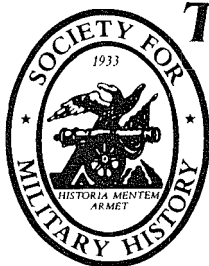
5. The civilian pipe band of Edmonton volunteered en masse to play the PPCLI to France and back again. They journeyed to Ottawa in August 1914 to enlist. Their experience as pipers was vast. While marching through a village in France occupied by American troops, the band played "Marching Through Georgia." On another occasion, the pipers played 42 different tunes on the march, something of a record. See Malcolm, p.218; Ralph Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), pp.8-9.
6. Brevet-Colonel Sir Bruce Seaton and Pipe Major John Grant, *The Pipes of War: A Record of Achievements of Pipers of Scottish and Overseas Regiments during the War, 1914-1918* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson & Co., 1920), p.153.
7. H.M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish), Canadian Expeditionary Force, in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932), p.182.
8. The posthumous award of the VC to Richardson was gazetted on 22 October 1918: "For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty when, prior to attack, he obtained permission from his Commanding Officer to play his company 'over the top.' As the company approached the objective, it was held up by very strong wire and came under intense fire, which caused heavy casualties and demoralized the formation at the moment. Realizing the situation, Piper Richardson strode up and down outside the wire, playing his pipes with great coolness. The effect was instantaneous. Inspired by his splendid example, the company rushed the wire with such fury and determination that the obstacle was overcome and the position captured. Later, after participating in bombing operations, he was detailed to take back a wounded comrade and prisoners. After proceeding 200 yards, Piper Richardson remembered that he had left his pipes

behind. Although strongly urged not to do so, he insisted on returning to recover his pipes. He has never been seen since, and his death has been presumed accordingly owing to lapse of time." Richardson was 20 years old at the time of his death. His body was eventually recovered and he was buried in Adanac Military Cemetery on the Somme. His VC is now in the possession of the Canadian War Museum. See Francis J. Blatherwick, *1000 Brave Canadians: The Canadian Gallantry Awards, 1854-1989* (Toronto: Unitrade Press, 1991), p.26; John Swettenham, *Valiant Men: Canada's Victoria Cross and George Cross Winners* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), p.45.

9. Urquhart, p.198.
10. *Ibid.*, p.199.
11. *Ibid.*, p.234. See also R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The 13th Battalion Royal Highlanders of Canada, 1914-1919* (Montreal: RHC, 1925), pp.195-196.
12. The announcement of Groat's DCM first appeared in the London Gazette on 16 January 1919. His citation can be found in David K. Riddle and Donald G. Mitchell, *The Distinguished Conduct Medal Awarded to Members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1920* (Winnipeg: Kirkby-Malton, 1991), p.101. It is also of interest that Lieutenant-Colonel Peck was awarded the VC for this same action.
13. Urquhart, p.199.
14. Malcolm, pp.217-226; Seton and Grant, pp.60-62, 150-158.
15. Frank Adams, *The Clans, Septs and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: W. & A.K. Johnston and G.W. Bacon Ltd., 1965), p.428.
16. Seton and Grant, pp.240-241.

Tim Stewart, CD holds an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in history and a Bachelor of Education degree from York University. At present he is a secondary school teacher in the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Sergeant Piper with The Toronto Scottish Regiment, and the curator of the Regimental Museum.

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