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# The Highland Pipers in the Great War

By Gordon Kinnie © 2000

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## PURPOSE

This paper is intended to provide an overview of the Great Highland Bagpipe and the pipers during World War One. My idea is to provide a little history for both pipers and people who enjoy pipe music. I hope that the reader enjoys the material and perhaps develops an increased interest in the history of this magnificent instrument and the brave men who played the Scottish Regiments over the top.

## BACKGROUND

On August 4, 1914, the “WAR TO END ALL WARS” began. Over the next 4 years and 3 months over 8 million men will be killed in combat and almost 20 million will be wounded fighting in trenches stretching from the Alps to the Baltic Sea.

During the First World War over 41% of Scottish males between 15 and 49 enlisted into the British armies. Recent estimates indicate that more than 147,000 Scottish Soldiers gave their lives during the war. The bravery of the Scottish regiments earned them the name “The Ladies from Hell”.

The Highland pipes were heard wherever the Scottish Regiments went to fight. Calling forth memories of home, tears for fallen comrades, and most often inspiring acts of bravery and self-sacrifice.

## THE LOSSES AND THE ASSIGNMENTS

All of the Scottish Regiments suffered extremely heavy losses in personnel during the war this high casualty rate included the pipers. During the Great War over 1000 pipers were killed leading the Scottish regiments into battle.

The Scots Guards 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion arrived in France in August 1914 with eight pipers. At the beginning of 1915 only two of the eight had survived. The Second Battalion lost 10 pipers over the span of three months.

When the Kings Own Scottish Borderers’ arrived in Gallipoli with eleven pipers, they had their rifles, bayonets and pipes. Often piping on the march or when in the trenches the pipers helped moral in the grueling conditions found on the peninsula. After 8 months only three of the original eleven pipers survived to play while the boats ferried off what was left of the retreating British forces.

During the battle for Loos in September 1915, over 50,000 British troops were dead, 15,000 of whom the remains were never found. The 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Cameron highlanders withstood Artillery shelling and gas attacks, of the 850 men who saw the battle begin, only 112 were left at the end. The seven pipers with the unit fared no better, 3 were killed, 3 wounded and one was gassed, the loss of a whole pipe band.

After suffering these heavy losses in the pipers, and realizing the effect the loss of all the pipers would have on the Scottish Regiments, it was ordered that the pipers stop playing the men into combat. Even though an edict against pipers playing their comrades “over the top” existed, several continued to play and lead the men out to fight.

Pipers were assigned many tasks after being banned from playing the men into “no man’s land”. They were employed carrying rations and supplies to the men severing in the forward trenches, often under cover of darkness. The Pipers continued to play the men from the rear areas to the front lines and often were used by non-Scottish units for this task. The most dangerous tasks were as runners, stretcher-bearers, bombers (hand grenadiers) and ammunition carriers. Of these tasks stretcher-bearer was the most hazardous of all the duties. Small parties tending to the wounded in no man’s land, often under heavy fire and the carrying the wounded through knee-deep mud made for continued casualties in the pipers ranks.

## THE PIPES IN ACTION

There are many events during the course of the war that exemplify the ability of the pipes to effect moral and inspire men to accomplish the unbelievable whatever the sacrifice.

In the confusion of the retreat from Mons, the British Regiments had become mixed as units from different regiments mingled with each other and continued to march wearily along. An Officer observed a piper from the Kings Own moving along with his pipes under his arm. The Officer yelled out “Piper, play up.” The piper replied “Sorry, Sir, I can’t my bag is to dry.” The Officer asked “Is it the Piper or the pipes that’s too dry?” The piper took this sarcasm as an affront to his piping abilities. With some difficulties he managed to get enough water to wet the bag and then struck up the pipes. Only two drones responded but the effect on the troops was magical. It was reported that men got into step and that the weariness seemed to leave them.

At Ambers Ridge on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1915, pipers from the Black Watch played the men into action amidst the fall of shells and fire. Almost inaudible, the strains of “Hieland Laddie” inspired the troops and demonstrated the dedication of the pipers in battle.

During the Battle of the Somme in 1916, Battalion after Battalion had tried to capture a strategic German trench. The Cameron's were brought forth and made ready to attack. The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion's pipers were also ready and led the men over the top to the tune of "The March of the Cameron Men". This attack though costly was successful in capturing the trench.

It was common for pipers to entertain their fellow soldiers in the trenches, dugouts and behind the lines. Sometimes members of other units often came through the trenches to hear a piper. The nearby French troops often wandered over to hear the pipers play. Many times the forward observation post would ask to listen in to these impromptu concerts by telephone.

### **PIPERS IN ACTION**

The pipers of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had been in combat for ten months when the command learned that 11 of the 21 pipers were killed or wounded. The order to withdrawal the rest from the trenches was given. Piper Peter Dean refused and became a machine gunner, his skill and daring earned him a DCM. Soon after he got a bar for the DCM and was promoted to a commission. Before the end of the war Dean became a Major within the regiment.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1915 at the Battle of Loos, the Kings Own came under heavy artillery fire and poison gas attack. The gas attack severely affected the men and those not wounded were shaken. The fighting ability of the unit was destroyed. Piper Daniel Laidlaw mounted the parapet of the trench and began to play "Blue Bonnets over the Boarder". The men followed him over the top and faced heavy machine gun fire but went forward with such determination that the German positions were taken. Laidlaw was wounded before he reached the German trench. He was awarded the VC and the Croix de Guerre for his conspicuous gallantry.

During the campaign on the Gallipoli peninsula the pipers took a leading role in saving the lives of the British troops. The high command had ordered the Scottish Horse to move forward to occupy what was believed to be a deserted enemy trench. The local officer had the men fix bayonets and show them over the top of the trench. The piper started to play "The Devils in the Kitchen" and the men cheered but did not advance. The Turkish troops responded by firing a rifle barrage at the British forces for a full 45 minutes. As the sound of the "battle" was heard further from the line both sides' artillery began to exchange fire with out knowing why. The High Command rescinded the order to occupy the trench.

During the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, the Germans launched a counter attacked with a vengeance against the exhausted British units. Piper Hugh MacAther got his pipes and standing on the top of the trenches he played, this so inspired the British soldiers that they were able to repulse the enemy.

An incident at Beaumont Hamel was the rout of the German forces by an Argylls piper. An officer, a sergeant and the piper found themselves isolated from their unit and behind the German rear. While the German unit fought off an attack to their front the piper struck up the regimental tune “The Campbells are coming”. The Germans fearing an attack from their rear flank retreated from the battlefield.

In October 1916, Piper James Richardson implored his commander to allow him to play the unit forward. As the company approached the enemy trench they were held up by concentration of wire that had not been cut by the artillery bombardment. Under fire from the nearby Germans, the men worked frantically to breach the barrier. As the casualties mounted the morale of the unit sagged. Piper Richardson, stood up and strode up and down in front of the wire. The effect on the morale was immediate, the unit again attacked. He played for 20 minutes as the wire was breached and the trench was taken. Later that day he went to help some wounded and was killed. He was posthumously awarded the VC.

In 1918, on the Albert-Arras road the Germans had occupied the heights to slow the British advance. The Black Watch was ordered to clear the hill. One company had advanced to within 120 yards when brought under intense fire by the Germans. The men were able to take a trench, many having been wounded, but were separated from the main units and under the conditions of the battle effectively lost, as no one knew of their position. Regardless of enemy fire the piper stood up and played the Regimental tune, this had the desired effect as several companies advanced to occupy the captured trench.

## PIPE TUNES

Reveille	Johnny Cope
Call to meals	Brose and Butter
March tunes	Highland Laddie Scotland the Brave Dumbarton's Drums Campbells are Coming Blue Bonnets over the Boarder Piobroch Donuil Dubh
Charging Tunes	Standard on the Braes o' Mar Caber Feidh Blue Bonnets over the Boarder Cock o' the North
In camp	Road to the Isles Nut Brown Maiden

The most often heard song was “Flowers of the Forest” at the funerals of fallen comrades. Many more tunes were popular during this time and played by the pipers.

Robert Meldrum following the battle wrote “Battle of the Somme”.

## CONCLUSION

During the Great War the Scottish Regiments were often in the toughest battles, and the pipers were inspiring the men into combat. Harry Lunan a piper from the Battle of the Somme said of pipe music “It gave them courage, incentive.” One veteran said, “when they played the bagpipes I felt I could go through anything.”

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below  
We are the dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie  
    In Flanders fields.  
Take up our quarrel with the foe  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
    In Flanders fields.

John McCrae

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