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Pipers of the 25th Nova Scotia Overseas Battalion in World War 1

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By Barry W. Shears

There have been several informative books and articles written since the end of the Great War (*An Cogadh Mòr*) including *The Piper in Peace and War* (Malcolm, 1927); *The Pipes of War* (Seton and

Grant, 1920); and more recently, *Piper Casualties of the Great War, 1914-1918* (Crawford, 2018). The first three books deal mostly with pipers in the Scottish regiments and the first two include short sketches of pipers from Commonwealth countries. Other recent publications dealing with pipers in the First World War include academic essays, for example, *Bagpipes at the Front* (Morag J. Grant, 2020) and *The Pipes Play On. Canadian Pipers at War 1914-1918* (Tim Stewart, 2000).

There are many stories to tell and many accomplishments to highlight. What follows is part of a much larger ongoing study of pipers from Canada's east coast who served overseas during both world wars, beginning with pipers in the 25th Nova Scotia Overseas Battalion.



Background

It is well known among pipers today that during the First World War, pipers were used to march soldiers to and from the front lines and would often pipe their comrades 'over the top'. In some units, pipers would compete for this honour, a tradition which originated among Scotland's highland regiments, and often permission to perform this task had to be granted by a senior officer. The toll on pipers was devastating and out of several thousand pipers from Britain and the Empire, it has been suggested that over 500 pipers were killed in action with another 600 being wounded. (This number has been enlarged recently to over 2,000 – A. Duthie, May 10, 2020).

In an effort to limit the casualties as a result of this practice it was decided to transfer the musicians to support roles. In addition to entertaining the troops, pipers and drummers were employed as messengers, stretcher-bearers, and ammunition carriers. Due to the restructuring of the role, there were many casualties among pipers who may not have been playing their comrades into battle, or have been missed in the list of those wounded/ killed appearing in the above-mentioned sources. For instance, my own piping instructor, Angus MacIntyre, served with the 24th Field Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, and saw action at several battles of the war including Vimy Ridge. He instructed many individuals to play bagpipe over his lifetime in Glace Bay. Similarly, John R. MacIsaac, a talented piper from Bein Eoin, Cape Breton was also in the field artillery but he was killed in 1915. When notice of his son's death reached his father, Rory 'Shim' MacIsaac, a piper and fiddler, he was so affected by the news he never cared to play the pipes again.

In addition, two other pipers from Cape Breton serving overseas left out of the lists were Donald J. Nicholson and Archie Andrew MacLellan. Nicholson was wounded while playing the troops of the 85th

Battalion, Nova Scotia Highlanders into action at the Battle of Lens, and died of his wounds June 29, 1917. MacLellan, was piper in the 185th Battalion, Cape Breton Highlanders, but towards the end of the war he was transferred to the Royal Canadian Regiment. He was wounded on November 10, 1918, and died from wounds on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, possibly the last 'piper' to die in that conflict.

Pipers of the 25th Battalion were often dispatched to rallying points along the line, to enable them to pipe their tired companions back to the rest camps behind the lines. In those instances where companies were split up during marches it was customary for the band to be split with two or three pipers and a drummer or two to lead individual companies. Some pipers opted to rejoin their companies and take part in the fighting for short durations, such was the case with David Brand (b. 1879), an immigrant Scot to Halifax who had served one year as a piper with the Gordon Highlanders before he immigrated to Canada. Brand had been a tailor in Halifax when he enlisted in the 25th Battalion in May of 1915 but due to his age he was evacuated back to England within two years.

25th Battalion (The fighting 25th)

Nova Scotia had already contributed men to several Canadian units with the outbreak of the First World War. One of the first infantry units raised in Nova Scotia was the 25th Battalion CEF (Canadian Expeditionary Force). Organised at Halifax in 1914, it had recruiting centres at Amherst, Sydney, Truro and Yarmouth. It was part of the much touted 'citizen's army' Canada was preparing to send to fight in Europe. The ranks of the 25th Battalion consisted mostly of farmers and fishermen, tailors and tradesmen from a variety of ethnic groups including English, Acadians, lowland Scots, and descendants of highlanders who settled in the province in the first half of the 19th century. A few of the recruits had basic military training with local militia battalions such as the 94th Regiment (Cape Breton) and the 78 Pictou Highlanders and 63rd Rifles on mainland Nova Scotia. These men were part-time soldiers, training one night a week augmented with a two week summer camp dedicated to military drill and war craft as it was practiced in the post-Boer War period.

The 25th battalion was not raised as a Highland unit, but because of the number of native Nova Scotian Gaels among its ranks, it held a strong attachment to the Highland tradition and from its very beginning this included a pipe band. In April 1918 a plebiscite was held among the NCOs and men that passed overwhelmingly in favour of re-designating the battalion as the 25th Highland Battalion (Nova Scotia) and for permission to, like members of the pipe band, wear Highland dress. Things move slow in the army, of course, and the war ended before any official action could be taken to re-name the Battalion or authorise the wearing of kilts.

Nova Scotia had a close affiliation with the music of the pipes well before war was declared in 1914. It was remarked by an officer of the 85th Battalion Nova Scotia Highlanders during the war that in Nova Scotia, "*pipe music was the favourite form of entertainment ... the people preferring it to all other kinds of music.*"



Archie A. MacLellan dressed in the uniform of the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade. (Photo: Shears Collection).

(Malcolm, p.225) The 25th Battalion had both a brass band and a pipe band, and at its height its ranks swelled to 16 pipers and eight drummers. The brass band was not so lucky and it was broken up in England before the unit was sent to France, its members sent to the ranks, or were attached to the pipe band as drummers and buglers. Casualties had been high during the war and many soldiers (and pipers) rotated through the battalion from other sections of the Canadian corps. This article will highlight the pipers who were the very first to enlist.

The benefits of highland bagpipe music on the morale of soldiers and its ability to banish fatigue in the Canadian army, is best summed up by Robert N. Clements, an officer with the 25th Battalion in his memoir, *Merry Hell*.

“The men quickly came to realize that for marching purposes on the road over long distances, the slower rhythm of the pipe music was much easier to move by than the quicker tempo of a regular brass band. For ceremonial duty on the parade ground, the short quick step of 180 to the minute with a brass band was very effective. Even when slowed down to 100 to the minute on the line of march it could just about kill you over a long distance under full load. Against this the cadence of the pipes at about eighty to ninety a minute enabled men to use a longer and easier rolling stride with much less muscle strain. Over the years, under active combat conditions, it became clearly recognized that behind the pipes entire battalions could cover ground faster, for longer distances, and arrive at their destinations in better physical shape than by any other means” (Clements, p.24).

The Scottish connection

The original pipe band consisted of both native Nova Scotians and ex-pat Scots then living in both Halifax, NS and the United States. Since the United States was not yet at war, a handful of Scottish pipers from the Boston area traveled north to Nova Scotia to enlist for overseas duty.

Mike MacDougall, Angus Campbell, and Dan Morrison represented Cape Breton and were all descended from Highland immigrants to the island in the early 19th century, The Scottish pipers included William Brand, David Brand, Arthur Lavery, James Cant, John ‘Jock’ Carson, and Walter Telfer.

Mike MacDougall (b.1891) was originally from Lewis Bay West, Cape Breton county. He was descended from immigrants from Morar, Scotland, he was the first piping instructor for the MacDougall Girls Pipe Band of Dominion, Cape Breton in the 1950s. The band, which lasted for over 40 years was named after Mike and as a further honour, the band wore the MacDougall tartan.



Pipe Band of the 25th Battalion, c. 1915. Back row, left-to-right: Mike MacDougall, William Brand, Walter Telfer, David Brand, David Neilson, Arthur Lavery, Jim Cant, Angus Campbell.



The Highland Dress Pipe Band, Boston, c. 1910 Front row: Drum Major John Maclean

Middle row: John ‘Jock’ Carson, Major MacRae, Major MacKenzie, Lt.Colonel LeCain, Captain Logan, Lieut.

Angus Campbell (b. 1886) was from Campbells Mountain, Inverness County and after the war he settled in Western Canada.

Dan Morrison (b.1883) was originally from Blues Mills, Inverness county. He immigrated to Boston before the War, and returned to Nova Scotia to enlist in the 25th Battalion, and after the conflict returned to Boston where he was active in several pipe bands.

Brothers David (mentioned above) and William Brand (b. 1897) had immigrated to Halifax Nova Scotia several years before the war. William led his company into battle at Vimy Ridge and was awarded the Military Medal (MM) for Conspicuous Gallantry. He was unscathed during most of the war but in 1918 he was near a high explosive shell that caused severe shellshock and led to his eventual discharge as being “medically unfit”.

Arthur Lavery (b. 1884) was from Shettleston, Scotland but had immigrated to Cape Breton where he was employed as a coal miner. Prior to leaving Scotland, Lavery had served for three years with the 93rd Regiment. After the war he returned to his home at Sydney Mines, Cape Breton.

James Cant was born at Dundee in 1883 and listed his occupation as boilermaker. He learned to play the pipes as a youth and at the age of 15 tried to volunteer for service in the Boer War as a piper. He was refused because of his age but later did serve with 3rd Battalion Black Watch for almost 2 years. He immigrated to New York in 1906 and later settled in Boston where he was Pipe Major of the Highland Dress Association Pipe Band. During the War, James developed severe varicose veins and was discharged as medically unfit in 1917. His wife, Mary was from Nova Scotia and after the war he spent time both in Halifax and Boston. Piping continued in the family and his two sons were pipers; Alan, who was Pipe Major of the Halifax Rifles Pipe Band, and James, who played with the Boston Legion in the United States.

John ‘Jock’ Carson (b. 1880) was originally from Greenock, Scotland and he had also immigrated to New York and later settled in Boston several years before the War. Carson, too, had previous military experience, having served eight years with the 5th Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He married Margaret MacKinnon of West Bay, Cape Breton during the early days in Halifax and in 1915 he was appointed Pipe Major of the 25th Battalion with the rank of Sergeant.

Carson was a fighting piper, and had gone over the top five times during the war for which he received three decorations. At the battle of Corcellette (Coeurcellette), the 25th was paired with 22nd regiment (The

(Cape Breton),
Pipe Major
Jim Cant,
Joe Morrison,
Duncan Grant, Pipe
Sergeant
‘Jock’ Carson.
Next row:
George Martin, Billy
Smith, Jack
Urquhart
(bass) Dan
Morrison
(Cape Breton).
The others
remain
unidentified.

MacNeil,
Dan
Morrison.
Front row:
Ronald C.
MacDonald,
Bernard
Kane,
Arthur
Muise.
(Photo:
Shears
Collection).

Vandoos) and Carson, known after the battle as “Jock, The Lone Piper of Couercelette” [sic], was shot and passed out. When he regained consciousness, he was still clutching his pipe chanter and discovered that the rest of instrument had been shot away. In 1919, H.R.H., Prince Edward, The Prince of Wales, presented him with a new set of silver mounted bagpipes on behalf of the Commanding Officer and officers of the 25th Battalion. After Carson’s death, Carson’s widow, Margaret donated the presentation bagpipe to the Province of Nova Scotia in a moving ceremony in Halifax in 1950. Carson’s son, John, played a few final tunes on the bagpipe before putting them back in the box and depositing them at the Provincial Archives. This set of bagpipes was for many years housed in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia but are now on loan to the Army Museum also in Halifax, NS.

Pipe Major Carson is credited with composing at least one pipe tune, a lament simply titled *Courcellette*. Unfortunately, this tune, which commemorates one of the toughest battles of the First World War, has been lost. The Battle of Corcellette, and the hand-to-hand fighting that ensued, reduced the overall strength of the battalion to 200 and on the battalion’s last parade in Halifax in 1919 only 48 of the ‘originals’ answered their names.

After the war, Carson remained in Nova Scotia for a short time, but eventually returned to Boston where among other jobs he was a building superintendant for Andrew Adie. Carson appears to have been lucky in war and lucky in life. In 1926 he received word that his uncle in Colorado had died and left him a sizeable inheritance, valued at \$300,000 at the time (approximately \$4 million today). After he was notified of his inheritance he made arrangements to have a friend manage his affairs and went about practicing for an upcoming event. The relatives of Carson I have corresponded with in preparing this article have only recently become aware of the inheritance in 1926 and are at a loss to explain what eventually happened to the mine, mining stock, bonds and ranch in Colorado which made up his inheritance.

Perhaps it didn’t survive the stock market crash of 1929. The Canadian War Museum in Ottawa has wonderful portrait of Pipe Major Carson painted by Margaret Fitzhugh Browne in 1932. Carson can be seen in full Highland dress but the tartan is not the tartan worn by the 25th Battalion pipe band, which was the MacKenzie of Seaforth tartan.

The last piper to be examined with Scottish connections in this article is Walter J. Telfer, or as he was later known throughout the British army “The Hero of Vimy Ridge”. He was born at Tighnabruaich, Argyllshire, in 1885. Prior to the outbreak of the war he was living in Boston with his mother and was employed as wine steward at a local hotel. He enlisted in Halifax in February 11, 1915 and on April 9, 1917 he was wounded at Vimy Ridge. The Battle of Vimy Ridge is considered by many to have been Canada’s coming of age as a country and still stands as Canada’s most important military victory.

William Brand and Walter Telfer both piped their companies into action at the Battle of Vimy Ridge and both were awarded the Military Medal. Unlike Brand, Telfer was wounded severely during the



Carson's bagpipe. (Photo courtesy of Bob MacLeod)



John 'Jock' Carson in Boston.



assault. After being struck down by shrapnel he crawled into a shell hole and continued to play his comrades to their objective. There are conflicting reports as to the tune Telfer played during the assault. One U.S. newspaper mentions *The Campbell's are Coming* while a second account mentions *The March of the Cameron Men*. It may have been either one or both during the advance since pipers would often play more than one tune. While waiting for the return of his comrades Telfer spotted a German soldier in a nearby shell hole and some discussion followed as to who was whose prisoner.

Walter
Telfer.

When the 25th Battalion withdrew from battle, they used several German prisoners to carry Telfer, pipes and all, back to the dressing station. The German prisoners kept pointing to Telfer's pipes while on the stretcher shouting "*Mitrailleuse! Mitrailleuse!* (Machine gun! Machine gun!) According to a later newspaper account, Telfer had no idea what they were saying until many years after the war.

He spent the next several hundred days in hospitals in France and England, where after numerous amputations to his right leg he was eventually outfitted with a prosthetic limb. For the rest of his life he had limited left arm function and suffered from 'ghost pain' from his right 'foot'. These hardships did not stop him from playing a few tunes for fellow patients at Cornelia Hospital in Poole, England where he convalescing in August of 1917. It may have been around this time in hospital that Mrs. E.M.E. Pratt sketched Telfer. The image is dated 1917, and depicts Telfer sitting in a chair (side on), playing pipes, his missing leg obvious in the drawing. The original image can also be found in the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.



Vimy
Ridge
today.



Walter
Telfer
from a
1917
sketch.

Telfer eventually returned to Boston and in the 1920s he was asked on several occasions to recount his exploits at various functions throughout the city, performing the "same tune on the same bagpipe" which won him so much fame and honour at Vimy Ridge. Telfer and his wife eventually moved to Everett, Washington State, where he died in 1966. The whereabouts of his pipes and service medals are currently unknown.

The 25th Battalion was one of the most decorated Canadian battalions during the First World War, and pipers played an integral role in its success.

"The 25th marched to the pipes as they moved from Boulogne to their baptism of fire at Kemmel: on the march from their ordeal at the Somme up to the Vimy sector; at Vimy itself their pipes played them over the top in a display of valor outstanding even on that day of glory; in the proudest moments of all- the triumphant entry into Bonn and the Victory March in London – the shrill defiance of the pipes seemed to symbolize the very soul of the Empire." (MacDonald and Gardner, p. 205)

Whether playing for route marches, acting as ammunition carriers or stretcher bearers, or playing their comrades "over the top", the 25th Battalion pipers (and drummers) continued to exhibit the combined

qualities of courage and gallantry during the war. The 25th Nova Scotia Overseas Battalion was officially disbanded on September 15, 1920 and its regimental colours deposited in Halifax where they are now on display at Government House.

• ***While researching the story of Walter Telfer, I was inspired to compose a tune in memory of the 'heroes' of Vimy. Canadian pipers played no small role in the advance on the ridge, whether piping or as a support capacity and these included pipers of the PPCLI, 16th Battalion, 85th Battalion and the 25th Battalion, among others.***

* ***Barry plays his tune (using a Blair electronic chanter) here:***

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Tags: 185th Battalion 24th Field Battery 63rd Rifles 78 Pictou Highlanders
94th Regiment (Cape Breton) Archie Andrew MacLellan Battle of Lens Bein Eoin
Canadian Field Artillery Cape Breton Highlanders CEF (Canadian Expeditionary Force) David Brand
Donald J. Nicholson Hero of Vimy Ridge John 'Jock' Carson John R. MacIsaac Lewis Bay West
MacDougall Girls Pipe Band of Dominion Merry Hell Robert N. Clements Rory 'Shim' MacIsaac
Walter J. Telfer