



THE PIPES OF WAR

HERO of DARGAI

GEORGE FINDLATER, VC



In the middle to late 1800's, the British were struggling to maintain their colony in India. The country had been a long established center of trade for one of history's most profitable and well-known trading enterprises: the British East India Trading Company. The company began its dealings with India around the year 1600, though it wasn't until 1757 that the British got a foothold on the subcontinent. British rule was established as the Raja, and when a famine decimated the Native population in the late 1700's, the British offered aid that secured a peaceful existence for some years to come. It wasn't until 1857 that India saw its first major conflict.

On May 10, 1857, soldiers of the British Indian Army mutinied with aid from several tribes unhappy with the British rule. A yearlong insurrection followed, known as the rebellion of 1857. It was the beginning of the end for the British Colony, which would return India to self-rule within 50 years. But before that outcome would be realized, many contentious battles would be fought.

George Findlater was born in Aberdeen Scotland in 1872. He was the son of a carpenter who did not want to see his son join the army, but at the age of 16 young Findlater ignored those wishes and enlisted. He joined the 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlander in Aberdeen. Since his childhood, Findlater had shown a particular interest in music, so it came as no surprise that after enlistment he took up instruction on the bagpipes. In 1896 he was promoted to the rank of piper.

On October 20, 1897, Findlater found himself in the northwest frontier of India (now Pakistan) where Afridi and Orakzai tribesmen were staging attacks from a hilltop stronghold known as the Heights of Dargai. This strategic position had to be taken if the British were to advance. Several other regiments including the Derbyshire and Dorsetshire had made attempts, but all had ended in failure. The task then fell to the Gordon Highlanders.

When the order to charge the Heights came through, the Pipe Major was in the rear superintending the bringing up of the reserve ammunitions. When the company advanced, it was led by five pipers, the Pipe Major remaining at his munitions duty. Lance-Corporal Piper Milne was the next most senior piper, and he led Pipers Findlater, Fraser, Wills, and Kidd into action. Later Sir William Lockhart, one of the officers, recalled that, "The Gordon Highlanders went straight up the hill without check or hesitation, headed by their pipers."

The enemy's fire was intense; almost from the start, the commanding officer, Major Macbean fell, was shot through the thigh. He drug himself behind a boulder where he sat cheering his men on. Piper Milne was struck in the chest and fell, unable to continue. Piper Findlater pressed on for nearly three quarters of the field of battle. It was there that a bullet struck him in the left ankle and he stumbled. Another bullet shattered the lowest portion of his chanter, and a final bullet passed through his right ankle, bringing him to the ground. In a situation where many would hide behind a rock and tend to their wounds, Findlater instead propped himself up against a boulder, still exposed to enemy fire, and continued to pipe his colleagues into battle. His wounds bled so profusely that his kilt was stained red and soon his pipes silenced as he slipped into unconsciousness. The Gordons, many of them greatly inspired by Findlater's actions, took the Heights in just 40 minutes. Of the five pipers who led the charge, only Piper Kidd made it to the Heights.

Findlater later wrote, “I remember the Colonel addressing the regiment, telling them what they were expected to do. I remember again the order for the regiment to attack, and the order “Pipers to the front”. I am told that the ‘Cock of the North’ was the tune ordered to be played, but I didn’t hear the order, and using my own judgment I thought that the charge would be better led by a quick strathspey, so I struck up ‘The Haughs o’ Cromdale’. The ‘Cock o’ the North’ is more of a march tune and the effort we had to make was a rush and a charge. The battle fever had taken hold of us and we thought not of what the other was feeling. Our whole interest being centered in self. Social positions were not thought of, and officers and men went forward with eagerness shoulder to shoulder. When I got wounded the feeling was as if I had been struck heavily with a stick. I remember falling and playing on for a short time; but I was bleeding profusely and in a few minutes sickened. I am told that the time I continued playing after falling was about five minutes. After the position was won, and the wounded taken to the rear, my first thoughts on recovery were how lucky I had been in getting off so easily. It never occurred to me that I had done anything to merit reward. What I did I could not help doing. It was a very great surprise when I was told that my action had been brave, and a recommendation had been made to award me the soldier’s prize - the VC.”

After being removed from the field, Findlater spent some weeks recovering in a Rawalpindi hospital. When news of his heroic acts reached Britain it caused a sensation throughout the Kingdom. He was presented the Victoria Cross from the queen herself after being transferred to the Netley Hospital in Southampton. He then received a discharge as an invalid; through he would recover quite remarkably.

Returning home Findlater found it impossible to survive on the meager pension the army provided at that time. As a result, he took an offer to perform at the Alhambra Theatre in London where hundreds lined up to see the “Hero of Dargai.” He had attained a status as a national hero and it was rumored that he was earning 15 times as much as the President of the Swiss Republic.

The War Office saw this as opportunist on Findlater’s part and openly berated their hero. He began to lose public sympathy until turning the focus on the plight of fellow soldiers whose bravery had also forced them out of the service. He pointed to pittance of a stipend the Army called a pension. Eventually through Findlater’s efforts, the government increased the soldiers’ pensions, and he retired from celebrity to become a farmer.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Findlater then 42 years old, volunteered for service. He was given the rank of Sergeant Piper with the 9th Battalion Gordon Highlanders. In 1915 he was again wounded at the Battle of Loos and was sent home where he returned to farming. He also served as Pipe Major for a local band.

On March 4th, 1942, George Frederick Findlater, VC, the Piper of Dargai, died at the age of 70 from a heart attack. His is a legacy of courage at the front lines and dedication to his fellow soldiers.



George F. Findlater, vc