



THE PIPES OF WAR
**PIPER OF
LOOS**
DANIEL LAIDLAW, VC



The Battle of Loos was one of the major British offensives launched on the Western Front in 1915 during WWI. The battle began on September 25th when the British were able to break through weaker German trenches and capture the town of Loos. It was a savage battle involving the use of 140 tons of chlorine gas. Unfortunately due to a shortage of men and artillery shells, the British could not exploit the breach they opened in the German line, and on September 28th the battle ended where it began, with the British pulling back to their original trenches.

Despite the futility of this poorly planned offensive, the men who broke the German lines and fell in the mud provided us with many examples of courage and heroism. The most famous among these stories is that of Piper Daniel Laidlaw.

The men of the 7th Kings Own Scottish Borderers (K.S.O.B.) were under heavy shell fire the morning of September 25, 1915. If that was not enough to unnerve the soldiers, a cloud of poison gas began to drift over their position. A few of the men began to cough and choke and many succumbed rapidly to the effects of the gas. The remainder were shaken by the disturbing image they saw. The commanding officer glanced over the scene as he saw Laidlaw standing with his pipes waiting orders to go 'over the top.'

"Pipe them together, Laidlaw, for God's sake, pipe them together," cried the commanding officer.

Immediately Laidlaw climbed onto the parapet and began marching up and down the length of the trench. Bullets whizzed past him, shells burst near him, but oblivious to the danger he played, "All the Blue Bonnets Over the Border." The effect it had on his company was almost magical. Seeing the men take courage, the commanding officer gave the order to advance and shouted, "Come on, Borderers, who'll be the first to reach the German trenches?"

Those not overcome by the gas swarmed up out of the trenches with bayonets bristling and followed Laidlaw into the assault. Men began falling all around him, but Laidlaw continued piping until he got near the German lines. Here he was hit and fell wounded and the officer beside him was killed. Like many other wounded pipers, he attempted to play, then managed to get up and hobble after the regiment.

For his efforts the 40 year old Laidlaw received the Victoria Cross. The official entry in the London Gazette, November 18, 1915, read:

"During the worst of the bombardment, Piper Laidlaw, seeing that his company was badly shaken from the effects of gas, with absolute coolness and disregard of danger, mounted the parapet, marched up and down and played company out of the trench. The effect of his splendid example was immediate and the company dashed out to the assault. Piper Laidlaw continued playing his pipes until he was wounded."

Laidlaw also received the French Croix de Guerre and was afterward promoted to Sergeant-Piper.

Recently on September 25, 2005, the 90th anniversary of the battle, Laidlaw's grandson, Victor Laidlaw, donated the Victoria Cross to the National Museum of Scotland. The medal is one of only 74 awarded to Scots during the First World War and arguably the most famous. Laidlaw returned home a celebrity, much like Piper George Findlater, and made several public appearances. He is also one of the only pipers of WWI ever to be filmed piping the tune he played in battle. Through his popularity he received the title, The Piper of Loos.

The Victoria Cross, of which only 1,300 have ever been awarded, and only 11 gifted to the state, is valued to be worth £100,000. It was first offered to the Borderers Regimental Museum, but politely refused they had no means to insure the famous

medal. It was also decided that the small museum located in Berwick-upon-Tweed was somewhat off the beaten tourist path where few members of the public could view such a prize. Instead the VC will go on display and the National War Museum in Edinburgh Castle.

Victor commented on the gift of the medal to the state saying, "My father was quite adamant that these things should not be hidden in vaults." Victor's father who was also a piper represented the war hero for many years at official functions like the VC centenary.

With the attention given to the display of the ultimate battlefield honor, Daniel Laidlaw will not soon be forgotten. His is the archetypical Scottish story: a warrior piper doing exactly what pipers in Scottish regiments are best known for, encouraging the men into an attack. It was said at the handover of the medal, "You can't get more of an exemplar of grace, coolness under fire, than the Piper of Loos."

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.



DANIEL LAIDLAW, VC