

# VICTORIA CROSS RECIPIENTS

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Since the introduction of the Victoria Cross in January 1856, when Queen Victoria decided to reward acts of valour during the Crimean Campaign only three medals have been awarded to pipers. The medal is the highest military decoration awarded to servicemen in Britain or some Commonwealth countries, for outstanding valour in the face of the enemy. Most have been awarded posthumously.

## **George Frederick Findlater, VC.**

George Frederick Findlater was born at Fergie, near Turriff in Aberdeenshire, in 1872. He enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders in 1888 and was posted to the 2nd Battalion with which he served in Belfast and Ceylon. Whilst serving in Ceylon in 1891 Findlater was transferred to the 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders. Four years later, in 1895, he accompanied the Battalion on the expedition to relieve Chitral, and in December 1896 he was listed as a piper.

In 1897 the 1st Battalion was part of the Tirah Expedition to North West India to protect trade routes and suppress local, hostile tribes. A point of strategic importance for the Force to surmount was the ridge or "Heights of Dargai", a rocky plateau with eroded natural ramparts occupied by the 8,000 strong Afridis tribe. On the 20th October 1897, assaults by the 1st Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment, the 2nd Battalion Derbyshire Regiment, the 2nd Battalion Ghurkhas and the Sikh Infantry, failed to gain any ground on Dargai. Early in the afternoon Colonel Mathias addressed the 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders saying, "*The hill must be taken at all costs....the Gordon Highlanders will take it!*"

The Battalion pipers, Kidd, Milne, Fraser, Wills and Findlater led the charge with Colonel Mathias at the front. Piper Findlater was wounded in both ankles during the initial charge over 150 yards of open ground from a hail of bullets from the "Heights". Nevertheless he continued to play on the bagpipes, leaning against a boulder, encouraging the Gordons up the steep mountainous slopes of Dargai.



To the sound of the pipers playing "Cock O'the North" and "The Haughs O'Cromdale" the Gordons had stormed the "Heights of Dargai" in approximately forty minutes, a climb of some 1,000 feet. By 3.15pm the Gordon Highlanders had taken and secured Dargai, and thereafter assisted in taking the wounded of all the regiments down to the hospital tents.

Findlater and the other wounded were transported to Netley Hospital in Southampton. The local newspapers and national press praised the bravery of the Gordon Highlander in this decisive attack, and when detailed reports became known Findlater was singled out for his actions in spite of severe wounds.

On the 16th May 1898 Queen Victoria visited the hospital and presented the Victoria Cross to Findlater, Lance-Corporal Vickery of the Dorsetshire Regiment and Private Lawson of the Gordon Highlanders for their gallantry on Dargai.



As a result of his wounds Findlater was discharged from the army. He earned £100 a year (compared to his £10 a year pension) for public appearances throughout Scotland giving recitals on the bagpipes to huge audiences. The issue was raised in Parliament as it was not considered appropriate for a VC recipient to be performing for the public and gaining reward as a result of the award. Findlater purchased a farm with his earnings and settled in Forglen in Aberdeenshire. However, on the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 Findlater again enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders and served with the 9th Battalion, rising to the rank of Sergeant Piper. He was discharged in 1919 and returned to Forglen and to his farm. Between 1919 and 1939 Findlater served as Pipe Major of the Turriff Pipe Band.

George Findlater, VC died of a heart attack at Forglen, Turriff, on the 4th of March 1942 at the age of 70. His Victoria Cross is displayed in the Gordon Highlanders Museum.

## **Daniel Laidlaw, VC.**

Born in 1875 in Little Swinton, Berwickshire, Daniel Laidlaw joined the 2nd Battalion, Durham Light Infantry on 11 April 1896 where he was immediately posted to India. He stayed for two years until June 1898. After returning to Britain he served in the King's Own Scottish Borderers as a piper until April 1912, when he was placed on the reserve.

Upon the outbreak of the Great War, Daniel Laidlaw re-enlisted in the KOSB on 1 September 1914 and went to France with the regiment the following June. In his own words he describes his action that resulted in him being awarded the Victoria Cross.

*"On Saturday morning we got orders to raid the German trenches. At 6.30 the bugles sounded the advance and I got over the parapet with Lieutenant Young. I at once got the pipes going and the lads gave a cheer as they started off for the enemy's lines. As soon as they showed themselves over the trench top they began to fall fast, but they never wavered, but dashed straight on as I played the old air they all knew "Blue Bonnets over the Border".*

*I ran forward with them piping for all I knew, and just as we were getting near the German lines I was wounded by shrapnel in the left ankle and leg. I was too excited to feel the pain just then, but scrambled along as best I could. I changed my tune to "The Standard on the Braes O Mar", a grand tune for charging on.*

*I kept on piping and piping and hobbling after the lads until I could go no farther, and then seeing that the boys had won the position I began to get back as best I could to our own trenches."*

[ London Gazette, 18 November 1915 ] Loos, France, 25 September 1915, No. 15851 Piper Daniel Laidlaw, 7th Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers.

*"For most conspicuous bravery prior to an assault on German trenches near Loos and Hill 70 on 25 September 1915. 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 the 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."*

Daniel Laidlaw was invested with his Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace on the 3rd February 1916.



Daniel Laidlaw was promoted to Sergeant Piper on 12 October 1917, and was eventually demobilised on 3 April 1919, with a total service of 20 years, 6 months. He died peacefully in 1950, aged 74, in Shoresedean, near Norham, Northumberland, and was buried in St. Cuthbert's Churchyard. There is also a memorial plaque within the church. A ceremony took place at St. Cuthbert's Churchyard, Norham, Northumberland, on 2nd June 2002 to place a headstone over the grave of Piper Daniel Laidlaw VC - "The Piper of Loos".

At a ceremony held at the Loos Museum, Belgium, on the 90th Anniversary of Daniel Laidlaw's brave action, his grandson Victor Laidlaw donated his grandfather's Victoria Cross and other campaign medals to Scotland's National War Museum based in Edinburgh Castle.

### **James Cleland Richardson, VC.**

James Cleland Richardson was born on 25 November 1895 in Bellshill, Scotland. His family immigrated to Canada around 1913 and settled in Chilliwack, British Columbia, where Richardson's father became the Chief of Police.

Richardson served for six months in the cadet corps of the 72nd Regiment (Seaforth Highlanders), a Vancouver unit with a prominent pipe band. When war broke out, Richardson volunteered for service and was part of the founding draft of Seaforths that made up the 16th Battalion. He arrived in France with the Battalion in February 1915 and saw significant action.

It was during the Battalion's attack on Regina Trench on 8 October 1916 that Richardson performed the incredible act that later saw him awarded the Victoria Cross. He had received permission to accompany the attack on Regina Trench but was told not to play his bagpipes until ordered to do so. When the Battalion came up against an intact barbed wire entanglement, the attack stalled and Richardson began to play in full view of the enemy. Encouraged by his example, the Battalion forced its way through the wire and made it to the trench.

Later, he was detailed to take back a wounded comrade and some prisoners, but after proceeding some distance he insisted on turning back to recover his pipes which he had left behind. Richardson was never seen alive again, and is presumed to have died on 9 October, seven weeks short of his twenty-first birthday.



After hearing about Richardson being awarded the Victoria Cross, Major G.H. Davis of the 16th Battalion wrote to Richardson's father. Davis wrote, *"He was a delightful chap, and in my company from when we left Vancouver. Never tired, however long the march was, and always ready with a willing hand to do anything and give the boys a tune, and always anxious to lead his company 'over the top'. He was a great loss to the Battalion, and I am sure greater to you. I had always hoped he would receive the V.C."*

*"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 demoralised the formation for the moment. Realising the situation, Piper Richardson strode up and down outside the wire, playing his pipes with the greatest 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 about 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."*

Richardson's death is estimated as 9 October 1916, and he was officially declared dead due to "lapse of time". His remains were recovered in 1920 and he was interred at Adanac Military Cemetery in Miraumont, France, Plot 3, Row F, Grave 36.

For almost 90 years, it was believed that Richardson's bagpipes were forever lost in the mud of the Somme. However, in 2002, Pipe Major Roger McGuire of The Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's) responded to an Internet posting and discovered that a British Army Chaplain, Major Edward Yeld-Bate, had found the pipes in 1917 and brought them back home after the war to an elementary school where he was a teacher.

An anonymous donor facilitated the purchase of the pipes on behalf of the citizens of Canada, and on 8 November of 2006, troops from The Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's) officially repatriated the pipes to Canada and placed them at the British Columbia Legislature where they are currently on public display.

Richardson's VC can be seen on display at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, Ontario.

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