

Repatriation of the Pipes of James Richardson, VC

Premier Gordon Campbell

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Check Against Delivery

Thank you all for coming today for what has got to be a celebration of heroism and of remembrance.

I want to thank Patrick Reid, Andrew Winstanley, Paul Daynes and the Canadian Club for their tireless efforts to make this day possible.

John Les and Barry Penner, our two MLAs from Chilliwack, who were in Scotland last month with Patrick Reid and Dan Richardson to receive the pipes, also deserve our thanks.

And most importantly, thank you to the Richardson family for entrusting the province with the honour of preserving and protecting this precious memory.

I also want to thank the Canadian Scottish Regiment, who have cared for the pipes since they were returned from Scotland and have delivered them here today with such honour and respect.

To all of you I say, on behalf of the people of British Columbia, thank you. Thank you for remembering, thank you for your commitment, and thank you for your efforts on behalf of all of us here in our province.

On September 23, 1914, James Richardson signed on to the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. The papers he filled out didn't indicate anything remarkable about this young man — at least, nothing beyond the fact that he was willing, like so many of his compatriots, to leave his home and country to stand up for something, to defend something, to believe in something enough to answer when he was called.

From those papers he signed, we learn that James Richardson was born in Bellshill, Scotland. He was unmarried. He was 5 feet 7 inches tall. He was fair. He had blue eyes. He had brown hair. There was nothing in that paperwork to set James Richardson apart from the other countless young people who joined up, boarded a ship and left God's country for the hell of the Great War.

But war is a place where men and women come face to face with fate and history, and all are changed, for better and for worse. The strongest souls can be broken, the most unexpected of heroes can be born, and ordinary boys from towns like Chilliwack, British Columbia, can become the most extraordinary of men.

Perhaps James Richardson had the stuff of heroes in him when he signed those papers in September of 1914. Perhaps it was there in him from his first days in Bellshill, the pride of the Scots come down through the generations. Or perhaps it was instilled in him as a young man in the still-young Dominion of Canada, a youth finding his strength as surely as this nation did in that cold, long war.

But wherever it came from, and however unremarkably his journey began, it was there amidst the wire and the mire of war that James Richardson and courage became one and the same.

It was a bitter October day. The Canadians battling at Regina Trench were held back by barbed wire and pinned by heavy enemy fire. Just imagine that for a second in this beautiful, peaceful part of our world. Imagine what that was like on that bitter October day. The Canadians were pinned down, so James Richardson stood up and began to play his pipes.

The official Victoria Cross citation reads: "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."

So it was that one young Canadian stepped forward to walk along that barbed wire, and he filled the air with that uniquely mournful, uplifting and defiant voice of the pipes. And today, in a cemetery far from here, amidst row upon row of silent stone markers, stands one engraved with his name and the image of the Victoria Cross.

For so many years the pipes he died trying to recover were thought lost. For so many years they lay unknown and unrecognized, broken and stained by the mud and blood of the Somme. But at last the pipes of James Richardson have found their way back to B.C., back to Canada and back home.

And even in their silence his pipes call to us still. They call us to uphold all that for which so many brave hearts gave up their last hurried pulse. They challenge us to be as proud of this country as James Richardson was the day he signed up. They summon us, like the voice of his generation, to be as bold in our freedom as those young men were in defending it.

Even in their silence his pipes call us still and, as the pipes so often do, their call both breaks our hearts and lifts our spirits with pride. They call us still, and they inspire us as surely as they inspired the soldiers who last heard them played.

They call us still, this silent and tattered collection of tartan and wood that today embodies all the sacrifice and heroism of a nation. They call us still, and as we approach another November 11th, they call us to remember.

As surely as the soldiers answered their call 90 years ago, we will answer their call today. These pipes will be placed here in the Legislature of the province of British Columbia not as a relic but as a tribute to all the men and women who gave so much for the freedom and justice and ideals this building was raised to uphold.

We will look upon this last precious, tangible reminder of James Richardson, and we will remember — remember all those brave souls whose stories are fading into history, but whose courage and sacrifice is reflected in the courage and sacrifice of a once-ordinary young man who will always be proudly recalled as the most extraordinary of heroes, whose courage and sacrifice is reflected in the faces and the eyes of our children today in a country that's known for its freedom, that's known for its liberty and that's known for its strength.