

Kilts and the First world war

The theme of the kilt in the Great War is reflected in this piece reproduced by kind permission of the Scottish Tartan Authority. <http://www.tartansauthority.com>

In his book "The Romantic Story of the Highland Garb and Tartan", J.G.MacKay gives us an appendix by Lt/Col Norman MacLeod from which this extract is taken. Bearing in mind the obscenely large losses of human life during World War I, this 'stiff upper lip' approach is disquieting - especially the last paragraph.

"With reference to my experience in France of the kilt as a dress in the Great War, I may say I saw service in the front line area for the best part of three years, both summer and winter. There were three reasons why I believe the kilt was fully justified as a dress on its merits;

1. the health of the troops,
2. usefulness and comfort of design
3. effect on morale.

1. There is certainly no reason for believing that kilted troops were less healthy than others, but rather the opposite, when the following advantages of the kilt are considered. In the first place, it kept the most vital part of the body, the middle, warmer than trousers. I believe some troops had body belts issued to them for this purpose, but it was generally admitted there was a difficulty in getting them worn. There was a good chance of them being thrown away, but a Highlander would not throw away his kilt.

Secondly, the great enemy to health is not cold, but wet. Any one who served in the trench system, especially in Winter, knows how often water was met with. One often had to wade through water for a certain distance. If there was little water the easiest plan was to remove the kilt and hang it round the shoulders. On the other hand, the man in trousers was wet up to his middle, for, even if the water was only knee deep it soon splashed or crept up the cloth.

When the kilt was worn regularly, the skin soon hardens, so that the legs and knees feel no more cold than the hands or the face. At the front, at night, when there was a keen frost the men often had to stand in icy water, but they apparently did not feel the cold more than the rest of their body.

The Highland Brigade claimed to have had the fewest cases of "trench foot". This I believe was partly accounted for by the use of the hose-top. It was well known that when the "putty" got wet it shrank and compressed the leg. Also, men wearing socks would put on two pairs to keep their feet warm which compressed their feet and interfered with circulation. Now, as hose-tops have no feet a man could wear two pairs without

compressing his legs or his feet and the hose tops kept his feet warm, as mittens around the wrist keep the hands warm.

2. Usefulness and comfort were proved in the freedom the kilt gave to the limbs. This was seen by the long easy stride of kilted men on the march, which made them dislike marching behind trousered regiments. The interference of trousers with the free play of the legs is, I think, proved by the number of men who cut their trousers off at the knee.

Another point which must be referred to is the case of "mustard gas". When it was first used it was expected that the Highlander would suffer badly from the effects of burning on his bare legs. But not so, the gas generally attacked the parts of the body where the skin was tender and the Highlander's legs were as tough as his hands or face. Again, a very common case of burning was accounted for by men sitting on ground saturated with gas. Now, the kilt being much thicker than trousers, meant that the gas did not penetrate so easily, and when the man stood up the kilt swinging in the air dispelled the gas more easily.

3. With reference to morale, I believe that the association of the kilt with the great deeds of valour on the part of the Highland Regiments, inspires their members. I know of no inspiration to be got from trousers.

In conclusion, it will naturally be asked what are the disadvantages of the kilt?

I can only think of one.

Going through barbed wire in the dark.

The kilt was more easily caught than trousers. At the same time a torn kilt with its pleats was not as serious a problem as a pair of torn pants!

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