

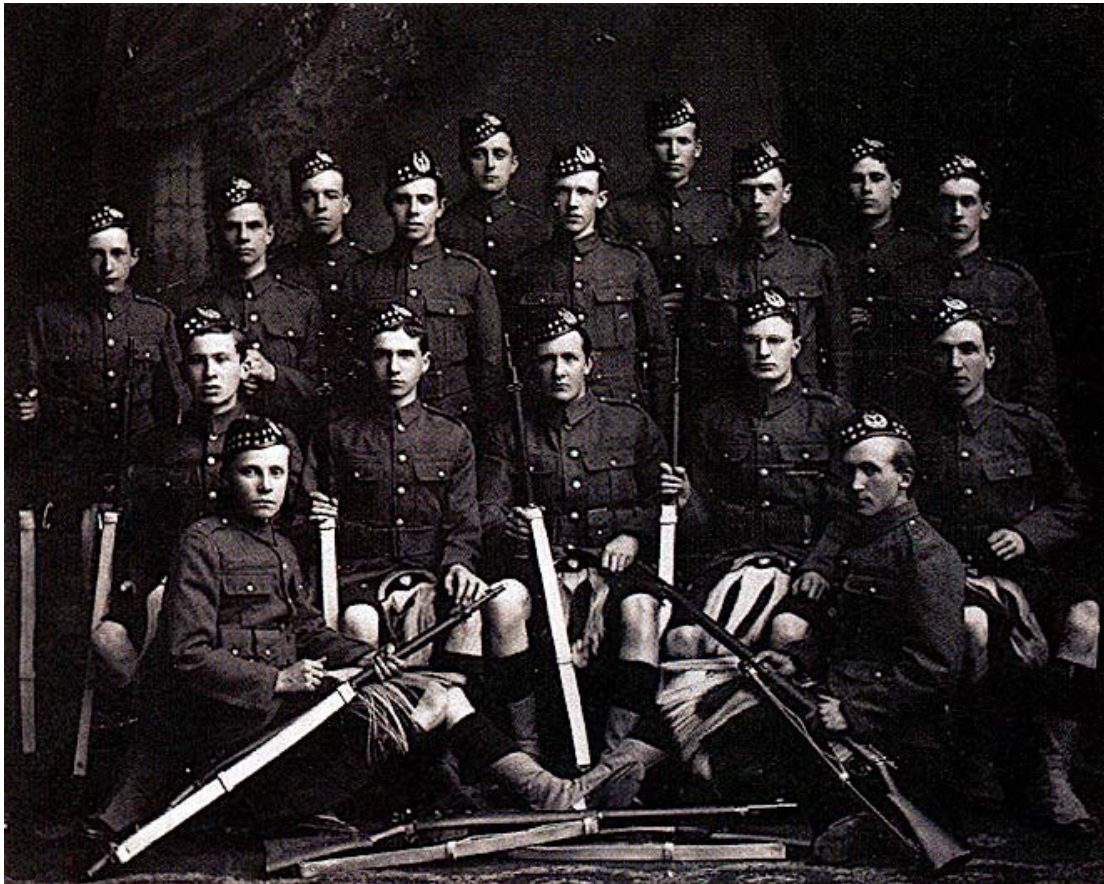
U Company (Aberdeen University Company, 4th Gordon Highlanders, 1914)

Retreat air



**U Company:** has interested me, ever since I first found out about it in my own undergraduate days. It's the only tune I have which is sad enough for the learned, witty and doomed student soldiers of Aberdeen University, few of whom survived the opening stages of the Great War. "U" Company was the University of Aberdeen Company of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders and the only university infantry company ever to go to war as a unit. They left Aberdeen in 1914. Exactly fifty years later I joined their unit as a piper and went on to become its Pipe Major. Just what was lost can be guessed from the letters and diaries reproduced in John McConachie's book *The Student Soldiers* (Elgin 1995): "During August 1914 the all-kilted Highland Division streamed into Bedford in trainload after trainload, and the skirl of the bagpipes was held throughout the land... The quiet old country town was shaken to its foundations. We doubled the population... In addition to our infantry, we had no fewer than twelve pipe bands. Bedford had known uninterrupted peace for centuries; it had suffered no invasion since the Danes arrived in their longboats and sacked the place... we shattered the calm of 700 years.

U Company, in the vanguard of this invasion, found temporary billets in the suburb of Honeyhill, and our first week there almost convinced the residents that we were semi-savages. They stood in their doorways and gaped at us when we danced an eightsome reel in the street to an accompaniment of hoochs and varsity yells...We revelled in our barbarian role and solemnly assured our hosts that the kilt was our normal civilian garb; we even had the effrontery to tell them that our wild hoochs represented the semi-articulate call of primitive ancestors, and were still used in communicating from one rocky Hielan' crag to another. 'But don't you wear longer kilts in winter'? The question came from a woman spectator and she was promptly enlightened on the point. Our landladies were equally ingenuous; they gravely showed us how to flush a lavatory and how to turn a gas-jet out- obviously fearing we might blow it out...[then to France] The boat we came over in was a cold storage boat converted at great expense into a transport. The boat alongside was a transport converted at great expense into a cold storage boat. We are a great nation."



*Members of U Company, 4<sup>th</sup> Gordon Highlanders, courtesy of Aberdeen University OTC*