

For King and Kanata ¹

by

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*"He certainly displayed war-like qualities"*²

Lt Col J.A. Currie 15th Battalion

"From a population numbering 7.88 million, over 620,000 Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) between 1914 and 1919. This number included over 4,000 Canadian Indians from a total 1914 population of 103,774 (excluding non-status Indians, Metis and Eskimos). This enlistment figure represents 35% of the male Indian population of military age, roughly equal to the percentage of Euro-Canadians who enlisted". ³

One of these First Nation soldiers was 27 year old 27220 Private William Foster Lickers who attested into the 15th Battalion (48th Highlanders) at Valcartier camp Quebec on 22 September 1914. Although he 'served as' William Foster Lickers, his actual name was Walton Foster and he was a Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Onondaga born on 10 October 1887 in Ohsweken Six Nations Reserve, Brantford Ontario. The large and well known Lickers family were one of the original settlers under the 1784 Haldimand Proclamation who had remained loyal to Britain during the American Revolution. The family had a distinguished military history having taken part in not only the War of Independence but also the War of 1812 and the Patriot Rebellion of 1837 as well as providing seven family members who served in the CEF – three of whom were KIA.

Prior to the war, William moved from the family fruit and vegetable farm in the Grimsby-Jordan Station area to Saskatchewan where he worked as a shipper-receiver for the Consolidated Rubber Company in Saskatoon. He had also served in the Militia in C Squadron of the 2nd Dragoons garrisoned at Burford Ontario and as such was one of the 3 officers and 29 other ranks from that Regiment that formed part of the original 15th Battalion at Valcartier in 1914. During the course of the war, the 2nd Dragoons would send over 1000 men to various CEF units including the 4th, 75th, 84th and 176th Battalions as well as the 4th and 8th CMR.

Although Lickers was originally in Battalion Transport "because he could handle horses", as Col JA Currie stated in his book 'The Red Watch', his official 15th Battalion Record of Services card shows him in No. 2 Company at the time of the 2nd Battle of Ypres in April 1915. No. 2 Company was the Battalion reserve positioned on the southern edge of St Julien astride the Ypres-Poelkapelle road well behind the front line. Following the initial chlorine gas attack on 22 April 1915 that collapsed French positions on the left flank of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade, the St Julian garrison, including Licker's No. 2 Company, suddenly found itself facing German attacks into the rear of the forward Canadian lines from the now open flank. Following the second gas attack on 24 April and the ensuing collapse of the Canadian front line positions

where Nos. 1, 3 and 4 Companies of the 15th Battalion were effectively destroyed, the Germans penetrated the Canadian line and increased their attacks against St Julian. Despite fierce resistance, the surrounded and vastly outnumbered St Julian garrison was overrun and its remnants surrendered at 12:45 PM on 25 April. 10 Officers and 247 other ranks surrendered. Wounded by shrapnel in his left leg and initially reported as KIA, Private William Lickers was one of No. 2 Company's surviving 2 Officers, 2 Sergeants and 36 Other Ranks all of whom became POWs.

Following capture, POWs were sent to *Kriegsgefangenlagern* (prisoner of war camps) with Officers sent to *Offizierslagern* (officer's camps) while NCMs and ORs were sent to *Mannschaftsлагern* (Enlisted Men's camps) and the facilities and conditions of imprisonment were vastly different. The 15th Battalion's Officers were mainly sent to *Offizierslager* Holzminden while Private Lickers, like the vast majority of men from the 15th Battalion, was sent to *Mannschaftslager* Gottingen - both managed by X Army Corps (Hannover).

The treatment of POWs in German camps during WW1 has been the subject of a number of well researched books (ie: *Silent Battle* by Desmond Morton, *In Enemy Hands* by Daniel Dancocks), as well as many post war POW accounts and official commission reports into the maltreatment of POWs (ie: McDougall Royal Commission). In the short space here, it would be accurate to say that although conditions might vary significantly from camp to camp, NCMs and Other Ranks endured treatment that was generally harsh with starvation, cold cramped housing, beatings, forced labour and acts of brutality being commonplace. Men deemed to be 'troublemakers' for a host of reasons including attempting to escape or refusing manual labour in the case of NCMs, were routinely sent to even harsher facilities for punishment.

Supported by the testimony of numerous POW eyewitnesses who were "*unanimous in declaring he (Private William Lickers) was subjected to most deliberate and heartless cruelty, far in excess of that received by other prisoners*", the McDougall Royal Commission determined his treatment was "*aroused by the special vindictiveness of his captors by reason of his nationality.*" Lickers was moved from Gottingen to the much harsher camps at Celle, Soltau, Hameln and the notorious salt mines at Beienrode near Gottingen for two years! His brutal treatment included severe beatings (including beatings with rifle butts and rubber hose), being tied hanging on posts and standing at attention for extended periods, solitary confinement, forced labour when ill and refusal of medical treatment.

In the fall of 1931 The McDougall Royal Commission on Maltreatment of Prisoners of War was conducting hearings across Canada listening to the claims of former prisoners seeking reparations. The Commission found that Licker's case was "*particularly distressing*" and that as a result of the brutal treatment he received as a POW, he was "*a physical wreck....wholly incapacitated*" and suffering "*great pain which can only be relieved at times by the administration of narcotics*". As a direct result, and despite already being the recipient of a full military pension, the Commissioner determined that Lickers was entitled to an additional award of \$3000---the highest award for reparations the Commission was authorized to award!

Private Lickers had been repatriated to and interned Holland on 13 June 1918 and from there to the UK on 4 Nov 1918 where he was hospitalized at the Canadian General Hospital, Orpington suffering from osteoarthritis and myalgia . He married in England before his eventual return to Canada, was demobilization on 11 April 1919 and returned to the family fruit farm in Grimsby. William Lickers died of lobar pneumonia at Christie Street Hospital in Toronto on 18 April 1938 and is buried in the veteran's section of Queen's Lawn Cemetery, Grimsby.

"I will faithfully do my duty to the last"⁴

Private William Lickers, 15th Battalion



Pte William F. Lickers, Holland 1918 Grave of William Lickers, Queen's Lawn Cemetery



15th Battalion POWs: forced labour party at the Beienrude salt mine



15th Battalion Transport Section at West Down camp south, UK 1914. Pte Lickers still in his 2nd Dragoon uniform is standing second from the right



15th Battalion POWs from Gottingen camp working at the Beienrude salt mine. Pte Lickers, in the kilt, is standing on the extreme left

Footnotes

1. For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and The First World War, Timothy Winegard
2. The Red Watch: With The First Canadian Division in Flanders, JA Currie
3. For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and The First World War, Timothy Winegard
4. Letter from William Lickers to Gladys Drope 6 March 1915, Brock University Library