

## **The History of the “Reel of the Fifty-First Division”**

**By Gillian Bagwell**

One of the most spectacular Allied successes of World War II was the evacuation of more than three hundred thousand British, French, and Belgian troops from Dunkirk between May 27 and June 4, 1940. The men had been cut off and surrounded by the German army, and would have been slaughtered or captured if not for a hastily assembled flotilla of more than eight hundred military and civilian vessels, which achieved what became known as the Miracle of Dunkirk.

Among the troops fighting to hold off the Germans and make the evacuation possible were the Seventh and Eighth Battalions of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, part of the Fifty-First Highland Division. Their officers read them these orders: “You will hold this position; you will either be killed, wounded or made a prisoner of war.”

At 3 p.m. on June 5, twenty-six-year old Lieutenant J. E. M. Atkinson of the Seventh Battalion, surrounded by German troops who had just shot off his wristwatch, surrendered near the French town of Saigneville. He was not alone. After Dunkirk, the Fifty-First Division was charged with recapturing the Abbeville bridgehead on the Somme, but they were overwhelmed and suffered heavy casualties, and on June 12, their commander Major General Victor Fortune surrendered at St. Valéry-en-Caux. In *The General Danced at Dawn*, George Macdonald Fraser tells of the remnants of his regiment of the Gordon Highlanders singing “We’re No Awa’ to Bide Awa’” “as they waited for the end.”

The captured Highlanders were marched a thousand miles to Oflag VII-C prison camp at Laufen Castle near Salzburg. Scottish country dancing had been a regular part of Jimmy Atkinson’s life at home, and he later recalled that during the long march, “I started thinking about dance tunes to keep my mind clear of grisly thoughts, and I began to get this idea for a dance” that would symbolize Scotland and the Highland Division. The figures that came to his mind were based on the diagonals of the St. Andrew’s Cross on the badge of the Fifty-First Division.

Also marching to Laufen was Lieutenant Peter Oliver of the Fourth Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders. At the prison camp, he started a reeling club which met three times a week after lunch on the roof of the prison hospital. He and Atkinson worked on the dance, along with Lieutenant Colonel Tom Harris Hunter, CO of the Royal Army Service Corps, who had been chairman of the Perth branch of the Scottish Country Dance Society (not yet royal!). The composition included figures from the dances “Scottish Reform” and “Hamilton House.” Eventually, written on “a scruffy bit of paper,” was:

5 set 51 Division

1-4 First couple set & cast off 3 places

5-8 Lead up to (top?) to corners

9-12 First couple set to first corner, turning by right

13-14 First couple, second man & third lady balance in a diagonal line  
(Scottish Reform)  
15-16 First couple turn left hand to second corners  
17-20 First couple set & turn corners by right hand  
21-22 First couple, third man and second lady balance in a diagonal  
line (Scottish Reform)  
23-24 First couple turn to own side, second place  
25-28 Six Hands round  
29-32 Back Again  
Repeat

At first, the men had to dance to their own whistling because the Germans had confiscated or destroyed their bagpipes. Later, the Red Cross sent bagpipe chanters, and eventually someone managed to get an accordion.

Another difficulty was that the Germans moved some of the prisoners to other locations. But the main players were reunited at OFLAG VII-B at Warburg in Westphalia in autumn 1941, and on Halloween, in the number 2 dining hall, the dance was performed publicly for the first time, honoring Fortune, the senior British officer in captivity, who had done much to get better conditions for his men. He approved the dance's first name, the "Fifty-First Country Dance."

Atkinson and Hunter both included instructions for the dance in letters home. The Germans intercepted Jimmy's missive and thought that the notation used to describe the dance was code. The men demonstrated the dance for a German officer. "I think they thought we were completely mad," Atkinson recalled, "but the steps got through to Harris Hunter's wife in Scotland."

Mrs. Hunter was secretary of the Perth branch of the SCDS, and it took up the dance. She printed and distributed a few copies, and soon began receiving requests for it. As one Highlander recalled, "scarcely a community in the Highlands and Northeast was untouched" by the capture of most of the Fifty-First Division, about ten thousand men, and the stirring story behind the dance fueled its popularity in wartime Britain. The unconfirmed story goes that Queen Elizabeth (mother of the present queen) urged the SCDS to publish the dance even though it didn't conform to the society's standards, and that the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret danced it in 1942.

In 1945, the SCDS did publish the dance, which had also been known as the "Laufen Reel" and "St. Valéry's Reel," under the name by which it is known today, the "Reel of the Fifty-First Division." The dance was adapted for a four-couple set to conform with SCDS standards, and the dancers no longer cast off three places.

The prisoners danced to "My Love She's but a Lassie Yet." Piper Hector Ross of the Fourth Battalion of the Seaforths composed a 6/8 tune for the dance, but it has been lost. In late 1944, Dugald Stewart of the Eighth Argylls also composed a tune, but it didn't arrive in the UK in time to be published with the dance. It was probably in Perth during the war that "The Drunken Piper"

was first used, and it became the standard, sometimes in medleys with other tunes, frequently including “The Black Bear.”

Major General Fortune had a stroke in 1944, but refused to be sent home along with other injured and older officers. He was liberated along with the other Highlanders in April 1945 and was soon given the Order of the British Empire (KBE) and knighted.

Jimmy Atkinson went home to Alloa, Clackmannanshire and his job in a paper mill, married Heather Young, and raised four children. He lived to see a BBC documentary about his dance, which aired around St. Andrew’s Day in November 1996. According to his obituary, this “charming man with a twinkling sense of humour...was always mildly amused and bemused by the worldwide success of the dance. ‘I just hope I brought a little happiness to people,’ he said.”

The “Reel of the Fifty-First Division” remains one of the most popular Scottish country dances. When the actor Hugh Grant was on the TV show *Desert Island Discs*, he named the “Reel of the Fifty-First Division” as one of his selections: his grandfather had been in the reeling club at Laufen. The dance is sometimes performed by sets of ten men, as it was originally danced by the Highland prisoners of war.

**Gillian Bagwell** is the author of three acclaimed historical novels: *The Darling Strumpet*, based on the life of Nell Gwynn, seventeenth-century actress and mistress of Charles II; *The September Queen*, the story of Jane Lane, who risked her life to help the young Charles II escape after the Battle of Worcester; and *Venus in Winter*, which covers the first forty years of the life of the formidable four-times widowed Tudor dynast. Gillian lives and dances in Berkeley, California, and is at work on her fourth novel. Since learning the story of the “Reel of the Fifty-First Division,” she has added to her list of future writing projects a play about the events surrounding the creation of the dance. Please visit her website, [www.gillianbagwell.com](http://www.gillianbagwell.com), for links to her research blogs and other articles, and more on her books and upcoming events.

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