

*“They Should Vanish Into Thin Air ... and Give no Trouble”:
Canadian Aboriginal Veterans of World Wars*

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Canadian Aboriginal People have a long history of military service. It begins with military traditions of particular tribes in pre-contact era and carries through various wars fought on behalf of the French and the British throughout the colonial period, when alliances with the Indians helped to keep the balance between the rival imperial powers. Although the role of Aboriginal warriors began diminishing because of demographic reasons in the second half of the 18th century, certain tribes, especially the Iroquois, became deeply involved in the conflict between Great Britain and the thirteen rebel American colonies (Dickason and McNab, 2009, p. 154-155). In subsequent years the War of 1812-1814 was the last conflict fought between the colonial powers in America in which Aboriginal military contribution was of vital importance (ibid., p. 189). Nevertheless, the support of First Nations' soldiers and individual tribes was also sought and appreciated in later conflicts, before and after Confederation - the rebellions of Upper and Lower Canada (1837 and 1838); the Red River (1869-1870); and the North-West (1885) (Winegard, 2012, p. 8-9).

The realities of colonial life and the necessity to rely on Indigenous allies helped to develop “distinct approach to war” in North America (Horn, 2006, p. 21), which the

French called “la petite guerre.” This form of guerrilla warfare stood in opposition to the European conventions based on rigid discipline, military drill, division into units and ranks, strict regulations, and preservation of formations under even the heaviest fire (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 187). The Indigenous way of war was based on cunning marksmanship, use of cover, sudden ambushes and raids, small unit tactics, independent actions, and avoidance of unnecessary casualties. First Nations warriors were used to extreme fatigue and hardships, presented endurance in the face of torture from the enemy hands, yet remained “fiercely independent” (Horn, 2007, p. 2) and unlikely to “maintain untenable positions” (Dickason, 2006, p. 13). Officers of European descent had to acculturate to such way of fighting and accept the individualism of Indigenous warriors, for whom “withdrawal was not a flight, nor a disgrace, it was a means of falling back to occupy a better position” (Horn, 2006, p. 31).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Aboriginal peoples – decimated by disease and pushed aside into reservations – no longer mobilized under their own military leadership. Some of them, however, began enlisting in the Canadian military as individuals. In this way First Nations soldiers went to fight overseas - 86 status Indians from Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba were recruited as *voyageurs* for 1884-1885 Nile Expedition under General Wolseley. Some indigenous soldiers also served with the Canadian contingent in South Africa during the Boer War, but the exact number is unknown because the racial origin of the volunteers was not recorded (Lackenbauer et al, 2010, p. 111-112).

At the beginning of the First World War, amidst war fervor, with high enlistments by volunteers of European descent, recruitment officers were unwilling or reticent to accept First Nations and Métis men. The Government feared that Aboriginal soldiers, stereotypically associated with savage and cruel Indians, would be refused “the privileges of civilized warfare” by the Germans (Walker, 1989, p. 4). Even though in 1914 and at the beginning of 1915 the official policy was not to enlist Indigenous and other visible minorities men, some Indians (especially non-status ones) who were anxious to participate managed to slip through recruitment procedures. Again, the exact numbers are unknown (Winegard, 2012, p. 5-10).

By the end of 1915, after Canadian units had sustained heavy casualties during the battles of Ypres, Festubert and Givenchy, sending reinforcements for the contingent

fighting in Europe became a matter of utmost importance. Enlistment restrictions were loosened and Indian recruitment was authorized. Military authorities hoped to use Indigenous soldiers' "natural" talents as scouts and marksmen. Proposals to form segregated Indigenous units were not implemented, so Indian recruits were distributed in various battalions, including the 114th from Ontario and 107th from Winnipeg in which approximately 50% of the soldiers were Aboriginal (Walker, 1989, p. 14; Bell, 1996, p. 73).

The Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for 1918-19, covering the First World War, announced that:

more than four thousand Indians enlisted for active service with the Canadian Expeditionary forces. This number represents approximately thirty-five per cent of the Indian male population of military age in the nine provinces, and it must be remembered, moreover, that there were undoubtedly cases of Indian enlistment which were not reported to the department (1920, p. 13).

Indigenous people's decisions to enlist were motivated by various, sometimes intertwining factors. Some volunteers decided to follow friends, while some looked for adventure and wanted to prove that "fighting spirit of my tribe was not squelched by reservation life" and show "all the bravery of our warriors of old" (Mountain Horse, 1979, p. 144). For many economic considerations were important, with upkeep and regular pay a key attraction. Another reason could also be the desire to fight for full citizenship through demonstration of loyalty to the Canadian state (Walker, 1989, p. 25). It should be remembered, however, that First Nations' support for war effort was not unanimous throughout the country (Talbot, 2011, p. 97-98). When the government introduced conscription in 1917 many band councils, especially in the West, insisted that the treaties that they had signed with the Crown exempted First Nations men from compulsory military service. Facing protest, the Government issued a special Order in Council in 1918 confirming that men of Indian descent were excluded from compulsory service, but qualified that they could be called to perform non-combat duties in Canada (Lackenbauer et al., 2009, p. 128; Talbot, p. 2011, 101-103).

A lack of formal education meant that most First Nations men were recruited into infantry or forestry and railway construction battalions. A few managed to advance to the rank of non-commissioned officers, but few were commissioned as officers during the

war (Lackenbauer and Mantle, 2007, p. 129). Yet the idea that Indians possessed innate martial talents remained deeply rooted, and the army especially appreciated most Indigenous soldiers' familiarity with firearms, patience, stamina, camouflage techniques and survival skills connected with life close to nature. Thus many Aboriginal soldiers became reconnaissance scouts, messengers between the lines or sharpshooters¹, sent to operate on no man's land or even behind the enemy lines (Summerby, 2005, p. 9-12). This belief in the special abilities of Indigenous soldiers meant that many of them were pushed into the most dangerous situations in combat, resulting in a high casualty and death rate among them (Carroll, 2008, p. 104-105).

In post-war reports Aboriginal soldiers were described as "second to none in daring and intrepidity," "prepared to give their life for their country without compulsion," commended highly for their "courage, intelligence, stamina and discipline," and their performance evaluated as a "ringing rebuttal to the familiar assertion that the red men has deteriorated" (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 13). The Department of Indian Affairs had a vested interest in publicizing information about successful status Indian soldiers as vindication of its work and assimilation programs. Nevertheless, reports contain fragments in which officials expressed their utmost astonishment that most Native men managed to find their place in the military environment, despite poor knowledge of language of command and the necessity to adapt to totally alien environment.

Many of these first came into contact with civilization as a result of joining the forces and a number of them were unable to speak a word of English. It is remarkable how rapidly these Indians became smart, well disciplined soldiers and how well they adapted themselves to surroundings entirely new to them (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 27).

According to casualty lists more than 300 status Indians were killed during the First World War (Lackenbauer and Mantle, 2007, p. xiv). The real toll amongst Indigenous soldiers is difficult to estimate, however, as fallen non-status and Métis soldiers were not

¹ Francis Pegahmagabow and Henry Louis Northwest were the ones credited with the largest numbers of shot enemies. Among First World War aboriginal snipers "Riel, a grandson of the famous rebel Louis Riel," is mentioned with 38 "notches" in the *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31, 1919*. The very same report lists a large number of Indian soldiers awarded various medals for outstanding service (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 13-20, 26-27).

included in these official statistics. Additionally, even though the Department of Indian Affairs was aware that “the Indians are especially susceptible to tuberculosis and many of their soldiers who escaped shells and bullets of the enemy succumbed to this dreaded disease upon their return to Canada as a result of the hardships to which they were exposed at the front” (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 14), it kept no official records of TB victims. Similarly, no consistent statistics were compiled concerning severely injured veterans who died shortly after the return to Canada or those who succumbed to Spanish flu, although the problem was mentioned in Department of Indians Affairs Report for year 1919 (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 13-20).

Indian Affairs reports for 1918, 1919, and 1920 evaluate Indigenous communities’ involvement in the war very favorably. “The Indians of Canada may look with just pride upon the part played by them in the great war both at home and on the field of battle,” Deputy Superintendent General for Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott boasted in the report for 1919. “They have well and nobly upheld the loyal traditions of their gallant ancestors who rendered invaluable service to the British cause in 1776 and in 1812” (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 14). Nevertheless, the war did not change the legal, social, or economic status of First Nations. Indians remained the wards of the Crown, deprived of the basic privileges of other citizens, especially the right to vote, even though First Nations soldiers could vote while they were serving overseas.

Communities received returning First Nations veterans enthusiastically. Special welcome ceremonies were organized, sometimes combined with erection of monuments or plaques to honor the fallen. Yet, Indians soon learned that upon return to Canada they were subject to the provisions of the *Indian Act* and their enlistment and sacrifice changed nothing in their social position, nor did it give them equal access to veterans’ benefits (Dickason, 2006, p. 222). Those who wanted to obtain pensions or apply for vocational courses stipulated in the *Pension Act* had to apply to their Indian Agents first, who might or might not be sympathetic or willing to take action on their behalf (Brownlie, 2003, p. ix).

The problem of application for benefits on behalf of Indians had surfaced during the war. Initially, families of Aboriginal soldiers were considered ineligible for Canadian Patriotic Fund benefits, even though First Nations communities across Canada made

substantial contributions to it.² The federal government argued that it already maintained Indians and they did not require additional support. Because of protests voiced by some Indian agents the problem was finally resolved in the spring of 1917 and the first benefits awarded to the closest relatives of First Nations soldiers soon thereafter (Winegard, 2012, p. 146). Nonetheless, the Department of Indian Affairs kept “close track of the dependants of Indian soldiers,” controlling whether pensions and benefits were “judiciously expended” (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 26). In many cases the money was never transferred to members of soldiers’ families, with Indian Affairs asserting that “recipients might not be in position to deal with the full allowances themselves” (Department of Indian Affairs, 1918, p. 15). Instead, Indian agents decided how such money should be used. Only a small fraction would be paid to volunteers’ families and the gross amount was accumulated in special accounts, which officials oversaw and administrated for later spending “on behalf of the children of Indian soldiers ... to give them a splendid start in life” (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 26). The government never investigated how much of this money vanished either by bad administration or simple fraud.

Disparate treatment of Aboriginal veterans was visible in the federal government’s unwillingness to award them any other forms of relief apart from disability pensions. If any additional support was granted, it usually did not exceed half of the sum “allowed on the white side” (MacDowall, 2015, p. 206). Disability pensions paid to Aboriginal and non-aboriginal soldiers alike, were also meager. Because the Canadian government was afraid of building a privileged class of politically influential veterans similar to Union combatants after the American Civil War, after the First World War its disabled soldiers were offered pensions which would not exceed average monthly income “unskilled but healthy and willing man can always secure in the general market for labor” (Todd, 1919, p. 501). A very strict qualification system governed payments and many claims were rejected when former soldiers could not prove definitively that their injuries were war-related. Although entitled to identical pensions for identical injuries, First Nations veterans, particularly those living on the reserves, had less opportunity for the Board of

² Allowances from Patriotic Funds were awarded to the families in need, which financial situation deteriorated substantially because of the enlistment of the main breadwinner. Amounts were established by local officials depending on the costs of life in a given area (Morris 1920, 8-9).

Pension Commissioners to examine their medical condition if health problems surfaced after demobilisation.

Indian soldiers did not capitalise on the second cornerstone of Canadian First World War veteran care system – the soldier settlement plan – either. Those who wanted to obtain land offered to veterans on the basis of *Soldier Settlement Act* faced substantial difficulties. This act directed that soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, disabled veterans who had been awarded pensions, and soldiers serving in the allied armies who had lived in Canada before the war, could purchase a farm or apply for a 160 acre land grant, paying only 10% of its overall value, which could not exceed \$4500. The remaining part of the loan was to be paid back over 20 years at 5% interest. Additional loans for purchase of equipment, life stock or construction of a house or farm buildings could also be obtained (Morton and Wright, 1987, p. 143, 146; *Soldier Settlement on the Land*, 1920, p. 12-17). The Department of Indian Affairs, however, administered the *Soldier Settlement Act* (SSA) for returned Indian soldiers, claiming that such a move would help to ensure optimal and efficient operation of the program on reserves. “The Indian Agents throughout the Dominion have the personal knowledge of the capabilities and needs of Indian returned soldiers belonging to their respective agencies,” an official report insisted, “and are, therefore, able to supply the information and assistance required in the same manner as the qualification committee, field agents, inspectors, etc. under the *Soldier Settlement Act*, thus reducing the cost of the work to a minimum” (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 29).

This approach blocked Indian veterans from making their own decisions. The fate as well as range of their applications for loans stipulated in the *SSA* depended largely on the discretion of Indian agents. First Nations soldiers applying for any type of loan (to buy a land plot, to pay off encumbrances on the land used, to build or repair farm buildings, or to buy equipment or life stock) had to fill in two forms which the Indian agent verified prior to forwarding them to DIA headquarters in Ottawa. The third document, known as “Confidential Report,” allowed the Indian agent to make “definite recommendation for or against the granting of the loan with his reasons therefor” (Scott, 1919, p. 5). The opinion of Indian agent was decisive. For example, when Francis Pegahmagabow (the most renowned Indian sharpshooter of the war) applied for a loan under the *Soldier Settlement Act* in 1919, he was denied it owing to the negative opinion

of his Indian agent who wrote: "I am sure he will never make a farmer and to encourage him to take out a loan for that purpose is only making trouble for himself and the department in the future" (Hayes, 2009).

On average First World War Aboriginal veterans received only half of the median loan given to non-Aboriginal soldier settlers (Brownlie, 1998, p. 184-186). This meant smaller and lower quality land plots, outdated equipment, and fewer livestock. The Department of Indian Affairs, which "endeavored to keep the loans as low as possible in order not to burden the settler with too large repayment; but in all cases he has been given sufficient to secure everything he needs," dictated this discriminatory policy (Department of Indian Affairs, 1920, p. 29).

Determining where Indian veterans should and would get their plots was contentious. Initially the Department considered enfranchising Indian soldiers, which would allow them to buy land or farms outside the reserves (Lackenbauer et al, 2010, p. 133). Because of protests against compulsory enfranchisement, however, officials decided that former soldiers of Indian descent should be provided land plots on the reserves - it would be more convenient for the Indian agents, and would free up more "idle" land off-reserve for non-indigenous applicants³. On the basis of an amendment to the *Indian Act* introduced in 1919, reserve land could be made available to for Indian veterans without the consent of band councils. The DIA's annual report for 1920-21 lists 330 applications for loans received and 180 granted (DIA, 1921, p. 16). By 1927 the number of settled Indian veterans rose to 224, out of the estimated 4000 men who enlisted (Carter, 1999). DIA trumpeted success, claiming that "every encouragement has been given," "the workers everywhere have been kept under constant supervision," "the crops have been uniformly good" and Indian veterans "have met their payments in a very satisfactory manner" (Department of Indian Affairs, 1921, p. 16). The reality, especially in the face of unstable post-war economic conditions, proved much harsher than this intimated. Veterans started farming too late to benefit from record prices of agricultural produce which had prevailed during the war. Among more than 24 000 non-aboriginal veterans who entered soldier settlement program, 50% had gone bankrupt by 1930 and the onset of the Great

³ As there was not enough fertile and easily accessible land in for non-aboriginal soldiers, the government began obtaining Indian reserve land for them. Particular bands, especially in the west, were approached and asked to surrender their land for this patriotic purpose (Carter 1999).

Depression (Morton, 1998, p. 26). There are no comparable records about the success rate among Indian veterans in 1920s and 1930s, and certainly no indications that their situation was better – although their legal status precluded them for bankruptcy and losing their farms akin to non-aboriginal farmer.

Many Canadian First Nations soldiers hoped that their participation in the war would help Indians to achieve greater autonomy, more control of their own affairs, and improved social and economic standing. DIA officials predicted that “the return of the Indian soldiers from the front will doubtless bring about great changes on the reserves” as they were “broadened by contact with the outside world and its affairs,” “mingled with the men of other races,” and “witnessed the many wonders and advantages of civilization.” They also hoped that overseas experiences would convince Indian soldiers to abandon their Indian identities and status, leaving them less “content to return to their old Indian mode of life” (Scott, 1919, p. 327). Contrary to the wishes of Indian Agents and DIA officials, however, most returned combatants firmly opposed attempts of depriving them of their Indian status. Increased awareness did not lead them to overall rejection of Indian traditions and culture. Instead, they did not want to return to the patronizing attitude, lack of political and economic opportunities, and limited range of civil, political and legal rights that First Nations faced in Canadian society. Moreover, the army afforded them a chance to encounter other Indigenous people from across the country with whom they could share and compare their experience. This led to the first, broad-scale attempts to organize Indians to fight for social and political rights.

Many First Nations veterans were convinced that, having served their country overseas, they were in stronger position to present their grievances and concerns publicly. In 1919, Canadian Forestry Corps lieutenant Fred Loft, a Mohawk veteran from Ontario, founded the first national Indian political organization in Canada - League of Indians, which by 1922 managed to gain strong support of First Nations across the country, particularly in the West (Kuchylski, 1988, p. 99-101). During its twenty years of existence, the League lobbied for solutions to the most pressing problems among Indian communities - preservation of hunting, trapping and fishing rights, an end to pressure for reserve-land surrenders, abolition of pass system, the right to perform traditional ceremonies, greater control of Indians over band funds and property, educational and healthcare programs, and economic aid (Ray, 2016, p. 319; Winegard, 2011, p. 243).

Fred Loft and other veterans involved in the League believed that uniting Indians from various bands in a strong political organization could be instrumental in challenging the *Indian Act* and Indian Affairs policy more generally. DIA officials shared this belief, viewing the League as a threat to the *status quo* in government Indian policy. Attempts to undermine Loft and the other activists' authority included obligatorily enfranchisement or accusations of "bolshevik," anti-government activism (Pettipas, 1994, p. 168). To prevent effective operation of any pan-Indian forum, special amendments to the *Indian Act* were introduced which made it illegal for the bands to collect and donate funds for Indian political activism and, eventually, forbade any form of such activism altogether (Winegard, 2011, p. 244). These coercive state actions, coupled with difficulties in maintaining communication between remote reserves, broke the unity of Indian groups engaged in creating the League which subdivided into smaller organizations (such as the League of Indians of Western Canada, Indian Association of Alberta, and Union of Saskatchewan Indians).

Fewer First Nations soldiers enlisted in the Canadian military during the Second World War. Indian Affairs listed 3090 status Indians who served (Lackenbauer and Mantle, 2007, p. xix). The exact number of non-status and Métis soldiers remains unknown, yet it has been estimated that the total number of Aboriginal people in Canadian military during WWII was not higher than 6000 (Dickason and McNab, 2009, p. 300). Most of Native soldiers were volunteers. Many Indian groups protested that in the eye of the treaties their ancestors had signed, as wards of the state, they were not subject to compulsory military training or service. Additionally, the geographic isolation of many potential Indigenous conscripts, their poor health, and limited knowledge of English and French posed problems during the mobilization process. In the face of Indigenous protests, the Canadian government decided to relieve members of First Nations that had signed Treaties no. 3, 6, 8 and 11 from compulsory overseas service. Nevertheless, all Status Indians fit for military service could be conscripted for home defence (Stevenson 1996, p. 211-212, 224-225; Summerby, 2005, p. 22). Lower interest in enlistment among Indigenous people during the Second World War can be attributed to several factors: opportunities to secure a relatively well-paying job in an expanding wartime economy in Canada; educational, health, and racial barriers introduced by the Royal Canadian Air Force and the Royal Canadian Navy (which usually limited

Aboriginal applicants to the Army) (Sheffield 1996, p. 9-10); and lingering resentment of disadvantaged Indian veterans of the First World War.

Once again Indigenous people served mainly in land forces, where there were no particular restrictions concerning education, origins or social class. As had been the case in the First World War, no segregated ethnic units were formed. Aboriginal people served in diverse capacities and were given relative freedom in deciding on their military trade. Many became snipers, messengers, and led reconnaissance patrols, but other options were open as well, with Indigenous soldiers serving as gunners, sappers, cooks, truck drivers, technicians (RCAP, 1996, p. 545). Although military cryptography was an important area where American Indian soldiers contributed to the US war effort, serving as radio operators and code talkers creating codes based on their native tongue, this phenomenon was rather limited in Canadian forces, with only a few Cree soldiers serving briefly in the capacity with the US Air Force in 1942. Because an insufficient number of Aboriginal soldiers fluent in English and speaking the same dialect were available in the Canadian Forces, the Canadian military never established its own, separate code-talking unit (Meadows, 2007, p. 185-187). Testimonies of Aboriginal veterans, quoted in Final Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), show that although many of them often felt lonely in an alien culture, military training and experience bolstered self-confidence. "For years I believed I was no good, that I wasn't level with anybody else," one veteran recalled. "Over there, on the battlefields, I learned I was just as good as anybody" (RCAP, 1996, p. 544). They did not feel discriminated against while serving in the armed forces, but encountered it once again upon their return to Canada. As one of Second World War veterans summed up: "When I served overseas I was Canadian, when I came home, I was just an Indian" (Ibid, p. 545).

During the Second World War Canadian authorities prepared a comprehensive system of veteran care commonly known as the *Veterans Charter*. It was designed to give more than a million of former soldiers the unprecedented chance of personal development and social advancement after the end of the conflict. The Department of Veterans Affairs learned lessons from mistakes made after the previous war and did everything to avoid formation of another "lost generation." As outlined in a special leaflet titled "Back to Civil Life," which was prepared to explain the provisions of *Veterans Charter* in clear and simple way, "the responsibility of the Government [is] to provide and

administer legislative machinery designed to prevent them [veterans] from being penalized through their war service" (paragraph 7). This set of federal government programs, aiming at providing the fullest possible care for the dependents of the fallen as well as rehabilitation to civilian life of all surviving Canadian Force members, became a building block for the Canadian welfare state. Its provisions introduced a comprehensive medical plan (treatment, rehabilitation), pensions for the disabled, grants to cover the costs of education (vocational or university level), subsidies for starting a business, preferential loans for land purchase, unemployment benefits, re-establishment credits, and even clothing allowances (*Back to Civil Life*, 1946, p. 240-290).

As in every complex set of legal solutions, the Veterans Charter was not free of mistakes and shortcomings. In the case of First Nations veterans, their fight for the services and benefits enjoyed by non-indigenous Canadian veterans took more than half a century. Discriminatory practices towards Aboriginal servicemen and their families came to light already during the war, beginning with the dependants' allowance. Upon enlistment Indian volunteers were assured that their soldier's pay will be augmented with a dependants' allowance (separation allowance for the wife and additional money for each child), which oscillated around \$55 a month (Innes, 2007, p. 41). Over the course of the conflict, however, many Indian agents asserted that this money was "a great deal more than they [the dependants] actually needed" (RCAP, 1996, p. 548), prompting Indian Affairs to limit the scope of this assistance. First, children of an enlisted status Indian would not be considered eligible for the allowance while attending a residential school. Second, Indian agents could arbitrarily decide that the wife of an Indian soldier was able to live on a smaller amount of money and the remaining part of the dependants allowance would be deposited in an agency saving account or entrusted to the Indian agent to manage (RCAP, 1996, p. 548). The war did nothing to reduce the immense control which Indian agents exercised on reserves or the depth of their ability to influence the lives of soldiers/veterans and their families.

In theory Indian servicemen and their dependants were eligible for all the benefits offered in *Veterans Charter*. Legislation did not distinguish between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal veterans, with the exception of the *Veterans' Land Act*. All veterans with confirmed war related disabilities were entitled to disability pensions. Everyone was eligible to War Service Gratuity, depending on the number of days spent in the armed

forces. Former soldiers could also choose a re-establishment credit or a training or education benefit (*Back to Civil Life*). These benefits were not awarded automatically: veterans had to apply for them, usually with the help of specially trained advisors from the Department of Veteran's Affairs. In case of status Indians, however, the old post-First World War pattern was retained. The Indian Affairs Branch (IAB) administered their benefits⁴ on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and status Indians needed to obtain from their agents various certificates and recommendations attesting to their eligibility for a given program in order to apply for any benefits and services offered within the scope of the *Veterans Charter*. Thus, status Indians remained under strict control of Indian agents, who rarely interpreted benefit plans to their wards' advantage. Furthermore, many Métis and non-status Indians (who did not fall under the control of Indian agents) faced obstacles that prevented them from taking advantage of many veterans' services. Most of them came from remote communities with limited communications facilities, far away from DVA offices or Royal Canadian Legion branches. This left them with few opportunities to fill in all necessary application forms and meet deadlines for programs and services.

The *Veterans' Land Act* was a flexible measure that sought to facilitate:

- (a) full-time farming for men with practical experience in farm operation;
- (b) small holding settlement, which means a rural home and small acreage located close to employment opportunity;
- (c) small holding settlement, coupled with commercial fishing in Canada's coastal regions or inland districts where fishing is engaged in on a commercial basis. (*The Veterans' Land Act*, 1942, p. 4)

A veteran who qualified for this plan could get up to a \$6000 loan at a 3.5% interest rate amortized over 20 years to purchase land, with the condition that he made a down payment of 10% of the property value. If the credit was repaid regularly over the following ten years, the Government annulled the remaining part of the debt (usually between 30-40% of the property's value) (*Ibid.*, p. 8-12).

⁴ Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) was dissolved in 1935 and its responsibilities were taken over by the Department of Mines and Resources, where a special sub-department was established: The Indian Affairs Branch (IAB). Independent Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development was developed only in 1966.

The *Veterans' Land Act* seemed to be suited perfectly for Indigenous veterans, most of whom lived in rural districts and could easily combine farm work with commercial fishing, hunting or trapping. Yet, Indians who did not wish to be enfranchised and wanted to return to their reserves could not apply for this type of loan, even if they had a location ticket on their reserve, because they formally resided on Crown land which could not act as security for loans (RCAP, 1996, p. 551). Instead, they only had access to "non-repayable grants up to \$2320 for the purchase of building materials and other construction costs, clearing and preparation of land for cultivation, purchase of livestock and farm machinery, machinery or equipment essential to forestry, commercial fishing equipment, trapping or fur farming equipment, but not breeding stock, and essential household equipment" (*Back to Civil Life*, Paragraph 128). Thus, the amount of money offered to status Indians returning to their reserves was practically identical with the forgivable portion of VLA loan. However, because these Indian veterans received non-repayable grants they became ineligible for further loans from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and they could not access commercial loans (because they could not hold reserve land as private property). Similarly, they were denied access to the small business loans available to other veterans. This limitation affected Indigenous service personnel who had served as mechanics or drivers while in the Canadian Armed Forces and who wanted to set up in similar enterprises after the war, because automobiles and repair equipment could not be purchased with the aforementioned grant (RCAP, 1996, p. 553-554).

The \$2320 grant designed for Indians living on reserves was not awarded automatically. Again, the decision as to whether a particular veteran was considered worthy to be paid the money belonged to the Indian agent, who had to issue certificates attesting applicant's qualifications and written recommendation as to the amount of money that should be disbursed. This grant was paid to the Minister of Mines and Resources who administered it in trust for the First Nations veteran (Sheffield, 2001, p. ix). According to the data gathered by the National Aboriginal Veterans Association, approximately 1330 status Indians received it (Smith, 2014, p. 216), usually to build a house, clear the land, and/or buy basic equipment to start a farm on the reserve. The average size on an "on reserve farm" was substantially smaller than those off-reserve, however, leaving First Nations farmers less competitive and hindering efforts to build prosperous, self-sustaining agricultural operations (Sheffield, 2001, p. 47).

The experience of military service profoundly changed most Aboriginal soldiers. Having fought against totalitarian regimes for human rights and the sovereignty of European and Asian countries, and being treated like all other citizens while in the armed forces, they began questioning their inferior status, *Indian Act* restrictions, and the omnipotence of Indian agents upon return to Canada. Some returned soldiers assumed leadership positions in their communities and started organizing campaigns seeking changes to the *Indian Act*. Their efforts, combined with widespread demand for reform voiced by non-indigenous activists, led to establishment of the Joint Senate and House of Commons Committee on the Indian Act in 1946. In 1948, this parliamentary committee proposed certain revisions to the act (mainly concerning social and economic issues), but practical changes were introduced at a slow pace. Not until the early 1950s were bans on traditional spirituality lifted, as well as off-reservation travel restrictions, and status Indians had to wait for the right to vote in federal elections until 1960.

First Nations veterans became more vocal about the unfair treatment that they had received in the 1970s. The problem was outlined in a landmark 1979 publication "Government Policy and Saskatchewan Indian Veterans: A Brief History of the Canadian Government's Treatment of Indian Veterans in World War Two," but it did not command serious government attention until the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples released reports in 1995. Both of these reports highlighted the need to "recognize the special contribution of Aboriginal veterans during the First and Second World Wars" and "apologize to Aboriginal veterans for the inequities and insensitive treatment they experienced after their return from these wars" (Senate, *Proceedings*, 17 March 1998), yet they remained silent about compensation for unfair treatment.

The issue was partially resolved in 2000, following lengthy negotiations at the National Roundtable on Aboriginal Veterans, when all First Nations veterans of the world wars and Korean War (or a widowed spouse) could apply for up to \$20 000 in compensation. First Nations representatives claimed that the proposed sum represented inadequate compensation for the opportunities denied to Indigenous veterans in the postwar years, and stressed the fact that compensation was available only to widowed spouses and not to other descendants. Furthermore, the four-month period to prepare an application for compensation was extremely short. Nevertheless, First Nations veterans'

association decided to sign the agreement, feeling that they “may not live long enough to receive anything if they did not.” Out of 2743 applications, the government issued compensation payments to 1250 veterans or veterans’ spouses (The Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans’ Association Issues Paper, 2007, p. 29).

The care of veterans after both world wars posed a huge challenge for all belligerents. Long-term costs of helping veterans and their families were immense everywhere. The preparations for postwar reintegration of soldiers, even if taken up during the war, usually turned out to be inadequate due to four main reasons:

- 1) surfacing health problems in post-war years and related increase of the number of the ex-soldiers qualified for support;
- 2) unclear division of obligations towards veterans between the state and various voluntary organizations and charities⁵;
- 3) lack of funds for veteran care in the countries shattered by war; and
- 4) political consequences of victory or defeat⁶.

Canada was exceptional compared to other fighting countries. During both conflicts, its federal government managed to prepare relatively far-reaching and efficient systems of care for the returning soldiers backed by adequate funding, as Canada did not suffer war destruction to its territory and its economy remained stable in the post-war years. Thanks to introduction of *Pensions Act* and *Soldier Settlement Act* during the First World War and a comprehensive *Veterans’ Charter* during the Second World War, the vast majority of Canadian ex-servicemen were offered retraining courses, employment and educational

⁵ In Britain after WWI reintegration of disabled men was left largely to voluntary effort and the pensions constituted less than 7% of country’s annual budget. In Germany state resumed full responsibility for veterans, spending approximately 20% on veteran care. See: Cohen D., *Will to Work: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany after the First World War* [in:] Garter D. A., *Disabled Veterans in History*, Ann Arbor, 2000, pp. 295-297. About precarious position of British ex-soldiers, especially those with serious disabilities, prior and after WWI, see: Barr, Nial. 2005. *The Lion and the Poppy*. Westport: Praeger Publishers. pp. 10-12.

⁶ After WWII veterans of Polish Army in the West who decided not to return communist-ruled Poland were fighting for benefits in the countries to which they emigrated. Many of those who decided to return to their homeland were deprived not only of benefits but of many civil rights. Only ex-combatants who decided to join veterans’ organizations approved of by the communist authorities could count on pensions and benefits, see: Wawrzyniak, Joanna. 2015. *Veterans, Victims and Memory. The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition. pp. 43-60

possibilities, land grants, and disability pensions. Compared to other countries, Canada addressed veteran re-establishment problems “with a high measure of success” (Meighen, 1921, p. 14). Canadian Aboriginal ex-service personnel were exceptions to this rule, however, and received inequitable treatment. They were deprived of opportunities and possibilities to make their own, informed, rational decisions about reintegration into civilian society. After the initial months of post-war appreciation of their military contribution, they and other veterans were expected to “vanish into thin air ... and give no trouble” (Leacock, 2010, p. 31).

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