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# Indigenous Veterans of the First World War and their Families in the Prairie West

WILLIAM JOHN PRATT

*Abstract: This study of forty-five military pension files of Indigenous First World War veterans of the Treaty 4, 6 and 7 regions shows that the racist perspectives and structures of settler colonialism on the Prairies could prevent just administration of benefits. Pension files of Indigenous veterans expose the tragedy of their lives during and after the First World War. Many soldiers had lingering pains and ailments as a result of the war, as well as continuing problems shaking the gaze of settler colonialism, which seemed unable to view them as both Indigenous and veterans. Despite the numerous legal and cultural obstacles to being treated equally to other veterans, many Indigenous men and their families were paid pensions, which were valuable, especially during the hardships on First Nations reserves in the interwar years.*

SOME INDIGENOUS MEN on the Canadian Prairies enlisted in the armed forces during the First World War to escape the limitations of life on First Nations reserves. While many traveled farther than they could have previously imagined, upon their return they found they could not escape the structures of settler colonialism. The promised benefits of veteran status could not relieve the burdens of Indian status. Indigenous veterans resumed life as observed under the “fatherly eye” of Indian Agents and administrators of the Department of Indian Affairs who weaponised racist notions of Indigenous character to ensure they remained locked into their place



Lance-Corporal Edwin Nokusis (1890–1933) enlisted with the 68th Battalion in August 1915. He is shown here in his uniform in September 1915, presumably on the File Hills Colony, which was a settlement created for the graduates of Indian Residential Schools, on the Peepeekisis First Nation reserve. Nokusis had attended Qu'Appelle Indian Industrial Residential School. He was severely injured at Lens, France, suffering gun shot and shell or shrapnel wounds to his legs and arms. As a result, his left leg was amputated above the knee. [Library and Archives Canada, RG 10, volume 3182, file 452,124-6]

in the colonial power structure.<sup>1</sup> Indian Agents extended their control to make critical decisions on war benefits and act as intermediaries with pension officials. An examination of a large sample of pension files for Plains Indigenous Peoples (mostly First Nations along with a handful of Métis) proves the difficulties they experienced in post-war life. For status First Nations, their unique legal standing created barriers which could act against fair treatment by colonial officials.

The current study is based on forty-five pension files of Indigenous veterans of the Treaty 4, 6 and 7 regions. These files were located by the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (now the Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada), in a search based on the names of 139 Indigenous soldiers from the Prairies that the

<sup>1</sup> Robin Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

author identified using Jeff Schlingloff's online Aboriginal Veterans Tribute Honour List.<sup>2</sup> Of the forty-five Indigenous veterans for whom files were located, at least twenty-two were either awarded disability pensions, or in the case of the deceased, their family received compensation. For those that had pension files, twenty were from the Treaty 4 region, fifteen from Treaty 6 and five from Treaty 7. A few others were non-status Indigenous Peoples or possibly Métis, and as the pension files are often not clear on these matters, a handful of the forty are also potentially not treaty First Nations. For instance, a man associated with Mistawasis First Nation in Treaty 6 on the Aboriginal Veterans Tribute Honour List is referenced in the language of a 1944 War Veterans Allowance Board as "half-breed" in the pension files.<sup>3</sup> However, as historian Eric Story has pointed out, "reductionist understandings of indigeneity" often meant that Métis and non-status First Nations were treated with a similar patronising condescension by pension administrators despite their differing legal status.<sup>4</sup> Racist assumptions about the character of Indigenous Peoples meant that meddling paternalism could extend beyond the legal powers of an Indian agent.

This article hopes to contribute to a wave of new scholarship which pushes beyond what has been identified as the "Forgotten Warriors" narrative in the early historiography of First Nations participation in the world wars. Early works argued that while many Indigenous men fought with skill and determination overseas, they were abandoned by the Canadian state and denied veterans

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal Veterans Tribute Honour List, <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/~jeffrey1/tribute.htm>, accessed June 30, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Dreaver, 17176, reel 800, Veterans Affairs Canada [VAC] pension files, Laurier Military History Archive [LMHA]. According to the agreement with Veterans Affairs to use this collection of pension files, only soldiers who have a known death record may be identified by name online. All other soldiers have been anonymised. Researchers can access their identities at the Laurier Military History Archive using an index created by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Story, "The Indigenous Casualties of War: Disability, Death, and the Racialized Politics of Pensions, 1914–39," *Canadian Historical Review* 102, 2 (2021): 288, 293.

benefits.<sup>5</sup> In Fred Gaffen's pioneering 1985 work *Forgotten Soldiers*, the author hoped to "rescue the native veteran from oblivion in the public consciousness," and argued that Indigenous Great War veterans faced discrimination, hardships and unfair treatment.<sup>6</sup> A generation of subsequent work has offered transnational comparisons of Indigenous Peoples and military service, uncovering exemplary individuals and specific community responses.<sup>7</sup> A major theme in the literature centres on Indigenous identity and legal status and how these manifested in military recruitment and conscription.<sup>8</sup> Such topics have recently been extended to post-war state programming, where due to their unique legal status and ongoing racist stereotyping,

<sup>5</sup> P. Whitney Lackenbauer and R. Scott Sheffield, "Moving Beyond 'Forgotten': The Historiography on Canadian Native Peoples and the World Wars," in *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* eds. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Craig Leslie Mantle, (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), 209–31. The term "Forgotten Warriors" was perhaps coined in this context by director Lorretta Todd in her film *Forgotten Warriors* (Montreal: National Film Board, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Fred Gaffen, *Forgotten Soldiers* (1985, repr., Winnipeg: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2008), frontmatter, 27–32.

<sup>7</sup> Evan Habkirk, " Militarism, Sovereignty, and Nationalism: Six Nations and the First World War," M.A. thesis, (Trent University, 2010); Brian D. McInnes, *Sounding Thunder: The Stories of Francis Pegahmagabow* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016); R. Scott Sheffield and Noah J. Riseman, *Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War: The Politics, Experiences and Legacies of War in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Timothy C. Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Steve Marti, "As Obsolete as the Buffalo and the Tomahawk: Assimilation, Autonomy, and the Mobilization of Indigenous Communities," in *For Home and Empire: Voluntary Mobilization in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand during the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 105–37.

<sup>8</sup> See James St. G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review* 70, 1 (1989): 1–26; Katherine McGowan, "'We are wards of the Crown and cannot be regarded as full citizens of Canada': Native Peoples, the Indian Act and Canada's War Effort," PhD dissertation, (University of Waterloo, 2011); Katharine McGowan and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Indigenous Nationalisms and the Great War: Enlisting the Six Nations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), 1914–17," in *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* eds. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Craig Mantle (Kingston: Canadian Defense Academy Press, 2007): 89–115; Katherine McGowan, "'In the Interest of the Indians': The Department of Indian Affairs, Charles Cooke and the Recruitment of Native Men in Southern Ontario for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1916," *Ontario History* 102, 1 (2010): 111–26; and Katherine McGowan, "'Until We Receive Just Treatment': The Fight against Conscription in the Naas Agency, British Columbia," *BC Studies* 167 (2010): 47–70.

Indigenous veterans had to prove they were worthy of administering their own pension monies.<sup>9</sup>

In his pioneering work on Indigenous soldiers in the West, James Dempsey tallied at least four hundred men who enlisted from the Prairie provinces.<sup>10</sup> Dempsey suggests that many were motivated to sign up due to historic bonds to the British Crown, while others simply wished to escape “the stagnation of reserve life and the confining atmosphere of the residential schools.”<sup>11</sup> To Dempsey, the “warrior tradition” on the Plains also led young men to join the forces, hoping to achieve masculine status through warfare like their storied grandfathers and ancestors. While pension files are silent on these issues, they do corroborate Dempsey’s argument that First Nations veterans’ benefits were unevenly and inadequately distributed.<sup>12</sup>

The story of Indigenous war service has largely been cast with exemplary soldiers. Perhaps the most famous of those from the Prairies is Henry Norwest, an Indigenous sniper from Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, who tallied 115 kills.<sup>13</sup> For every Norwest, however, there were hundreds of ordinary Indigenous soldiers, whose war records span the gamut of possibilities during wartime. They got sick and never left the country. They fought at Vimy Ridge and other legendary Canadian battles. They served in the Forestry Corps or

<sup>9</sup> Story, “The Indigenous Casualties of War,” 302. MacDowall argues that 1936 was the year that Indigenous veterans were finally beginning to be recognised as full veterans. Brian MacDowall, “‘A Flag That Knows No Colour Line’: Aboriginal Veteranship in Canada, 1914–1939,” PhD dissertation, (York University, 2017), 304, 307, 310.

<sup>10</sup> James Dempsey, *Warriors of the King* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1999), 62. Of the Prairie Indigenous soldiers, some 300 served overseas and at least 267 served in combat units. Over half of these became casualties, with fifty-six killed and eighty-two wounded. In Alberta, some twenty-nine First Nations men served in uniform, in Saskatchewan ninety-three served overseas, and from Manitoba there were 145 men who served overseas. See also, Whitney Lackenbauer et al., *A Commemorative History of Aboriginal People in the Canadian Military*, (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2010), 125; and Whitney Lackenbauer, “Indigenous Peoples and the World Wars,” Saskatchewan Encyclopedia, University of Saskatchewan, <https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/indigenous-peoples-and-the-world-wars.php>, accessed 6 June 2021.

<sup>11</sup> James Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> James Dempsey, “Problems of Western Canadian Indian War Veterans After World War One,” *Native Studies Review* 5, 1 (1989): 12.

<sup>13</sup> James Dempsey, “Norwest, Henry,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14 (University of Toronto Press, 1998), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/norwest\\_henry\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/norwest_henry_14E.html), accessed 16 June 2021.

along the lines of communication. They deserted. They soldiered on. They were detained for military crimes. The current study looks at the legacy of the war for these Indigenous soldiers and finds plenty of evidence of the lingering resonance of their time in uniform. Sickiness cares little for gallantry. Tuberculosis affected men who never left the cold damp camps of Canada as it did men who were gassed at the Second Battle of Ypres. The examination of the pension files of these men shows some of the injustices of a system that was not designed with Indigenous culture in mind. It exposes the awkward and racist moments when administrators attempted to determine how Indian status in Canada intersected with the rights owed to veterans and proves that the system came up short. Yet it shows, as well, that many men and their families were paid pensions, and such payments were valuable, especially due to the poverty First Nations experienced on reserves in the interwar years. At times allies came to their aid and lobbied for a square deal from the government, but there are also plenty of cases of Indian Agents or pension investigators who had little sympathy for their “wards.”

After 1914, an expanding Canadian bureaucracy delivered a host of veterans’ benefits. Perhaps the most problematic of these, for treaty First Nations, was the traditional soldier’s bounty: free land. Soldier Settlement Acts in 1917 and 1919 delineated the ways that veterans could benefit from land grants and cheap loans intended to start them out on the farm.<sup>14</sup> When those in the Prairie West tried to take the lands held for speculation by the vested interests of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Hudson’s Bay Company, the federal government diverted their land lust towards First Nations reserves.<sup>15</sup> Many parties saw reserves as unused or underused land which should be requisitioned for the use of veterans. In keeping with a longstanding record of attempting to negotiate reserve land surrenders, inspector for the Department of Indian Affairs, William Graham, endorsed the notion that land should be alienated from

<sup>14</sup> Kent Fedorowich, “Ex-Servicemen and the Politics of Soldier Settlement in Canada and Australia, 1915–1925,” *War & Society* 20, 1 (2002): 60; and Allan Rowe, “Soldier Settlement in Alberta, 1917–1931,” in *The Frontier of Patriotism: Alberta and the First World War* eds. Adriana A. Davies and Jeff Keshen (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2016), 519.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Carter, “‘An infamous proposal’: Prairie Indian reserve land and soldier settlement after World War I,” *Manitoba History* 37 (1999), [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb\\_history/37/infamousproposal.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/37/infamousproposal.shtml).



First Nations reserves for the benefit of soldier settlers.<sup>16</sup> In 1919, some 85,000 acres of treaty lands, largely in Saskatchewan, were secured for the Soldier Settlement Board. Such land surrenders were in addition to those the government took for its Greater Production Campaign, administered by Graham. This scheme was announced in 1918 as a plan to increase agricultural production by First Nations farmers and facilitate leasing of reserve land to white settler farmers. The Indian Act was amended to allow the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs to lease lands deemed uncultivated on reserves and intervene further in band management and funds.<sup>17</sup> Historian Bruce Dawson has characterised the campaign as creating a “cumbersome and mismanaged agricultural empire,” which provided little to no gain for First Nations residents.<sup>18</sup> Across Canada, around 255,000 acres were leased to white farmers for up to five years and another 20,448 acres were established for government-managed Greater Production farms.<sup>19</sup>

For First Nations veterans, the land bounty was a double-edged sword. Not only were thousands of acres of their reserves surrendered to non-Indigenous farmers and veteran settlers, but First Nations were denied the right to homestead on these lands by Section 70 of the 1876

<sup>16</sup> James Dempsey, “Problems of Western Canadian Indian War Veterans After World War One,” 12. E. Brian Titley, “Graham, William Morris,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 16 (University of Toronto Press, 2003), accessed May 15, 2019, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/graham\\_william\\_morris\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/graham_william_morris_16E.html).

<sup>17</sup> Duncan Scott, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs “Part I – Report of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31, 1918,” 3 September 1918, in Dominion of Canada, “Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31, 1918,” 19. Under revisions of the Indian Act in the spring of 1918, reserve lands could be leased without the consent of the band. Maureen Lux, *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880–1940* (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 162; and Carter, “‘An Infamous Proposal.’”

<sup>18</sup> See Bruce Dawson, “‘Better Than a Few Squirrels’: The Greater Production Campaign on the First Nations Reserves of the Canadian Prairies,” in *Plain Speaking: Essay on Aboriginal Peoples and the Prairies*, ed. Patrick C. Douaud (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2002), 11–22; and Bruce Dawson, “‘Better than a Few Squirrels’: The Greater Production Campaign on the First Nations Reserves of the Canadian Prairies” M.A. thesis, (University of Saskatchewan, 2001), ii.

<sup>19</sup> Dempsey, “Problems of Western Canadian Indian War Veterans After World War One,” 3.



*Indian Act*.<sup>20</sup> In 1919, the law was amended to authorise the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs to administer most provisions of the Soldier Settlement Act as they applied to First Nations.<sup>21</sup> It was possible for First Nations to acquire land set aside for veterans on the reserve, but this would effectively be a location ticket (property rights subject to the approval of the band council and Indian Affairs), which was available to any First Nations person. Soldier settlement land for First Nations outside the reserve was considered to be akin to homesteading and was thus denied.<sup>22</sup> In this case, as in many others, being Indigenous seems to have been more important than being a veteran. Only one in ten First Nations veterans who applied received government loans or land allotments on reserve.

The just administration of Indigenous veterans' pensions was stifled by paternalistic colonial intermediaries, racist assumptions and the belief that the existing system already provided adequate support to Indigenous Peoples. In late 1917, Indian Affairs was granted responsibility to administer estates and pensions of First Nations soldiers killed in the war.<sup>23</sup> A curious case involving a soldier in the present study shows how benefits for Indigenous veterans could be arbitrarily distributed. Leonard Creeley from the Okanese First Nation was gassed at the Somme and rated a 50 per cent disability in 1919.<sup>24</sup> In the same year, he received a soldier settlement grant which granted him a loan for livestock and supplies. By 1923, however, his disability rating increased to 80 per cent and he could not farm. Indian Commissioner William Graham's solution was to transfer the loan and the land to another First Nations man, despite the fact that he was not a returned soldier. Graham received a stern letter from Deputy Superintendent General Duncan Campbell Scott.

<sup>20</sup> The provision against First Nations homesteaders lasted until 1951, when there was practically no available land left. First Nations could purchase and sell lands off the reserves. Sarah Carter, "Erasing and Replacing: Property and Homestead Rights of First Nations Farmers of Manitoba and the Northwest, 1870s–1910s," *Place and Replace: Essays on Western Canada*, eds. Adele Perry, Esyllt W. Jones and Leah Morton (University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 24.

<sup>21</sup> "Indian Veterans' Rights," Report No. 3 (Saskatoon: Native Law Centre, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Carter, "Erasing and Replacing," 29. Winegard suggests that some did manage to leave the reserves and take up the benefits of the Soldiers Settlement Act, claiming it forced Indian veterans and their families off reserve in order to gain the benefits of post-war programs. Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War*, 154.

<sup>23</sup> Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> Leonard Creeley, 49159, reel 1191, VAC pension files, LMHA.

A rarity for an Indigenous pensioner with tuberculosis, Creeley lived into his seventies.

Indigenous customs did not fit well into the bureaucratic pension system. When a pensions official wrote the Blood Indian Agent in 1917 asking for documents on a pensioner's family, the reply was that the man was "married according to Indian custom, 'exchange of presents', and the children's births are not registered."<sup>25</sup> In another case, it was the colonial structures that added confusion to the details of a person's life. The names of a deceased veteran's children had changed because they had first been baptised by a reverend and then by a priest at the Roman Catholic residential school.<sup>26</sup>

Plains First Nations Peoples suffered from illnesses and diseases at a higher rate than the non-Indigenous Canadian public.<sup>27</sup> Many of the veterans in this study attended residential schools in their youth, where health was notoriously poor. Indigenous Peoples in Canada suffered from far higher tuberculosis rates than non-Indigenous Peoples due largely to their poor nutrition and cramped and inadequate housing. In July 1917, a physician with experience in Western Canada wrote on a Keeseekoose First Nation soldier's medical case sheet in the language of the day: "the Indian Race is as a whole predisposed to consumption – throughout the northern west of Canada. Most of the deaths among them are due to it. In ten years among them, I do not recollect a death from old age."<sup>28</sup> The patient's father died of tuberculosis in 1914 and his sister succumbed the next year. The veteran died in 1922 of pulmonary tuberculosis, leaving his widow with five children. At first, the Board of Pension Commissioners (BPC) did not believe his death was attributable to war service, but they reversed the decision. Perhaps it was hard to argue against a payout when in the year of his death, the pensioner was deemed to be completely disabled with half attributable to war service. At least four other veterans in this study developed tuberculosis after exposure to gas at the front.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Soldier 98, 16913, reel 369, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Razor, 43328, reel 34, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>27</sup> Lux, *Medicine That Walks*.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Razor, 43328, reel 34, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>29</sup> Leonard Creeley, 49159, reel 1191; Isaac Merasty, [no pension number], reel 370; Harold Mooney, 192835, reel 978; George Strangling Wolf, 27538, reel 190, VAC pension files, LMHA.

Some First Nations men were treated alongside non-Indigenous veterans in the hospitals established by the Military Hospitals Commission. This suggests that as veterans they received a more equitable treatment than relegation to the segregated Indian Hospitals or those run by religious organisations on reserves.<sup>30</sup> Edward Cote, from the Cote First Nation, was completely incapacitated by tuberculosis, spending time in the Frank Sanatorium. After about four months, he left but was admitted to the St. Boniface Hospital, near Winnipeg in October 1921 and died within a year.<sup>31</sup> Another veteran from the Kahkewistahaw First Nation was diagnosed with tuberculosis before he enlisted and after the war was deemed 50 per cent disabled but only half of this disability was considered aggravated by military service.<sup>32</sup> He refused treatment in a soldiers' hospital and was discharged. In another rare case of improvement after a tuberculosis diagnosis, in 1925 his medical examination suggests his health was well. A man who suffered from exposure from a wartime stay at barracks in Prince Albert was treated at Frank Sanatorium for at least half a year. In 1920, his examiner answered the question, "Are the disabilities permanent?" with "Yes, (an Indian)."<sup>33</sup> When a Kainai (Blood First Nation) soldier was released from Frank Sanatorium, his examiner wrote, he "should appear before a Medical Board at the end of three months, as he is an Indian and may relapse into bad habits."<sup>34</sup> Isaac Merasty, from Flying Dust First Nation, suffered gas poisoning in September 1917, but despite this injury, his death at the Saskatchewan Sanitarium in 1922 due to tuberculosis was not attributed to service.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these pension files are a record of suffering and the misery which extends beyond the physical ailments associated with the war. A soldier of mixed ethnicity, associated with the Peepeekisis First Nation on the Aboriginal Honour Roll, left home when he was seventeen and worked as a farm labourer.<sup>36</sup> During the war, he suffered a gunshot wound and was assessed at a 15 per cent disability

<sup>30</sup> Maureen Lux, *Separate Beds: A History of Indian Hospitals in Canada, 1920s–1980s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Edward Cote, 240, reel 681, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>32</sup> Soldier 75, 27973, reel 745, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>33</sup> Soldier 85, 100, reel 1097, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>34</sup> Soldier 98, 16913, reel 369, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>35</sup> Isaac Merasty, [no pension number], reel 370, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>36</sup> Soldier 83, 116125, reel 1085, VAC pension files, LMHA.

after the war. He farmed his Soldier Settlement Board land grant in the Balcarres district until 1928, when he gave it up and moved to Regina, claiming to have difficulty working with his injured arm. By 1939, he fell on hard times, working a little with seasonal harvesting, odd jobs and collecting junk. A pension authority wrote,

There is obviously a lot of Indian in this man ... He is definitely not the type to inspire a would be employer with a shadow of trust or ability ... one can't imagine this man ever working, he obviously has neither taste, skill, or strength for it. If ever there was a [Veterans Allowance Board] case, this certainly appears to be a pretty good example of one.

He was granted his veterans' relief stipend, but it appears to have done little to improve his life, which was consumed by alcohol abuse. In 1940, he was evicted from his house and was incarcerated in the provincial jail for ten days on a drunk and disorderly charge. Officials warned him that if he did not stop drinking his War Veterans Allowance would be cancelled. It was terminated from 1940–1944 with the rationale that it was not used to his advantage.

Readers familiar with chronic issues of inadequate First Nations housing, poor nutrition and parsimonious policies of the federal government may find it hard to believe that a major reason for denying benefits to First Nations veterans was the argument that they were well provided for by the Department of Indian Affairs. For example, the Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF) was designed to administer financial assistance to soldiers' families. In February 1917, however, when there were several dependents of Kainai soldiers who could use assistance, the local organisers of the CPF in nearby Macleod stated they were of the opinion that since First Nations were wards of the government, they did not need extra help, as the government was already providing them support.<sup>37</sup> By April 1917, pressure from Duncan Campbell Scott and Lieutenant Colonel William C. Bryan (who had led recruitment efforts directed towards First Nations in the region) had convinced the CPF organisers that their policy was poorly considered.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Blood Agency to Lieut. Col. Bryan, OC, 191st Battalion, 19 February 1917. Folder no. 122: "Blood Indian agency Correspondence, etc. 1917–1918," Blood Indian Agency Fonds, Glenbow Museum Archives (GMA).

<sup>38</sup> Scott to Dilworth, 18 April 1917. Bryan to Thoburn Allan, Sec. Canadian Patriotic Fund, Calgary, 14 March 1917. Folder no. 122: "Blood Indian agency Correspondence, etc 1917–1918," Blood Indian Agency Fonds, GMA.

Another sad intersection of settler colonialism and the Indigenous veteran experience surrounds residential schools. Because the children of some veterans were in residential schools, they did not receive the normal pension stipend, as these pensioners were not considered to be supporting their children. Creeley had two of his children removed from his pension payments when it was discovered they were at Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School.<sup>39</sup> In 1930 and 1931, even the BPC debated amongst themselves as to whether these children should be supported by pension payments, as the family bought them clothes and put them up for two months each summer. Nonetheless, they remained off the pension rolls. Harry Badger, from Muskoday First Nation (the John Smith Band), received serious shrapnel wounds in November 1917, which later seems to have exacerbated his tuberculosis. His elder son was in Duck Lake Boarding School (St. Michael's Residential School) and since the pensioner was not supporting him, he received no pension. When the Indian Agent at Duck Lake asked about a pension for a younger infant son in 1921, the official noted that he had not mentioned the child earlier because he did not expect the boy to live very long. Badger spent time in the Saskatchewan Sanitarium at Fort Qu'Appelle and died in 1936 at the Prince Albert Sanatorium.<sup>40</sup> His son was left to tend to his affairs and wrote the Department of Pensions and National Health in November 1936:

My father told me in [his] dying bed. How he went over seas. Fought for his Country and King and After he came back from over seas he suffered of untold Misery and on [top] of that [the] Pension Commission at Saskatoon did their best to deprive of My Decased [sic] Pension which was a very. (Raw Deal) ... if you officials only knew how he suffered the last eighteen years may be the pension commission would not have been so hard on him.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Leonard Creeley, 49159, reel 1191, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>40</sup> The Prince Albert Sanatorium was a new facility built in 1930. Generally, publicly funded provincial institutions provided free treatment to taxpayers only, and Indigenous people might only find a bed if the Department of Indian Affairs could purchase a vacant one. Prince Alberta Sanatorium admitted its first two Indigenous patients in 1935. It is possible this Indigenous pensioner was one of them. Lux, *Separate Beds*, 210, note 48.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to Pensions and National Health, 16 November 1936, Harry Badger, 55956, reel 85, VAC pension files, LMHA.

Another correspondent wrote on behalf of an orphaned son of a John Gerard, associated with the Muskeg Lake Cree in 1924:

The father has been killed on the front and on that account the boy (Rich or poor) is entitled to a pension through the intermediate of his guardian. The obligations of the guardian was to give a reasonable education to the boy. Just because the boy is an inmate of the Indian School at Duck Lake, has he lost his right to the pension?<sup>42</sup>

The dependent did receive a pension in this case. There are other instances of confusion surrounding pensions and the rights of treaty people. Canadian Pensions Commission correspondence of 1943 reported that because a Kainai veteran George Strangling Wolf was a pensioner, an Indian Agent stated it was unlikely he would receive “treaty money, etc.”<sup>43</sup>

Stereotypes could play a role in the assessment of pensions. In 1926, the father of a deceased soldier from the Onion Lake Reserve area applied for a pension as he was destitute. The BPC replied, saying it was possible he could receive a pension, even though his son had not supported him at the time of his death. If he could not earn a living and the BPC could prove that his son would have contributed to his material wellbeing if able, then he may have been eligible to receive a pension. The Department of Soldiers’ Civil Re-establishment official in Edmonton however, wrote, “People whom I interviewed stated that [the soldier son] supported him just as much as the average Indian does support his parents, which is never, as a rule, very much.”<sup>44</sup> Described as a “half-breed,” it was still speculated that he might be entitled to the rights of a Treaty Indian if he lived on reserve. Presumably, some of these factors were counted into the final judgement that rendered him ineligible for support from a dependant’s pension.

Similar blanket stereotypes and prejudice are found throughout the pension files. A commissioner weighed in on a Dakota widow’s qualities in racist terms, advocating paternalist control of her funds: “We may say that this pensioner is an Indian woman, and they as a

<sup>42</sup> John Gerard, 14125, reel 63, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>43</sup> George Strangling Wolf, 27538, reel 190, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from James Bell to Director of Administration, December 30, 1926, John Bangs, [no pension number], reel 219, VAC pension files, LMHA.

class cannot be looked upon as being thrifty, or holding on to money when they get it.”<sup>45</sup> That her husband Joe Peters had died on the first day of the Battle of Vimy Ridge seemed to count for little in the colonial reasoning of Saskatchewan in the 1920s. In another case, in 1931, a medical examiner from Calgary wrote to the BPC about Kainai veteran Jim White Bull: “Evidently this man is an Indian, and I think you will agree with me that it is impossible to secure from him a statement of any value re. his service overseas, and particularly re. his state of health, etc., subsequent to his discharge.”<sup>46</sup>

Indian Agents were the key arm of surveillance to inform the pension authorities if children were at residential schools or widows had remarried, thus removing them from pension rolls. On occasion, however, agents could attempt to act as allies. One Indian Agent encouraged Moses Lavallee, from the Peepeekisis First Nation, to file for a pension, but the man refused.<sup>47</sup> A clerk from the File Hills Agency wrote in 1934,

He seemed to have a dread of going into a Hospital and consistently refused either to apply for treatment or a pension. He did not even want to discuss it and I really do not know his reasons, but imagine it was some superstition, because he once stated that once a person went into Hospital, he died.

After the veteran died of pulmonary tuberculosis in 1933, the Indian Agent applied for a pension on behalf of his widow and four destitute children. He wrote that he had known Lavallee for a decade and he was always sick. In a case of aggressive paternalism, the agent had called the RCMP to take the veteran to the Regina Hospital, thinking he was a public health menace on the reserve. Lavallee escaped from hospital. The man’s mother had written in 1934 that he had joined the forces as a bugler at the age of sixteen, but contracted influenza and never recovered. Painting a sorrowful picture of his service, she wrote, that “playing the cornet weakened his lungs as he often told me how he used to stand and play the last post for some poor fellow [...] in the pouring rain.”<sup>48</sup> She finished with, “Well now my boy is

<sup>45</sup> Joe Peters, 17257, reel 734, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>46</sup> Moses Lavallee, [no pension number], reel 292, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>47</sup> Moses Lavallee, [no pension number], reel 292, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>48</sup> Moses Lavallee, [no pension number], reel 292, VAC pension files, LMHA .





Edwin Nokusis fought to administer his own pension after his return from the war but his cheques were instead administered by Indian Agents. He is shown here in his military uniform, perhaps soon after he returned from overseas. Having attended commercial vocational school in Saskatoon, he worked until 1922 as a clerk with the Touchwood Indian Agency. In 1928, he was issued an artificial leg. He died in 1933. [Glenbow Library and Archives, University of Calgary, NA-5462-26]

gone and his family is left and I'm hoping you will be able to do something for him." His widow noted that he had never complained about his poor lungs as he wanted to make it to the front.

Many staff in the Department of Indian Affairs were anything but allies. This might include Indian Agents who were keen to remove pensions when they saw a woman remarry or a veteran's health improving. In one case, William Graham intervened to ensure that a pension was administered by an Indian Agent rather than sent to the pensioner directly. Edwin Nokusis wrote the BPC in October 1927:

I haven't had any help from the Indian Agency I never asked for any Help since I came back from the War, I am Capable to Provide and have done same for my Family all the time, Why are you having my Cheque sent to the Agency. I have Fought for my Country and Bled for My Country, and is what I get for as a Gratitude for what I have Done ... Come to me personally as they have done before.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Edward Nokusis, 101497, reel 1119, VAC pension files, LMHA.

Graham personally held assigned pay and separation allowances sent to a spouse from a Okanese First Nation soldier during the war.<sup>50</sup> Graham also made sure to inform the BPC when widows remarried.<sup>51</sup> In 1919, a “concerned citizen” from Fort Macleod wrote to the BPC that a Kainai pensioner’s claim was fraudulent and that the man was in the same health condition as when he enlisted.<sup>52</sup> The Board’s medical files said otherwise and the dispute was thrown aside.

Pension files of Indigenous veterans expose the tragedy of their lives during and after the First World War. Many soldiers had lingering pains and ailments as a result of the war, as well as continuing problems shaking the gaze of settler colonialism, which seemed unable to view them as both Indigenous and veterans. A handful of veterans were paid pensions, which were a welcome addition to rather dire circumstances. The varied nature of pensions files, with occasional allies found in Indian Agents, or bending of policies to fit the circumstances, suggest there is much more to be discovered in other regional studies. Occasionally, First Nations’ voices are found in the letters kept on file, which is a welcome change from the lens of Indigenous history in Canada, which in the past has often been told through the observations of non-Indigenous church or government officials. Indigenous veterans and their families protested government agents when authorities refused to relinquish control over pension cheques, or when they felt wrongfully denied. They testified to the hardships of life on the reserves for disabled men attempting to scratch out a living on the farm. Such stories can be difficult to hear but are important to inform us of the long legacies of the First World War for Indigenous Peoples on the Plains.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**William John Pratt** works as a historian for Parks Canada.

<sup>50</sup> Leonard Creeley, 49159, reel 1191, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>51</sup> Joe Peters, 17257, reel 734, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>52</sup> Soldier 98, 16913, reel 369, VAC pension files, LMHA.