

*Stó:lō*  
Soldiers,  
*Stó:lō*  
Veterans

*Dedicated to the memory of Wesley Sam, 1919-1994*



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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

The experiences of *Stó:lō* soldiers in the Canadian Armed Forces during the Second World War can be a vehicle for understanding significant historical and anthropological issues. Very little has been written about the role of Aboriginal servicemen in the Second World War, and even less relating to the official government treatment of Aboriginal veterans since 1945. Throughout Canadian history Aboriginal people often chose to participate in “European wars” for reasons unappreciated by Canadians of European descent. Relatedly, stereotypes of the “Indian warrior” have driven government recruitment practices and influenced the way Aboriginal soldiers have been treated by the military establishment. These stereotypes have also clouded public perceptions of Aboriginal military personnel, and affected the way in which returning Aboriginal veterans have been received by their own communities.

This chapter looks at official Canadian policy towards Aboriginal people during World War II, as well as the government’s treatment of *Stó:lō* veterans after the war.

The experiences of returning *Stó:lō* veteran “warriors”

as they attempted to reintegrate themselves into civilian life and their Aboriginal communities after the war, will also be discussed. Finally, this chapter discusses the way the wartime experience of *Stó:lō* veterans both positively and adversely affected their position within *Stó:lō* society.<sup>1</sup>



Wes Sam, *Stó:lō* Veteran of WWII sharing stories about the role of Aboriginal veterans in bringing about changes to the Indian Act.



# 1 ABORIGINAL SOLDIERS IN CANADIAN HISTORY ■

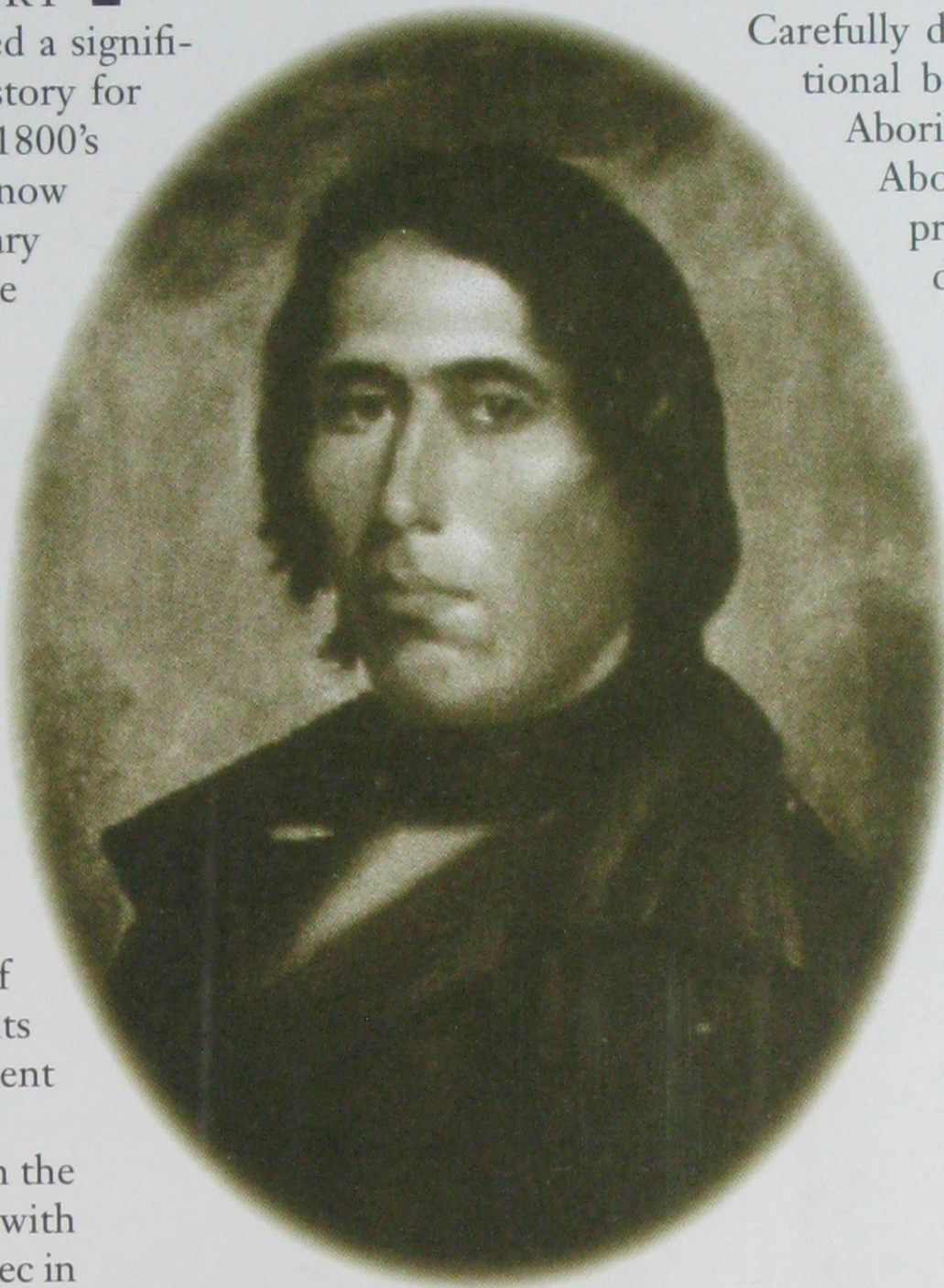
Aboriginal soldiers have played a significant role in Canadian military history for over 200 years. In the 1700's and 1800's Aboriginal people from what is now eastern Canada often acted as military allies for the British against the French or vice versa. Typically, these conflicts originated in European issues which had little to do with North America, let alone Aboriginal people. Yet, when non-indigenous politics and military feuds spilled over from Europe into North America, Aboriginal people often chose to participate. They participated not because they cared about or even understood the original European cause of the dispute, but because the interests of the British or French governments happened to parallel or compliment their own.

Many people are familiar with the story of how the Iroquois sided with Britain against the French in Quebec in the 1760's. Many more, no doubt, have heard the history of how the renowned Aboriginal leader Tecumseh united the Tribes of the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes region to fight as allies of the British against the Americans in the War of 1812. Tecumseh did not necessarily side with the British because he agreed with overall British policy against the Americans. Rather, Tecumseh recognized that unlike the American government, the British were not encouraging settlers to move into the region used by Aboriginal people and fur traders. The British became a convenient, if somewhat temporary, ally as long as their interests coincided with those of Tecumseh and his people. Similar alliances were formed between various Aboriginal communities and the French, Spanish, Russian, and later the American and Canadian governments at different times in various parts of the continent.

After 1812, the significance of Aboriginal allies for North American military and political disputes declined. The annexation of French, Spanish,

Dutch and later Mexican territories into either the United States or British North America (Canada) ultimately ended international conflict on the continent.

Carefully defined and accepted international borders reduced the need for Aboriginal allies. Likewise, rapid Aboriginal population decline, primarily resulting from introduced disease, and a simultaneous population explosion among the *Xwelítem* (non-Aboriginal) population reduced the relative military strength of Aboriginal communities vis à vis European powers. British, Canadian and American legislation undermined Aboriginal unity thereby making Aboriginal communities less powerful, and therefore less valuable as allies (or dangerous as enemies). Over time, those Aboriginal people who decided to participate in either the Canadian or American military ventures did so increasingly as individuals rather than as part of an autonomous allied Aboriginal community.



*Tecumseh* united diverse Tribes to fight as allies of the British against the Americans in the War of 1812.

Stó:lō WWII veterans Benny Joe, Wes Sam, Joe Alex and Harold Wells at the dedication of the Stó:lō veterans memorial on the Coqualeetza Grounds in Sardis, November 11, 1993.





## 2 ABORIGINAL PARTICIPATION IN WORLD WAR I & II (1914-1918 & 1939-1945) ■

The involvement of Tecumseh and other Aboriginal leaders in Canada's early military campaigns clearly shows that when Aboriginal people chose to participate they did so for reasons unappreciated by their European friends and allies. Similarly, individual Aboriginal soldiers in the First and Second World Wars chose to participate for reasons often unappreciated by mainstream Canadian society. Before looking at specific histories of individual *Stó:lō* service men it is useful to set the scene by examining actual Canadian government policy.

World War I (1914-1918) established a number of precedents concerning the involvement of Aboriginal people in Canada's military. During the first half of "the Great War," the Canadian government refused to accept Aboriginal volunteers. The official justification for this was based on the paternalistic grounds that Aboriginal people needed to be protected from the "savage" German army. At that time, the Canadian government had determined that German soldiers had such a low regard for "non-white" people that they could not be trusted to provide Aboriginal prisoners of war with all the "privileges of civilized warfare."<sup>2</sup> Later in the war, when manpower shortages became critical, such concerns were set aside and Aboriginal volunteers were welcomed at recruitment centres. Yet, while other Canadian men were being conscripted and forced to serve in the military, Aboriginal men were given the option of deciding for themselves whether they would serve or not. Parliament determined that, as "wards of the government," Indians could not be compelled to fight in an overseas war.

Given this precedent, one would assume that Aboriginal people would have been exempt from compulsory military registration or service in any and all future overseas wars. Indeed, correspondence from the Department of Indian Affairs dated at the beginning of the Second World War indicates that the federal government intended to follow the WWI precedent of exempting Aboriginal people from conscription. However, when the Canadian government declared war on Nazi Germany in 1939 few politicians gave

any thought to the effects the war would have on Canada's Aboriginal population. National attention was focused on the "bigger issue" of defeating Fascism. This preoccupation caused much bureaucratic confusion – confusion that resulted in hardships for Canada's Aboriginal population.

To prepare the country's defence, in August 1940, the Canadian Parliament passed the *National Mobilization Act*. This legislation required all adult Canadians to register for potential military service, and was designed to help the government coordinate the nation's manpower resources. Because of the precedent set in WWI, Aboriginals were the only people in Canada exempt from the registration. However, it appears that one hand of the federal government was unaware of what the other was



Raymond Bobb

doing, for at the time the *Mobilization Act* was enacted, the government passed companion legislation making it illegal for employers to pay their civilian employees unless they could produce their *Mobilization Act* "registration card." This measure was intended to ensure that all civilians registered under the *Mobilization Act*, and were "on the list," should conscription become necessary. Registering also required men to serve one month of basic military training with their "Home Militia." Thus, conflicting policies inadvertently resulted in Aboriginal peo-





*Stó:lō* veteran Wes Sam during ceremony of November 11, 1993.

ple being unable to collect their civilian pay cheques unless they registered for the draft. Many Aboriginal people protested this fact, leading a top official in Ottawa to clarify that Indians were exempt from having to register.<sup>3</sup> Yet, for unknown reasons, this information was never adequately communicated to either the police or private sector employers. As a result, Aboriginal people lost their jobs and were arrested by overzealous police officers for not possessing Registration Cards.<sup>4</sup>

Responding to ever-increasing complaints, the government decided the simplest solution was to “register” Aboriginal people so they could continue working in the civilian workforce. However, Aboriginal men were assured that they would be exempt from the otherwise compulsory 30 day Home Militia basic training process. Likewise, they were also promised that their registration would not lead to compulsory military training and service should the government ever decide to conscript people. For whatever reason, the first part of this message (exemption from training and service) was once again ineffectively communicated to individual Indian Agents and Aboriginal communities. As a result, by 1941,

even though they did not have any of the privileges of citizenship (ie., Aboriginal people could not vote, purchase alcohol, or attend university) many Aboriginal people had been compelled to complete the 30 day basic training as though they were Canadian citizens.<sup>5</sup>

By the time officials in Ottawa improved their communication strategies to inform local officials that Aboriginal people did not have to register, many Aboriginal men had already completed basic military training. As a result, the government decided that the only way to be fair to everyone was to compel all remaining Aboriginal men to also attend basic training. Shortly thereafter in January 1941, the National Mobilization Act extended the mandatory training period from 30 days to four months. After completing their training, men automatically became part of the “Home Service Militia.” In late 1944, the government reneged on its promise to Aboriginal leaders and enacted conscription legislation allowing them to draft Aboriginal people for compulsory active duty.<sup>6</sup> In other words,



*Stó:lō* people working in the salmon cannery industry.

Aboriginal men who had been repeatedly assured they would not have to serve in the forces, and who had only registered in order to collect their civilian pay cheque, suddenly found themselves being drafted and eligible for overseas fighting.



At this point a number of Aboriginal communities throughout Canada redoubled their efforts to remind the government of the WWI exemption precedent. They also reminded the government of the earlier promises made during the war in progress. They argued that Aboriginal men should be allowed to make the choice to participate, and not be forced. One Aboriginal man from Quebec named Shortfence actually took the government to court, arguing that as a non-citizen he should have been excluded from conscription. The government lawyer countered that while Aboriginal people were not full Canadian citizens, they were "subjects" of His Majesty the King, and therefore they were obliged to comply with the draft. After listening to the arguments, the court determined that only those Aboriginal people whose treaties with the federal government explicitly exempted them from compulsory military service would be exempted from the draft. Recognizing that there were two ways of recording history, the court included with this group all Aboriginal communities whose oral traditions stated that it was their understanding that during the treaty making process, their leaders had secured

military exemptions, even if the treaty document itself was unclear on the matter. As a result of this legal decision, all Aboriginal people from "Treaty groups 3, 6, 8, and 11" (much of Ontario and the prairie provinces) were excluded from the draft. All other Aboriginal people were considered to have surrendered any special rights of exemption to the government through their treaties. Interestingly, no mention was made of Aboriginal people in B.C., who had never signed treaties.

### 3 DISCRIMINATION WITHIN THE ARMED FORCES ■

The above discussion of Canadian-wide developments should be considered against the specific British Columbian and *Stó:lō* experiences. To this day, the vast majority of B.C.'s Aboriginal people have never signed treaties alienating any of their title or rights. Therefore, it would appear that Aboriginal people living in British Columbia, by the court's definition, should have been included among those groups exempted from military service. However, this never occurred, and it is little wonder,



*Stó:lō* WWII veterans (left to right) Dan Francis, Archie Charles, Moody Michelle, Clarence Morgan, Mr. Kelly, Alfred Myra, Benny Joe and Wes Sam at 1993 Remembrance Day Ceremonies.



given the fact that a decade prior to the war, in 1927, the Indian Act had been amended making it illegal for a lawyer to work for an Aboriginal person or organization pursuing matters of Aboriginal rights and title. This law was not repealed until 1951, largely as a result of the effective lobbying of Second World War Aboriginal veterans.<sup>7</sup>

Being compelled to register and enlist for active duty did not mean that Aboriginal enlistees would be provided with all the choices available to non-Aboriginal servicemen. Up until 1943 the Royal Canadian Navy accepted only people who were of “pure European Descent and of the White Race.”<sup>8</sup> Naval Officials felt that “The confined living spaces... [on board ship] do not lend themselves to satisfactory mixing of the white races with Indians.”<sup>9</sup> When the war broke out The Royal Canadian Air Force had an even more racially restrictive policy which required that all recruits “be British subjects and of pure European descent.”<sup>10</sup> This policy only officially reversed in 1941. However, through the entire conflict it remained an unwritten rule that Aboriginal people were not welcome in any branch of the armed forces except the Army.<sup>11</sup> *Stó:lō* veteran Wes Sam explained that, “When I joined up I wanted to get into the air gunners. A lot of my white friends got into the air gunners and that’s where I wanted to go too, but when I tried out I was rejected. All my white friends were accepted, but I was rejected. So I thought I’d try to get in through the back door, and I went to another recruitment office in Vancouver. They told me ‘try the army.’ So I did, and the army accepted me so fast I never even got to go home and visit my family – straight to the barracks.”<sup>12</sup> These bigoted policies move from being simply distasteful to deplorable when one considers that a serviceman’s chance of being killed or wounded was far greater in the Army than either the Navy or the Air Force.

## 4 *STÓ:LŌ* ORAL TRADITIONS: PERSONAL REASONS FOR ENLISTING ■

Through the written archival records we learn that government policy was very confused when it came to dealing with Aboriginal people during the Second World War. Bureaucratic confusion had a great and sometimes devastating impact on individual Aboriginal people. To more fully appreciate this impact, it is useful to review the individual oral histories of various *Stó:lō* veterans. By listening to their voices we can come to appreciate the personal impact of government policy. Their stories also illustrate the creativity and resourcefulness of *Stó:lō* people faced with frustrating and threatening government policy.

More than 100 young *Stó:lō* men and at least one *Stó:lō* woman served in the Canadian military during World War II.<sup>13</sup> The factors which motivated individual *Stó:lō* people to enlist were just as varied and complex as those which had influenced men like Tecumseh two hundred years earlier. Some *Stó:lō* veterans, like Charlie Fisher, remember enlisting because, “I couldn’t get work and I needed a job to feed my wife and son.”<sup>14</sup> More commonly, *Stó:lō* veterans mentioned that they were led to believe that if they did not enlist on their own they would inevitably be drafted. In addition, they were told that volunteers were provided placement options that draftees were not. In other words, because they were not even aware that they had the option of not serving in the military they were effectively denied their rights in more ways than one. *Stó:lō* veteran Harold Wells explained how this was the case for him:



Harold Wells, *Stó:lō* veteran of WWII

**M**y older brother got notice to appear [at the recruitment office]. He decided he wouldn’t volunteer for active service, so they sent him up to Vernon [B.C.], where they had a separate camp for



guys who wouldn't volunteer.... He spent four months there. The only thing was, he said they never let him out. All the time you were there, [they] wouldn't give you weekend leave or anything like that. He finally decided the only way he could get out of there was to volunteer for active service. So that's what I did too.<sup>15</sup> 🗣️

Fear of being drafted and assigned an undesirable position was the most common reason for enlisting, but it was not the only one. Some *Stó:lō* veterans remember being enticed by captivating tales describing life in the military (and in particular Europe) as a "life without racism." Such stories were particularly appealing to young men who had grown up in an environment rife with racial discrimination. *Stó:lō* veteran Wes Sam recalled being greatly influenced by such stories told to him by older Aboriginal servicemen who had returned home on vacation or leave. When asked if racial discrimination and government injustice towards Aboriginal people before the war discouraged *Stó:lō* men from enlisting, Wes Sam explained:

Those things become history.... Those *Stó:lō* soldiers brought back stories of their experiences from over there in Europe. And when the government changed the law of the lands, [allowing Aboriginal people to become Canadian citizens in 1951] it was because of the knowledge of these veterans. Because the ordinary person in the *Stó:lō* communities, they did not know they were in poverty. They did not know that they were not treated right [by mainstream society and the government]. They did not know that they were discriminated against. When you don't know those things you learn to accept. When you moved from your Canadian country and went to Europe it was an entirely different experience for a Native person.

*Question: Is that why Stó:lō people were so eager to join?*

Yes. When that knowledge was obtained by the first Native veterans [to arrive in Europe] they sent the word back to their villages: "Oh, what a great place this is! We never felt so good in our life. – We were treated like any other person – Equal to all people who wear the Canadian badge." "Back home," they said, "people look down on you...." As soon as the veterans returned home, and started telling the other people... the stories of how wonderful that life was over there; how we could be treated so well – it was a wonderful experience. And the veterans said, "We could change that. We could have that right in our own land if we wanted to." So it was a new concept of life. They said that's what they were trying to do.<sup>16</sup> 🗣️

## 5 LIFE AFTER THE WAR: LOST VETERAN'S BENEFITS: ■

The brief historical description of Canadian government policy towards Aboriginal people during the Second World War presented earlier is a story of the insult suffered by Aboriginal veterans confronted by racist enlistment policies and the marginalization of Aboriginal rights. To this insult, injury was later added when returning Aboriginal service men failed to receive the same veteran's benefits as their non-Aboriginal comrades-in-arms.

All returning veterans were entitled to certain benefits at the end of the war. Among these were financial assistance for education and job training, inexpensive life insurance, \$6,000 loans towards the purchase of property, and a \$2,320 cash grant towards the purchase of farming or fishing equipment.<sup>17</sup> Each veteran should have been informed of his right to these benefits upon returning to civilian life. However, surviving *Stó:lō* veterans are unanimous in stating that they were never appraised of their entitlement to such benefits, let alone received any. To understand how this could have occurred, we must again consult the official government archival records.

It appears that after the war ended Aboriginal veterans became the victims of an interdepartmental rivalry between the Department of Indian Affairs and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Veteran's benefits were under the jurisdiction of the Department of Veteran's Affairs. However, the Department of Indian Affairs successfully demanded that all government programs relating to Aboriginal people be administered through their offices. As a result, responsibility for informing Aboriginal veterans of their benefit entitlements fell to individual Indian Agents. Apparently, the Indian Agent working among the *Stó:lō* never made this a priority.

Thus, while non-Aboriginal veterans were upgrading their education and starting businesses as farmers or fishermen with government assistance, *Stó:lō* veterans were scrambling on their own to adjust to civilian life. They had expected that the noble principles they had fought for in Europe and Asia would be applied in their home communities in Canada. When this proved not the case they were bitterly disappointed.

One *Stó:lō* veteran explained that upon returning home from the war, he applied for a job as a foreman on the railroad. He assumed that his pre-war experience working for the same company as a labourer, coupled with the administrative training he had received in while in the military qualified him for the job. His potential employer apparently thought so too, but decided to deny him the position regardless. The railroad official justified his decision stating that "white people simply won't work under an Indian." Economically marginalized, he was forced to accept low-paying menial employment for which he was vastly overqualified.

Another *Stó:lō* veteran told a similar story of racial discrimination. Like many Aboriginal soldiers who had been



impressed with the lack of overt racism and the unusual extent of social integration they experienced during the war, this particular *Stó:lō* veteran had been persuaded to “give up his [Indian] status” at the war’s end and become an “enfranchised” Canadian citizen. However, when he tried to buy a house and move into a predominantly

“white” residential suburb he discovered that being a Canadian citizen and veteran did not necessarily entitle him to all the social benefits of equal citizenry. He was told by a real estate agent that his presence would adversely affect his *Xwelítem* neighbour’s property values. As such, he was not welcome. Sadly, when this newly enfranchised citizen tried to return to his reserve he was informed by the local Indian Agent that according to Canadian law, as specified in the “Indian Act” prior to 1951, non-Indians were not legally entitled to live on reserve. His Canadian citizenship had become a burden with few benefits. Socially ostracized this young veteran and his *Stó:lō* family were left with no other option than to move into a “shack” on the outskirts of town.

Enfranchised *Stó:lō* veterans were not the only ones told they were not welcome on their home reserve. Many returning *Stó:lō* veterans who retained their Aboriginal status also found themselves ostracized by members of their home villages because they were seen as having rejected their *Stó:lō* culture when they joined the army. They were criticized by some for having tried to “become White:”

When we returned we were not accepted by the people in our own communities. We stopped going to Indian gatherings for many years because we were vets. We were not accepted, they rejected us.... They never liked us because we were more systematic and thoughtful. The military trained us to think critically and accept discipline. The Indian who stayed behind looked at us as if we were different.... Upon our return the people of our reserves just pushed us aside.... The other *Stó:lō* people who stayed behind and didn’t enlist, well they thought we were strange because we were more military minded.<sup>18</sup> 🙄

As Harold Wells, Wes Sam, Charlie Fisher and other



Map of Canadian Indian Treaties

to be a “warrior.” It should be noted that in *Stó:lō* society the most highly respected people are known as *siyá:m*.<sup>19</sup> By definition a *siyá:m* is wise and gentle. Traditionally, violence was a last resort if all other avenues of dispute resolution failed, and even then, it tended to be defensive rather than offensive. A *siyá:m* was not a warrior, but a diplomat. By way of contrast, warriors in traditional *Stó:lō* society were referred to as *stómex*, a term which implies “short tempered and likes to fight.”<sup>20</sup> *Stómex* people were aggressive. If *stómex* warriors received any respect from the community, it was usually derived from the fear they instilled in people. To the extent that they helped defend their communities, and brought wealth to their families through raiding other villages, they were appreciated. But the oral records indicate that *stómex* warriors were never accorded the respect accorded to a *siyá:m*. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century – when raiding was no longer practised – aggressive *stómex* warriors found themselves essentially unvalued by their communities. Yet, for most *Xwelítem* people, particularly military officials, every “Indian enlistee” was viewed as a potential warrior. Hollywood images seem to have been accepted as accurate ethnographic descriptions by the officials at the recruitment office. These officials assumed that Aboriginal men’s “warrior” heritage would make them excellent soldiers.

Such stereotypical assumptions on the part of Canadian government officials proved insulting to many *Stó:lō* enlistees. They were also potentially harmful. For example, as *Stó:lō* veteran Wes Sam explained, when he enlisted everyone in the Army expected him to be a “great shot, and a good tracker and to have a [mystical] sixth sense, just like Indian warriors in the movies.”<sup>21</sup> The military establishment as well as other rank and file soldiers expected Aboriginal soldiers to be especially brave and adept at warfare. *Stó:lō* soldiers were encouraged to become “snipers” and to fill other “special roles,” where they could kill enemy soldiers by surprise. Considered from a *Stó:lō* perspective, the Canadian Army expected



*Stó:lō* soldiers to act “*stómex*.” Thus, for a *Stó:lō* soldier to live up to the expectations of his *Xwelítem* comrades, and thereby gain their respect in a war-time setting, he would have had to compromise some of his *Stó:lō* values. It is not difficult to imagine how after having accepted the role of a “warrior” during his time in the military, a returning *Stó:lō* veteran would have a difficult time reintegrating himself into *Stó:lō* society.

The experience of one *Stó:lō* veteran is particularly enlightening. Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the story, his identity has been disguised, and he will be referred to as “Tonto” – the supposedly flattering “nickname” bestowed upon him by his non-Aboriginal “buddies” in the army.<sup>22</sup>

Tonto came from a respected *Stó:lō* family – one regarded as *siyà:m*. Surviving family members explain that Tonto decided to leave his young wife and join the army because the 1930’s depression had been particularly hard on *Stó:lō* families, and he needed employment. Before enlisting, Tonto had established a reputation as an accomplished hunter (“*tewít*” in the *Halq’eméylem* language) and because he was familiar with a rifle he was quickly assigned to the infantry as a sniper. The other men in Tonto’s unit

always complimented him on being an excellent shot and a loyal companion, just like his namesake on the “Lone Ranger” radio program. According to people who knew Tonto, he appeared to have been flattered by the attention and respect he received from his *Xwelítem* friends in the army. Tonto was not accustomed to “white people” looking up to him or appreciating his particular skills and abilities. To earn their respect and friendship, Tonto appears to have begun to change his behaviour, to comply with what he thought his comrades expected from “Tonto, the Indian warrior.”

By the end of the war, Tonto’s success as a sniper had turned him into an acknowledged Canadian hero. His companions boasted that his “Indian skills” had made him the perfect soldier. He was eager for battle and had shot and killed over 20 Nazi soldiers. When Tonto returned from Europe after the war, he was given a hero’s welcome by *Xwelítem* communities in the lower mainland and Fraser Valley. Family members even remember the Mayor of Vancouver giving him the keys to the city. When the excitement of the victory over Nazi Germany subsided, and people began returning to their peace-time routine,

Tonto ultimately found himself living back on his home reserve. However, instead of being treated like a



Remembrance Day Service,  
November 11, 1993.  
Mrs. Ethel Fisher lays cedar boughs  
in memory of her late husband Charlie.





heroic warrior by the *Stó:lō*, he was viewed with suspicion. It seems that in their minds, the war had transformed him into a *stómex* warrior, and, as explained earlier, by 1945, *stómex* warriors no longer had a respectable place within *Stó:lō* society.

*Sí:yám* remain highly respected leaders, respected because of their wisdom and gentle nature.

Elders explain that people were afraid of Tonto after he came back from the war. One Elder expressed his feelings this way: “[Tonto] was a killer, I didn’t like to be around him.” It appears that *Stó:lō* people did not know how to relate to a person who had achieved his status in mainstream Canadian society by being aggressive and killing people. Even if he had killed Nazis in what most other Canadians considered a “just war,” he had still acted in a *stómex* manner not easily accepted by many *Stó:lō* people.

As time passed Tonto started drinking heavily, possibly to help him avoid having to deal with the fact that so many people from his home community did not like being around him. His wife eventually left him, leaving Tonto to live the remainder of his life forgotten by the mainstream Canadian culture which had made him a “warrior hero,” and socially marginalized within *Stó:lō* society. Ultimately, in the 1970’s, Tonto died a tragic alcohol associated death.

Unfortunately, Tonto’s experiences were not uncommon. When asked whether he thought *Stó:lō* veterans were as discouraged about the continued presence of racism in Canadian society after the war as African-Americans veterans were upon their return to civilian life in the United States, *Stó:lō* veteran Wes Sam replied: “More so. You got it from your own Native people.”<sup>23</sup>

Wes Sam explained that:

The tragic part is, our own people, looked down on us.

They said, ‘why did

you have to go and join – it wasn’t your fight....’ After we came back from overseas many of us fell back into

the little cracks and holes in our own villages – into obscurity. And that hurt a lot of the old veterans. They never did come forward.

They never did attend big gatherings.

The people of authority among our own people didn’t want them to be recognized that way. That’s what hurt us as veterans – myself as a veteran.<sup>24</sup> 🙄

*Stó:lō* soldiers were not warmly received in their *Stó:lō* communities after the war because “it wasn’t their fight.” Like the nineteenth century *stómex* warrior who raided distant communities a century earlier, often simply to acquire wealth, the WWII *Stó:lō* soldier had gone and fought against people, sometimes civilians, who had done nothing to directly harm *Stó:lō* or even Canadian people. It was not immediately apparent to all *Stó:lō* people that enlisting in the army, and fighting Germans or Italians in Europe was an indirect means of defending their home community. Had Germany attacked the Fraser Valley, and *Stó:lō* men fought to protect their families and communities, it would have been easy to regard the soldiers as respected *sí:yám*. But because many *Stó:lō* soldiers had sought to live up to their non-*Stó:lō* comrades’ expectations of an “Indian warrior,” they had behaved in a way which was interpreted as distasteful, and even dangerous, by members of *Stó:lō* society.



## 6 STÓ:LŌ VETERANS HELPING AND HEALING COMMUNITIES: NEW OPPORTUNITIES ■

As time progressed, an ever increasing number of *Stó:lō* people came to appreciate their World War II veterans. In a manner similar to the *stómex* who relied upon special training, wisdom and spirit power to assist his people, veterans could use the special organizational skills, education and training they acquired while in the armed forces to assist their communities deal with the assimilationist policies of the Canadian government. They began working to help their communities achieve a more fulfilling and respectable position within the broader Canadian society.

*Stó:lō* veteran Wes Sam explained that the Aboriginal veterans

Weren't satisfied with the way they were treated once they [returned to Canada and] became Canadian here again. They said, "all right, this is what I done for Canada, and this is what you brought back. This is not right!" For me, as a soldier who was over there... I wanted to be treated just like every other Canadian, but I guess between our Indian leaders and the government of Canada (the Department of Indian Affairs) they made it very difficult for Indian soldiers, for veterans, to be heard. So we, as veterans, as Native people, mentioned this to our Legions. The [Royal Canadian] Legion took all this thing into hand. They used their organization to change the laws of the land [remove the most racist and assimilationist clauses in the Indian Act such as the provisions which prevented Indians from being citizens, and prevented them from voting or purchasing alcohol, or hiring a lawyer etc.<sup>25</sup>... In the churches and the Legions there were veterans, you know, Native and non-Native – so these organizations delved into a little research program to find out about Native people's participation in the Second World War, and

with that knowledge they went to the government of Canada...

So, the changing of the laws of the land took place by 1952. They start to break down the barriers recognize, to recognize that all Canadians will be equal, all Canadians. Up to this time, the laws of the land did not allow a native person to go to high school, did not allow him to become a lawyer, did not allow him to take any part in education that would hinder the Department of Indian affairs style of looking after. So, it was very simple for them. It was their law – it sure wasn't ours. But us veterans wanted to change that law. Through the aid of organizations such as the Legion and church groups the Indian Act was changed....

"In 1952 there was a major shake-up, I guess you could call it that, to the administration of native people, of the old law that we had. It was a step towards making available to the native people the rights that had been enjoyed by other Canadians for a long long time: The right to chose where you want to live, or be whatever you want to be. If you want to become a nurse, that's what you train for, or a doctor, lawyer, or whatever it might be, you finally got the right to higher education. We didn't have those rights prior to World War Two. There was no way that we'd ever have been able to obtain that kind of training or education then. They controlled it, the Department of Indian Affairs controlled you. If they wanted to, they made you sign a paper. If you want to go to University you had to sign a paper taking you off the list of Indians, put you on like any other Canadian. 🙄

As the years went by, Aboriginal veterans increasingly played key leadership roles in defending their communities' interests. For example, in 1969 when the federal government proposed that all Aboriginal people be stripped of their collective Aboriginal rights WWII veterans played



Although aggressive and feared *Stómex* warriors were respected because they helped protect their home village and because their raids brought wealth, but as time progressed, warriors became less needed and overly aggressive men were looked on with fear.

(Paul Kane, 1863)



key roles in organizing an effective opposition. Their leadership caused the government to rethink and then reverse its position. Likewise, in the early 1970's, when the federal government attempted to deny *Stó:lō* people the right to use the Coqualeetza Property in Chilliwack (which had formerly been set aside as an Indian Residential School and Indian hospital) it was *Stó:lō* veterans who organized and led the occupation of the site. Their leadership ultimately convinced the government to declare the property a collective reserve for the use of all *Stó:lō* people.

*Stó:lō* veterans of WWII found opportunities to make their war-time skills and experiences useful and appreciated. People recognized this, and acknowledged that their military service was in many ways beyond their control, and therefore they were not to blame for having "acted white" or appearing *stómex*. As a result of these changes of attitude, in 1993 the *Stó:lō* Tribal Council organized and hosted a special Remembrance Day ceremony to specially honour the life-long contributions of their veterans. At the ceremony they emphasised not so much the *Stó:lō* veterans' military contributions, but their post-war contributions to their communities.

## 7 CONCLUSION ■

In many ways the story of the *Stó:lō* veteran is a reflection of the broader Aboriginal experience in Canada. *Stó:lō* veterans' participation in World War Two was largely the result of governmental bungling. Though disenfranchised, *Stó:lō* men were compelled to join the Canadian war effort. Upon their return, *Stó:lō* veterans were abandoned by the military establishment that had embraced them as potential "warrior soldiers." Not only were *Stó:lō* veterans denied benefits accorded to other veterans, they were again racially marginalized. As Canadian veterans they shared the legacy of "shell shock," or what is now called post-traumatic stress syndrome. As *Stó:lō* veterans they were confronted by special cultural dilemmas. They were criticized for acting too "white" and thinking they were better than other *Stó:lō* on the one hand, and of acting too much like traditional *stómex* warriors on the other. Their overcoming of these obstacles stands as testimony to their dedication to principle and their commitment to their communities' welfare.

*Stó:lō* veterans received the recognition they so long desired at the first *Stó:lō* Remembrance Day ceremony in 1993.





## Footnotes

- 1 I am indebted to Ed Labinsky, Pauline Joli de Lotbiniere, and Robert Scott Sheffield (past graduate students from the Universities of British Columbia and Victoria) for their assistance in documenting and researching issues pertaining to *Stó:lō* veterans.
- 2 James W. St. G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War One: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol.LXX, 1989.
- 3 MacInnes to all Inspectors, Indian Agents and the Indian Commissioner for British Columbia, August 6, 1940, (RG 10, c-8514, file # 452-26; Chief Registrar to McGill, August 3, 1940, RG 10, c-8514, vol.6770, file #452-26, (Microfilm copies at *Stó:lō* Nation Archives – SNA). See also Robert Scott Sheffield, "*...In the Same Manner as Other People*": *Government Policy and the Military Service of Canada's First Nations People*, (University of Victoria, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, 1995) Chapter 3.
- 4 Sheffield, p.54.
- 5 Correspondence Outward, McGill, August 20, 1940, RG 10, c-8514, vol. 6770, file 452-26), (Microfilm copy at *Stó:lō* Nation Archives).
- 6 Sheffield, p.103
- 7 See Chapter 5 this volume.
- 8 Maclauchlan to Camsell, March 18, 1941, cited in Sheffield, p.23.
- 9 Ibid., p.23.
- 10 Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters, 75/347, April 4, 1939. (Microfilm copy at SNA).
- 11 Sheffield, p.28-30. Sheffield also shows that at least initially the army was even reluctant to accept Aboriginal people due to poor health conditions and



- inferior residential schools education levels.
- 12 Wes Sam in conversation with Charlie Fisher and Keith Thor Carlson, September 23, 1993. (Fieldnotes on file at SNA).
- 13 At least four *Stó:lō* men enlisted in the United States Armed Forces during WWII. Apparently, those who joined the U.S. services did so because they were living in the States participating in a modified version of their traditional seasonal rounds at the time. One *Stó:lō* woman is also known to have participated in the Canadian Armed Forces.
- 14 Charlie Fisher in conversation with Wes Sam and Keith Thor Carlson, September 23, 1993. (Fieldnotes on file at SNA).
- 15 Herald Wells in conversation with Scott Sheffield, May 11, 1995, Hope B.C. (Tape on file at SNA).
- 16 Wes Sam in conversation with Pauline Joli de Lotbiniere, May 12, 1993. (Tape on file at SNA).
- 17 "Department of Veteran Affairs Benefits," A document published by the Canadian Senate Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, Senate of Canada, 140 St. Wellington St., Ottawa Ontario. This document outlines the benefits all veterans are/were entitled to.
- 18 Charlie Fisher in conversation with Wes Sam and Keith Thor Carlson, September 23, 1993. (Fieldnotes on file at SNA)
- 19 See Chapter 5 this volume.
- 20 Sonny McHalsie in conversation with Keith Carlson, June 19, 1995. (Tape on file at SNA).
- 21 Wes Sam in conversation with Keith Carlson, Soowahlie, B.C., July 1992. (Fieldnotes on file at SNA)
- 22 When asking for direction on how to discuss the personal history of people who were sometimes not well liked or perhaps misunderstood by their community in the past, Elder Frank Malloway suggested that it was not appropriate to bring up something that might hurt or embarrass their living family members: "its past history, its past history, it shouldn't be talked about, you know." Frank Malloway in conversation with Heather Myles and Tracy Joe, Yakweawkwoose, June 17, 1996. (Taped copy and transcript on file at SNA). See Chapter 1, this volume.
- 23 Wes Sam in conversation with Keith Carlson and Pauline Joli de Lobiniere, Soowahlie, May 14, 1993. (Transcript on file at SNA).
- 24 Wes Sam in conversation with Pauline Joly de Lotbiniere. Soowahlie, May 12, 1993. (Transcript on file at SNA).
- 25 See Chapter 5 this volume.