

INTRODUCTION

METIS VETERANS: REMEMBRANCES

(DRAFT COPY)

Submitted by:

DAVE HUTCHINSON

November 28, 1993

"Tradition," wrote a Regina Leader Post reporter in a special despatch from Lebret on September 18, 194_, "enjoins on the descendants of those brave pioneers of the western plains, a devotion to religion and patriotism, and particularly the faith of their fathers. The majority of the men enlisted are all direct descendants of men who took no active part in the Metis Rebellions of 1870 and 1885, although their sympathies were with their leader, Louis Riel. Through the teaching and spreading of the principles of British Liberty, these men are today in the ranks of the great patriots, and have donned the garb of the fighter for liberty and justice."

Many of the Metis veterans interviewed for this book probably wouldn't argue that "tradition" played a significant role in their decision to enlist. Yet the veterans' motivation bore little resemblance to the romantic assumptions of the Leader Post reporter. Wilfred John Henry, a World War Two veteran, speaks of a much different "tradition":

I joined up to make money. I was getting \$1.10 at first. I thought that was good money. It was better than fifty cents a day hauling wood into town. \$1.10 a day, free clothes and all that, free board and room. That was the reason I joined up. I wanted to help my folks out. Give them half my pay. I thought this was the real thing. I could send my folks a few dollars because I knew their problems and what their conditions were. When I was home, I used to haul cords into town for them... fifty cents a cord. It wasn't much money, but I helped my folks out the best I could.

For Metis veterans like Wilfred John Henry, the tradition underscoring their decision to enlist was characterized by poverty and alienation. Certainly this idea is not new. Many veterans, both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal, joined out of poverty and a desire to belong. Yet what makes Metis enlistment unique is the sociocultural, historical, and political circumstances. By tracing: i) the dissolution of Metis Community Law (through the Hudson Bay Company's enforcement of British Common Law); ii) the introduction of the Manitoba Act of 1874, which fragmented Metis extended families and rendered impossible the development of a Metis enclave; and iii) the execution of Louis Riel in 1885, we uncover a rationale for substantial Metis enlistment in WWI, WWII, and the Korean War. As a result of such events, many Metis found themselves relegated to the margins of western canadian society, living on road allowances and working for meagre wages, "scrubbing bush", or as farm labourers.

This is not to suggest that the Metis military contribution was not significant or honourable - it was in fact, both. It is to say however, that the very events that preceded the subjugation of Metis peoples also, ironically, ensured the availability of a sizable volunteer military force. Certainly some veterans joined out of a sense of adventure and others, patriotism, but on this issue I believe the veterans' stories speak for themselves.

On their return to Canada, many of the Metis veterans returned to less than a hero's welcome. Intolerant of unacceptable social conditions and mainstream attitudes, a number of veterans became community leaders, participating in the development of successful housing, education, alcohol abuse counselling, recreation, and culture programs. Further, in response to the inequitable distribution of military benefits, the veterans formed the Saskatchewan Metis Veteran's Association (SMVA). This association is now, along with the Saskatchewan Indian Veteran's Association (SIVA), under the umbrella of the National Aboriginal Veteran's Association (NAVA). Perhaps no one spoke more passionately to the issue of equitable treatment for Saskatchewan Metis veterans than Ron Camponi, a Korean War veteran, whom I interviewed shortly before his death in the fall of 1993:

I honestly think that the Metis and the Aboriginal veterans were really shafted. I don't know if it was intentional or just a bureaucratic what shall I say, bumbling and fumbling, not knowing that there were veterans out there that had come from reserves, right in the north, in small villages, some of them not even villages, trap lines. So the method they used to inform the veterans was definately bad for the Aboriginal veterans. You take the Indians, they had to give up their treaty rights, disenfranchise themselves so they could join the army. Things like that, people like the Metis. We didn't even have reserves. We lived on road allowances and when they came back they went right back to the road allowances. Some of them couldn't read, couldn't write, some couldn't understand the language. They knew their own language, Cree. There were never people that went out to inform them, or were supposed to, didn't get out to these people and tell them what they had coming to them. The benefits that they were entitled to. Not that it was discretionary or anything, but like I said, they never knew what their

rights were. Because you have rights to land, education for your children. All these benefits that none of them even knew about. And God knows that this went on from the first World War, right through.

It is clear that despite their contribution, Metis veterans continue to pursue full recognition. Yet to explain this any further would be fruitless... listen to the voices of the veterans themselves, and draw your own conclusions.

Dave Hutchinson
Fort Smith, NWT
November 1993