



Photo by Frank McTighe

Preston Crow Chief paints Blackfoot warrior symbols on Moonshine.

Blackfoot veteran shares good fortune with horses

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The prayers and good fortune Crow Chief passed to the horses also transferred to the people gathered in Centennial park to watch.

Crow Chief said only a war veteran can use the Blackfoot warrior symbols.

"The requirement is you go to a war zone and you come back to tell the tale," Crow Chief said.

Crow Chief was just 16 years old when he joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 2005 through the Bold Eagle program for First Nations people.

Crow Chief received his training at Shilo, Man. before he was deployed to Afghanistan in October 2009.

"I was listed as a driver-gunner, kind of a dual role," Crow Chief said of his duties while deployed.

Those duties included driving the heavy armoured units and serving as a gunner in the vehicle's hatch.

Crow Chief was a driver for the company commander of Bravo Company, transporting him outside the wire to meetings with tribal elders and leaders, often in dangerous areas.

Crow Chief was with the 20th Independent Field Battery, Royal Canadian Artillery, in Lethbridge until he received his release in May.

Crow Chief completed a management degree at the University of Lethbridge and is now an accounts payable clerk with Blood Tribe Housing in Stand Off.

Last October, Crow Chief was approached by another First Nations veteran, Kenny Fox, to a spirit ride.

"We went out there and painted about 20 horses,"



Photo by Frank McTighe

Preston Crow Chief, who served in Afghanistan with the Canadian Armed Forces, explains the symbols he painted on Moonshine.

Crow Chief said. "He introduced me to some of the rules and said as veterans, this is what we get to do. He has more or less been mentoring me on how to do these symbols."

In June, Crow Chief did a horse painting demonstration at Chinook Regional Hospital in Lethbridge.

Lethbridge Therapeutic Riding Association executive director Jason Shriner said the program benefited from a grant from the Community Foundation of Lethbridge and Southwestern Alberta.

The funding allows the association to take horses across the south to visit people in lodges and other settings.

Shriner said the association is delighted to have Crow Chief involved.

"Preston has a lot to teach us about the value of equine in Blackfoot culture and Alberta culture," Shriner said. "I think that's the real power of truth and reconciliation. Let's have a

discussion, let's learn from each other. Let's share values and see where they mesh, where we can develop and grow."

Vera Crow Shoe conducted a smudging ceremony and said a Blackfoot prayer to begin the process.

"The prayer was about recovery, healing and making connections with the horses," Crow Chief said.

After he painted the horses, Crow Chief explained what the symbols represent.

Crow Chief painted squares that represent the missions he went on in Afghanistan.

"I was outside the wire a lot in Afghanistan," Crow Chief said of leaving the relative safety of forward operating bases in Afghanistan. "I was outside the wire maybe three or four times a day."

The dots painted on the horses represent the times he touched an enemy, something that occurred mainly when he was posted at a prison in Kandahar City.

"Whenever we detained an enemy — a Taliban or an insurgent — that's when I would have dealt with an enemy," Crow Chief said.

Straight lines represent the number of times Crow Chief seized an enemy weapon.

"Most notably for me, IEDs (improvised explosive devices) were everywhere — vehicle-borne IEDs, donkey IEDs, land mines," Crow Chief said.

Lightning bolts represent Crow Chief moving away from the main fighting force on scouting missions. Handprints represent big events in Afghanistan.

Vera Crow Shoe said it was important to bring the horses and the painting ceremony to Fort Macleod for their place as a connection between the North West Mounted Police and First Nations people.

"We connect with these horses and they connect with us," Crow Shoe said. "Horses give us the gift to be able to do the work we do with healing people."

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