

# Wartime contributions of our Indigenous neighbours

By Mike Renzella  
The Haldimand Press

Every year on November 11, Canadians gather to remember, honour, and pay tribute to those who put their life on the line to protect our country. Fighting alongside their fellow soldiers in the Canadian armed forces, our Indigenous neighbours from both Six Nations and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) earned their place in our national history and helped inspire a generation to stand up for their rights and refuse to be treated as second-class citizens.

The Press sat down with Darin Wybenga, Traditional Knowledge and Land Use Coordinator for MCFN, to learn a little bit more about that history.

"There was conflict amongst First Nations themselves long before Europeans arrived," said Wybenga, who noted the first known alliances with British forces took place in the War of 1812, where Indigenous warriors from the area battled in Detroit and York. "The two warriors that we know about who actually lived here at New Credit go by the names Lawrence Herkimer and Joseph Sawyer. They were both fighting on the British side.... The War of 1812 fell right in the middle of our treaty making process. Our first treaty with the Crown was in 1781.... In those early treaties we expected to share the land with the Crown. Of course, it didn't quite work out the way we expected."

Wybenga said that despite contributing to the war effort, by 1820 the government had taken four million acres of land, leaving MCFN with just 200 acres – and a population under 200: "Our people were fairly disheartened that our lands were being taken out from underneath of us during the War of 1812."

He said that by the time WWI arrived, with that disenfranchisement holding firm roots, there was little compulsion for MCFN residents to enlist as soldiers – and yet, a steady stream of them signed up.

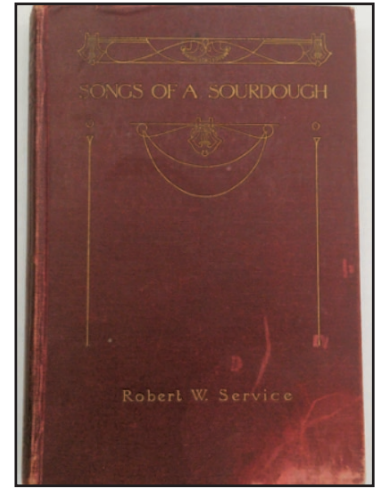
Wybenga explained, "There seemed to be this re-establishment of pride that we needed, after being marginalized so much in Canadian society. We could take our place on the battlefield and fight just as hard for the British crown. We didn't even have the rights to fight for. We couldn't vote, we couldn't hire a lawyer, we were confined to our reserves.... I marvel at it today. You'd think there would be so much resentment, but there we are, we're going out to fight and we continue to fight in the conflicts of the 21st century."

He continued, "32 of our band members enlisted in WWI. We had a population of 286 at the time. That's a rather significant contribution.... Most of our people joined the 114th battalion, called Brock's Rangers."

Based out of Haldimand, Wybenga said the battalion consisted of a large contingent of Indigenous warriors from both Six Nations and Credit.

For one young member of the battalion, Lieutenant Cameron D. Brant, great-grandson of Joseph Brant, the chance to fight in WWI was something he'd prepared his whole life for. When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, it took Brant just three days to sign up for service.

"He was one of these people, like a lot of small boys, who was just in love with military things," said



CREDIT—Lieutenant Cameron D. Brant and some of his personal items from the war: the book *Songs of Sourdough*, a Brock's Rangers collar badge, and a collection of medals found inside a Selkirk home.



CREDIT—Six members of the MCFN-based Laforme family: (l-r) Dan, Sam, Peter, Wesley, Elias, and Herb, who signed up together to serve in the Canadian armed forces during WWI.

Wybenga, noting that Brant graduated from Hagersville High School, a considerable accomplishment at the time. "He represents one of the very best of our New Credit young men who went and fought."

From there, Brant joined up with the 37th regiment of the Haldimand Rifles, where he earned the rank of lieutenant, a rank he would hold in armed forces as well. Brant was on the battlefield during Canada's first major incursion, the second battle of Ypres, fought from April 22 to May 25, 1915 in Belgium.

"He was there for that very first gas attack against Canadian soldiers. He could see the gas coming. He seemed to survive that, but in a counterattack, he was killed," explained Wybenga.

According to dispatches from the battlefield, Brant was highly regarded by his fellow soldiers. He taught members of his regiment an "Indian war dance", which he also performed nightly. On the frontlines, he received praise from commanding officers for his heroics.

"He was one of our very first, and brightest, and best, and he went off and got killed right away in the war," said Wybenga.

While records remain chronicling the Indigenous veterans who served in that era, Wybenga said tangible artifacts are very hard to find. He was therefore very surprised by two discoveries in 2014, the first of which came from a yard sale: "I get a call out of nowhere from Picton, Ontario ... from someone running a rummage sale. She asked me if I would like a book that once belonged to Cameron Brant."

The book, titled *Songs of Sourdough* by Robert

Service, was full of poetry.

"That was (Brant's) reading material while he was waiting in the trench," said Wybenga. "To me, he turns the stereotypical view of a First Nations warrior upside down.... You get this image of these fierce warriors, and what is he doing in his downtime? He's reading poetry."

Wybenga said Brant's wife at the time had to fight hard to get his personal effects back. He figures the book was one such item she secured, and another surfaced that same year.

"A guy stopped in our Band office, he was remodeling a home near Selkirk, Ontario. He pulled apart the mantelpiece and he found war medals inside. There were four medals, including the dead man's penny.... These had Cameron Brant's name inscribed right on the medals."

Wybenga speculated that Brant's wife, who remarried after his death, placed the medals inside the mantle at some point when she lived in the home: "I don't buy into coincidences too often, but this was really quite the ultimate find for our First Nation, that we got something tangible from Cameron Brant, who is important in so many ways."

Brant would be one of just four casualties amongst the Credit warriors who fought in WWI. Wybenga detailed how all those contributing to WWI had a positive impact on his community, explaining how the Soldier's Settlement Act after the war granted many Indigenous veterans loans needed to buy farm equipment and establish themselves.

Perhaps more importantly, "Our guys working alongside other Canadians helped to reduce some of those barriers. I've read that our soldiers were seen as soldiers first by their fellow soldiers. They weren't discriminated against or thought of differently. They were seen as soldiers. I think that helped our people see their worth as well."

He concluded, "It inspired them to fight for their rights once they arrived back in Canada, that they didn't have to be second-class citizens any longer. You get this political activism that spreads out throughout the country after WWI. We didn't have to feel inferior to other people living in Canada. We laid our lives on the line, too, and are very much a part of the fabric of the Canadian nation."

For more information on Brant, and MCFN's varied history in the area, visit [mncfn.ca/category/culture-history](http://mncfn.ca/category/culture-history) where you can read posts from Wybenga, view video content, and more.

We humbly and generously thank all our troops who have fought for our freedom and to those who continue to serve.

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