

Warriors Remember:
Aboriginal Veterans & Oral History In Canada

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“Official histories hold a powerful sway over the formation and conception of Military history.”¹

All too often when the issue of First Nations veterans has been examined in the past, there has been inadequate attention paid to the testimonies of the veterans themselves. Archival records alone do not tell the whole story, and on some matters reveal a good deal less than the whole story.²

The participation of aboriginal people in the Canadian Forces has not been well documented. “Aboriginal servicemen were so fully integrated into the Canadian armed forces, particularly the Army, that official records seldom report on them separately.”³ It has been a footnote in the larger national narrative of military history. Participation of aboriginal peoples in the academic documentation of their own histories has also been minimal. To date, most documentation of Aboriginal oral histories have focused on what John Tosh refers to as “oral traditions... the narratives and descriptions of people and events in the past which have been handed down by word of mouth over several generations.”⁴ This has been in place of what Tosh distinguishes as “oral reminiscences – the first hand recollections of people interviewed by a historian.”⁵ As a result of the current climate surrounding treaty negotiations in Canada, the primary focus of most aboriginal oral history research has been

¹ Tim Cook, “Clio’s Soldiers: Charles Stacey and the Army Historical Section in the Second World War,” Canadian Historical Review 83, (March 2002): 29.

² R. Scott Sheffield, A search for equity. A study of the Treatment Accorded to First Nations, Veterans and Dependents of the Second World War and the Korean Conflict, prepared for the National Round Table on First Nations Veterans’ Issues, (2001), 49.

³ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1 - Looking Forward Looking Back Part Two: False Assumptions and a Failed Relationship, section 4.2 “Second World War: Community Support.” October 1996.

⁴ John Tosh, “History by Word of Mouth,” The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History (London: Longman, 1991), 206.

⁵ Tosh, “History by Word of Mouth,” 206.

largely centered on traditional land use and first contact. As a result, it positions the oral testimonies of aboriginal veterans as a priceless starting point, as there is so little documentation regarding their experiences to begin with.

While it is true that these sources cannot “re-create these neglected territories of history with authentic immediacy”⁶, is that the goal? And if so, is that appropriate? “The first thing that makes oral history different...is that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*.”⁷ Value and purpose is derived from interviewing aboriginal veterans such as Ernest Clark, Claude McKenzie and Frank Planes not only from the events that their memories can testify to, but also by the recognition of their service as *aboriginal* veterans. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity for both the aboriginal researcher and veteran to engage in a cultural tradition of storytelling. This process, based often on listening to the experiences of elders compliments Paul Thompson’s discussion of Wilhelm Dilthey’s thoughts on the value of history:

Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us. Here is the outward, phenomenal course of a life which forms the basis for understanding what has produced it within a certain environment...The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created a coherence in that life which he is now putting into words...He has, in his memory, singled out and accentuated the moments which he experienced as significant; others he has allowed to sink into forgetfulness...Thus, the first problem of grasping and presenting historical connections is already half solved by life.⁸

⁶ Tosh, “History by Word of Mouth,” 227.

⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different? Reprinted as “The peculiarities of Oral History,” in History Workshop, no 12 (1981), 67.

⁸ Paul Thompson, “Historians and Oral History,” The Voice of the Past: Oral History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 edition), 49.

What is important to consider here, extends beyond fact and, lies in the tradition of the *telling* process. This practice of aboriginal telling is geared towards making historical, personal and cultural connections. Tosh indicates “the ‘voice of the past’ is inescapably the voice of the present too.”⁹ Within aboriginal storytelling tradition, this is a positive and accepted practice. While it is acknowledged that perspective and historical detail may be informed by current knowledge, the history does not lose credibility, it gains meaning as a whole.

One suspects that here in the long term the disadvantages of the European outsider may prove decisive. The social codes and layers of expressive meaning have to be penetrated as well as formal language itself. Even the very structure of conceptualization may be fundamentally different, and Western notions of time and space misleading.¹⁰

The continuing process of sharing memories is seen as a foundation for what will inevitably become part of an “oral tradition.”¹¹ What is important is that this process be an ongoing historical vehicle, which extends beyond the current political focus of settling land disputes.

The reality of aboriginal peoples lived experience has been silenced, misrepresented and largely misunderstood. “What happens to the research when the researched become the researchers?”¹² So far, this discussion has been based on a model where the histories presented orally by Aboriginal veterans are recorded by a researcher who is aboriginal as well. What comes

⁹ Tosh, “History by Word of Mouth,” 214.

¹⁰ Paul Thompson, “Evidence,” The Voice of the Past: Oral History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 edition), 121.

¹¹ Tosh, “History by Word of Mouth,” 206.

¹² Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and Indigenous Peoples, (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999), 183.

from an interview “depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, dialogue, and personal relationship.”¹³ It is this relationship, which must be navigated thru layers of cultural protocol that suggests that an aboriginal researcher could be more sensitive too, or better accepted to negotiate within as elaborated by Thompson:¹⁴

The insider and outsider have different difficulties here. The insider knows the way around, can be less easily fooled, understands the nuances and starts with far more useful contacts and, hopefully, as an established person of good faith.¹⁵

“Gender, and race, close some avenues of inquiry but clearly open up others.”¹⁶

To create an environment that will allow for a candid discourse on personal experience, particularly from a class of citizen that has been marginalized based on their ethnicity, the aboriginal status of the researcher can play an important role in creating rapport with the informants. On arriving at the home of Mr. Ernest Clark, it was apparent that the presence of an aboriginal student was greeted warmly. Pre-interview conversation focused greatly on establishing connections that were shared both within the local aboriginal community, and academically, as Mr. Clark is an Alumni from the Aboriginal Governance Program¹⁷ at the University of Victoria. As the interview progressed and the subject of racism in both the military and the home environment was discussed. The topic seemed to

¹³ Portelli, “History Workshop, no 12 (1981), 70.

¹⁴ This should not be an inherent expectation however, considering that lateral politics that are based on family connections, tribal dis/connections, gender issues and military allegiances will also contextualize an interview situation. It was my personal experience that these factors did each inform the interviews as a challenge and benefit in creating a rapport with the veterans.

¹⁵ Paul Thompson, “Evidence,” The Voice of the Past: Oral History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 edition), 120.

¹⁶ Maurice Punch, “Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research,” (in Denzin and Lincoln, Handbook of Qualitative Research, 87.

¹⁷ Ernest Clark Interview, 19 November 2005, Metchosin, B.C.

surface naturally on more than one occasion, but was difficult and most likely inappropriate to elaborate upon. It is evidence that “race can provide another kind of barrier”¹⁸ to the oral history interview. It was implied that as an aboriginal person, my understanding of the racial dynamics he would have faced should already be apparent, as I too would have similar experiences. It is in this particular instance where the outsider may have had an advantage, having the ability to “ask for the obvious to be explained.”¹⁹

The issue of racism was further complicated to discuss due to the lateral distinctions Mr. Clark made in regards to Non-status and Metis peoples being included in Aboriginal events for both veterans and otherwise in the aboriginal community. Current, more inclusive national definitions of First Nations people that prevail within government created a tension with Mr. Clark that were best left alone. As Mr. Clark is very active in the local veteran and aboriginal community, and was the primary source for contacting other veterans, it did indicate that he would not be able to provide connections with non-status aboriginal or Metis veterans for interviews. If this was to be the only sampling of aboriginal veterans oral histories, that would prove problematic, as it would not “secure as representative a group of informants as possible.”²⁰ Certainly, how one’s sources are chosen to represent all considerable sub-sections within it²¹ if results are to be maximized and comparable. But what to do if the sources themselves

¹⁸ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 213.

¹⁹ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 120.

²⁰ Paul Thompson, “Evidence,” *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 edition), 124.

²¹ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 131.

are of an age that limits opportunities for further Oral history research? You can still benefit from what you have access to.

Frank Planes is a Hereditary Chief of the T'Souke First Nation.²² He served in the Army during World War II in what was officially designated as "water transport." He was part of what is now referred to as the "Gumboot Navy."²³ This branch of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, was also referred to by the navy as the "Fisherman's Reserve."²⁴ "The strength of the [Fisherman's Reserve] was based on pre-war surveys which established what fishing boats would be suitable for anti-submarine patrol work."²⁵ The account that Mr. Planes gives is very compelling and elaborated in detail. It is not rehearsed and his wife (Bunny) confirms that he has never discussed his service, even with his own children and grandchildren. He begins with his recruitment from a boom dock, in Sooke, BC in 1943. Prior to 1943, "the recruitment of British Columbia Indians [had not] been encouraged, although an unsuccessful attempt was made to obtain a single crew of them for the Fisherman's Reserve."²⁶ Aboriginal peoples were exempt from Conscription, and therefore not required to serve with the Canadian Armed Forces. Mr. Planes did not serve with the Navy, however, although officially the Fisherman's Reserve came under their jurisdiction. Mr. Planes was recruited into the army on the 7th of January 1943 at

²² Frank Planes Interview, 23 November 2005, Sooke, B.C. His Indian name was given as evidence as were the names of his siblings to confirm this.

²³ Frank Planes Interview, 23 November 2005, Sooke, B.C

²⁴ Carol Popp, The Gumboot Navy: Memories of the men who served in the Fisherman's Reserve – a special naval unit formed to patrol the coast of British Columbia during World War II, (Lanzville: Oolichan Books, 1988), 9.

²⁵ Popp, The Gumboot Navy, 12.

²⁶ Fred Gaffen, Forgotten Soldiers, (Penticton: Theytus Books Ltd, 1985), 64.

Little Mountain Barracks (now known as Queen Elizabeth Park.)²⁷ He was specifically recruited as a result of his knowledge of the Coastal waters on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. This all seems plausible and his discharge papers confirm his dates of enlistment. There is a discrepancy with the Official Navy record however.

According to the Official Navy record, "In October 1943, the participation of the Fishermen's Reserve in west-coast combined Operations activities came to an end...By 1944 the work of the Fisherman's Reserve was finished. The danger of an attack upon the west coast had long been remote, and the main reason for the patrols had thus been removed."²⁸

These dates and the Navy designation of the Combine Operations that formed the Gumboot Navy do not coincide with the Service dates and military force with which Mr. Planes was enlisted. Nor can there be any record as of yet recording the name and Captain of the Ship he was first deployed on. While it is necessary to view the interview with Mr. Planes with objectivity, so too should the written record. The "Gumboot Navy"²⁹ is not a well documented Operation of the Second World War. The account that Mr. Planes gives of his "1090 days at sea"³⁰ give many other examples of verifiable information that confirms his experience with the Fisherman's Reserve.

So we got fixed up and we left. And all the squakin' I made about being clay pigeons... we were called the Gumboot Navy, 'cuz we were all fishermen...Wally Layton from a reserve from just this side of Alaska [Metlakatla] was Captain. So when we left Vancouver to come out, they gave us an envelope and it said do not open to [until you are] 30 miles off Estevan Point. That' s the

²⁷ Anonymous, "Honoring Aboriginal Veterans APTN Forum" 7 November 2004, <<http://www.aptn.ca/forums/index.php?showtopic=136>> (1 December 2005).

²⁸ Gilbert Norman Tucker, PhD, The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History Volume II Activities on Shore during the Second World War, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), 317.

²⁹ Frank Planes Interview, 23 November 2005, Sooke, B.C.

³⁰ Frank Planes Interview, 23 November 2005, Sooke, B.C.

point that the Japs used the deck gun on, they shelled Estevan Point.

It says positions first... and code word for position. Wally and I were studying it. Sighting second...*Position*... never a word on the raid without a position first. The radio on the boat was a huge thing. You could listen to people in Mexico all yakin'...So I'm steering and Wally is sittin' away... It was a real nice day and we were going along pretty good. It was oh, about a half an hour before it was getting daylight...[There was a] haze and you couldn't see too far and we were in the wheelhouse. The cook came by 'I was just out on deck do you hear anything' Oh he said, 'there's a funny noise out there.' Hmmm.....

And that's after we reported our positions and sighting, and it was coming from southeast.. and all the way around us! I looked into the sun as it come up... then on the horizon... I noticed something flash in the water... maybe it was a submarine! It was a tiny little airplane and it could sure go! Looked like it was only 10 feet above the water.. And it zoomed right past our mast and there were 15 or 20 coming from all different directions and then there were a steaming mass. You could see these great big bombers!..[There were hundreds of all kinds!]

That made us feel better. The japs must have been watching that performance because after that... time went by and the japs just picked up and left. And we found out that the US was in it also and they were sending all these men over to that island to take it over. When they got there though, all they found was jap tracks from where they were running away was still smoking. When they left, they bombed Dutch Harbour. They didn't bomb it to hit the houses, they bombed in between the houses!³¹

So to interpret this excerpt from Mr. Planes interview we can compare many things. First would be the fear about being bait for the Japanese submarines was quite real. No ships were really well equipped for the duties they were assigned to. The rest of the Canadian Navy was preoccupied with the Battle of the Atlantic. And while the Fisherman's Reserve were confident in their ability to navigate up and down the coast, their manoeuvrability was primarily what would

³¹ Frank Planes Interview, 23 November 2005, Sooke, B.C.

have had to protect them from the enemy. “We were given depth charges, Lewis machine guns, and 303s... which wasn’t enough to fight off an irate fisherman!”³² Mr. Planes confirms this aspect later on in his interview, saying that they were no match for a submarine, but they could manoeuvre faster and knew how to get to shallow water quickly where a submarine could not follow. The knowledge that with air support, they would have a chance should they actually confront a submarine gave the crew, according to Mr. Planes, much comfort. The presence itself, of the Japanese in Dutch Harbour is well documented, however there are few, if any visual accounts of “the only convoy assembled on the west coast [that] was formed for a specific military operation – the re-occupation of Kiska Island in the Aleutians in August 1943.”³³ Furthermore, other sources qualifies this Pacific coastal account by acknowledging “the Rocky Mountain Rangers [,who] at one point had about two companies of Indians. This battalion formed part of the force that landed on Kiska in August 1943, only to find that the Japanese had already left.”³⁴

This elaboration on events already documented in the formal accounts allows the listener to share in the emotional and sometimes humorous side to conflict. It allows the aboriginal researcher a more recent and tangible way to understand history and to consider the opportunities personally experienced by Aboriginal Veterans. As a hereditary chief, Frank Planes childhood experiences unfolded in an environment of discipline, duty and training which may or may not

³² Popp, The Gumboot Navy, 34.

³³ Gilbert Norman Tucker, PhD, The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History Volume II Activities on Shore during the Second World War, (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1952), 215.

³⁴ Gaffen, Forgotten Soldiers, 68.

have suited him for military service. However, it is important to note the memories he shared also extend to the experiences and values shared with him by his mother and the other elderly ladies of the community. It is from that special connection that stressed a strong work ethic and a value in listening to ones elders. The interview with him, gives serious consideration to his traditional upbringing before the war and his life following. It is an example of how “Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”³⁵ This is particularly useful learning device for the aboriginal researcher. The process itself is an extension of ritual forms of traditional knowledge transmission as well as an academic exercise.

While there are definitely advantages to performing research within your own ethnic community, it is by no means a guarantee of candid access to a Veterans memory. Always other contextual factors can supersede that connection. In Interviewing Claude McKenzie, who served with the Navy for thirteen years, it became apparent that although the initial aboriginal connection may have facilitated the meeting, it did not override the other challenges presented on arrival. “Some people may object to recording,”³⁶ as was the case with Mr. McKenzie whose level of comfort diminished significantly at the site of the recorder. Mr McKenzie seemed much more comfortable and interested in a casual dialogue off tape, rather than an interview on tape. Speculation could be that Mr. McKenzie left the service for medical reasons or because he still felt

³⁵ Portelli, “History Workshop,” no 12 (1981), 67.

³⁶ Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History, 204.

disappointment over his lack of advancement due to the Navy's imposed bilingual requirement. Another challenge could have been the gender and/or age dynamic between the informant and the researcher, both already from the aboriginal community. Could a male researcher, or an older researcher have been able to build a better rapport and get further into the military history of Mr. McKenzie? While that is possible, the importance of what is included in an interview can also be just as important as what is left out.

Leading Seaman Ned Memnook, Canada's only sailor to die during a peacekeeping mission, received the Memorial Cross on July 29 at a ceremony held in his honour at CFB Esquimalt. Their daughter, Carolyn Memnook, was also at the ceremony to join her family in receiving her father's Special Service Medal, his Canadian Forces Peacekeeping Service Medal and the Aboriginal Commemorative Millennium Medal given to Aboriginal military members and veterans.

LS Memnook, a member of Saddle Lake First Nation, passed away on March 15, 1973 while serving overseas onboard HMCS TERRA NOVA in support of the International Commissions of Control and Supervision mission for Vietnam.³⁷

Mr. McKenzie was on the HMCS Terra Nova at the time of Memnook's demise. He did not know the aboriginal engineer personally but knew that he had gotten ill and passed before being able to gain medical attention on shore. After the Memnook's passing, Mr. Mckenzie and other aboriginal crewmembers on the HMCS Terra Nova were flown back to Canada. One could only speculate that

³⁷ Capt Leah Gillespie, "Aboriginal peacekeeper recognized", MapleLeaf, 1 September 2004, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/community/mapleleaf/vol_7/vol7_29/729-09.pdf >(26 November, 2005).

there was concern that the aboriginal crewmembers would not have immunity to whatever had claimed the Memnook's life.³⁸

"Historians must accept responsibility for their share in creating new evidence."³⁹ It is reasonable to imply that aboriginal historians share that responsibility as well. There is a lack of written sources on aboriginal histories that extend beyond conventional ethnographic research on Indigenous Peoples. Histories that are more recent need to be collected and made accessible to help inform the official national historic narratives. While it is not necessary that this process be exclusively aboriginal in its creation, it is important to take responsibility for the caretaking of one's own history. Never before have aboriginal veterans or academics had this opportunity to connect in this way, nor has it ever been as urgent as our histories fade as our elders pass. "The 'voice of the past' is inescapably the voice of the present too"⁴⁰, and therefore the important thread that will influence our future.

³⁸ Claude McKenzie Interview, 25 November 2005, Victoria, B.C.

³⁹ Tosh, "History by Word of Mouth," 213.

⁴⁰ Tosh, "History by Word of Mouth," 214.

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