

NATIVE AMERICANS

Over 4,000 enlisted under assumed names

ARACA stands for the Association de Recherche des Anciens Combattants Amérindiens. In just a few years this association, whose headquarters is in Loos-en-Gohelle, has been a key player in research into the military role played by Native Americans.

Its president, Yann Castelnot, has even become a spokesperson for the families of those Native American soldiers who came to Europe to fight in Canadian, British and, on occasion, French units. Its aim is to honour their memory and to recognise their commitment and sacrifice which have long been ignored.

To date, Yann Castelnot has a list of more than 4,000 names of Native Americans who fought in the First World War. These include Mohawks, Onondagas, Oneidas, Tuscaroras, Chippewas, Crees, Algonquins, Malecites, Bloods, Iroquois and Sioux, who came from numerous native nations around North America. How many of them made it to the Pas-de-Calais? It's a very difficult question to answer at present as historians and researchers have only shown interest in this subject over the past decade.

For his part, Yann Castelnot has embarked on a long and painstaking project, as those Native Americans who did enlist did so under French- or English-sounding assumed names. Officially, they were not allowed to sign up for purely political reasons: sending "savages" to the front wasn't the done thing. In addition, military enlistment papers in 1914-1915 bore no indication as to whether those enrolled were Native Americans or not. The only clue was their place of birth. However, information provided by families also had to be factored in. Many present-day Native Americans are aware that their grandfathers and great-grandfathers left for the war, but most have paid little attention to what happened or what they went through. For many, their

enlistment proved their patriotism. "*Native Americans are particularly appreciative of France, which often stood alongside them in their struggle for the recognition of their rights*", explains Annick Bouquet, ARACA's secretary. Many left with the hope of bringing money to help their families live on their reserves, where the land was not especially fertile. According to a native historian, this was also a way for men to rediscover an active and essential role for themselves, a role which they had enjoyed until the establishment of their reserves. "*It was an opportunity for them to escape a life of boredom*". They headed off with enthusiasm, sometimes several from the same family. One source highlights the case of the Algonquins from the shores of the Golden Lake: only three men remained on the entire reserve. Annick Bouquet also points out that women also volunteered as nurses, canteen workers etc. Children remained at home with the older generations. Yann Castelnot adds that on the list in his possession the same family name and place of origin is repeated on several occasions. The proof appears to be conclusive.

For a long time it has been difficult to discuss this issue. Firstly, because the Canadian authorities, like the British, were reticent about opening up their archives. In the United States, where the question has been asked in similar terms, it is also almost impossible to make any headway at present. Another problem was that those Native Americans who returned home had, like the European soldiers they fought alongside, found it hard to talk of their experiences. Today, however, they are confronted by the question of their own cultural identity and their spirituality. They are embarking on a process of cultural rebuilding and as such need to know the history of their ancestors. Yann Castelnot, who now lives in Canada, is keen to help them and to obtain from them the information which will assist him with

the research he is carrying out. And with each person he meets, he makes a new friend and is moved by their experiences.



John Lorenzotto, from the Okanagan nation, had an ancestor who was Italian. Attached to a group of soldiers responsible for bringing provisions to the front line, he was taken by surprise and killed in a bombardment on 8 September 1918. His grave is located in the dominion cemetery between Cagnicourt and Hendecourt-lès-Cagnicourt.

Photo: Michel Gravel documentary collection

Snipers and runners : feared adversaries

WHILE wandering around military cemeteries and poring over registers, Yann made his first discovery: the grave of Standing Buffalo, the grandson of the Sioux chief Sitting Bull, who died during the First World War, in the cemetery along the Bucquoy road, in Fичeux.

Far from the image associated with the Sioux, that of semi-savages adorned with feathers, Native Americans were considered unrivalled warriors with qualities that were taken advantage of by military leaders. Because of their ability to move around silently and unnoticed, the most dangerous reconnaissance missions were assigned to them. Prior to an attack, they were sent into no man's land, often behind enemy lines to bring back valuable information. Excellent spotters, they were also given the role of snipers, whose

aim was to disconcert the enemy. The most famous example is that of Henri Norwest, who is said to have killed 115 soldiers, and was considered the best Canadian shot and perhaps the most accomplished within the combined British forces, to whom the Military Medal was promised for his reconnaissance work and comportsment at Vimy Ridge in 1917. Sadly, Norwest was the victim of a German sniper, and is buried at Warvillers in the Somme.

Native Americans were numerous among the Canadian troops engaged at Vimy: among them, Mike Mountain Horse, who saw his first action at Vimy and who later wrote in his memoirs: "*Lying on top of Vimy Ridge one night, along with a number of other Indian boys, I listened to the deafening enemy bombardment of Allied lines and I asked myself where was this God talked about by white men*



Tom Lamboat is perhaps the most famous Native American from the Great War. A marathon champion, he was used as courier.

and in whom they wanted us to believe? Why was he allowing all this destruction? And I prayed that he would bring nations to reason." Mike Mountain Horse had brothers who also enlisted, including Albert, who took part in the 2nd Battle of Ypres, and Joe, wounded at Arras in 1917. Yann Castelnot also highlights the examples of William Cleary, a Montagnais, and Joseph Roussin, a Mohawk, both lumberjacks, who served in the 22nd French-Canadian battalion and who distinguished themselves in Lens, one by retrieving two wounded men upon his return from a raid, the other for having led a successful solo attack against eight enemy soldiers. These events confirm Annick Bouquet's view that the Germans were very afraid of the Native Americans. She also mentions an event that is said to have taken place around Lillers in which an Indian, screaming at the top of his voice, headed off alone to

attack a trench occupied by Germans who immediately surrendered to him. She does concede, however, that this anecdote has not been verified, as the difficulty lies in finding historical proof for such stories. True or not, German records exist that confirm this fear. In one of them, there is a tale of a Native American who ran at full speed (many were used as couriers), fell numerous times, got up on each occasion and despite his injuries was still able to surprise his assailant.

In another, it is the description of one of these Native Americans, captured at Vimy, which is noted: "*he had no hair, just a tuft on the top of his head. His face was painted in red and white*". Such an image was certain to instil fear, but what was most impressive, perhaps, was the steady gaze. Norwest's stare, with his eyes resembling two polished black marble discs, could be enigmatic, hypnotic and piercing all at once.