

JAPANESE Kamakura, Mitsui etc

Japanese-Canadians in the Great War

A close look at the names inscribed on the tombstones of military cemeteries confirms the global dimension of the Great War in the Pas-de-Calais. In the extension of the communal cemetery in Aix-Noulette, three graves in particular draw the attention: resting side by side are Kichimatsu Sugimoto, killed on 24 August 1917; Tagakichi Fukui, killed on 21 September 1917; and Yoichi Kamakura, killed in combat near Lens on 26 August 1917, at the end of the battle for Hill 70.

Awarded the Military Medal on 4 July 1917, Kamakura was born in Japan in 1882 and arrived in Canada in 1908. The participation of the Japanese-Canadians in the First World War is a brief but uplifting tale within a much bigger story! The Japanese started to arrive in the Canadian province of British Columbia from the 1870s onwards. When war broke out in August 1914, Japanese-Canadians were keen to enlist in the Canadian army, hoping to prove their loyalty to their new homeland, but were met with a categorical refusal, so the most determined of them headed to the country's west coast. Close to two hundred Japanese – 196 to be precise

– were finally incorporated into English-speaking battalions in Alberta, and set sail for Europe. In 1916, for example, the 52nd battalion included 42 Japanese soldiers: 14 were killed, buried in Aix-Noulette, Maroeuil, Vimy, Aubigny etc. Of the two hundred volunteers, 55 were never to return to their adopted homeland.



Sergeant Mitsui

Another Japanese-Canadian or Canadian-Japanese soldier distinguished himself with the 10th Infantry Battalion during the 3rd Battle of Ypres and then on Vimy Ridge in April 1917. Sergeant Masumi Mitsui, who was born on 7 October 1887, settled in Port Coquitlam near Vancouver, and was awarded the Military Medal at Vimy. He was then present during the fighting around the Canal du Nord in September 1918. Upon his return to Canada, where, like all Japanese veterans, he obtained the right to vote in 1931, Masumi Mitsui prospered as a poultry farmer, although his land and all his possessions were confiscated during the Second World War. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, he was separated from his children and interned in camps along with the other 22,000 Canadian-Japanese judged to be “hostile



Sergeant Masumi Mitsui with his medals. Photo: Michel Gravel

the official naming ceremony of Place McKean in Cagnicourt, as Masumi had been involved in operations in this sector. As can be seen from the above examples, the Japanese-Canadians are also part of the history of the Pas-de-Calais.

foreigners”. Appearing before a security committee, the furious veteran searched in his pockets, retrieved his medals and threw them on the floor, shouting: “What use are these?” It was only in 1985 that the Canadian government apologised for actions committed against its citizens of Japanese origin and on 2 August of the same year Masumi relit the flame at the monument that had been built in Stanley Park, Vancouver, in 1920 to pay homage to the country's soldiers of Japanese extraction during the Great War. The flame was extinguished after Pearl Harbor. Sergeant Masumi Mitsui died on 22 April 1987, a few months before his 100th birthday. On 8 September 2003, David Mitsui, the sergeant's grandson, was invited by the Canadian Michel Gravel to attend

FUJANS A prince “as black as ink”

From a paradise in the middle of the Pacific to the hell of the trenches – this is the extraordinary journey undertaken by Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, a chief from the Fijian islands, who fought in the Champagne and Artois regions and was awarded both the Military Medal and Croix de Guerre. Josefa Lalabalavu Vana'ali'ali Sukuna was born on 22 April 1888 on the island of Viti Levu. His family were part of the archipelago's nobility and as a young boy received a very “British” education, which included studies at Oxford University. He was in England when the First World War broke out and was keen to see battle. However, this Fijian student was black, and the British army refused to enlist non-whites. No matter, for the Fijian crossed the Channel and joined the Foreign Legion – the American Henry Farnsworth spoke of a “prince as black as ink”. It is spring 1915 and the prince and his legionnaires are in the trenches in Berthonval. With the first brigade of the Moroccan Division, part of the 2nd infantry regiment of the 1st Foreign Legion company, Sukuna mounts an assault on the “Ouvrages Blancs” near Neuville-Saint-Vaast on 9 May 1915. Carency and Souchez followed, with their scenes of blood and fury, where the Fijian was to receive



A group of workers from the Fiji Labour Corps. In Calais they were petrified of air raids: ‘back home some would think that the day of the Last Judgment had come’, wrote one worker to his family.

his first citation for acts of bravery. In September 1915, Sukuna took part in the Battle of Champagne and on the 28th, in Souain, he was wounded in the temple and hospitalised in Lyon. “I am conscious of doing my duty”, he wrote to his family, “but war is hell. The sight of blood makes me nauseous, and the effect of the conflict on the local population brings tears to my eyes”. In January 1916, the British authorities

urged him to return to his homeland. He disembarked in Suva on 30 March, his head swathed in bandages. As a native islander subject to the decisions of the colonial authorities, Sukuna became a civil servant and tried to convince the British to send Fijians to the front. He was to return to France in May 1917, not as a soldier but as a sergeant and worker in the Fiji Labour Corps. In Calais, Sukuna and a hundred other men worked at the port. In January 1918, they were sent to Marseille and from there to Taranto in Italy. Eleven of his co-workers died in France and are buried in either Calais, Marseille or Taranto. In September 1918, the Fiji Labour Corps set sail for the Pacific. After a short period as a barrister at the London Bar, this Fijian “to the core” became a leading politician in the islands. During the Second World War, he exhorted Fijians “to spill their blood for Great Britain”: two thousand fought alongside the Allies. During Fiji's decolonisation process, Ratu Sukuna was president of the legislative council. The “father of modern Fijians” retired in April 1958 and died on 30 May on board a ship taking him to England. Henceforth, in the Fijian islands, the last Monday in May became a public holiday known as Ratu Sukuna Day. Fiji: a Pacific idyll home to rugby and a hero of the Great War.