

# THE VETERAN'S VOICE



Nearly a century ago, 27 year old Alfred Settee made his way back to Canada aboard the grand passenger steamer the RMS Empress Britain, one of the finest in the Canadian Pacific Railway fleet. The date was February 25th, 1919. Just three months and two weeks earlier however, as with so many others of his generation— 61,000 Canadian war dead in total— there was always a chance that Alfred Settee may not have come home at all.

On the other medal was the image of a gowned woman bearing a torch, the reverse of which proclaimed “The Great War for Civilisation: 1914-1919”. On the rims of both of these medals was inscribed “235015 Spr A. Settee, C. E.”



But what did this mean? It was a true mystery, as Grandpa Alfred had shared not one word about the First World War or about his service in that war with his grandchildren. The only thing that anyone knew was that Alfred had difficulty at times with his eyesight. But then again, what elderly person is free from such a challenge?

With the end of the First World War on November 11th, 1918 however, Alfred Settee became one of the lucky ones. One of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were left to “grow old” and bear witness, sometimes spoken and sometimes silent, having lived through some of the most horrific experiences in the collective experience of humanity. But if luck was on Alfred Settee’s side during the war, fairness, equality and justice most certainly were not waiting for him upon his return home to Canada. Nor on the way to his final destination—the remote community of Norway House, Manitoba.

Over the past four years, to help families commemorate the 100th anniversary of the First World War, the National Archives and Library in Ottawa has digitized hundreds of thousands of WW1 Canadian war service records. With a little luck and a lot of pluck, family members can now access the online database and find their family members’ full and uncensored war records (go to: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/personnel-records/Pages/search.aspx>).

To uncover the rest of this story, we need to fast forward nearly a century, and look inside of a tiny box inherited by Alfred’s grandson Lloyd, who now lives in Winnipeg. As a child, Lloyd and his cousin Donna grew up in Grandpa Alfred’s home in northern Manitoba, a two storey log cabin that Alfred built with his own hands.

Records were made available in alphabetical order according to family surname, so “Settee” was made available only as of the beginning of 2018.

By all counts, Alfred Settee was a kind and gentle spirit. One who passed along the traditions of his community to his grandchildren. He was a fierce advocate for Indigenous rights and the advancement of Aboriginal peoples in Manitoba. But Grandpa Alfred held a deep, unspoken secret. One that was only recently brought to light earlier this year.

The details that this service file held for Donna, Lloyd and the over 100 descendants of Alfred Settee who have survived him today, helped tell an important story of their grandfather’s service, his sacrifice and the sorrowful plight that he and his fellow Indigenous veterans experienced upon their return to Canada. These digitized personnel records became the “Veterans’ Voice” that Alfred Settee never himself used to tell his own story. They shared what he endured and had achieved as one of the estimated 4,000 Indigenous Canadian persons who served during the First World War.

The first hint of this secret came when Lloyd found two medals in a tiny box that he had inherited following the passing of a close family member. Upon one medal was the image of a naked man on horseback trampling a shield which bore a German imperial eagle, with the dates 1914 and 1918.

The story starts May 1st, 1916. On that day, like so many other young men of eligible age, Alfred Settee lined up at the local recruiting station that had come to Norway House to enlist all available hands for the war effort. In those days, recruiters wanted to know a few basic details. Name: Alfred Settee. Next

of Kin: Catherine Settee, mother. Trade or calling: hunter and trapper. Married? No. Are you willing to be vaccinated? Yes. Any previous military service? No.

Part two of the “interview” was a full physical and health inspection. On this occasion, renowned doctor Horatio Clarence Norquay, one of Manitoba’s earliest medical graduates, recorded only what was necessary and fitting both for Alfred to kill and be killed in one of the saddest and bloodiest conflicts in human history. Height: 6 feet, 1 inch. Chest: 39 inches. Complexion: Dark. Eyes: Brown. Hair: Black.

These notes bear no record of ethnic or cultural background, which is why knowing how many Indigenous Canadians served during the First World War remains a challenge today.

Finding no cause to reject him and declaring him “fit” for service, Dr. Norquay signed the enlistment (or attestation) paper, which was then countersigned by Alfred’s future commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J. E. Stansford, of the 203rd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), a unit of the Winnipeg Rifles. Like many other local recruits, Alfred was then outfitted with his full army kit (tunic, helmet, ruck and haversack, boots, puttees and rifle) and sent off to Camp Hughes for training. For some families, this would be the very last time that they would ever see their loved ones again.

Located half-way between Brandon and Portage la Prairie along the Trans-Canada Highway, many Manitobans do not know that buried in the woods at the former site of Camp Hughes, is the largest trench network in all of North America. Most every infantry battalion raised in Manitoba passed through the Camp before being sent overseas. The job of the training staff at the camp was to ready all recruits for the tough conditions they would experience once they were sent to the front-lines in France and Belgium.

With basic training completed, Alfred then boarded a train for Halifax and crossed the Atlantic on the SS Grampian, during a nine day ocean crossing rife with the danger of being torpedoed by an enemy submarine, or some other unfortunate occurrence. He arrived in England on November 4th, 1916.



Roughly two months after arriving in England, a unique administrative decision on January 9th, 1917 made Alfred Settee one of 500 Indigenous soldiers who filled the ranks of the 107th Battalion CEF, a unit that became known as the “Timber Wolves of War”. Roughly half of the 1,000 soldiers in this outfit were Indigenous Manitobans.

In 2014, David Jøn Fuller wrote an exceptional history of this battalion in the pages of the Winnipeg Free Press. This article can still be accessed online at: <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/lestweforget/The-Timber-Wolves-of-war-281913071.html>

Life with the Timber Wolves was not easy. After several months living in a variety of camps in England, Alfred and the others were finally deployed to France on May 10th, 1917. In a scene that became almost fixed as a painting from that era upon the landscape of Europe, the men of the 107th would have boarded one of His Majesty’s Transport ferries that made the quick trip across the English Channel to the French port of Le Havre or Calais. From there, it was all a waiting game to see when the high command wished to put your battalion to use in furtherance of the war effort. This meant being sent into the brutality of trench warfare on the front-lines of the war.

While Grandpa Alfred’s war records remain silent between May 10th and August 15th, 1917, what follows reflects the journey taken by so many Canadians who served in the First World War. Alfred was wounded for the very first time in action but the records note that he “remained at duty”. Readers should make no mistake. This was no small wound. It was labelled as a “gun-shot wound” that Alfred received by his left eye. To remain “at duty” would have taken one’s all. Grandpa Alfred’s story was slowly being told, with each detail told from his service file. The “Veteran’s Voice” was beginning to take flight.

On March 10th, 1918, Alfred’s battalion then became the 107th Pioneer Battalion and the records then show that this Pioneer Battalion was assigned to duty with the Canadian Engineers (hence why Alfred’s medals indicate that his unit was “C.E.” or Canadian Engineers). Manitoba’s Indigenous veterans experienced many hardships in the months that followed. As a pioneer battalion, these troops were tasked with the hardest of labours. Their weapon of war became a shovel or a pick alongside of the rifle and cannon. And their task: to dig the hazardous, extensive underground tunnel networks below the trenches when they were not above ground constructing the trenches themselves. As a Sapper, Alfred Settee would have endured some of the hardest and harshest conditions of any soldier during the Great War.



The Timber Wolves were sent to many of those bloody battles that we still see marked on monuments across Manitoba: Hill 70, Ypres, and Passchendaele. When Alfred was wounded for the very first time in August, 1917, this occurred during the battle for Hill 70. His records indicate that the location where he was wounded was “Lens”, which was the French village closest to the Hill 70 fighting area.

Then in March, 1918, Alfred was wounded in action a second time and taken to hospital. During the 40 days of his recovery from March to May, 1918, the pay records show that he actually forfeited 50 cents per day from his pay. Given that he made only \$20 each month for his service during the war, this docked pay would have reduced his pay-check by more than half. If life in the trenches were not brutal enough, the army's mentality when it came to a soldier's "just reward" for being wounded certainly made up the difference!

The medical records from this time show that the "gun-shot wound" that Sapper Settee had suffered at the Battle of Hill 70 was starting to affect him. Further examinations revealed small abrasions to the eye. The reason? As stated in the report, shrapnel— those sharp, jagged metal bits that peppered the battlefield and all who happened to be on it, the result of bullet, grenade or artillery shell blasts— had clearly entered Alfred Settee's eyes. By the time the war had ended in November of 1918, and Alfred was waiting to be returned home, further pre-release medical examinations cited "defective vision".

Alfred was then given one final medical examination at the ocean-side camp at Kinmel Park in Wales, a depot to which many thousands of Canadians were sent as they awaited a return to Canada following the armistice. The examiners' report can only be described as a great injustice. And likely, this injustice was borne of the rampant discrimination faced by many of Manitoba's Indigenous veterans.

The examiner's report claimed that Alfred's eye condition "pre-existed the war" and was only "aggravated by his service". This is an odd statement however, given that back home in Manitoba at the time that Alfred enlisted for service, Dr. Norquay's exam found him to be fit for active service and made absolutely no reference to any vision issues...

That such a blatant injustice was perpetrated on the part of Sapper Settee's medical examiners not only reflects a discriminatory attitude but also a more flagrant attempt to avoid having to pay any post-war disability benefits to Alfred Settee. This, in spite of the fact that he was clearly wounded in action and that his vision would never be repaired or addressed, even with glasses.

But like so many Indigenous veterans, Grandpa Alfred's vision problems, as were known to his family throughout his later years, were borne with silent dignity and great humility. What Grandpa Alfred's eyes had seen during the course of his life, was enough to know that speaking out would only be met with more injustice and even greater indignity.

And so two months after the war had ended, surrounded by men awaiting their final voyage back to Canada, men whose wounds

were borne in body, mind and spirit, Alfred Settee waited. And waited some more. The holding camp at Kinmel Park rapidly exhausted the patience of those Canadians who were lucky enough to survive, until their patience simply ran out. With abysmal living conditions in the camp during one of the coldest



winters on record, buffeted by the frigid Atlantic winds, full-scale riots began not soon after Alfred boarded the Empress of Britain in February, 1919: one of the great untold stories of the First World War. All that the men had wanted was to just get home. For Indigenous Canadians like Alfred Settee, the longing was never greater to return to their families and the traditional lands of their people.

In the end, as noted by David Jøn Fuller, they had fought their fight, "despite the fact that in the early 20th century, Canada was depriving indigenous people of their lands, instituting residential schools and encouraging white settlement." Like too many others of his own and in the generations to come, Alfred Settee experienced the worst treatment that his government could give to those who had so bravely and selflessly served their country, ironically in the cause of freedom, liberty, democracy and justice.

When they returned home, these men continued to hold their heads high in spite of the denial to Indigenous veterans of the same post-war benefits that their white counterparts received, including education, training, medical and other entitlements in acknowledgement of their service. Many remained ineligible to vote. Alfred Settee was forced to give up his Treaty rights to receive a lot of land on which to build his home, while his future wife Melanie was compelled to give up her own Treaty rights following her decision to marry a now "non-status Indian".

But on such topics, Sapper Alfred Settee never said a word about what he had given in return. His voice was one of silence. The only legacy of his service to a country that had once asked him to fight a war for "civilisation", was found in a tiny box by his grandchildren nearly one hundred years later. Tarnished and tattered.

These were the only clues left behind, that gave Alfred Settee's family the opportunity to hear him tell his story a century later. A story recounted not in his own words, but through the 68 pages of digitized war records that have now very recently been made available by Ottawa.

*They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. From the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.*

Manitobans across our province will hear these words this Remembrance Day, a century after the end of the First World War. Some may even repeat these words in solemn reflection.

While many will remember those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, this recital makes perhaps an equally if not more powerful and bolder statement about those veterans who were left behind, men like Alfred Settee. Those soldiers who were wearied and condemned through a lifetime of recollected nightmares– through the not-so-distant images of all that they witnessed during wartime.

Today, the over 100 descendants of Alfred Settee are the inheritors of a rich legacy. Of a story that deserves to be told. It is now for them to carry the voice of their grandfather though to the Seven Generations that follow, so that they can be proud of who he was, and proud of all that he endured and overcame. In this sacred task, they owe their very existence to the incomprehensible happenstance of that war, one that took so many but spared their own grandfather, by only the near-miss of the exploded fragments that plagued their grandfather’s vision for the rest of his life. On this occasion of the end of the First World War, Alfred’s medals are now out of that tiny box. The ribbons have been replaced. They are proudly on display.

And so it is now for the rest of us– all of us as Canadians and as citizens, as compatriots and as human beings– to carry the voice of their grandfather, this once silent veteran’s voice, so that the same injustice does not occur over the next hundred years of our shared co-habitation on Turtle Island. So that the freedoms, liberties and democracy that has been defended by all Canadians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, can be rightly enjoyed by those who follow in their footsteps. So that together, side by side, we will proclaim “never again” with greater retrospection and introspection than ever before.

*îkâ wihkâc ta-waniskisiyahk*

***Lest we forget***

