

Excerpts from 1983 interview with Mark Wolfleg Sr.

Location: Blackfoot Reserve, Alberta

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Original Language: Blackfoot/English

Interviewer: Tony Snowsill

Interviewee: Mark Wolfleg Sr.

Interpreter: Mervyn Wolfleg

Tony: Mark, I would like to ask you now about your experiences in the army... What was the reason that you joined the army [in the Second World War]?

Mark: At the time of World War, a lot of the people were being conscripted. At the time I was working at the mines, at the east end of the reserve, and I had gone up to Calgary for shopping and the next day I was still there, and I was walking up 8th Ave. heading west and I looked across the street and I saw a recruitment sign. So out of curiosity, I went in and there was a sergeant there and he was really glad to see me and really friendly so he asked me if I wanted to sign up so just on impulse I said, "Yeah, I came to sign up." I came just by chance. It wasn't a conscious decision.

Tony: How did being in the army affect you? By that I mean, there were things that you were accustomed to before the war living here on the reserve and you led a certain kind of life. Then going into the army, you went overseas and all sorts of things happened. You have had all sorts of experiences which I would like you to tell us about but what I would like to know now is how much the experience of being in the army changed you and the way that you looked at things. Did it make a difference to you?

Mark: When I first enlisted, I did not really know what it was all about, the war and everything, but slowly I began to change. I noticed a change in my thinking, the life was very different from what I knew and back home in the Indian way of life, my outlook was a lot different then and it changed radically, especially when I went overseas. My outlook on life became more harsh, a harder outlook. There was anger in my life that wasn't there before and through all of the experiences I experienced over there, when I came back, I had become a much angrier person, a person that got angry a lot faster whereas before I never had the experience of experiencing anger. I was more easy going then but through the years I got over this. Especially when I got into the spiritual life more and more. I became more kindly to the elders and the youngsters because these were the ones that I saw suffer the most in the war, the older people and the children. So I became more closer to them, became more kindly to them. And I guess I could say that while I was there, I walked among death and this brought the anger into my life when I came back. Since then I've gotten over this path and gotten the spiritual way of life back into my Indian way of thinking.

Tony: What sort of things made the changes in your way of thinking and the way that you looked at the world when you were in the army? What were the things that created the anger

for you and what were some of the experiences you had while you were in the army that were important to you?

Mark: Remembering my experiences in the war, I remember those of us that survived and those of us that didn't. These are the memories I have about the war. The other memories I have, that I also was the cause of some people not surviving but in that situation I could do nothing about. That is what I was there for. Seeing war does not bring out any outstanding experiences. It is all lonesome and that is what war is, it is lonesome, so I cannot really see what was very outstanding and none of the experiences stand out as being outstanding, it was all lonesome, loneliness.

Tony: When you came back after the war, Mark, did you notice many changes in the reserve or did you feel different when you came back here? Did you feel differently about things on the reserve when you came back?

Mark: The only feeling I have about coming back is that I was too happy to get back home so I didn't notice any changes. I was just glad to be back among my relatives.

Tony: How were you treated as a veteran by the government and did the fact that you were a veteran change your thinking about the government?

Mark: As a veteran when I came back to my land, the Indian Superintendent, the Indian agent at the time, his name was Gooderham, had already arranged everything for us. He had told Ottawa officials that we, the Indian veterans, did not need any help, that everything was being taken care of. And so the benefits that I would have gotten from the government, I did not receive as was also the case with a lot of veterans. When this happened, I thought about the times when I was in the front, in the front lines. At that time, nobody emphasized that we were treaty. Nobody mentioned, okay, because you are treaty, you can walk five miles behind the lines, we were right there with everybody else. So the emphasis was only told to us after we came back from the front lines. We fought the war for Canada.

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Tony: There were spiritual things that happened to you and those events that you felt were worthy of keeping in your memory by naming your grandchildren after things that happened to you and people that you did some of these things with.

Mark: Well the things I did experience, they were in the combat in Italy because the name, the things that you do, just like this granddaughter of mine, MaryAnne, I call her [---], that's Slowly Singing. Those are the things I heard just before we was on attack, the assault on the Hitler line on May 23, 1940. So I gave her that name. But, so those are some of the things the old warriors do and they have to experience, not the others to take the experience, what I take. Another one I had was in [---]. We were going to another building, so I went across to the building, just before I got through the door they open up on me with a machine gun so I turned around, kind of a zigzag, went to another place, kind of a zigzag to the next building. So those I

gave one to my grandchildren, call him [---], that's Running Across. Because in those things you had a narrow escape and when you give out the names to your grandchildren or anybody else, you have to pray for him to hold that name and the experience that you did to have him good luck for the rest of his life.

Tony: You told us about the singing and that experience. Could you tell us about that again Mark?

Mark: Yes, I was in a slit trench, just before we were moving out with that big drive on Hitler, so I happened to fall asleep for a few hours and I heard somebody singing quite a ways up then it stopped. Then I heard it again coming and I heard those songs, the Horn Society's song, the pipe bundle songs, and the Beaver Bundle, and I thought to myself, gee, I heard those songs before. So this is a second time. So the third time, just as if I was in a tipi there, sitting up in the back, just outside this people was singing. The third time they started singing. I could hear quite plainly what they said. So they stopped singing, it's always four things, in all life when the spirits want to do anything for, they always have four times, you do things like. So they stopped singing then they would start shouting so I woke up and I could still hear those songs that they were singing. I guess the spirits must have come to me just to guide me through the hardship that we were going through that day.

Tony: What were some of the details of that hardship? You were talking about some of the people that were killed before and how you avoided those things.

Mark: Well, before we start out at six o'clock when we start the attack, because we were the second wave of the attack. By the time we had gone maybe 50 to 100 yards, and that's when they start opening up, the Germans opening up with machine guns, all we could hear was the whistling sounds of the bullets going by and we lost some of our officers before we go up to the main attack. It just so happens some of us were lucky to cut through as far as we had to go because I remember we came into a little ridge, a little hill, just like a bank, and the officer, the corporal waved us to go. So we started going up on that ridge, and it just so happens I slipped, it is a kind of a sand. When I slipped back one of the 88 shells landed where I was going. So we got through with that. Then we were moving up to the lines, the main advancing lines.