

What do the stories of the 'often forgotten armies' reveal about the Western Front?



This calfskin (left) once belonged to Corporal **Mike Mountain Horse** (right). Mike was a member of a First Nation tribe in Canada. The tribe is called **the Bloods**.

After the **colonisation** of Canada by the British, the Bloods came under the rule of the new Canadian government. This government told the Bloods to give up their warrior traditions.

After the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Britain called on its colonies to fight on the Western Front. We have already seen that Indian troops were among the first colonial soldiers to arrive in France.

Mike Mountain Horse's older brother, Albert, **enlisted** in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Albert fought in the **Second Battle of Ypres**. He was gassed three times and his lungs were damaged, so he was sent home. Albert died one day after reaching Canada, in November 1915.

Albert had been encouraged to join the army by a **missionary** called Samuel Middleton. After being told of her son's death, Albert's mother took a knife and tried to kill Middleton. She was dragged away by her other sons. At the funeral, the Bloods felt their warrior tradition reawaken:

'I felt a spirit of revenge as I gazed down on Albert lying in his coffin. Soon after, my brother and I, Joe Mountain Horse, and a number of Indian boys from neighbouring reserves, enlisted in the 191st Battalion for service overseas.'

Mike and Joe Mountain Horse arrived in France in 1917. In the woods behind the front lines, they prayed together. One of the Bloods, called George Strangling Wolf, took a knife and cut off a strip of flesh from around his knee. Holding up the bloody offering towards the sun, he prayed aloud: 'Help me, Sun, to survive this terrible war.' He then buried his flesh in the mud of northern France.

Strangling Wolf's official army records list his religion as 'Church of England', but he survived the war under the gaze of the Sun Spirit of his Blood ancestors.

Mike and Joe Mountain Horse fought at a fierce battle called **Vimy Ridge**. They fought again at the **Battle of Cambrai** (November 1917), which was the first mass tank attack in history. At one point during the battle, Mike was buried under rubble for four days. He survived, but he was later wounded. He was shipped to England to **convalesce** (get better). In 1919 he returned to the Blood Reserve in Canada with the Distinguished Conduct Medal on his chest.

Years later, Mike told the story of his Great War Deeds to a friend and artist, Ambrose Two Chiefs. Ambrose painted the story onto calfskin in the traditions of the Indians of the Great Plains.