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A Warrior's ROBE



by

L. James Dempsey

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He is the author of *Warriors of the King: Prairie Indians in World War One* (1999) and *Blackfoot Warrior Representational Art* (2000). He is completing a book on Blackfoot pictography for the University of Oklahoma Press.

One of the most popular figures in Lethbridge during the 1930s was Mike Mountain Horse, a Blood Indian who participated in parades, wrote articles for the local newspaper, and often spoke to school children and women's groups. One of the reasons for his popularity was the fact that he was a veteran of World War One and had been wounded in action. Not only that, but he came from a family of warriors, his brother Albert being one of the victims of the war. Gassed in two battles in 1916, Albert was invalided to Canada but died on the way home. Shortly after his body was returned to the reserve, Mike joined up. He recalled:

Reared in the environment of my forefathers, the spirit of revenge for my brother's death manifested itself strongly in me as I gazed down on Albert lying in his coffin that cold wintery day in November 1915. Soon after the funeral I obtained indefinite leave from my work as an interpreter and scout for the Royal North-West Mounted Police at Macleod, and with my brother Joe Mountain Horse and a number of other Indian boys from neighboring reserves, I enlisted in the 191st Battalion for service overseas.¹

Mike Mountain Horse was born in 1888, the son of Mountain Horse and Sikski, and was given the personal name of Crow Flag. He attended St. Paul's Residential School on the Blood Reserve and at the turn of the century he was transferred to the Calgary Indian Industrial School. He was remembered for

his interest in school work, particularly reading and writing. He was also an athlete and when he left school in 1905 he raced for a time under the name of Mike Deerfoot. He then became a scout for the Royal North-West Mounted Police in 1907, serving for many years at detachments in the Macleod and Lethbridge districts.

He enlisted in the Canadian Army in May 1916 at the age of twenty-six. According to a friend, "Mike Mountain Horse felt like an old time warrior going to war."² He trained in England and was sent to France in 1917 where he immediately went to Vimy Ridge. He recalled the scene:

Lying on top of Vimy Ridge one night, along with a number of other Indian boys, the scene before our eyes might best be described as that of a huge stage with lighting effects -- verry lights from the Hun lines, and flames from bursting shells in the city of Lens. The red glare thrown back appeared like a great fire in the sky all the time.

The trenches ran through almost to the heart of the French coal mining city. Here a brigade of the Germans had entrenched themselves so well that incessant bombardment by artillery and bombing from the air did not aid the boys from the Dominion to any great extent, although they had been in this sector for a long time. Along the miles of trenches one could see planes dropping bombs on the German lines, followed by geysers of smoke and dirt shooting skyward like volcanoes in eruption. One could witness houses bursting suddenly into flame as projectiles from heavy artillery of the enemy struck them. One could walk past Canadian howitzer batteries about a mile from the

trenches in front and hear the 57 inch shells from these guns screaming overhead on their errands of death and destruction.³

Mountain Horse experienced shell shock in October 1917 at the first battle of Cambrai but recovered and returned to duty. At the second Cambrai engagement he was a corporal instructor of a machine gun squad when they were bombarded by German guns. Mountain Horse was buried in the debris of a German cellar and remained there for four days until he was rescued. Wounded, he was sent to an English hospital. While Mike was there he wrote:

I am now in an English hospital for wounded Colonial soldiers; all we have to do is to get well, and at the present time I am getting along fine, although they've told me that I've got to stay for another two months before I am again fit for active service. I hate the idea of staying here doing nothing, and offered to go with the first draft leaving for the trenches. The officer in command said he admired my pluck, but he could not take me, so I am doomed to stay in this place for some time. We all had to behave like men in France, and I think we did so, although well knowing the nature of the men facing us. I got a slight scratch from a Prussian Guard during an engagement in No Man's Land; the fellow caught me with his bayonet, on the outside of my arm, but I proved superior to him, although he made it hot for me for a time.⁴

During his time in France, Mountain Horse had a number of experiences that reflected upon his native beliefs. He recalled one incident in 1917 when he and a number of fellow Bloods went to a small clearing where they started to pray. "Some made supplication for the success of the allies, while others prayed for a happy return to their fathers and mothers, or to their families." George Strangling Wolf decided to make an offering to the Sun spirit to protect him in the forthcoming battle. He stuck a needle into the skin near his knee,

lifted a portion of flesh up and sliced it off with his knife. Pointing in the direction of the sun, he held the bloody piece of skin aloft and prayed: "Help me, Sun, to survive this terrible war, that I may meet my relatives again. With this request, I offer you my body as food."⁶ He then buried the offering in the ground.

On another occasion, Mountain Horse remembered one of his own experiences:

One morning Jerry had been strafing us most unpleasantly. My discomfort was intense and finally, my nerves getting the better of me, I released my pent-up feelings in the rendering of my own particular war song. The first and most vociferous response came from an adjoining section of hefty Jocks who, wishing me to repeat this demonstration for the benefit of their officers, encored me vigorously. I declined to do so, however, and though some of my companions assured me that my war whoops had stopped the war for at least a few seconds, I have never been able to ascertain exactly what was Jerry's reaction to my outburst.⁷

When he was demobilized in 1919, Mountain Horse was honoured by Indians and whites alike. According to one reporter, "Mike was wounded three times... He came home with battle scars, along with the rank of acting sergeant and a Distinguished Conduct Medal." A Blood stated, "Mike went overseas in the First War, and after that he was always honored because he had been to war." He returned to his post with the Mounted Police, where he remained until 1933. At that time he decided to devote his time to public speaking and writing. He wrote a book-length manuscript entitled "Indians of the Western Plains," but it was never published in his lifetime. Finally, in 1979 it was published under the title *My People the Bloods* in a project jointly sponsored by the Blood Tribal Council and the Glenbow Museum.



Mike Mountain Horse was a Blood Indian and a distinguished war veteran. He is seen here when he was elected to the Blood tribal council.

His work was encouraged by Lethbridge resident Mrs. Thyrsa Young Burkitt, who assisted him in getting many articles published in local newspapers. During their conversations, Mountain Horse told how “he treasured memories of his first home with tanned hides and mystic heraldry adorning the walls. Those symbols represented the ancient deeds, feuds and battles of his ancestors.”¹⁰

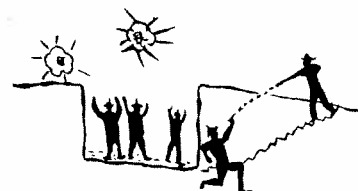
Mountain Horse noted that two Bloods who served overseas with him had created pictographs of their exploits in the traditional manner. Nick King’s experiences were painted on the side of a war tipi, while those of George Strangling Wolf were on a painted door panel.

To create his own pictograph record, Mounted Horse enlisted the help of Ambrose Two Chiefs to paint his war experiences on a cowhide. The skin was divided into twelve sections by a series of lines. Unlike traditional painted robes, this one is painted all one colour, perhaps reflecting the poverty of the tribe during the Depression. The paintings themselves also seem to bear no resemblance to the traditional images of his tribe. Rather, they are realistic renderings of the events, with relatively realistic human figures. Yet even though Mountain Horse and Two Chiefs were dealing with experiences in an alien culture and in a foreign country, they still managed to include several aspects of traditional pictography. At the head of the robe are three traditional symbols: a circle representing an entrenchment (comparable to trenches in France), an axe-like scouting sign, and two inverted U-shaped war party signs. Also, one incident is laid out in traditional style, with dotted lines marking the route of the attackers. Five other exploits are laid out in the usual form of native conflicts, and one shows a traditional entrenchment. Unusual for the Bloods are the German helmets (although Nick King also used these in his painting), as well as the house and cannons.

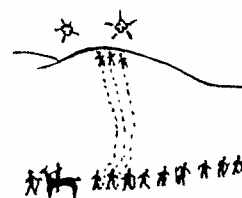
Mountain Horse presumably sat with Two Chiefs and dictated the order in which the events should be painted. The designs

themselves would usually be left up to the artist. The war deeds are not in chronological order, just as the painters of traditional robes were not obliged to follow any particular order or pattern. Rather, Mountain Horse appears to have listed the events in their order of importance to him, based upon the traditional grading of war honours. The first is the killing of a German officer and the second is a scouting expedition ordered by an officer. Both of these can be compared with killing an enemy chief and fulfilling a dangerous role for his own chief.

Once the robe was completed, Mountain Horse wrote down the events, describing them as “The Great War Deeds of Mike Mountain Horse.”¹¹ The top panel with the entrenchment, scouting, and war party symbols is partly for ornamentation and partly to summarize some of the activities shown on other parts of the robe.



No.1. This is Mountain Horse’s most important exploit. It states: “August 21st, 1917. The 50th battalion of Calgary attacked the German trenches. Corporal Mike Mountain Horse led his machine gun section on an old building behind the German defence. On obtaining their objective, Mountain Horse heard noises in an old cellar. He called upon the enemy to surrender but received no answer. Then he descended the stair. Looking down, he saw a German officer kneeling and aiming to shoot... [damaged page]...tain quickly fired at the officer, killing..... [damaged page] he himself was wounded.”

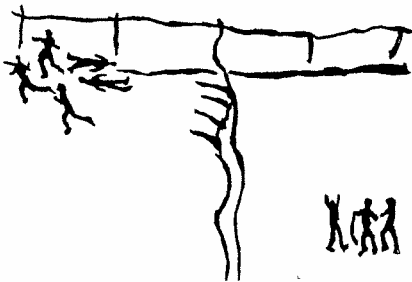


No.2. Mountain Horse and companions are seen leaving the line of march and going to

the top of the hill to scout for the enemy while shells burst overhead. "August 10th, 1918 - M. Mountain Horse with two others was sent ahead by their commanding officer at the Battle of Amiens to examine the country ahead. An honor of this kind coming from a superior officer is an important factor in the life of an Indian Warrior."



No.3. "August 11th, 1918 - At the Battle of Amiens, M. Mountain Horse with a companion shot three Germans who were in a trench. After the enemy soldiers had surrendered, they fired on the Canadians with machine guns."



No.4. The wavy line is a trench and the captured German has his hands raised at right. The guns of the Canadians in the trench are shooting at the retreating soldiers. "August 11th, 1918 - At the Battle of Amiens, a small party of German soldiers were approached unawares and bombed out of their trench by the M. Mountain Horse section. The enemy soldiers were shot down, with only one captured."

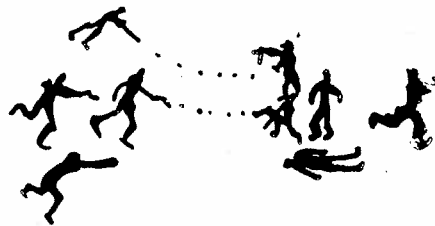


No.5. Mountain Horse can be seen lying in the deep hole: "August 21st, 1917 -

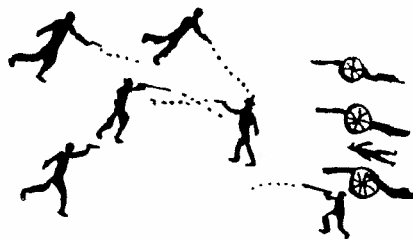
Mountain Horse was buried in this old cellar for four days. He had gone down the cellar to get enemy soldiers who had surrendered to the Canadians. While he was down, a German shell wrecked the roof of the cellar. M. Mountain Horse was buried beneath the wreckage and left for dead."



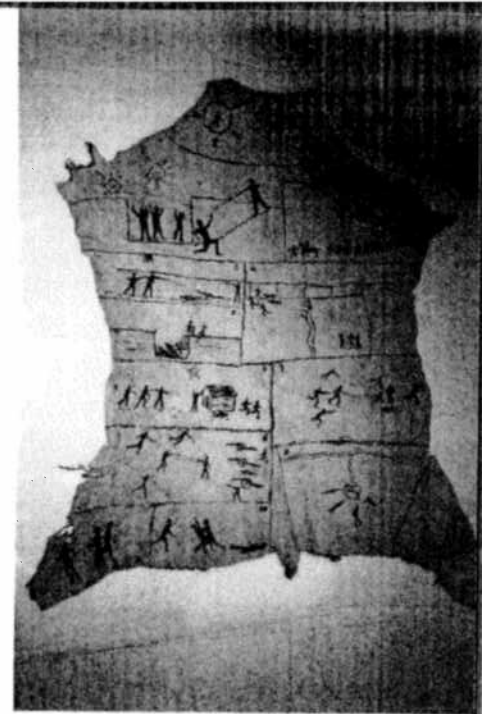
No.6. "At the Battle of Amiens, August 10th, 1918 - After the Germans had evacuated their trench, M. Mountain Horse and his section chased a number of Germans out of a small hut, killing several Germans. From all indications, the German soldiers had been eating a meal. The Canadian soldiers ate the meal instead."



No.7. "August 10th, 1918 - At the Battle of Amiens, a machine gun section was bothering the right flank of the 50th Battalion. M. Mountain Horse and his section killed the German gunners who were responsible. They also captured their guns."



No.8. "At the Battle of Amiens, M. Mountain Horse and his section killed a few survivors of a German battery and marked the German artillery with the marks and designs of the Blackfoot Confederacy."



Mike Mountain Horse's robe depicts his experiences during World War One. The robe is now in the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery.