

FRIENDS OF PEACE AND ORDER
The Contributions of the St Peter's Band of Indians to the Canadian Forces'
Aboriginal Heritage
By Bill Shead

Abstract: Many members of the St. Peter's (later Peguis) Band of Indians joined the Canadian Forces to fight for peace around the world. Some participated in the 1885 Nile Expedition. Later, others served during World War I, World War II, Korea and recent operations. Many of those who returned took on leadership roles in their communities and worked to improve life for their people. This paper outlines the contributions of the St. Peter's Band of Indians to the Canadian Forces against a historical background that very well could have dictated a much different kind of participation.

INTRODUCTION

The St. Peter's Band of Indian had built a peaceful and prosperous community along the shores of the Red River some forty kilometres north of Winnipeg. Then, by illegal means, their Reserve was surrendered in 1907; and Band members were dispossessed of their homes and the lands they had settled and developed for over one hundred years. They were uprooted and moved about 200 kilometres northwest to the banks of the Fisher River and became today's Peguis First Nation. The once prosperous *Indian Settlement* of several hundred souls at St Peter's was virtually depopulated. Only St. Peter's Old Stone Church and its surrounding graveyard remain to remind us that the St. Peter's Band ever existed. Several graves there are unmarked. Many of the markers that are there are worn, broken and, for all practical purposes, unreadable. There are some markers which mark no grave, but were placed there in memory of loved ones lost with no mortal remains or who may be buried elsewhere. Look closely at the markers that are there and you should discover that members of the St. Peter's Band of Indians have contributed much to the Canadian Forces' aboriginal heritage. Their story is not unlike that of many aboriginal people and communities throughout Canada. Considering the circumstance surrounding the St. Peter's Surrender, the contributions of the St. Peter's Band of Indians to the Canadian Forces may be unique.

MIGRATION & IMMIGRATION - PURSUING PEACE & PROSPERITY

During the early 1790's, Chief Peguis had led a band of Saulteaux from Sault Ste. Marie to settle near the junction of the Red River and Netley Creek – just few kilometer south from where the Red empties into Lake Winnipeg. A campsite of a local band of Indians – probably Assiniboines - was deserted. Disease and hunger had wiped them out. For centuries many small bands of other Indians had migrated in and out of the area patterning their movements after the seasonal migrations of birds and game. Aside from a few fur trading posts, there were no permanent settlements along the Red River until Peguis and his people arrived. To escape starvation, brought on by 150 years of exploitation of furs in the immediate northern regions of Hudson Bay, some Muskaigowak, or Crees, also had migrated into the Red River area and settled in with the Saulteaux. The area they occupied stretched fifteen kilometres from the mouth of the Red

south to what is now the City of Selkirk. The first large wave of immigration began about 1812 with the arrival of the Selkirk Settlers. They settled the area south of Selkirk. Peguis and his people befriended and protected the settlers when they were intimidated by the fur traders. Peguis tried to ease tension between the trading rivals in the Hudson's Bay and the North West Companies. During the *Seven Oaks Massacre* of 19 June 1816 Peguis remained neutral and kept his people out of the conflict. In fact, Peguis and his people gave the harassed settlers protection and every assistance. On his visit to Red River in 1817, Lord Selkirk signed a treaty¹ with Peguis. Selkirk also provided Peguis with a letter of introduction in which he wrote:

*The bearer, Peguis, one of the principal chiefs of the Chippewas or Saulteaux of Red River has been a steady friend to the Settlement ever since its first establishment and has never deserted its cause in its greatest reverses. He has often exerted his influence to restore peace; and having rendered most essential services to the settlers in their distress, deserves to be treated with favour and distinction by the officers of the Hudson's Bay Company and all friends of peace and order.*²

In 1820 John West of the Church Mission Society came to Red River as a missionary. Peguis was initially skeptical of West's work - although two of his own sons attended the mission school. He wanted to know what the children would do once they were educated. Reverend William Cockran at St. Andrews initiated an agricultural program in 1829 and an experimental farm in 1831. After the harsh winters of 1831 and 1832 the Indians agreed to receive instruction in farming, housekeeping, basic carpentry, reading and writing. By 1833 the Saulteaux and Cree at St. Peter's had a log school, houses and a mill - the beginning of a more permanent settlement. With knowledge gained through education and training the Band began to prosper. Peguis sought out new knowledge to benefit his people. In 1841, he traveled to Norway House to see a syllabics system for writing the Cree language³. Peguis was baptized on 7 February 1838 taking William King as his Christian name (with his sons using Prince as their surname). Under Peguis's leadership many of his people became Christians. By 1850, St. Peter's had become a proper Anglican parish. They completed building the Old Stone Church in 1854. Until he died in 1864, Peguis fought to protect his people's land rights, which they gained in the Treaty he and Lord Selkirk signed in 1817.

¹ As controlling shareholder of the Hudson's Bay Company, Selkirk purchased 116,000 square miles of land (*Assiniboia*). This included the area north of the Selkirk Settlement which was occupied by Peguis and his people. The Selkirk Treaty recognized them as owners of the land they occupied and provided for Peguis and his people to own their lands *individually and privately (fee simple)*. This was to come into conflict with the *communal* provisions of *Treaty Number 1* and *The Indian Act* whereby all Indians lands are held by *The Crown in trust* for the Indians collectively (i.e., no individual ownership nor individual right to sell land).

² Hudson Bay Company Archives

³ Much earlier in September 1814, Peguis had traveled with Miles Macdonnell to York Factory on Hudson's Bay and spent a few days aboard *HMS ROSAMOND* commanded by Lieutenant Edward Chappell, RN.

Henry Prince, Peguis's son, succeeded him as Chief. Leading up to the 1869 Riel Rebellion, Chief Henry Prince met with Riel on several occasions. The people of St. Peter's again remained neutral and stayed out of the Rebellion - in spite of Riel's many appeals. After the Rebellion a small contingent of men from St. Peter's remained at Fort Garry to provide additional protection to the settlement. The first of the *numbered* Indian Treaties, Treaty No. 1, was signed at Lower Fort Garry in 1871 creating the St. Peter's Reserve. Within a few years the Canadian Pacific Railway began surveying a route for its main line to cross the Red River at Selkirk Land speculation mushroomed. This led to conflicting claims for the excellent land around St. Peter's. In 1885 Ottawa created a Board of Commissioners to examine the land disputes at St. Peter's. These concerns abated somewhat when Winnipeg, using generous tax concessions and other financial incentives, convinced the Canadian Pacific Railway to re-route its planned crossing of the Red River from a site near Selkirk to Winnipeg.

DIASPORA - THE SURRENDER OF ST PETERS

By 1902 the St Peter's Reserve was well developed with good houses, schools, churches, farms and roadways. It was close to good employment opportunities and excellent trading centres at Selkirk and Winnipeg. The greed of some local speculators fueled a movement to engineer the surrender of the St Peter's Reserve and to relocate the band members far from their homes along the Red River. William Asham⁴ and Councilor William Henry Prince were opposed to the surrender. At the band meetings dealing with the surrender proposal, Asham argued the case against the surrender while Prince acted as interpreter. Leading up to a final meeting, it appeared that a large majority of the band members were against the surrender.

A band meeting was called for 11AM on 23 September 1907 to consider and decide on the surrender. It was held in an old school house only large enough for about half of the 200 men who turned out to vote. Many others were away hunting, fishing or working. In midst of some confusion towards the end of the meeting the Inspector of Indian Agencies, John Semmons, urged '*all you that want \$90 go to this side*' - which the white officials took as a vote in favour of the surrender. Asham and Prince believed the count showed that fewer men were on the side of the room wanting the \$90. The other side claimed that they had a majority of seven. William Asham protested - insisting that Semmons should have said '*you that want to surrender the Reserve go to one side, and you that don't want to surrender the Reserve go to the other side*'. Had Semmons been that explicit, Asham held that '*the people would have understood what they were voting for.*' The result, unfair and questionable as it was, approved the surrender and rendered the St. Peter's Band homeless. William Asham wrote a comprehensive letter on the proceeding to Mr. Bradbury, the local Member of Parliament. Bradbury laid out the facts

⁴William Asham was born at St. Peter's in January 1855. At the signing of Treaty No. 1 in 1871, Indian Agent Alexander Muckle assisted *Willie Asham*, Muckle's ward and one of the newly elected headmen, to recover the red coat given him as a headman. William married Mary Jane Thomas on 28 January 1875. He then served as Chief of St. Peter's from 1891 to 1896. He was a Band Councilor in 1909, 1918, 1919, 1923 and 1925.

in the House of Commons. Four men were implicated in the fraudulent acquisition of Reserve lands that they acquired for \$2 an acre and sold for \$20 an acre. For the surrender of 48,000 acres of first class developed and settled land at St. Peter's with homes, schools, a church and other buildings, roads, etc., the people received \$5,000 and 75,000 acres of empty and poor scrub land 200 kilometres north in a remote wilderness.

In 1914 the Exchequer Court of Canada ruled that the St. Peter's surrender was invalid and void. Nevertheless, the Parliament of Canada passed the St. Peter's Reserve Act of 1916 to legitimize the surrender. The Act deemed all sales of the St. Peter's lands after the surrender to be legal. William Asham's arguments helped to invalidate the surrender in court; however, the St. Peter's Reserve Act and the displacement of the people of St Peter's made the surrender an absolute reality. It was a very sad ending to the story of St. Peter's⁵. In spite of the gross unfairness and absolute acts of greed surrounding the surrender, it is remarkable how the people of St. Peter's were able to remain friends with their neighbours and move ahead to re-establish a new home community.

REBUILDING AT PEGUIS

There were no houses, school, post office or church at Peguis. In fact the land was not yet cleared and broken. Nevertheless, people began moving there in July 1909 after the Dominion Land Surveyors surveyed the new reserve. The Thompson⁶ family was in the first group of forty who traveled on the *S.S. City of Selkirk* and *S.S. Fredrick*. Living conditions were hard. People lived in tents while cutting logs for their houses. Land had to be cleared before it could be tilled. No agricultural tools or seed was provided. Thirty-six houses were completed in 1909. The nearest store was 8 miles away at the Fisher River Reserve⁷. This store could not bring in enough supplies for new people as well as those already being served at Fisher River. It took ten days to complete a round trip to the nearest town, Gimli, 75 miles away over an old trail. The Canadian Pacific Railway completed the rail line to Arborg in 1909 and by 1910 merchants had begun business there - ending the need for the longer trek to Gimli. Schools were built of logs for the start of the school years in September 1911. Church services were held in homes until the first schools were completed and services were held there until 1922.

⁵ The people of the Peguis First Nation will soon be vote on a proposal to settle the St. Peter's Land Claim – perhaps as early as December – almost 100 years after the illegitimate surrender of 1907.

⁶ Albert Edward Thompson, William Henry Prince's grandson, was born at St Peter's on 4 September 1900. He was Chief of the Peguis Band from 1961 to 1973. Just before his death in 1973, he wrote about much of the struggles of the Peter's and Peguis Bands in his book *Chief Peguis and His Descendants*.

⁷The Fisher River Reserve was established in 1871 and is located downstream from Peguis on the Fisher River.

⁸ Angus Prince, another great great grandson of Chief Peguis, was the teacher at the North Peguis School.

The St. Peter's people re-established a thriving community at Peguis in the face of much hardship. They lived peacefully and prospered despite the unfairness of the surrender. They valued peace as much as other Canadians and many joined the Canadian Forces and fought in overseas wars. On their return from military service many served as community leaders at home trying to help other aboriginal people to find peace and prosperity. This was not without its affect on family life. Jean Spence was born on 6 March 1884 at St. Peter's and married Nathaniel Asham⁹ in 1904. Nathaniel was born New Years Day 1874. Nathaniel and Jean had nine children – two of whom died in infancy. The surviving siblings worked hard at farm chores and house work. They also had to do their school work. The local school was some distance away and traveling there in winter was particularly difficult. The family lived in a house built from logs they cut. There was no electricity, no central heating, no telephone, no newspaper and virtually no real roads. Later, they were able to hear news, personal messages and church services on a radio operated by battery. They had a good farm with a vegetable garden, horses, cattle and poultry that fed their family and others well - even during the Depression years. They also made a small amount of money digging and selling 'snake root'. Nathaniel hunted and trapped. He was also a school teacher and spoke and read three languages fluently - Cree, Saulteaux and English. He traveled and taught in the north around The Pas. Nathaniel was Chief from 1935 to 1940 and 1947-49. He initiated a land claim action for St. Peter's during his time as Chief.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Three of the Asham children attended the Residential School at Elkhorn, Manitoba in the early 1920's. While home life was difficult, there was loving atmosphere and the family lived relatively well because of their farm, trapping, hunting and gathering. At the school they worked hard at chores and received very little education. Their food was not as good as they had at home. And the adults at school were not as loving nor as caring. Their time at Elkhorn came to an end because of kind act by the Indian Agent. Two of the Asham children had contracted TB and were isolated in a small room. The Indian Agent he discovered their situation when he visited Elkhorn and advised Nathaniel and Jean to bring their children home. They did so and they children made a complete recovery from TB. When any of her children were in harm's way or facing difficulties, Jean prayed for their health, happiness or safety. Grandchildren were a joy. Jean told them bible stories; taught them their prayers, taught them to recite some of her favorite psalms like the 23rd psalm. She also told them some of the old *Weesaykajak* legends and sang Cree lullabies and hymns to them at their bed time. Jean's children, grandchildren and the generations that followed have enjoyed a more comfortable life with all the modern conveniences available today. Many of them became well educated, held jobs with great responsibility and contributed to community life through their leadership and volunteer work.

⁹ Nathaniel was born New Years Day 1874. When he died at the end of November 1972, the ground at St. Peter's was frozen and a grave could not be opened for him. So he is buried at St. Clements. Jean died 14 March 1963 aged 84 and is buried at St. Peter's.

IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE

The people of St. Peter's and Peguis lived in peace with their neighbours. They joined with other Canadians to fight for peace in other parts of the world. Peguis's son, Chief Henry Prince, served as a Foreman with the Nile Expedition to Khartoum in 1885. His great grandson, Edward Albert Thompson served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force until 1919. Kenneth McClure Asham, William Asham's son, enfranchised to serve in WWI. He enlisted with the 108th Battalion raised at Selkirk. After embarking overseas, he was sent to France in 1917 as a re-enforcement for the 78th Battalion. He was killed in March 1917. Kenneth's daughter, Louise¹⁰, was born just before he went overseas in 1916. With the death of their son, William and Mary Jane Asham adopted their granddaughter Louise so they could raise her as member of the Band. William's grandson, Tom (Nathaniel Asham's son) enfranchised to enlist in World War II. He rose to the rank of Sergeant in the Fort Garry Horse and participated in the D-Day Landings at Normandy on 6 June 1944. Sgt. Tom Prince, a direct descendant of Peguis, served with the First Special Services Force (the famed *Devil's Brigade*) in WWII and with the PPCLI in Korea and was Canada's most decorated aboriginal soldier. There were many other aboriginal men who served in the Canada Forces in war and peace. Returning aboriginal soldiers played a major role in providing leadership in their community as Chief and Council. Many of these individuals played instrumental, roles in developing communications between aboriginal people and other Canadians on aboriginal issues.

In the graveyard surrounding the Old Stone Church at St Peter's hold several graves and markers. The monument in Chief Peguis's memory is surrounded by the graves of some of his immediate descendants – notably son John Prince, a Life Councilor of the St. Peter's Band who Chief from 1903-05 and who died in 1910 at the age of 95; John's son George Prince, a divinity student, who died in 1869 at age 18; James died 1867 aged 6 years; and George and Nancy Prince – grand children of Peguis. Nearby is a small family plot enclosed by a small fence containing the graves of some members of the Muckle family. One of the members buried there was the aunt of Lord W.J. Pirrie who built the ill-fated *RMS Titanic*. Alexander Muckle was the Indian agent for St Peter's when Treaty Number One was signed at Lower Fort Garry in 1871 (It is he who befriended William Asham – footnote 4). He also wrote a comprehensive report of the St Peter's land question in 1884. One of his descendants, Bob Muckle, served in WWII and recently passed away. Also nearby are some stones in memory soldiers (Andersons and Sandersons) killed in action overseas at Ortona and in France of World Wars I and II.

A very interesting group of graves at the southwest edge of graveyard includes markers to Adam Cochrane (1849-1933), Alex Cochrane (1845-1927), Alex G. Cochrane (1865-1945) and Alex James Cochrane (1894-1938). Adam and Alex served as Boatmen on the 1885 Nile Expedition led by General Wolsley to relieve General Gordon at Khartoum. (Another Boatman, John Pratt, is buried closer to the south west side of the church. Peguis's son and former chief, William Prince, also served on the Expedition as a

¹⁰ Louise Asham was born August 8th 1916 at Fisher River and baptized on 26 September. She resides on the Peguis First Nation.

foreman.) Alex James served in World War I. Several other servicemen of World Wars I & II, the Korean War and peacekeeping operations are buried throughout the graveyard – or are remembered by a monument placed here in their memory. Near the south end, in an unmarked grave, Jean Asham (nee Spence) lies close to her sister to Sophia Cochrane and their brother John Spence who serve in WWI.

Near the east side of the graveyard are several markers which indicate the graves of familiar family names – Bear, Greyeyes, Hourie, Stranger, etc. Many of these people lost ‘status’ as Indians as defined under the Indian Act. Some of these are descendants of band members who dispersed from St. Peter’s to Selkirk, Petersfield, the Eastern Beaches and far beyond. For many former St Peter’s members and their descendants, no matter where they settled after the surrender, this became their resting place – home at last.

The markers at St. Peter’s bear witness to how, through service in the Canadian Forces, our aboriginal ancestors link this community with major historic events around the world. It is very probable that those who went abroad had no prior knowledge of the lands they went to or the people or issues surrounding the events in which they played a role. Indeed, they had virtually nothing in common with others involved nor with the countries where the events took place. More often than not they went on these *adventures* to help their friends – as the Boatmen on the Nile did to aid General Wolseley. Mean while at home their family and friends experienced some grave injustices. Yet they chose to serve the cause of peace to the best of their ability. Many aboriginal men who served in the Canada Forces in war and peace returned to their community to lead their people and to work to improve the social, economic and other conditions for their people. The markers at the Old Stone Church of St. Peter’s and the efforts made to maintain their memory are a testament to their fundamental belief in and commitment to peace and freedom – not unlike other aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples of Canada.

CONCLUSION

The stories of the people of St. Peter’s and Peguis show just how resilient and determined they were. They lived in peace with their neighbours. They avoided choosing sides when their friends fought amongst themselves at Seven Oaks and in the Riel Rebellion. Instead they protected and assisted the settlers during their *greatest reverses*. From the days when William Cockran offered to teach them, the people of St. Peter’s accepted (and today their descendants at Peguis continue to accept) education and training opportunities to learn more and do more in life.. They have joined their fellow citizens of Canada in all branches of the Canadian Forces to fight for peace around the world. Boatmen and foremen from St. Peters participated in the 1885 Nile Expedition to Khartoum. Others have enlisted in the Canadian Forces as sailors, soldiers and airmen to serve during World War I, World War II, Korea, and recent operations. Band members of St Peter’s and, now, the Peguis First Nation continue to pursue peace and accept their share of responsibility to preserve peace here and around the world. What Lord Selkirk said of Peguis in his 1817 letter of introduction applies to all of the people of St. Peter’s and the Peguis First Nation - they *deserves to be treated with favour and distinction by all friends of peace and order.*

Author's Note:

This paper had its genesis in preparing for two celebrations at St. Peter's Old Stone Church. The first was the Sacred Circle hosted by the Rupert's Land Indigenous Council of the Anglican Diocese of Rupert's Land in 2002. The second was the visit of the Lieutenant-Governor in 2004 to mark the 150th anniversary of St. Peter's Old Stone Church. Both events led me to uncover more detail about the historical events of St. Peter's and, collaterally, my family. I had already learned much of our family's basic genealogy some years ago. William Asham was my great grandfather; Nathaniel and Jean were my mother's parents; Kenneth McClure Asham was Nathaniel's brother and Tom was Nathaniel's son and my mother's brother. John Spence was my grandmother Jean's brother. My dad's father, Frank, his four brothers, a sister and their parents came to Selkirk about 1880. Frank married Mary Mason, a member of the Fisher River Band of Indians. Four generations of Sheads and Ashams have served for over one hundred years in the Navy, Army and Air Force of the Canadian Forces. Kenneth McClure Asham, John Spence (my grandmother's brother) and Harry Shead (my grandfather's brother) all served in the army during WWI. Tom Asham was a Sergeant in the Fort Garry Horse during WWII and took part in the 6 June 1944 D Day landings at Normandy. As well, three sons of James Asham (my grandfather Nathaniel's brother) served in the Air Force and Army. Howard, Orton and Ebenezer all serve in WWII. Howard and Orton went on to serve 25 years each post war. Harry Shead's sons, Bill and Harry served in the Navy and Air Force during WWII. Their cousin, Gordon Berrisford, perished in the sinking of HMCS ST. CROIX in the Battle of the Atlantic. As well, their cousin, Stan Shead, served in the Air Force and cousin Bert served in the Army. My dad, Harry, and two of his brothers, Bill and Nelson, all served in the Navy during WWII. My late brother, Tom served 30 years in the Air Force from 1960 to 1990 – retiring as a Master Warrant Officer. I served in the regular and reserve forces of the Navy from 1956 to 1993. My cousin, Susan Shead (my dad's brother Bill's daughter) served briefing in the Naval Reserve. Today Ryan Shead, son of Gordon (Susan's brother) and grandson of my uncle Bill, is a Corporal with the PPCLI and served in Afghanistan in 2005.

History does play tricks. While in the Naval Reserve, I served as Mayor of Selkirk in 1982, the Town's centennial year. As Mayor I hosted the Tenth Earl of Selkirk and, as a Naval Reserve Officer took him up the Red River from Selkirk to Winnipeg aboard HMCS CHIPPAWA's tender. 1982 was the 75th anniversary year of the St. Peter's Surrender which my great grandfather William Asham opposed. Next year, 2007, will mark the 100th year since the surrender and should see some resolution to this long outstanding land claim – which has been pursued peacefully all this time by the people of St. Peter's and Peguis.

*Bill Shead
At Selkirk, Manitoba
20 June 2006*

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Note: A primary source for this paper was Chief Albert Edward Thompson's book, '*Chief Peguis and His Descendants*' which documents the oral history of St. Peter's. George Ladd's book, '*Shall We Gather At the River?*' provides another perspective on the subject which is recommended to the reader. A more recent book, *Peguis, A Noble Friend*, by Donna F. Sutherland (published 2003) is also recommended. Of particular interest for its detail is the research report, *The Illegal Surrender of St. Peter's Reserve*, prepared by Tyler, Wright & Daniel Limited for the Treaty & Aboriginal Rights Research Centre Of Manitoba Inc. Some other useful and interesting works are included in the bibliography.

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