



The Royal Canadian Military Institute Whitecap Dakota Nation

MEDIA RELEASE



For immediate release – November 2, 2023

The Repatriation of Ceremonial Pipe to the Whitecap Dakota Nation after 138 Years

Toronto, Ontario - Today at the Royal Canadian Military Institute (RCMI), the Whitecap Dakota Nation (WDN) Council reclaimed a ceremonial pipe belonging to Chief Whitecap. The ceremonial pipe was acquired by Lieutenant William Hamilton Merritt III in May 1885, during the Riel Resistance in Saskatchewan, 138 years ago, at the time of Chief's detainment and subsequent release.

In 1909, Lt. Merritt donated the pipe to RCMI (then the CMI). It was loaned in the 1930s to the Fort York Museum, where it remained for 90 years. In 2021, the City of Toronto, now responsible for the Fort York Museum, brought the pipe to the attention of RCMI. After extensive research in consultation with the City of Toronto and other institutions, RCMI regained the ceremonial pipe, and engaged actively in the process of repatriating this valued cultural object to WDN.

Lt Merritt's possession of Chief Whitecap's pipe occurred at a time when restrictions were placed on Indigenous cultural practices by the Canadian government. The return of the pipe is significant for the Dakota people, according to Councillor Frank Royal, "For us, our pipes have sacred meaning and life. Certainly, Chief Whitecap used this in ceremony with Lt. Merritt as a symbol of diplomacy. We are grateful that RCMI reached out to have this ceremonial icon returned to our community."

"This comes at a time when our community has achieved formal recognition of the Dakota as Indigenous peoples of Canada, including an acknowledgement of the mistreatment of the Dakota people by the Crown. To me, this symbolizes a significant step toward further acknowledging and repairing historical wrongs against the Dakota people," WDN Chief Bear stated.

The RCMI is proud to return this important cultural object to the members of the Whitecap Dakota Nation, as RCMI President Michael Clarry affirmed, "The Royal Canadian Military Institute is honoured to return this ceremonial pipe to the Whitecap Dakota Nation. What was an important historical artifact for us is far more valuable as a significant cultural object in its community of origin."

RCMI Museum Director & Curator Ryan Goldsworthy added "It has been a privilege to work with this indelible and sacred piece of history and with the Whitecap Dakota Nation for its repatriation. We recognize the importance of this initiative to Canadian history and to the Dakota people."

A background document is attached to this release to provide further historical context and information.

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The Royal Canadian Military Institute Whitecap Dakota Nation **BACKGROUNDER**



The Repatriation of Chief Whitecap's Pipe to the Whitecap Dakota Nation

On November 2nd, 2023, the ceremonial pipe belonging to Chief Whitecap will be returned to the rights holding community of Whitecap Dakota Nation after 138 years. The pipe had been held by the Royal Canadian Military Institute (RCMI) and is being returned by that institution.

History of the Pipe

The pipe belonging to Chief Whitecap was acquired from him on May 19, 1885 by Lieutenant William H. Merritt after participating in a pipe ceremony with Chief Whitecap at the time of his detention, along with members of his family, and other Dakota community during the 1885 Riel Resistance.

As part of Dakota cultural and spiritual traditions, the pipe is smoked with due ceremony to seal friendships and signify agreements. The Dakota employed pipe ceremonies as sacred symbols of respect and recognition and to facilitate diplomatic relations with their allies and those whose friendship and alliance they hoped to secure. This, along with the historical context later noted, makes it likely that there was cultural confusion between Chief Whitecap and Merritt, both in the significance of the ceremony and the intention for the pipe itself.

Following the events of 1885, Merritt rose to command his regiment, The Governor General's Body Guard for Ontario. As a Lieutenant-Colonel, Merritt became the President of the Canadian Military Institute (CMI) in 1905 (the *Royal* Canadian Military Institute after 1948), a position he held until 1914. As CMI President, he donated the indigenous cultural object to the Museum of the CMI in 1909, the same year he retired from his regiment. The pipe was maintained in the RCMI's (CMI's) collection until it was informally loaned to the Fort York Historic Site and Museum sometime between 1934 and 1939. The City of Toronto's Museum staff later discovered the pipe in their collection and they subsequently brought it to the attention of the RCMI. In collaboration, the RCMI Museum researched and identified the pipe and then took steps to return it to the rights holding community.

Chief Whitecap and the 1885 Resistance

During the Riel Resistance of 1885, Chief Whitecap negotiated with some of the Métis who were on their way to Batoche and intent on rising against Saskatoon residents. He successfully convinced them to bypass the Saskatoon residents peacefully and accompanied members of his community travelling with the Métis to Batoche.

Some accounts suggest Chief Whitecap was forced to go to Batoche, while others assert that he went along to provide guidance and counsel to resistance participants. Evidence suggests that Chief Whitecap had kinship ties to inhabitants of Batoche, many of whom were people of Dakota descent.

The Governor General's Body Guard for Ontario, of which Lt Merritt was a part, was mobilized as a full squadron and participated in the 1885 Resistance as rear area security for General Middleton's force. This brought them to the Batoche area in May of 1885, at which time Lt. Merritt was instructed to capture Chief Whitecap, his family, and other Dakota people who had left the area following the battle at Fish Creek.

After being pursued by Lt Merritt and other members of the Governor General's Body Guard for Ontario, Chief Whitecap and the others were detained and removed to Humboldt. It is worth noting that the Dakota group consisted of women and children, along with several men, all who were held at Humboldt for a month. Although no evidence existed that Chief Whitecap participating in the fighting, he was charged with felony treason and imprisoned in Regina while awaiting trial.

Chief Whitecap was acquitted of all charges, partially due to the testimony of his Saskatoon friend, Gerald Willoughby, who attested that Whitecap was truthful, honest, and loyal to the Crown.

Colonial Removal of Indigenous Cultural Belongings

Lt Merritt's possession of Chief Whitecap's pipe occurred at a time when severe limitations were placed on Indigenous cultural practices by the colonial government. The government had rules and actions to confiscate Indigenous cultural belongings from communities. Believing that Indigenous people should become more like the settler populations, Indigenous groups were made to give up their cultural belongings under the Indian Act. This helps us see how

"collectors" took traditional cultural belongings from Indigenous communities, thinking they needed to be saved in their personal collections or preserved in museums.

Repatriation of the Pipe by RCMI

In 2021, the City of Toronto, now responsible for the Fort York Museum, brought the pipe to the attention of the Museum Director and Curator of the RCMI, Ryan Goldsworthy.

After extensive research in consultation with the City of Toronto and other institutions, Goldsworthy regained the pipe, and engaged actively in the process of repatriating this valued object to its First Nation of origin. The members of the Royal Canadian Military Institute are honoured to return this important cultural icon to the members of the Whitecap Dakota First Nation. An appropriate ceremony involving members of the Whitecap Dakota First Nation, members of the RCMI, press representatives, and others will be held at the RCMI on November 2nd at which the pipe will be formally returned to its First Nation home.

The pipe will be temporarily stewarded by the Western Development Museum in Saskatoon at the request of the Whitecap Dakota Nation.

Images:

1 – The Ceremonial Pipe



2 – Lt Merritt, Chief Whitecap and companions, 1885



Download high-resolution images here.

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