

“It’s to make rise to the spirit”

Melvin Swan is a born fighter, whether in the Canadian military or working for the well-being of Aboriginal people and preservation of his culture.

Born in Dog Creek, Swan grew up around area icons such as his father, Chief Raymond Swan; cousin Adam Beach; fiddler Cliff Maytwayashing; George Missiabit, band manager of the Lake Manitoba First Nation for 35 years; veteran Bill Paul; and ‘Tomahawk’ Bruce Swan, a former band councilor who wrestled against the likes of Chris Jericho.

“We have so much talent in our community that our leadership doesn’t seem to pay attention to,” said Swan. “It’s important for them to be remembered, especially for the youth, because it shows the spirit and power that is there.”

Swan’s a leader in spirit and power in his own right, having served in the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry and as a military policeman. He’s created recruitment programs for Aboriginal youth; served as vice president of Aboriginal Veterans of Canada and First Nation Veterans of Canada; and been a spiritual leader and vice chair for Spirit Wind, a grassroots movement for residential school survivors.

Swan served in the military from 1976-88.

“I think every one of our people should go through the military if they want to be a warrior because our old ways talk about our spirituality, the eagle feather and the big heart the warrior carries to protect, serve and carry on our culture,” said Swan.

“I reflect back to my military career with pride and honour. The military was really instrumental in developing me by teaching me discipline, routine and drive through the regimented lifestyle. I give them a lot of credit because they essentially made me who I am today. They have a hard time taking credit for that because how could someone like me, after serving 12 years, turn around and sue them for discrimination? Because it’s beyond our veterans, it’s beyond our people.”

Swan won his case in 1994 and says he wouldn’t have without the help of Mary Pitawanakwat, who won her own human rights case against the Secretary of State in the 1980s.

“The human rights case took six years and I went through a lot of trauma, healing and letting go,” said Swan. “Only the veterans can tell you how hard it is to overcome such a system by biting the hand that fed you. It’s hard, it’s conditioning and when I fought that human rights case, it really tried who I was. It really showed me things in this country that are needed and [things that are] misguided. I don’t know if too many others have been through a human rights battle like mine.”

Swan says Swan vs. CAF is now case law.

“I felt my legal team sold me out,” said Swan. “I had three charges against the military, but in all the back-door negotiations, they dropped my two main charges and went with the lesser charge, personal harassment, which is harder to prove. I would’ve had them, but I let that go because here I am now. I have Bold Eagle as a vehicle and I want to connect the youth and my culture to those in the military. I have a long way to go.”

Bold Eagle, which originated in Saskatchewan, is a seven-week program run in Wainwright Alta.; it gives Aboriginal men and women 16-29 years old basic military training with a cultural component consisting of traditional teachings and elder support. Participants receive certificates, \$4,000 and preparation for a military or law enforcement career.

Swan brought Bold Eagle to Manitoba in 1993 and works as a director out of the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak offices in Winnipeg.

“I’m the father of Bold Eagle,” said Swan. “I saw a need for that continuing education and connection not only for the youth, but for the military. In Bold Eagle, the cultural component’s very important. The elders, the ceremonies and the military are taking part in the whole process and getting an understanding of our spirituality and what a warrior is. If you look back at our history as First Nations and Aboriginal people, we’ve always answered the call of duty as warriors. You look at our youth today that connection is severed. They have no understanding.”

Swan says similar programs, such as Black Bear, Raven and Falcon, exist for different service branches.

“I gave them an Aboriginal military programming proposal they’re sitting on and they got a proposal from me a year-and-a-half ago that’s gone to the RCMP,” said Swan. “The military has many of my ideas but they refuse to acknowledge it and that’s the way it is. I don’t really care much about being honoured or acknowledged because I know in this country they’ll do that after you’re buried — and that’s cool. I wish I could do more for the military and that they would come to the table and not be afraid of me.”

Despite his struggles with getting funding and resources from the forces every year, Swan says he’s certain of the program’s future.

“Bold Eagle has a spirit of its own,” said Swan. “It was created that way by the elders, veterans and military, and it’s highly successful. It’s the point program in today’s Canadian armed forces Aboriginal military and youth programming in this province and Western Canada.”

Swan says there are positives in his whole military experience.

“I wouldn’t be here pushing Bold Eagle if I didn’t believe in what I’ve survived and come to,” said Swan. “There are positive things the military showed me; the travel (to England, Germany and Norway); and thinking outside the box. The greatest enemy I ever faced was not the military, it was my own spirit and mind.”

Swan still carries scars from his internal battles.

“If you look at my right hand I’ve got 46 stitches because I had rage and I thank the army for tempering that,” said Swan. “I’m the type of the guy the spirits made with no fear. Jumping out of airplanes, ready to fight at a moment’s notice; that’s the way I was as a 19-year-old. I look back at that now and think I must have been crazy. I got beyond that because I think I have a full understanding of what truth and life is in today’s society. I’ve learned from the elders not to go back to the rage that was so evident growing up in day schools and not knowing my language, culture and identity. Coming to an understanding and making peace with that is all part of the spiritual connection.”

Swan says going back to the spirit after his experiences in Dauphin residential school has been hard but, because of it, he’s become better connected as a spiritual leader with Spirit Wind, which recently launched a lawsuit against the federal government for compensation for residential day-school survivors.

“I got involved with Spirit Wind in 2002 when a meeting was called in Winnipeg,” said Swan. “I went there to be an observer. There were 250 people and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs grand chief was there. When they started the meeting, a gentleman did an opening prayer using the Bible. Then they introduced everybody at the table and when they got to me, I respectfully said ‘Mr. Chairman I am Annissabee Okijita (Ojibway warrior). I understand things happen for a reason. You give tobacco to an elder in the opening prayer. That Bible he’s got in his hand is the reason we’re in this mess anyway. And when you are conducting business or ceremony with our people you always go clockwise.’ He apologized and we started all over again.”

“There was a Josey Bear, one of the board members, who came to the table,” said Swan. “She said: ‘When Mr. Swan spoke, the back of my hair was standing up.’ I felt the power of that whirling spirit wind and when I heard that I got goose bumps.”

Swan says spiritual leader was the first position appointed at the meeting.

“The chair nominated me right away and before I could say no everybody put up their hands,” said Swan. “That’s the traditional way of standing behind a leader. Who am I to say no?”

Swan is a spiritual leader as well as vice president of the First Nation Veterans of Canada.

“I can do the Aboriginal Veteran Day, November 8, ceremony myself,” said Swan. “I can recite the whole process.”

Swan says he also provides part-time personal protection services.

“I was trained by the SAS (the British Red Caps) in England in 1984,” said Swan. “What you see with James Bond: driving skills, shooting skills, movement, air force drills, booby traps, I learned it all. I was trained to be a bodyguard for the NATO defence commander at the time but it never happened. I’ve guarded the national chief Phil Fontaine, Adam Beach, a few local chiefs and the grand chief. I was trying to develop a personal protection business and keep it less a homegrown connection protection circle with more than just being a bodyguard.”

Swan is also on the board of directors for Aboriginal Native Languages of Manitoba, and is fluent in Ojibway.

“Like Adam Beach will tell you, I’m the guy they looked up to and I’m still sort of the guy he looks up to today when it comes to the language and connection,” said Swan. “It’s to make a rise through the spirit to shake up the people. My life has been like that because I’ve shaken up a lot of people. There was nobody to catch me when I fell. But the warrior I am, I refused to just lay down and let things happen.”

Swan says he sees a lot of problems in Aboriginal communities today, but says the solution lies with a strong leader.

“You know, my people are so lost today,” said Swan. “They forget who they are and about looking at our past and role models like Tommy Prince, the most decorated Aboriginal soldier in Canada. You go back to that reserve and his monument isn’t respected. It’s terrible that people are so lost. You see it in every aspect of today’s society, especially in Winnipeg. You see the gangsters that confuse youth, who are playing musical chairs and going around in a vicious circle of law and justice. It’s very reprehensible.

“Our people are sick, Mother Earth is sick. All these things are coming at us like Swine Flu and that’s because we’re not taking care of Mother Earth and ourselves. It’s a matter of respect, going back to the language, the teachings, the connection and it’s very hard because everything’s so confusing, even in Dog Creek. I go up there and I sense the hopelessness. They’re so conditioned, nobody’s thinking beyond the box.”

Swan says he measures today’s Aboriginal leadership by his father, who died in 1994.

“Today I see these chiefs and, not to say anything disrespectful, but they don’t know who they are,” said Swan. “They’re just like any other leader in this country. I saw my father lead. He was more than a chief. If anybody had a problem, like these youth getting arrested, they had to be sent to Chief Raymond Swan to deal with. If the police came on the reserve, they had to go see him first. My father refused to wear the chief’s headdress. He used to tell me, ‘Son, I’m not from Hollywood. My life belongs to the people, language and that connection.’ I understand that very clearly now. It’s very profound. I

don't think there's anyone who can match his leadership, vision and capacity to bring people together because I haven't seen it since he died. You want to be chief now, you're there like a mayor. It's not the true essence of being a chief. The Indian Act is not where it's at and today's leaders don't understand that. My father sat where these grand chiefs sat and Phil Fontaine will tell you that. He was hard, tough and grassroots and I think we need to go back to that."

Swan, a former Lake Manitoba councillor whose portfolio was health and policing, says he may follow in his father's footsteps and run for chief of Lake Manitoba.

"I think I'll go back there one way or another," said Swan. "It's hard to envision what's coming for not only Dog Creek, Interlake Tribal Council or the whole political role for the First Nations as well as society. When I was on council, I learned from the best, my father.

"Take a look at what's around us in this country," said Swan. "Everyone's poisoned; you have terrorism, sovereignty, but who sees all that?" said Swan. "There's no politician that has the spirit and heart to deal with that and I think that's what's missing in this country. I tried to teach them that through my human rights case. I've said that to my people in the residential schools, I've said that to people in the First Nations Veterans of Canada, to get beyond this. Let's heal, but this is not happening. I can speak for myself, but I cannot speak for others and how they've dealt with this country."

Swan says he feels the plight of his people.

"Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, being human, I get mad because things aren't supposed to be happening," said Swan. "You open the newspaper and find Aboriginal women being killed. What's wrong with that picture, what's wrong with the police, what's wrong with the society? I always question that and when I think about it, I feel that pain."

The now-53-year-old Swan says the next phase of his life will be fulfilling his destiny as it's revealed to him.

"For me I let the spirit guide me," said Swan. "I've been blessed with these gifts by the creator and they scared the s— out of me through my life. As my grandfather told me before he passed, 'You go where the people call you young man. Don't hesitate. You have gifts, you have connection.' And I use that whether it's with Bold Eagle, ALM or as a spiritual leader with the veterans or residential schools. I'll keep doing what I'm doing and, as I get older, my vision starts opening up and I use my dreams as my guidance. At this point in my life I'm learning to trust that spirit, to give my life to it and let it guide me to where I have to go, whether its back home to be chief where my father sat for 20 years, to be here in the Bold Eagle circle or the language here in Winnipeg. Who knows. I don't own my life; it belongs to the people and, knowing that, I've got my work cut out for me."

More information about Bold Eagle can be found at: www.army.forces.gc.ca/boldeagle

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