

Indigenous Veterans

November 8 is National Indigenous Veterans Day



Put yourself in the position of going to war to fight for King & country...to defend what you hold to be true; including democratic values, freedom and the protection of your home and family. Now think of that situation if you were a bit of an 'outsider' in that place you are compelled to protect. First Nations men & women during WWI, WWII and the Korean War were somewhat in that position. They had very few rights, they couldn't vote, were forced to live on reserves and very much kept to themselves. But your country is at war and even though you feel yourself a bit of an outcast in your own land, you have a strong; indeed a spiritual connection to that land and your ancestors. For that reason, even though you are deemed non-Canadian, you want to protect that ancestral land...so you enlist.

The First Nations, Inuit and Métis of Canada have a long and proud tradition of military service to our country.

We can turn history back to the war of 1812 where we witness many First Nations & Metis assisting settler militias and the British against the Americans. Estimates of up to 10,000 fought to keep the Americans out of British North America. Names such as the Shawnee Chief Tecumseh, Mohawk Leader Joseph Brant & his son John and John Norton are among the names of First Nations men prominent in the war of 1812.

First Nations people also enlisted and fought as 'Canadians' in the Boer War

<https://www.trentu.ca/education/resources/indigenous-veterans-day>

Over 12,000 Indigenous people are estimated to have volunteered in all three wars (WWI WWII, Korea) and approximately 500 died in these conflicts.

First Nations, Inuit and Metis people were not eligible for conscription until 1917 because they were not citizens of Canada (they were also unable to vote), but many volunteered despite the challenges including traveling long distances from remote communities, learning a new language (English), and coping with prejudices. Indigenous people were not allowed to join the Canadian Air Force until 1942 and the Canadian Navy until 1943 as these services demanded that: "members be of pure European descent and of the white race." Many, however, served with distinction, winning medals for bravery in action.

<https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/>

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/people-and-stories/indigenous-veterans>

The First World War

On the eve of the First World War, Canada had no official policy on the recruitment of Indigenous peoples. Although they were originally discouraged from enlisting, policy would shift to become more accepting of Indigenous enlistment and recruitment and led to new policies regarding Indigenous recruits. In 1915 due to high casualty rates, restrictions were relaxed and allowed Indigenous recruitment. By 1917, Indian agents were holding recruiting events on reserves. In August 1917, the *Military Service Act* instituted conscription for all British subjects of age to serve; including First Nations men. Treaty Indians had expected to be exempt because they did not have the rights of citizenship, so conscription was an extremely contentious issue. Many non-Indigenous peoples publicly supported the exemption of status Indians from conscription.

During the First World War, more than 4,000 Indigenous people served. It was a remarkable response and in some areas, one in three able-bodied men between 18-45 would volunteer. Indigenous recruits joined up for a variety of reasons, from seeking employment or adventure, to better their families financially to wanting to uphold a tradition that had seen their ancestors fight alongside the British in earlier military efforts like the War of 1812 and the South African War.

Valuable skills

Many Indigenous men brought valuable skills with them: Patience, stealth and marksmanship were traits brought from communities & traditions where hunting and trapping were parts of daily life. These attributes helped these soldiers become military sharpshooters and reconnaissance scouts. Henry Louis Norwest, an Alberta Métis was one of the most famous snipers of the entire Canadian Corps and was awarded the Military Medal and bar for his courage under fire.

Cpl. Francis Pegahmagabow WWI was an Ojibwa from the Parry Island Band in Ontario, who enlisted with the 23rd Regiment (Northern Pioneers) in August 1914 serving as a scout, messenger and marksman. He was awarded the Military Medal plus two bars for acts of bravery in Belgium and France. Pegahmagabow was one of 39 members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force who received two bars in addition to the Military Medal. He went on to be one of Canada's most decorated First Nations soldiers.

After the war he lobbied for indigenous citizen rights and became Supreme Chief of the Native Independent Government (now the Assembly of First Nations).



<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indigenous-peoples-and-the-second-world-war>

The Second World War

At least 4,250 First Nations soldiers enlisted or were conscripted into the Canadian military in the Second World War, with thousands more Métis, Inuit, and non-Status Indian soldiers serving without official recognition of their Indigenous identity. Some historians put the total as around 8,000.

Arguably, the scale and diversity of Indigenous engagement in the war effort was greater in WWII, as was the breadth and determination of opposition to conscription. As in the First World War, Indigenous military servicemen and women generally experienced respect, acceptance and promotion in the forces. But that would revert to type upon discharge or retirement. Brigadier Oliver Martin, a Mohawk from the Six Nations Grand River reserve, was the highest-ranking Indigenous officer of the war.

Inadequate healthcare and schooling for Indigenous populations in the early 20th century meant few could meet strict medical and education standards to achieve higher ranks and placements especially in the RCAF & RCN once restrictions were relaxed. However, a unique role for indigenous soldiers was the "code talker." Men translated sensitive radio messages into and out of Cree to avoid interception of vital allied information. Despite their contributions and sacrifices, however, Indigenous peoples remained marginalized, without basic civil rights like the right to vote.

Indigenous people also contributed to the war effort on the home front by donating money, clothing and food to worthy causes and also granted the use of portions of their reserve lands to allow for the construction of new airports, rifle ranges and defence installations. The special efforts of First Nations communities in Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia were also recognized with the awarding of the British Empire Medal.

Indigenous Women's Service

Some First Nations and Métis women are known to have enlisted with the women's auxiliary services of the Army, RCN and RCAF, filling many different clerical, first aid and mechanical roles, in Canada and overseas. They experienced many parallels with other servicewomen in the form of pervasive sexism in the forces and a "whisper" campaign in the press that painted women in uniform as promiscuous.

The Korean War

The Korean War saw several hundred Indigenous people serve Canada in uniform during the conflict. Many of them had seen action in the Second World War. This return to service would see some of these individuals expanding on their previous duties in new ways.

Sgt. Tommy Prince was born into the Brokenhead Band at Scanterbury, Manitoba. Despite having been forced to attend a residential school, he enlisted in June 1940 as a 'sapper' and later became a reconnaissance expert in the Devil's Brigade (the American 1st Special Service Force). Tommy Prince is also one of the most decorated First Nations veterans having been awarded the Military Medal and the American Army decoration Silver Star with ribbon (one of only 59 Canadians to achieve that award).



After the Korean War, he served as Manitoba Indian Association Vice President. Canada Post has just honoured him with a stamp. One of the most decorated First Nations persons in Canadian history died in 1977—homeless.

After the wars, enlisted Indigenous people returned home to renewed or continued discrimination, including in some cases denial of benefits, loss of Status, and expropriation of their land by the government for non-Indigenous veterans. As the country looked to create a new order in the aftermath of the WWII, Canadians looked at their country's treatment of Indigenous peoples and did not like what they saw. In this brief climate of recognition, Indigenous leaders, veterans groups and many other Canadians pressured the government for reform and citizenship rights, leading to major amendments to the Indian Act in 1951 (though voting rights were not granted at the federal level until 1960). Thereafter, Indigenous veterans were largely forgotten until they began to campaign for recognition of their sacrifices and restitution for grievances over veterans benefits from the 1970s to the present. It was only in 1995 that Indigenous veterans were allowed to lay wreaths commemorating their fallen comrades at the National War Memorial in Ottawa. The first monument commemorating the role of Indigenous people during these three wars was dedicated in 2001 in Ottawa. It took until 2003 for the Government of Canada to provide veterans' benefits to First Nations soldiers and Metis veterans have never received them.

I Love This Land

You were and always shall be my brother
We were all the same color wrapped in the flag of this nation
My blood flowed as freely as yours, mixed in the fields one could not be distinguished
from the other

Yet when we came home, when the nation's colours were removed
Difference became apparent, not between you and me, God willing never
But in the eyes of those for whom we laid down our lives.

Oh, we still stood shoulder to shoulder in the parades, but the government thought that
your life was more
valuable than mine

So you were given land, property, while I waited and I waited,
I know what you were given was not enough for what we endured
Still it was much more than I.

I am not envious of you brother, I believe you deserve even more than you received
But it hurt me very badly, I am not ashamed to say I cried and why not
I bled, I died, I killed, why does my country think I am unworthy
The enemy I fought could never be as cruel as the people I came back to embrace.

I gave so much, lived through so much and then you,
you who I would give all for, you pushed me aside as if I was inconsequential
I feel as if I have been spit upon by one I honored.

Do I feel good, having to ask you for what should have been given long ago, no?
In fact, I am a little ashamed to ask for justice in this
For I never went to war for money, for glory, for reward, I went because it was the right
thing to do and God forgive me, I would go again.

This may seem an old wound to you but it is a wound that never heals
For it is a wound to my people's heart and soul and insult to our pride
And we deserve so much better, especially from you

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