



C A N A D A R E M E M B E R S

## INDIGENOUS VETERANS

### INTRODUCTION

The First Nations, Métis and Inuit people of Canada have a long and proud tradition of military service to our country. While exact statistics are difficult to determine, the rate of Indigenous participation in Canada's military efforts over the years has been impressive. These determined volunteers were often forced to overcome many challenges to serve in uniform, from learning a new language and adapting to cultural differences, to having to travel great distances from their remote communities just to enlist.

### FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War raged from 1914 to 1918 and more than 4,000 Indigenous people served in uniform during the conflict. It was a remarkable response and in some areas, one in three able-bodied men would volunteer. Indeed, some communities (such as the Head of the Lake Band in British Columbia) saw every man between 20 and 35 years of age enlist. Indigenous recruits joined up for a variety of reasons, from seeking employment or adventure 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.

Many Indigenous men brought valuable skills with them when they joined the military. Patience, stealth and marksmanship were well-honed traits for those who had come from communities where hunting was a cornerstone of daily life. These attributes helped many of these soldiers become successful snipers (military sharpshooters) and reconnaissance scouts

(men who stealthily gathered information on enemy positions). Indigenous soldiers earned at least 50 decorations for bravery during the war. Henry Louis Norwest, a Métis from Alberta and one of the most famous snipers of the entire Canadian Corps, held a divisional sniping record of 115 fatal shots and was awarded the Military Medal and bar for his courage under fire. Francis Pegahmagabow, an Ojibwa from Ontario, was another elite sniper and would be one of the very few Canadians to receive a Military Medal with two bars for his repeated heroic acts during the conflict.

Edith Anderson Monture, a young woman from the Six Nations Grand River Reserve in Ontario, served in a different way. In 1917, this nurse who had been working in the United States went overseas to help the sick and wounded in an American military hospital in France. She later spoke of the destruction she had witnessed:

*"We would walk right over to where there had been fighting. It was a terrible sight—buildings in rubble, trees burnt, spent shells all over the place, whole towns blown up."*

### THE SECOND WORLD WAR

When the Second World War erupted in September 1939, many Indigenous people again answered the call of duty and joined the military. By March 1940, more than 100 of them had volunteered and by the end of the conflict in 1945, over 3,000 First Nations members, as well as an unknown number of Métis,

Inuit and other Indigenous recruits, had served in uniform. While some did see action with the Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Canadian Air Force, most would serve in the Canadian Army.

While Indigenous soldiers again served as snipers and scouts, as they had during the First World War, they also took on interesting new roles during this conflict. One unique example was being a “code talker.” Men like Charles Checker Tompkins of Alberta translated sensitive radio messages into Cree so they could not be understood if they were intercepted by the enemy. Another Cree-speaking “code talker” would then translate the received messages back into English so they could be understood by the intended recipients.

Indigenous service members would receive numerous decorations for bravery during the war. Willard Bolduc, an Ojibwa airman from Ontario, earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for his brave actions as an air gunner during bombing raids over occupied Europe. Huron Brant, a Mohawk from Ontario, earned the Military Medal for his courage while fighting in Sicily.

Indigenous people also contributed to the war effort on the home front. They donated large amounts of 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 to acknowledge their great contributions.

## THE KOREAN WAR

The Korean War erupted in 1950 and several hundred Indigenous people would serve Canada in uniform during the conflict. Many of them had seen action in the Second World War which had only come to an end five years earlier. This return to service in Korea would see some of these brave individuals expanding on their previous duties in new ways.

Tommy Prince, an Ojibwa from Manitoba, served with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in Korea. He would draw upon his extensive infantry experience in the Second World War with missions like a “snatch patrol” raid. Prince was second-in-command of a rifle platoon and led a group of men into an enemy camp where they captured two machine guns. He also took part in the bitter Battle of Kapyong in April 1951 which saw his battalion subsequently awarded the United States Presidential Unit Citation for its distinguished service—a rare honour for a non-American force.

## POST-WAR YEARS

Indigenous men and women have continued to proudly serve in uniform in the post-war years, as well. Like so many of those who have pursued a life in the military, they have been deployed wherever they have been needed—from NATO duties in Europe during the Cold War to service with United Nations and other multinational peace support operations in dozens of countries around the world. In more recent years, many Indigenous Canadian Armed Forces members saw hazardous duty in Afghanistan during our country's 2001-2014 military efforts in that war-torn land.



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Closer to home, Indigenous military personnel have filled a wide variety of roles, including serving with the Canadian Rangers. This group of army reservists is active predominantly in the North, as well as on remote stretches of our east and west coasts. The Rangers use their intimate knowledge of the land there to help maintain a national military presence in these difficult-to-reach areas, monitoring the coastlines and assisting in local rescue operations.

## LEGACY

The story of Indigenous service in the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War and later Canadian Armed Forces efforts is a proud one. While exact numbers are elusive, it has been estimated that as many as 12,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit people served in the great conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with at least 500 of them sadly losing their lives.

This rich heritage has been recognized in many ways. The names given to several Royal Canadian Navy warships over the years, like HMCS *Iroquois*, *Cayuga* and *Huron*, are just one indication of our country's lasting respect for the contributions of Indigenous peoples. This long tradition of military service is also commemorated with the striking National Aboriginal

Veterans Monument in Ottawa. This deeply symbolic memorial features a large bronze eagle at its top, with four men and women from different Indigenous groups from across Canada immediately below. A wolf, bear, bison and caribou—powerful animals that represent “spiritual guides” which have long been seen by Indigenous cultures as important to military success—look out from each corner. Remembrance ceremonies are held at this special monument, including on Indigenous Veterans Day which is observed each year on November 8.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about the role played by Indigenous people in our country's military efforts over the years, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call 1-866-522-2122 toll free.

*This publication is available upon request in alternate formats.*

