



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

## ABORIGINAL VETERANS

Aboriginal Canadians have demonstrated time and again their great service and sacrifice for our country through their participation in Canada's military, particularly during times of conflict. Although past treaties with the government often meant they were not compelled to serve, many felt it was their duty to do so. While a lack of official records means that exact statistics are often hard to determine, Aboriginal men and women have served in Canada's military in impressive numbers. To do so, they have often had to overcome challenges such as cultural differences, learning a new language and even travelling great distances just to enlist.

### THE FIRST WORLD WAR

On August 4, 1914, Canada, as a member of the British Empire, went to war against Germany. It would be more than four years of terrible loss of life before the 'Great War' was over. More than 4,000 Aboriginal Canadians would volunteer for service.

The Aboriginal response was remarkable. In some areas one in three able-bodied men would enlist. Some communities (such as the Head of the Lake Band in British Columbia) saw every man between 20 and 35 years of age volunteer, as well as many women volunteer for the medical corps. Some Aboriginal Canadians volunteered because they were looking for a change while others volunteered because of tradition — in the past they had fought on the side of the British and felt it should be no different in this conflict.

The talents which they acquired through their life experiences proved valuable to the military. Many of the men had great patience, stealth and marksmanship

— skills honed with their traditional hunting lifestyles. These talents made them valuable assets to the Canadian Army as snipers (sharpshooters who used their rifles with deadly precision) and as reconnaissance scouts (soldiers who would slip behind enemy lines to report on enemy positions and defences). For their accomplishments, Aboriginal soldiers were decorated with at least 50 medals, including the prestigious Military Medal. Henry Louis Norwest, one of the most famous Canadian snipers during the war, held a division sniping record of 115 fatal shots and was awarded the Military Medal for the bravery and skill he demonstrated during the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917.

### THE SECOND WORLD WAR

On September 10, 1939, Canadians found themselves in conflict again as our country declared war on Germany and entered the Second World War. Once again, Canada's Aboriginal men and women answered the call of duty. By March 1940, more than 100 had volunteered and by the end of the war in 1945, more than 3,000 status Indians, as well as an unknown number of Inuit, Métis and First Nations peoples had enlisted.

One interesting role some Aboriginal Canadians would play in this conflict would be as "code talkers." Soldiers like Alberta's Charles Checker Tompkins would translate sensitive messages into Cree so the enemy could not understand any intercepted transmissions. Once the message was received by another Cree-speaking "code talker," it would be translated back into English so it could be understood by the recipients.



The Aboriginal men and women who contributed to Canada's war effort were recognized in various ways, both individually and as communities. At home, along with their financial donations, they contributed clothing, food and portions of their reserve lands to create airports, rifle ranges and defence posts. First Nations communities in Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia received a decoration of the British Empire Medal for their various contributions. As well, individuals received awards in recognition of their great service, people like Flying Officer Willard John Bolduc who received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions as an air gunner during a series of bombing attacks in 1943.

## THE KOREAN WAR

Less than five years after the end of the Second World War, Canada would enter the Korean War on June 25, 1950, and several hundred Aboriginal Canadians would participate in this conflict as well. Many of those who enlisted had taken part in the Second World War, and service in Korea would see them expanding on their previous duties.

Sergeant Tommy Prince drew upon his extensive previous infantry experience with missions like a "snatch patrol" raid of an enemy camp in Korea. Prince was second-in-command of a rifle platoon of eight men which entered an enemy camp and captured two machine guns. As well, he was a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry which was awarded the United States Presidential Unit Citation for distinguished service in the Kapyong Valley.

## THE NORTH AND ELSEWHERE

Aboriginal Canadian men and women have continued to serve in the Armed Forces since the end of the Korean War, and like all those who have made the military their career, they have been deployed wherever they may have been needed – in NATO, as peacekeepers, and, occasionally, as peacemakers. At home, meanwhile, many are members of the Canadian Rangers, active predominantly in northern Canada. The Rangers are members of the Canadian Forces Reserve, and use their knowledge of the North to maintain a national military presence in those remote areas, monitoring the coastlines and assisting in rescue operations.

## ABORIGINAL WOMEN

Aboriginal women have also served in Canada's military over the years. An example of this kind of service was that of Edith Anderson Monture, from the Six Nations Grand River Reserve in southern Ontario. In 1917, the 27 year-old nurse left her job as an elementary school nurse to go overseas and help the sick and wounded in an American military hospital in France. The front line was often not far away for Monture and, after returning home to Canada, she would speak 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."*



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## THE LEGACY

The story of Aboriginal involvement in the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War and the Canadian Forces during peacetime is a proud one. It is estimated that more than 7,000 served in the great conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with at least 500 giving their lives. In addition, Aboriginal communities made substantial financial donations, as well as contributing clothing, food and land to the Canadian war effort. The names of several of our warships, like the HMCS *Iroquois*, HMCS *Micmac* and HMCS *Huron* (all of which participated in the Korean War) are an indication of our country's esteem for the proud heritage of Aboriginal Canadians.

Aboriginal Canadian Veterans have a monument in Ottawa commemorating their military service. The *National Aboriginal Veterans Monument* is a striking sculpture which incorporates images of four 'spiritual guides' seen as being important to military success - the wolf, the bear, the bison and the caribou. The qualities these spiritual guides represent were keys to these brave Aboriginal Canadians' success as snipers, scouts and soldiers.

## 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 Aboriginal-Canadians' role in our country's military efforts over the years, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at [www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca) or call 1-866-522-2122 toll free.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

You can find the Aboriginal-Canadian Veterans Web feature on our Web site. Select "Canada Remembers" then click on "Anniversaries and Features."

- Canadian Forces Rangers  
[www.army.forces.gc.ca/land-terre/cr-rc/index-eng.asp](http://www.army.forces.gc.ca/land-terre/cr-rc/index-eng.asp)
- Assembly of First Nations  
[www.afn.ca](http://www.afn.ca)

Visit the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Kids' Stop Web site at [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks). Go to "Recommended Reads", select "Information sheets" then click on "Aboriginal Veterans."

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

