

Why some Indigenous Peoples chose to go to War for Canada

Nov. 8, 1994, the Canadian government established the National Indigenous Veterans day to honor the bravery, sacrifices and contributions thousands of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people who served in the world wars, the Korean War and later conflicts. This memorial was unveiled in 2001 on National Aboriginal Day.



National Indigenous veterans
Memorial. Indigenous and Northern
Affairs Canada. Date taken: August 7,
2008.

Some Reasons Indigenous Peoples served in War

For many of the more than 7000 Indigenous peoples in Canada who served in the First and Second World Wars and the Korean conflict, enlisting in the military was a chance to escape colonial control and reclaim their warrior heritage.

Each Indigenous group has their own unique stories of the war and notable interactions with local officials. Individuals had their own reasons for signing up. Pratt stated that the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and militia were uncertain about whether they were actively going to look for Indigenous soldiers for the Great War initially, but the official policy was that they wouldn't be taking men to fight conflicts.

- Albert Mountain Horse of the Kainai (Blood) First Nation, who is regarded as one of the earliest First Nations peoples to enlist, managed to sign up and head overseas despite the government's discouragement. Albert did pass away from his injuries in 1915.
- John Campbell, an Indigenous man lived in the northern territories. In order to fight for Canada, he hiked a forest trail and canoed for days. He was able to purchase a ticket for a steamboat heading to Vancouver, where John enlisted in the Army. He travelled almost 5000 miles just so he could join the Army. That's about the distance from Vancouver to the City of Montreal.



Mike Mountain Horse (bottom row, right) poses with fellow Blood Tribe recruits in the 191st Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force at Fort Macleod, Alberta, in 1916. In speaking engagements, Mountain Horse mentioned that he enlisted in the First World War to avenge the death of his brother

Albert. (Photo: Glenbow Archives, NA-2164-1)

Taryn's Great Grandpa Peter

- Taryn's Great Grandpa, Peter Woods, was a Tsimshian man and a member of Lax'Kwalaams Band which is located on the Northwest coast of BC. He was always sharing jokes, tricks, laughs and lots of stories.
- He joined the Canadian Merchant Navy during World War 2, even though he had no idea how to swim.
- Great Grandpa Peter was recognized as being an Indigenous man who had status, but for him to join the Navy, he was forced by the Canadian government to give up that status. He also would not be recognized as a Canadian citizen. These rules were all put into place by the Canadian government.
- Taryn's Grandpa still chose to join the Navy regardless of this massive loss of identity and rights. He couldn't get his First Nations Status back until the 1980's (40 years later), and he wasn't allowed to vote in Canada until the 1960's. This was a law that applied to all Indigenous people.

Regardless of these laws, Taryn's Grandpa still was a proud veteran and each year he is honored and remembered for his service.



Challenges and Triumph

- First people's troops encountered a double cultural barrier in the military. They had to face the racial preconception that marked the contemporary non-Indigenous world, and a military ranking that worked almost exclusively in English, which was a language many Indigenous recruits didn't speak. The determined volunteers overcame many challenges like learning a new language and adapting to cultural differences and travelling great distances from their remote communities.
- In some areas one-in-three able bodied men would volunteer, some communities like the Head of Lake Band in B.C saw every man between the ages of 20 and 35 years enlist. The first world war comes along 1914 to 1918, and more than 4000 indigenous people served in uniform.
- At the start of the conflict, indigenous people didn't necessarily understand what they were going into, but they get to go to war. Interviews with Veterans provide evidence to suggest some men enlisted to "escape the boredom of reserve life," or wanted to uphold a tradition that had seen their ancestors fighting alongside the British in earlier conflicts like the war of 1812.
- Records and memories suggest that most of the units eventually embraced Aboriginal soldiers , even providing a "more welcoming or progressive environment than other areas of contemporary society."
- After the wars, Indigenous Veterans faced unequal access to benefits and programs provided to help veterans re-establish themselves to civilian life. First Nations military participation meagre reward given for their sacrifices in peacetime raised some questions to why Indigenous boriginal peoples would volunteer and fight for a country that oppressed and mistreated them ?

Problems Arise

- Researcher Will Pratt, who studies how WW1 affected the 29 men from Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta who served in the conflict. The work detailed his difficult efforts to disentangle them from the national narrative.
- Going to war was one way of gaining warrior status in their communities. Once Indigenous peoples were moved onto reserves, most ways for a man to gain his status were eliminated. Intertribal warfare wasn't allowed, horse riding became a crime, so the aboriginal peoples didn't have the outlets.
- More than 4000 members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force were of Aboriginal descent. This is astonishing given the limited civil rights accorded Canada's first peoples in the early 20th century.
- While the Army experimented with segregating all Indigenous units in WW1, overwhelmingly First Nations youth enlisted and served as individuals integrated into regular military units. During WW1, racial barriers combined with strict health and education requirements to bar First Nations from the Navy or Air Force, funneling most into the army.
- First Nations Leaders across Canada, protesting the application of the Military Service Act of 1917 to their people. In response, the government exempted Status Aboriginal people from overseas combative services.
- When Ottawa sent mandatory drafts overseas, only a few First Nations who, during treaty negotiations, were explicitly promised "The Queen would not ask her "Indian children" to fight for her unless they wished," were exempted.

More contributions from Indigenous communities

An estimated 800 men and women from First Nations in Saskatchewan served during both world wars and the Korean conflict. Though reliable statistics are not available, the official records doesn't list more than 100 status Indigenous peoples from Saskatchewan served, including over half of the eligible adult males on the Cote Reserve.

At home, Saskatchewan's indigenous communities also donated \$17,257.90 in support of the war effort, almost double that of any other province. Alone the File Hills community raised \$8,562 for Red Cross, while Indigenous women formed Red Cross societies. By the end, Indigenous peoples donated \$67,000 to war relief funds as well as generously giving land as defense posts, airports and rifle ranges

Through out the wars, the department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada received thousands of letters from the battle front applauding Indigenous marksmen and scouts.

Not just Indigenous, Metis and Inuit men served, but so did the woman. They contributed their valuable skills, and at home they helped raise money and knitted for soldiers or worked in factories as well overseas many woman were nurses.

First nations troops left a remarkable record of wartime accomplishments. Several men were commissioned as officers, and many served as battle hardened platoon leaders and combat instructors.



J.P. Flammond and James G. Poitras served in the Second World War.





The Importance of the Indigenous language during the war

Indigenous language in the wars played a unique part and crucial role.

Charles Checker Tomkins, from Grouard , Alberta, was a Cree veteran of WW2. He and other Cree soldiers worked as code-talkers. As a member, Charles was tasked with translating military messages into Cree before being sent to battlefields in Europe. Often the messages were from military officials to provide orders and instruction for troop movement, supply lines and other specifics. After being received, another translation from English to Cree using an Indigenous code-talker and given back to officials. There are two types of code-talkers

1. Consisting of 26 Navajo terms that stood for individual English letters used to spell out words, ex- the Navajo word for “Ant” is “wo-la-chee” or the letter A
2. Contains words that directly translate from English into Navajo, and the code talkers also developed a dictionary of a then 211 terms, and now 411 terms for military words and names, ex- there was no Navajo word for submarine, so they used the term “besh-lo”, which translates to “iron-fish”

More On Charles Checker Tomkins...

- Charles's family was unaware of his role as a code talker until well after the war. His brother Jimmy only learned about his brother's service in 1992, after the two had watched *Windtalkers* — a film about Navajo code talkers in the American military. The rest of Charles's family learned of his involvement in 2003, just two months before he died at age 85, when two representatives from the Smithsonian Institution came to [Calgary](#) to interview him about the [Cree code talkers](#) program. Sworn to secrecy during the war, Charles only revealed the truth about his service towards the end of his life. Some code talkers died without ever having told family and friends of their work.
- Little documentation about the efforts of code talkers exists in Canada. Related documents remained highly classified until the Canadian government released them in 1963. Even then, information about code talkers from Canada — such as, for example, how many contributed to the Allied effort during the [Second World War](#) — remains sparse, given the fact that these code talkers served with the American military. Moreover, American books and films on code talkers tend to primarily highlight their Navajo counterparts.



Thank you to all our Indigenous, Inuit and Metis Veterans

- Fighting in a war is not easy or pleasant. It can be lonely and extremely dangerous. Over 12,000 Indigenous people are estimated to have volunteered in all three wars, including 7,000 First Nations members, and approximately 300- 500 died during these conflicts. Indigenous veterans made great sacrifices to serve in Canada's war efforts both overseas and at home. Many had to overcome major challenges to serve in war such as;

Learning to speak and write a new language

Adjusting to new cultures

Being separated from your family and community.

At least 50 men were decorated for bravery on the battlefield while snipping and scouting. Many Indigenous troops acquired a near legendary status as scouts and snipers, drawing on prewar hunting skills and wilderness experience.

1. The most decorated- Corporal Francis Pegahmaghow, an Ojibwa man from the Parry Island Band near Parry sound, Ontario, received the Military Medal and two bars for his bravery and effectiveness as a sniper.
2. Former rodeo performer, Metis Henry Norwest, was credited with 115 kills before his death
3. Alexander Smith Jr. and his brother Charles, the sons of Six Nations Cayuga Chief Alexander G Smith. Were both awarded the military cross

*We
Remember...*

*(art created by Andy
Everson of K'ómoks First
Nation)*



Resources

- <https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2019/11/why-some-indigenous-people-chose-to-go-to-war-for-canada.html>

<https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/people/in-uniform/first-nations-soldiers/> (This is WW One)

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

<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-war-heroes-good-men>

<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/14-facts-you-may-not-know-about-contributions-of-indigenous-veterans>

<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/canadian-indigenous-code-talkers-remain-unacknowledged>

- [Charles Tomkins | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

<https://opentextbc.ca/postconfederation/chapter/6-12-status-indians-and-military-service-in-the-world-wars/>

https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/indigenous_peoples_and_the_world_wars.php#content (click on link that says Skip to main content)

- [The road to recognition has been long and hard for Indigenous veterans - The Globe and Mail](#)
- [National Aboriginal Veterans Monument - Canada.ca](#)