

Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War

Article by R. Scott Sheffield

Updated by David Joseph Gallant

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In 1939, Canada found itself at war for the second time in a generation. As in the First World War (1914-18), thousands of Indigenous soldiers and nurses volunteered for the war effort at home and abroad, serving with distinction in the Canadian army, navy, and air force. At least 4,250 First Nations soldiers enlisted in 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.

Tommy and Morris Prince

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Sergeant Tommy Prince (R), M.M., 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, with his brother, Private Morris Prince, at an investiture at Buckingham Palace. February 12th, 1945.

(courtesy Christopher J. Woods / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-142289)

Second World War, 1939-45

In 1939, Canada declared war and began building militarily and economically for the Allied cause (see Second World War). Once again, as in 1914 (see Indigenous Peoples and the First World War), Indigenous youth volunteered in the thousands, more still were conscripted, and communities contributed to the national war effort. Arguably, the scale and diversity of Indigenous engagement in the war effort was greater in this conflict, as was the breadth and determination of opposition to conscription. As in the First World War, more is known of Status Indians' service and experiences, as most Métis were not recorded, and few Inuit served. Indian Affairs (see Federal Departments of Indigenous and Northern Affairs) figures for First Nations enlistments note 3,090, but these figures were woefully incomplete. The numbers for Status Indians were closer to 4,250; the figures for other Indigenous groups are difficult to pinpoint but may have totalled a few thousand. As in the First World War, Indigenous military servicemen and women generally experienced respect, acceptance and promotion in the forces. Brigadier Oliver Martin, a Mohawk from the Six Nations Grand River reserve, was the highest-ranking Indigenous officer of the war.

Indigenous Women's Service

Some First Nations and Métis women are known to have enlisted with the women's auxiliary services of the Army (CWAC), RCN (WRCNS, "Wrens") and RCAF (RCAF-WD), filling many different clerical, first aid and mechanical roles, both in Canada and overseas. In all, 72 Status Indian women are known to have served overseas. They experienced many parallels with other servicewomen in the form of pervasive sexism in the forces and a nasty "whisper" campaign in the press that painted women in uniform as promiscuous. Indigenous women saw relatively little in the form of racial prejudice in women's auxiliaries, as Métis Dorothy Asquith recalled, "[e]verybody was so involved in what was happening with the war nobody was involved in such pettiness."

Home Front

Indigenous people engaged widely and often enthusiastically in the war effort: donating huge sums to humanitarian and patriotic causes; participating in drives to collect scrap metal, rubber, bones (even from old buffalo jumps); conducting public and ceremonial expressions of support and loyalty; and working in war industries and production in unprecedented numbers. Labour shortages across the country provided more work opportunities, at higher wages, than Indigenous people had ever seen. It was, oddly, the best of times financially for many families.

While collaboration generally characterised Indigenous experience in the Second World War, not all were enthusiastic about joining the cause. Even amongst those supportive, their willingness to contribute was neither unlimited nor unconditional. Wartime taxation and lingering prewar grievances plagued Indigenous-government relations, but conscription inspired more resistance than any other issue. Across the country, and throughout the war, Indigenous communities protested conscription. Young men ignored their call to report for medical examination and avoided authorities (sometimes with support from community elders), and one violent riot broke out when the RCMP tried to arrest draft evaders from the Kahnawake Reserve south of Montréal.

Veterans

Indigenous service personnel returning to Canada in 1945-46 looked forward to the generous and diverse benefits provided by a grateful nation, benefits that were theoretically available to all veterans equally. In practice, however, Status Indians' access to advising, application forms and all programs was not equal, as Indian Affairs handled most of their case files in ways that disadvantaged many veterans. Métis veterans similarly have felt they were ignored and largely shut

out of benefits. Whether or not they received benefits, Indigenous veterans faced a steeper climb to successfully re-establishing themselves in civilian life than their non-Indigenous comrades.

Coming home after years away at war was a happy memory, but many veterans subsequently struggled to settle back into normal life. Large numbers still carried physical and psychological scars; some turned to alcohol to cope or could not remain in one place, or job, for long. Mobility was common, especially for Métis veterans. Undoubtedly, veterans contributed to rapid Indigenous urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s. They also contributed to an increase in Indigenous political organization, especially at the regional and provincial levels, in the post-war period (see Indigenous Political Organization and Activism). However, many found the return to societal racism and marginalization difficult after the acceptance they experienced in uniform. Perhaps this explains anecdotal reports suggesting that many Indigenous veterans re-enlisted for service in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. Amongst them was the most decorated Indigenous soldier of the Second World War, Ojibwe Sergeant Thomas Prince, who did two tours in Korea.

Legacy and Memory

Unlike during the First World War, Canadians acknowledged Indigenous participation during the Second World War. As the country looked to create a new order in the aftermath of the war, many Canadians suddenly 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 a Parliamentary review in 1946 and major amendments to the Indian Act in 1951 (though voting rights were not granted at the federal level until 1960; see Indigenous Suffrage). Thereafter, Indigenous veterans were largely forgotten until they began to organize and campaign for recognition of their sacrifices and restitution for grievances over veterans benefits from the 1970s to the 2000s. Perseverance paid off, with a consensus report accepted by both First Nations veterans groups and the government in 2001, followed by an offer of a public apology and offer of compensation in 2003. Métis veterans' grievances have not received the same hearing. In recent years, Indigenous veterans have gained much greater recognition in local and national acts of remembrance, including Aboriginal Veterans Day on 8 November (inaugurated by Winnipeg's city council in 1994) and a National Aboriginal Veterans Monument in Ottawa (unveiled in 2001). They are forgotten warriors no longer.

Second World War Inuit First World War Indigenous Peoples in Canada First Nations Métis

Further Reading

Tim Cook, *The Necessary War: Canadians Fighting the Second World War 1939-1943, Volume One* (2014).

Tim Cook, *Fight to the Finish: Canadians in the Second World War 1944-1945, Volume Two*(2015).

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, et al., *A Commemorative History of Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian Military* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2010).

Grace Poulin, *Invisible Women: World War II Aboriginal Servicemen in Canada*(Thunder Bay: Ontario Native Women's Association, 2007).

R. Scott Sheffield, "Fighting a White Man's War? First Nations Participation in the Canadian War Effort, 1939-45," in *Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp*, ed. by Geoffrey Hayes, Mike Bechthold and Matt Symes (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012) and *A Search for Equity: A Study of the Treatment Accorded to First Nations Veterans and Dependents of the Second World War and the Korean Conflict. The Final Report of the National Round Table on First Nations Veterans' Issues* (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations, May 2001).

Timothy C. Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War*(Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

External Links

Veterans Affairs Canada *Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields* (Remembrance Series) Learn more about Indigenous peoples in the world wars

First Nations Drum Kelly Many Guns reports, "Indigenous Soldier Database Lists Over 150,000 Names"

Canadian Army (Government of Canada) Steven Fouchard (Army Public Affairs) reports, "Indigenous war stories 'must be told,' says Quebec historian"

CBC News Jessica Deer reports, "Meet the amateur historian who created one of the largest databases of Indigenous soldiers"

THE CANADIAN FORCES Learn about Indigenous peoples in the Canadian military during the First and Second World Wars

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM Explore an online exhibit about First Nations soldiers of the First World War

Veterans Affairs Canada Learn more about Indigenous Peoples during the two world wars

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada Read more about Indigenous contributions during the First World War