

**National Aboriginal Day
Celebrating Aboriginal Veterans**

**HON. Tom Christensen
Minister of Aboriginal Relations
and Reconciliation**

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Thank you, Ida.

Good afternoon ladies and gentleman. It is an honour to be here today in my capacity of Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation.

I am privileged to be joining all of you to celebrate National Aboriginal Day.

I also bring greetings from Premier Gordon Campbell, he sends his sincere regrets that he was unable to join us today.

Today also marks a very special day as we recognize the achievements of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit veterans during the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, the first Gulf War and United Nations peacekeeping roles and soldiers presently deployed to places including Afghanistan.

I'd like to recognize members of the various veterans' organizations attending today.

Vancouver Island Aboriginal Veterans Association, Lower Mainland Aboriginal Veterans Association and the B.C. Branch Métis Veterans Association.

I would also like to acknowledge Ed John and members of the First Nations Summit, Assembly of First Nations, Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, Métis Provincial Council, MLA's (TBC) who join us today. Thank you for being here.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to recognize the families of the Aboriginal veterans who have travelled here today.

Family plays a very important role in the life of a veteran or soldier who is often separated from his or her loved ones for months and years at a time.

Without the support of family and community, our soldiers and veterans could not do the valuable work that they do on behalf of all Canadians. Thank you for joining us.

Today we live in a free society where we cherish our democracy, our freedoms and the culture that defines who we all are as Canadians.

This year, 2005, has been declared the Year of the Veteran in Canada.

Today, on National Aboriginal Day, Aboriginal veterans are being celebrated in their communities all across the nation.

Earlier this year celebrations in Europe marked the accomplishments of the Allied Forces in the Second World War.

The images of Canadians at 60th anniversary VE Day celebrations made us all very proud.

It affirmed the place that Canadian soldiers hold in past and recent history and it reconfirmed our country's contributions to fighting for, maintaining and working towards keeping peace in the world.

And this wouldn't be possible without the contributions of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit veterans here today.

You have volunteered and defended our country during times of war.

One in three: That was the proportion of able-bodied Canadian Aboriginal men, of age to serve, who enlisted during the First World War.

Many came from isolated areas of the country, and more than four-thousand Aboriginal Canadians left their homes and families to help fight an international war that raged in European battlefields.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit again volunteered to serve in the Second World War to protect this great land. And many have lost their lives.

At least as many Aboriginals volunteered to fight again though the true number may never been known since many were registered with little concern for their Aboriginal heritage.

Moreover, research indicates that in both of these wars proportionally more Aboriginal Canadians volunteered for military service in than the rest of the Canadian population at large.

And by the time the Korean War began in 1950, your contribution and the contribution of all Aboriginal people was recognized by naming six of the Canadian ships to serve in Korea after First Nations including HMCS Nootka and HMCS Haida.

This is no small achievement and these names are testimony to the respect you and other Aboriginal veterans have earned within the Canadian military establishment.

What compelled these individuals to take arms in defence of our nation?

The answers are no doubt as varied as the people involved. But all share a common desire to protect our land.

In spite of the challenges faced by Aboriginals here in Canada, they've stood proud in defence of this nation.

Thankfully, we have come a long way as a nation and as a province. While we can't undo the injustices of the past, we are moving forward and taking measures to reconcile with and recognize the unique and distinct culture that Aboriginal peoples have and hold in our society.

When this government took office we committed to forging a new relationship with First Nations.

A relationship that will be earned through reconciliation and mutual respect and it will be built with bold new approaches that will materially improve the quality of life for Aboriginals around B.C. That work continues.

I can tell you today that great strides are being made on forging this relationship with First Nations involving Aboriginal leaders that represent Aboriginal peoples from across the province.

Through this new relationship a commitment of reconciliation of Aboriginal and Crown titles and jurisdictions is being made.

We know that by working together we can improve the quality of life for Aboriginal people – and for all British Columbians – so our communities can become stronger and more sustainable.

Aboriginal veterans have been absolutely unique, insofar as their ongoing struggle to assert their rights at home, they have nevertheless been at the very forefront in fulfilling abroad what is arguably the single most onerous and profound obligation of citizenship – bearing arms against the nation's enemies.

Today, as we gather to celebrate National Aboriginal Day, it's very important to take the time to reflect upon the valuable contributions that all of you have made to give Canadians the freedoms we all enjoy across our wonderful nation. You have set an example for all – Aboriginal and non-aboriginal – to know of what it means to be a true Canadian.

I thank and applaud you.

And I urge all British Columbians to take a moment today to think about the valuable contribution that Aboriginals make to our province – yesterday, today and tomorrow.