

Aboriginal Veterans: Stories of Honour and Heroism

Imagine yourself having lived in a small
community all your life.

Now, imagine that the year is 1914.



Picture yourself packing up your belongings, saying goodbye to your friends and family, and leaving your home on foot to reach a destination 3,000 miles away. You then hike alone for days and days along a forest trail until you reach a familiar river. You take a short rest, and then climb into a borrowed canoe along with your gear. You canoe for days, even weeks, sleeping in make-shift shelters along the riverbank, and fishing and hunting for food between long hours of rigorous paddling. Finally, you come to a wide opening in the river where a large steamboat awaits to depart for Vancouver. You purchase a ticket, and step aboard, heaving a huge sigh of relief. At the same time, you swallow hard, and feel a mix of fear and anticipation jabbering in your stomach. You know that while the end of this journey is near, it is also just the beginning of an entirely new one. The new journey will be both exciting and very, very dangerous. This is because once you reach Vancouver, you will enlist in the army to fight for Canada and the Allied Nations in the First World War.

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This is the true life story of how John Campbell began his service in the First World War. He was one of more than 4,000 Aboriginal people in Canada who left their homes and their families to help fight in the First World War, an international war that blazed in battlefields throughout Europe. Aboriginal people made important contributions to the First World War (1914-1918), the Second World War (1939-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953).

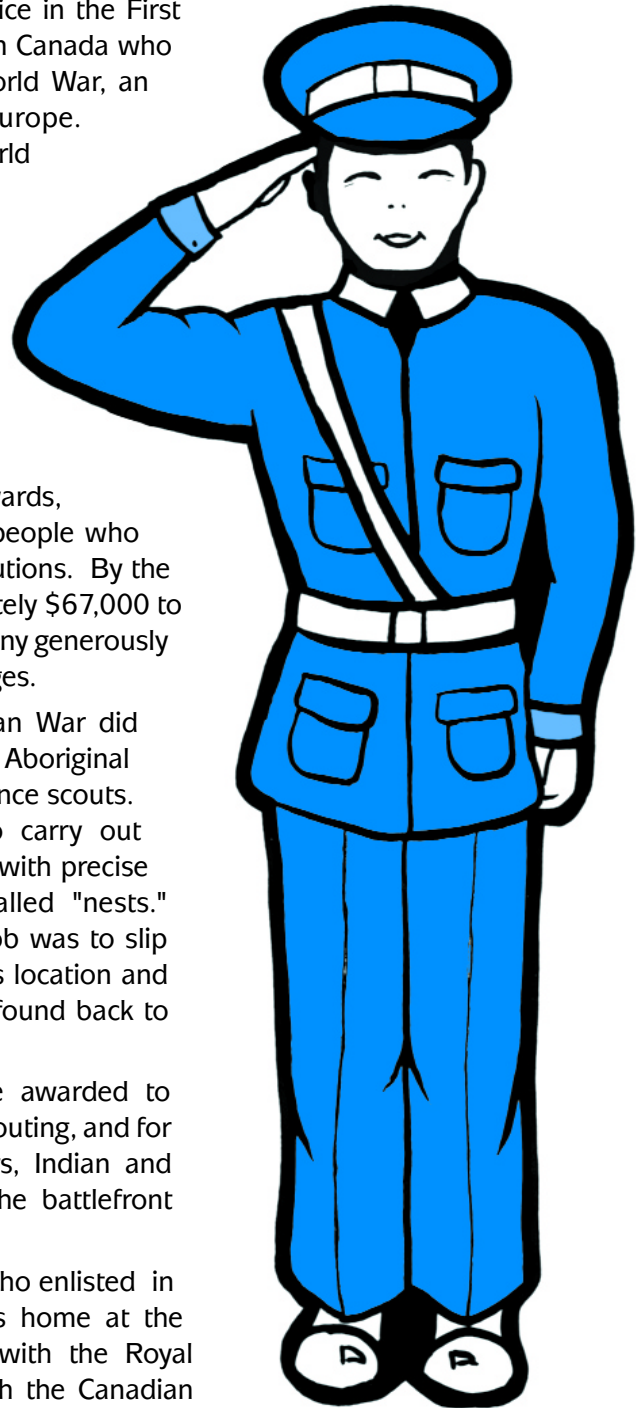
Aboriginal veterans have many reasons to be proud of their military accomplishments. More than 7,000 First Nations people served in all three wars and a number of Inuit and Métis also participated. One Aboriginal veterans' group estimates that more than 12,000 Aboriginal people served altogether in the three wars.

Many Aboriginal soldiers were decorated with honours and awards, and were highly praised for their skill and bravery. Aboriginal people who stayed in Canada during the wars also made meaningful contributions. By the end of the two world wars, First Nations had donated approximately \$67,000 to war relief funds like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, and many generously gave reserve land for use as defence posts, airports and rifle ranges.

Most Canadians who served in the world wars and the Korean War did service in the infantry—the ground troops. This was the same for Aboriginal people. Many Aboriginal soldiers became snipers or reconnaissance scouts. They used their traditional hunting and military expertise to carry out dangerous and skilful tasks. Snipers were required to use guns with precise aim. They shot at enemy targets from hidden positions called "nests." Reconnaissance scouts had to be speedy and discrete. Their job was to slip behind the front lines before an attack to determine the enemy's location and their weapon power, then secretly relay the information they'd found back to their side of the fighting lines.

During the First World War alone, at least 50 medals were awarded to Aboriginal people in Canada for their bravery while sniping and scouting, and for performing other daring and heroic acts. Throughout the wars, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada received thousands of letters from the battlefield applauding Aboriginal marksmen and scouts.

One of these outstanding soldiers was Thomas George Prince, who enlisted in the Second World War in 1940 at the age of 24. He left his home at the Brokenhead First Nation in Scanterbury, Manitoba to work with the Royal Canadian Engineers. By 1942, he was working in Europe with the Canadian Special Service Battalion, which later became the 1st Special Service Force as a combined Canadian/American unit that specialized in scouting and launching surprise attacks on enemy installations.



On February 8, 1944, as a member of the "Devil's Brigade," Reconnaissance Sergeant Prince was spying on enemy activities in an old abandoned farmhouse near Littoria, Italy. As he watched German troops from inside the house, his communication lines were severed, leaving him without a way to send messages to his fellow soldiers. Calmly, he changed into civilian clothing so that he looked like a regular farmer (not a soldier), grabbed a hoe and, right before enemy eyes, acted like a farmer weeding his crops. He slowly approached the spot where his communication line was damaged and, pretending to tie his shoelaces, quickly re-attached the broken wires. He then slowly got back to the farmhouse. His quick thinking and courage in this situation enabled Prince to continue reporting on enemy activity and aid his unit in disassembling many enemy positions.

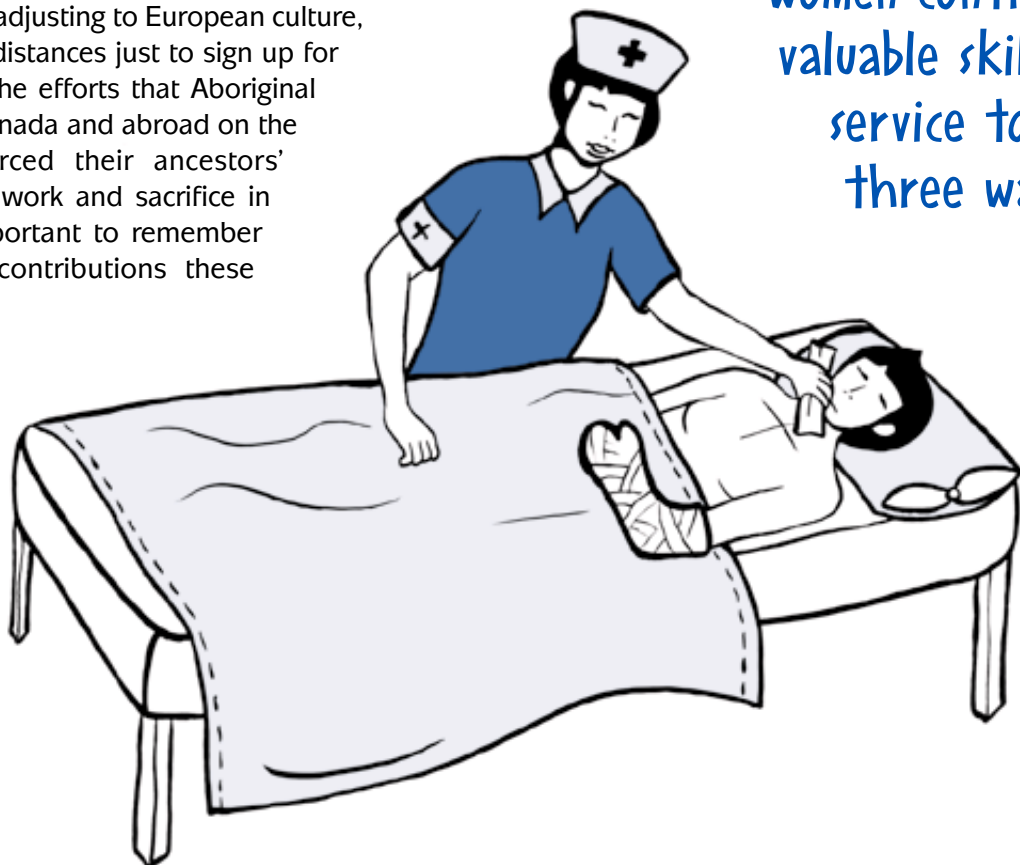
Aboriginal languages played a unique and crucial role in the wars. Charles Checker Tompkins from Grouard, Alberta, was a Cree veteran in the Second World War. He and other Cree soldiers worked as "code-talkers." As a member of this special group, his job was to translate military messages into Cree before they were sent out through European battlefields. Often messages came from military officials requesting certain types of weapons for planned attacks, and it was vital that they remained secret from enemy ears. After the coded messages had been received at their proper destination, they were translated back into English from Cree by another Aboriginal "code-talker" and given to military officials to read.

Aboriginal women also contributed valuable skills and service to all three wars. Edith Anderson Monture served as a nurse overseas in the First World War. In 1917, at the age of 27, she left the Six Nations Reserve to work at an American hospital base in Vittel, France. She spent most of her time at the hospital caring for soldiers who had been wounded from shooting or poisonous gas. Back in Canada several years later, the then 93-year-old Monture spoke with a reporter about her experiences during the war:

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

Fighting in a war is not easy or pleasant. It can be lonely and is always very dangerous. Approximately 500 Aboriginal veterans died during the First and Second World Wars. Aboriginal veterans made great sacrifices to serve in Canada's war efforts, both overseas and at home. Many of them overcame major challenges to serve in the wars; from learning to speak English and adjusting to European culture, to travelling great distances just to sign up for military service. The efforts that Aboriginal people made in Canada and abroad on the battlefield reinforced their ancestors' traditions of hard work and sacrifice in wartime. It is important to remember the tremendous contributions these veterans made.

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Activity Idea:

Medals are a type of "decoration" or award given to soldiers for admirable work in the military. Many Aboriginal veterans were awarded medals for their bravery and excellence during the world wars and the Korean War. One of these medals was the Military Medal or "MM," which was awarded to several Aboriginal veterans. Another important medal was the Silver Star, an American medal which was awarded to 59 Canadians, including Sergeant Thomas George Prince.

- ☾ If you could design a medal to award to an Aboriginal veteran for their war service, what would it look like?
- ☾ What colour and shape would you give it?
- ☾ What kinds of pictures would you draw on it, if any?
- ☾ Would you write something on it?

In the space below, design your own medal.



This medal is the Military Medal or "MM," which was awarded to several Aboriginal veterans.

Web sites

For more information about Aboriginal veterans:

- @ The Native Veterans Association of Northwestern Ontario:
<http://aboriginalcollections.ic.gc.ca/veterans/home.htm>
- @ Native Veterans:
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/courage/nativeveterans.html>
- @ Veterans Affairs Canada—Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields:
<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/general/sub.cfm?source=history/other/native>

This information is also available through the Internet at www.inac.gc.ca

