

ABORIGINAL CANADIANS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal peoples from every region of Canada served in the armed forces during the Second World War, fighting in every major battle and campaign of the conflict. To serve their country in the armed forces, Aboriginal Canadians had to overcome unique cultural challenges. Their courage, sacrifices and accomplishments are a continuing source of pride to their families, communities, and all Canadians.

- At least 3,000 status (treaty) Indians - including 72 women - enlisted, as well as an unknown number of Inuit, Métis, and other Natives. The actual numbers were no doubt much higher.
- Among just this small number of identified Aboriginal members of the forces, at least 17 decorations for bravery in action were earned.

MANY OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

■ A Veteran Returns

Chief Joe Dreaver of Mistawasis Cree Band in Saskatchewan, served in both world wars. During the First World War, he was a sapper and earned the Military Medal, an award for bravery in the field, in Belgium. When war erupted again, he immediately re-enlisted, leaving his farm and bringing 17 men with him, including three of his sons. At 48, he was too old for overseas service and remained in Canada with the Veterans Guard, watching over prisoners of war in Alberta.

■ An Extraordinary Family Sacrifice

John McLeod, an Ojibwa, served overseas in the First World War and was a member of the Veterans Guard during the Second World War. Six of his sons and one of his daughters enlisted. Two sons gave their lives, and another two were wounded. In 1972, John's wife, Mary, became the first Aboriginal woman to be named Canada's Memorial Cross Mother, placing a wreath at the National War Memorial in Ottawa on Remembrance Day on behalf of all Canadian mothers who had lost children to the war.

■ Bravery in Action

Charles Byce, the son of a Cree woman, joined the Lake Superior Regiment (Motor). He won the Military Medal in the Netherlands and the Distinguished Conduct Medal in the Rhineland Campaign. His citation for the latter was impressive: "His gallant stand, without adequate weapons and with a bare handful of men against hopeless odds will remain, for all time, an outstanding example to all ranks of the Regiment."

■ Prince of The Brigade

Thomas George Prince, an Obijwa from Manitoba, volunteered to be a paratrooper. His unit, the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, joined with an elite American troop from a spearhead of 1,600 men that became known to the Germans as the Devil's Brigade. He earned the Military Medal during a battle in Italy and the Silver Star, an American award for gallantry, for his reconnaissance work in France. These awards were presented to him by King George VI at Buckingham Palace.

Photo: Sgt. Tommy Prince with Military Medal which he received during an investiture at Buckingham Palace - 12 February 1945 / London, England. National Archives of Canada/PA-142287
Some of the medals of Tommy Prince. DND photo.



■ **A Distinguished Career**

Brigadier Oliver Milton Martin, a Mohawk from the Six Nations Grand River Reserve, reached the highest military rank ever held by an aboriginal person. During the First World War, he served in both the army and the air force. During the Second World War, he oversaw the training of hundreds of recruits in Canada. For his 20 years of excellent service, he was awarded the Colonial Auxiliary Forces Officer's Decoration.

■ **A Man of Many Talents**

David Greyeyes, a member of the Muskeg Lake Cree Band in Saskatchewan, served in seven European countries in many difficult military roles, including commanding a mortar platoon in Italy. During the Italian Campaign, he earned the Greek Military Cross (third class) for valour in supporting the Greek Mountain Brigade. In 1977 he was awarded the Order of Canada. His citation reads: "Athlete, soldier, farmer, former Chief of the Muskeg Lake Reserve, Saskatchewan, and ultimately Director of Indian Affairs in the Maritime and Alberta Regions. For long and devoted service to his people, often under difficult circumstances."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

- "We're proud of the word 'volunteer'. Nobody forced us. We were good Canadians – patriots – we fought for our country." - Syd Moore, Second World War veteran
- "In Cree we say 'Kahgee pohn noten took' on Remembrance Day. It means, 'the fighting has ended'." - Irene Plante, veteran's widow
- "The colonel begins to read the 36 names of our fallen. Tears are in his eyes. He falters and hands the paper to the adjutant who calmly folds the paper and puts it in his pocket and quietly says, 'It is not necessary. They were comrades. We remember.'" James Brady, Second World War veteran

THE LEGACY

The brave native men and women who left their homes during the Second World War to contribute to the struggle for peace were true heroes. The extra challenges that they had to face and overcome makes their achievements all the more notable. To learn more about their achievements and sacrifices, please refer to the Veterans Affairs Canada publication "Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields" at www.vac acc.gc.ca or call **1-877-604-8469** toll-free.

