

## Strangers on Common Ground Canadian First Nations' Participation in WWII

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“As far as I’m concerned they [Native soldiers] are forgotten. Not only by the federal and provincial governments but by society as a whole.”

– Fred L’Hirondelle, WWII Native Canadian War Veteran<sup>1</sup>

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the response of Canada’s Aboriginal population to the emerging war effort was surprisingly strong. Against a history of strained relations with the Canadian government, and in many cases Canada’s population, Aboriginal participation in the military was unexpected. By the end of the war, well over 3,000 registered Indians had volunteered for service, along with many non-status, Inuit and Métis participants not included on Indian Affairs’ tallies.<sup>2</sup> These volunteers were active in almost every theatre of the war. Numerous Aboriginal veterans were among the many Canadian soldiers to receive decoration after the war. Native bands have war heroes and the remembrance of these people is a large part of the traditions of many communities. The involvement of Canada’s Aboriginal communities in the war catalyzed a change in social relationships across the country. Having a collective goal for an entire country shifted many racial and political alliances between Native and non-Native populations by introducing a unique sense of patriotism for all Canadians. Canada’s wartime policies, native participation and post-war activism helped to promote many First Nations individuals and communities to

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<sup>1</sup> Fred L’Hirondelle in Loretta Todd, dir., *Forgotten Warriors: The Story of Canada’s Aboriginal War Veterans*, VHS (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Veteran Affairs Canada, “Native Soldiers – Foreign Battlefields,” Government of Canada, [http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/other/native/second\\_response](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/other/native/second_response) (accessed May 28, 2008).

a prominent and unprecedented place in contemporary Canada. The fight for Native veteran reparations, land repatriation and national recognition is a consequence of historical tensions between the Canadian government and Canada's Aboriginal population. The tensions that were created and perpetuated by an overwhelming number of government policies concerning Aboriginal people played a significant role in the dynamics of wartime participation and post-war native resistance. Alongside societal changes caused by the war, the landscapes of Canada's Aboriginal populations were also in rapid flux. During wartime action, Canada's government was vigorous in utilizing all its resources to assist the war effort. Native reserve land was particularly targeted as a useable resource. Native communities suffered displacement and extreme poverty both during and after the war as a result of the War Measures Act and the Veterans' Land Act, which effectively dismissed the efforts of Aboriginal soldiers in the war. The effects of a world war inevitably touch every fraction of society, but the Second World War affected Canada's Aboriginal populations in very distinct ways.

Many soldiers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, joined the war because of a concern over the spread of Nazism, a chance for self-advancement, or as part of family tradition. Strong ties to Canada's landscapes influenced Aboriginal participation more so than a feeling of solidarity with the Canadian government. Protection of land, homes and families was a significant motivating factor for many Native recruits. The threat that Hitler's regime posed to the free world was great and Native peoples were active in their duty to defend their country. Glen Douglas, a WWII veteran, stated, "it was even more so my duty because this is my country."<sup>3</sup> He felt that his community's connection and history with the land charged him with the duty of defending it. Another WWII veteran, Leroy Littlebear, explained that historically, his people had not fought imperialist wars. Their wars were primarily concerned with the protection of land, and in WWII the incentive for fighting lay

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<sup>3</sup> Glen Douglas in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

in the attempt to “maintain relationships with the land and bring harmony”<sup>4</sup> back to their homes.

Although patriotism was a factor in some participants’ reason for joining up, there were many other circumstances that encouraged Native participation in the war effort, both overseas and on the home front. The poor economic situation on Canada’s reserves and elsewhere was a major factor. One Métis veteran explained, “men couldn’t get a job...In the army they paid a dollar-and-a-half...A dollar-and-a-half sounded awfully good.”<sup>5</sup> Joining the war was a display of commitment to their families and the role of provider, for both men and women in Aboriginal communities. Alongside the economic opportunity presented by the war, many Aboriginal people saw the war as a chance to find an avenue for social advancement. Although the Air Force and Navy restricted non-white enrolment until 1943, Native Canadians were appointed to almost all other areas of military service. Brigadier Oliver Martin, a Six Nations Mohawk, reached the highest rank ever held by a Native Canadian soldier. His outstanding military career eventually led him to prominent appointments outside of war. He was provincial magistrate for Ontario District 6 and the first Native to hold a judicial post in Ontario.<sup>6</sup> Numerous Native soldiers used their time in the Canadian military to carve paths for themselves in contemporary Canada. In a tribute to another native veteran, Dr. Gilbert “Big Feather” Monture, the Six Nations newspaper Tekawennake stated, “it’s a long way from a two-roomed cabin on the Six Nations reserve shared with eight brothers and sisters to the position of world citizen.”<sup>7</sup> The achievements of these, and other, exceptional soldiers are a continuing source of pride for individuals, their families and their communities.

Native youths, with lesser economic concerns, were simply eager for a chance to experience a world away from their reserves. They had rarely, if ever, been exposed to new places, difference races or even members of other Canadian First Nation bands. World War

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<sup>4</sup> Leroy Littlebear in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>5</sup> Janice Summerby, *Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields* (Ottawa: Veterans’ Affairs Canada, 1993), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

II veteran, Gordon Ahenakew recalled, “I had black buddies, I had Jewish buddies, Scottish boys, English. It was all the same, didn’t matter.”<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Askwith remembers her experience as the only girl from the Métis community to join the RCAF. She was able to get training and qualification for a range of jobs that would never have otherwise been available to her. She recalled “because I didn’t have qualifications in any profession I jumped here and there and all over the place...They didn’t deny you anything; you could take almost any trade if you passed a test and they felt you could give it a shot.”<sup>9</sup> Dorothy experienced life away from her reserve and seized upon the opportunity to try jobs that were not previously available to a woman, or to a Native person. Relationships among people from different native communities in Canada were also formed during these first experiences away from their homes and reserves.

Family traditions were also a factor in many decisions by Native men to take part in the war. In the case of Charles Bryce, his father’s military decorations in the First World War were the primary motivating factor for his enlistment just two decades later.<sup>10</sup> Many elders felt that their communities were tied to the British crown, as British subjects, as opposed to the Canadian government as Canadians. Celebrated soldier, Thomas George Prince, felt honoured to serve in the army. Prince’s words, “As soon as I put on my uniform I felt a better man,” still evoke a sense of pride among the people of the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. Prince is credited with a “keen sense of responsibility and devotion to duty”<sup>11</sup> and earned multiple medals for his military contributions.

By celebrating the achievements of war heroes, Aboriginal communities attempted to merge their identities as both Canadian and Aboriginal. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal soldiers joined the war effort out of a desire to belong to the wider realities of a modernizing nation, despite the strained relationship between Aboriginal communities and a growing Canadian society. Although dissention and racism were still present during the war, many

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon Ahenakew in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey J. Linnen, ed., *Remembrances: Métis Veterans*, compiled by Dave Hutchinson, Anne Dorian and Rick Desjarlais (Regina: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1997), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Summerby, 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

new kinds of relationships were being formed in response to the country's collective efforts.<sup>12</sup> The most extraordinary trend that emerged out of the wartime situation in Canada was the immediate elevation of Native Canadians in society. Personal accounts of army experiences testify to the fact that racial boundaries were almost entirely disregarded within the army at this time. In her memoirs, a Métis woman stated, "Discrimination? Everyone was so involved with what was happening with the war that nobody was involved in such pettiness."<sup>13</sup> Euclide Boyer recalled, "I found there was no discrimination once you were in uniform."<sup>14</sup> Suddenly the Canadian government was no longer suppressing the "warrior ethic" or hunting traditions of Aboriginal communities: "The efforts of Canadian Natives at home and abroad had reinforced the traditions of sacrifice and achievement in wartime."<sup>15</sup> Efforts by the federal government for assimilation and segregation were, at least temporarily, paused to benefit the larger issue of global conflict. Native veteran, George Munroe, was awarded the Military Medal of Bravery after the war for covering retreating men from his battalion during heavy fire. He humbly remembered that "it was just like hunting moose. 'Cuz I used to hunt when I was young."<sup>16</sup> The traditions of his childhood, which generations of assimilation policies had tried to suppress, were proving an asset to the Canadian forces overseas. The commitment and bravery shown by Native men in battle was all part of their association with a collective Canadian cause. A unique relationship was being formed between Native and non-Native soldiers because of their shared sufferings. Soldiers, volunteers and nurses of all races and classes shared wartime experiences: "The horrors of life in the trenches had quickly submerged distinctions based on class, religion, politics, or race."<sup>17</sup> The trench stories of Native soldiers were equally as horrific, and the losses suffered equally as painful. Aboriginal

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Shead, "The Contribution of the St. Peter's Band of Indians to the Canadian Forces," Friends of Peace and Order, delivered at Selkirk, Manitoba (20 June 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Linnen, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> John Moses, "Aboriginal Participation in Canadian Military Service: Historic and Contemporary Context," *The Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin* 3, no.3 (2000): 47.

<sup>16</sup> George Munroe in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Hayes, *Pegahmagabow: Legendary Warrior, Forgotten Hero* (Ontario: Fox Meadow Creations, 2003), 59.

soldiers and communities hoped that they would return to a Canada that upheld this new social acceptance.

The war had generated hope for improved relations between Aboriginal communities, the government and non-native populations in Canada. However, residual racism and war measures enacted by the government to justify the acquisition of Native land alluded to a different reality. A Canadian Métis soldier remembered feeling that although outright racism was not practiced among soldiers, suggestions of a social hierarchy within the army ranks were still evident. He recalled, “they sent me over with The Algonquin Regiment, an Ontario regiment, and they called us the Mohawks.”<sup>18</sup> Although being an Aboriginal did not prevent him from participating, the disregard for individual identity illustrates lingering tensions. Although there was hope of returning to an improved social landscape, many Aboriginal soldiers were skeptical of the lasting effects of the wartime unity in Canada. Major Jim Stone recalls an interesting conversation he had with Native Lance-Sergeant Joseph Flavien St. Germain in 1943. Upon congratulating St. Germain on excellent work, he replied, “Its fine, sir, but if I get back to Canada, I’ll be treated just like another poor goddamn Indian.”<sup>19</sup>

Although many WWI veterans were also involved in WWII, there was some dissension among native ex-soldiers for the abandonment felt in the inter-war years, leading up to the Second World War. They feared that the opportunities being presented to the members of their communities would be short-lived. Some of the men who had volunteered for service had been told that they would have to surrender their title as status Indians. Wilfred Brass, a WWII veteran, remembers receiving his enfranchisement card. “So I’m not an Indian anymore. I don’t know what to call myself you know. It says on there now I can vote and I enjoy all the privileges of his majesties’ subjects. In other words I guess I made myself a first class citizen, but I’ve lost my rights an Indian.”<sup>20</sup> The government encouraged the enthusiasm and commitment fostered by traditions of war and loyalty in Native culture,

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<sup>18</sup> Linnen, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Hayes, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Wilfred Brass in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

but the right to be both a Canadian citizen, as military service guaranteed the right to vote, and a registered Indian was not granted. Native Canadian sacrifices to the war effort did not stop at manpower or money.

One important leader in opposing the conscription of Native Canadians brought about by the 1941 National Resources Mobilization Act was Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow. His contributions during the First World War had been rewarded in the early post-war years, but he and his family quickly fell into poverty. His bitterness towards the unfair compensation he received after WWI fuelled his fight against compulsory participation of “young fellow Indians”<sup>21</sup> in the world’s next conflict. In October of 1941, Pegahmagabow wrote to Prime Minister Mackenzie King about his opposition to mandatory registration of Native Canadians.<sup>22</sup> One WWII veteran stated after the war, “I want equal terms as anybody else. But I can’t seem to get it.”<sup>23</sup> Pegahmagabow had witnessed these inequalities suffered by Native participants of the First World War and fought against the Canadian government to ensure that Native rights were respected after the Second World War. In 1943, compulsory overseas conscription was introduced for all able-bodied Aboriginal men. This time numerous Native communities responded by protesting in Ottawa or through petitions. By 1944 this resistance force had won the exemption of approximately 20,000 men who had been promised conscription exemption in treaty negotiations. Pegahmagabow became one of the pioneers of later Aboriginal Rights movements in Canada. His organization against the Canadian government was strengthened by other new relationships that were formed as a result of the war. Native youths were brought into contact with many non-Native populations during the war, but were also introduced to members of other Canadian Aboriginal communities. The relationships formed between Native soldiers would assist in the formation of pan-native organizations in post-war Canada.

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<sup>21</sup> Hayes, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> George Munroe in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

During the war, Native Canadians at home had unique experiences. Despite the ongoing military, volunteer and monetary contributions of Aboriginal communities, the Canadian government continued to suppress Native traditions and confiscate land. For the men in the trenches who depended on their neighbours for survival, social and racial hierarchies were not upheld. For the desperate Allied Forces, racist exclusion policies could not remain the basis for recruitment. However, remaining in control of the Aboriginal populations on the ground remained a primary objective in Canada. Bernelda Wheeler was young when the war was waged, but she remembered listening to the radio every night with her mother for news of brothers, sons, husbands, and uncles who had left to fight overseas. She also recalled sneaking to ritual Sun Dances, which were still illegal at the time: “It would take us four or five days to get there because they were far away. We had to travel at night and camp during the day and not talk in the wagon on the way there.”<sup>24</sup> Bernelda and her mother were traveling to these events to pray for the members of their community that were fighting in the war. As early as 1942, politicians such as opposition MP and future Prime Minister John Diefenbaker acknowledged the tremendous sacrifices of Canadian Aboriginal communities. He stated in the House of Commons that, “In Western Canada the reserves have been depleted of almost all physically fit men.”<sup>25</sup> However, even in light of their notable involvement, these communities were not permitted to celebrate and pray for their fallen and endangered family members.

The Canadian government also focused on the appropriation of reserve lands. In 1942, under the War Measures Act thousands of acres of Native territory was maneuvered into the hands of the Canadian government. The appropriation of reserve lands continued after the war. Returning soldiers found that they had no rights as landowners and that communities had been removed from their reserves to make room for the families of white soldiers. Many accounts from Native war veterans reveal astonishment and disillusionment at the minimal compensation they received for their service. Fred L’Hirondelle still said, “I’m not sure what I’m entitled. No one said a word. Of course the other veterans that were non-

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<sup>24</sup> Bernelda Wheeler in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>25</sup> Summerby, 21.

Native were told what they were entitled to, but not us.”<sup>26</sup> Native soldiers were not given the kind of federal assistance that white soldiers were given on their return to Canada. Along with simply not being told what they were entitled to, the government continued to make living difficult for the men that had risked their lives in the war. After a few years, when Wilfred Brass had settled with his wife and young daughter he remembered being visited by an Indian Affairs officer: “I thought, he’s probably from Indian Affairs. He’s coming to shake my hand and give me a pat on the back for doing so good for myself.” Instead, Brass was told that as a Treaty Indian he was violating the law by owning property. He responded, “You mean to tell me that after fighting for the war for this country that I can’t have no right to own property?”<sup>27</sup> the unjust policies and actions of the Canadian government toward Native Canadians after they fought in the war was expressed by Bernelda Wheeler: “the irony of Aboriginal soldiers fighting a war against the oppression of fascism, giving their lives for that, is them coming home to face oppressive fascism.”<sup>28</sup>

The reserve lands of the Stoney Point Nation in Ipperwash, Ontario serve as an example of the government’s deceitful attainment of land from Native communities. While the men were fighting for the government, Stoney Point lands were confiscated as an emergency measure to serve as a military base. The lands were occupied with the insurance that they would be returned after the war.<sup>29</sup> Nearly 60 years later, in December 2007, the Canadian government finally returned the Stoney Point Military Base to the Chippewas of Ontario. The land will be returned gradually to the native people of Kettle and Stoney Point through co-management agreements with the government and non-Native neighbours. Twelve years ago, an OPP officer shot Native protestor, Dudley George, during an occupation of the park. His brother, Sam George, said, “the return of the land is a tribute to

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<sup>26</sup> Fred L’Hirondelle in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>27</sup> Wilfred Brass in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>28</sup> Bernelda Wheeler in Todd, *Forgotten Warriors*.

<sup>29</sup> John Turner, “Stoney Point First Nation Land Claim,” delivered at Kettle and Stoney Point Community Centre (16 April 1992).

his brother's memory."<sup>30</sup> The time it took for the people of Kettle and Stoney Point to reclaim their homes is an example of how slowly the Canadian government is working to rectify its actions, which have caused so many generations of displacement and suffering.

By 1939, the history of conflict between Canada and its Aboriginal people had created an atmosphere of unequivocal tension in Canada. Despite these tensions, Canadian Aboriginals formed a significant force in Canada's war efforts during WWII. Although the government in post-war Canada did very little to reward their participation, the Second World War benefitted Aboriginal communities. Through their own agency, Aboriginal communities took advantage of the opportunities created by the mobilization of the country. Military participants immediately recognized opportunities for a working wage, self-advancement and travel. In the post-war years, the connections formed between communities across Canada were utilized to build a foundation for generations of pan-Aboriginal organization in Aboriginal Rights movements. Even in a situation of resistance and disadvantage, the Aboriginal people of Canada were able to maneuver power and success into their communities.

The oppression and injustice faced by Native Canadian war veterans is still a prominent topic in Canadian politics. Efforts for compensation, re-appropriation and recognition are slowly being realized in Canadian society. It took nearly 50 years for the Canadian government to finally invite Native veterans to lay a wreath in Ottawa on Remembrance Day. However, the Second World War offered Canada's Aboriginal communities an opportunity to grow as Canadians, become collectively unique within Canada and to lay the foundations for the Native Rights movement.<sup>31</sup> Harry Lavalle discussed the gradual process of collecting political power saying, "We all realized that we had to do something. That we had to be recognized, first for ourselves and we had to heal so we

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<sup>30</sup> Chris Wattie, "Ontario to return Ipperwash park to Chippewas," CanWest News Service (20 December 2007), <http://www.canada.com/topics/news/story.html?id=5a8e0b4e-4b9b-4017-9d05-aef2875899acc> (accessed 20 May 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Moses, 46.

could go on and get stronger.”<sup>32</sup> The ability of veterans to become leaders within their communities gave them the potential to spearhead a path to recognition and equality. At Douglas College in Vancouver, a group of young Aboriginal students, recognizing the importance of Native Canadians’ military service to their culture, performed a ceremony where they offered eagle feathers to their soldiers and warriors. They offered these to “pray that they will have quiet hearts and maybe someday the recognition of Canada.

**\*Jillian Carson** is a fourth year History major with a special interest in North American Aboriginal history. Jillian is from London, Ontario and it is there that she first became aware of issues surrounding the history and politics of Canada’s First Nations people. The idea for this paper is a direct extension of her interest in the communities of Southwestern Ontario and British Columbia. Jillian would like to focus her graduate studies in the area of law or business. She looks forward to being a proponent of Native rights and equality within Canada in the future.

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<sup>32</sup> Harry Lavalley in Todd, Dir., *Forgotten Warriors*.