

ABORIGINAL VETERANS



Aboriginal Canadians have demonstrated their skill and spirit through their great service and sacrifice for our country through their participation in Canada's military, particularly during times of conflict. Although past treaties with the government often insisted they were not compelled to serve, many felt it was their duty to do so. While a lack of official records means that exact statistics are often hard to determine, Aboriginal men and women have served in Canada's military in impressive numbers. To do so, they have often had to overcome challenges such as cultural differences, learning a new language and even travelling great distances and to enlist.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

On August 4, 1914, Canada, as a member of the British Empire, went to war against Germany. It would be more than four years of terrible loss of life before the "Great War" was over. More than 4,000 Aboriginal Canadians would volunteer for service.

The Aboriginal response was remarkable. In some areas one in three able bodied men would enlist. Some communities (such as the 11st of the Lake Band in British Columbia) saw every man between 20 and 35 years of age volunteer, as well as many women volunteered for the medical corps. Some Aboriginal Canadians volunteered because they were looking for a change while others volunteered because of tradition — in the past they had fought on the side of the British and felt it should be no different in this conflict.

The talents which they acquired through their life experiences proved valuable to the military. Many of the men had great patience, skills and craftsmanship

— skills honed with their traditional hunting lifestyles. These talents made them valuable assets to the Canadian Army as snipers (sharpshooters who used their rifles with deadly precision) and as maintenance men (soldiers who would slip behind enemy lines to report on enemy positions and defenses). For their accomplishments, Aboriginal soldiers were decorated with at least 90 medals (including the prestigious Military Medal). Henry Louis Nuewet, one of the most famous Canadian snipers during the war, held a division sniping record of 115 fatal shots and was awarded the Military Medal for the Bravery and skill he demonstrated during the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

On September 10, 1939, Canadians joined themselves in conflict again as our country declared war on Germany and entered the Second World War. Once again, Canada's Aboriginal men and women answered the call of duty. By March 1940, more than 500 had volunteered and by the end of the war in 1945, more than 3,000 status Indians, as well as an unknown number of Inuit, Métis and First Nations peoples had enlisted.

One interesting tale came. Aboriginal Canadians would play in this conflict as "code talkers." Soldier Albert Charles Chester Jongsjies would translate sensitive messages into Cree so the enemy could not understand any intercepted transmissions. Once the message was received by another Cree-speaking "code talker," it would be translated back into English so it could be understood by the recipients.



www.veterans.gc.ca

Canada

RESOURCES FOR INCLUDING FIRST NATIONS CONTENT

National Aboriginal Veterans

Monument

Veterans Affairs Canada

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/feature/abmem>

National Aboriginal Veterans Monument



To Aboriginal War Veterans in Canada and to those that have Fallen

This monument is raised in honour and in recognition of all Aboriginal Canadians in war and peacekeeping operations.

Many thousands of Aboriginal people saw action and endured hardship in the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War. They served with honour and distinction in all branches of the service and in every rank and appointment from Private to Brigadier. They fought overseas to defend the sovereignty and unity of armed nations, in addition to supporting the cause at home. Their dedication continues in peacekeeping operations in faraway lands.

National Aboriginal Veterans

Monument

(colouring sheet)

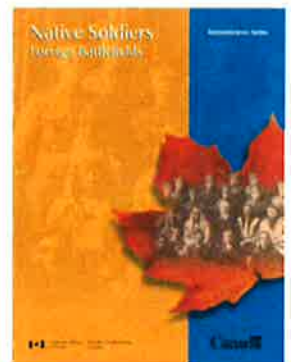
Veterans Affairs Canada

Web Overview

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/aboriginal/learning/colour>

Printable PDF

http://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/history/aboriginal/colour_e.pdf



Native Soldiers - Foreign

Battlefields

Veterans Affairs Canada

Web Version

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/other/native>

PDF Version

http://www.veterans.gc.ca/public/pages/history/other/native/natives_e.pdf

natives_e.pdf

Aboriginal Canadians in the Second World War

Veterans Affairs Canada

Web Version

http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/secondwar/fact_sheets/aborigin

PDF Version

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/cr/pi-sheets/aborigin.pdf>



Aboriginal Veterans

Veterans Affairs Canada

Web Version

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/aboriginal-pi>

PDF Version

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/cr/pi-sheets/Aboriginal-pi-e.pdf>



Mtbs at Sarcee Camp — Canadian forestry corps / Glenbow Archives NA-2164-1

A Commemorative History of Aboriginal People in the Canadian Military



The following document is available for downloading or viewing:

[A Commemorative History of Aboriginal People in the Canadian Military, 29 January 2010 \(PDF Version, 18.70 MB\)](#)

For more information on accessing this file, please visit our [help page](#).

Table of Contents

- [Introduction – Warfare in Pre-Columbian North America](#)

Web Version

<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/pub/boo-bro/abo-aut/index-eng.asp>

PDF Version

<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/pub/boo-bro/abo-aut/doc/abo-aut-eng.pdf>

Aboriginal Documentary Heritage

Aboriginal Soldiers in the First World War

By James Dempsey

Essay

- [Introduction](#)
- [Why Enlist?](#)
- [Voluntary Service](#)
- [Military Service Act](#)
- [Government Response to Recruits](#)
- [Experiences of War](#)
- [Life on the Home Front](#)
- [Post-war Experiences](#)
- [Post-war Rise of Political Organizations](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [References](#)



Aboriginal Soldiers in the First World War

Library and Archives Canada

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/aboriginal-heritage/020016-4001-e.html>

Poetry Project From Chemainus Elementary

Grade 6/7 Unit with supporting PowerPoint and Performance Standards

[http://www.sd79.bc.ca/groups/mrsakedves/wiki/b142c/Remembrance Day 1.html](http://www.sd79.bc.ca/groups/mrsakedves/wiki/b142c/Remembrance_Day_1.html)



Remembrance Day 1

Home

Poetry has many types of inspiration. Today we are going to use images, both real and artistic, to develop an image bank from which you will write poetry.

At the end of this unit you will be able to say: "I can write poetry using powerful imagery and figurative language."

Part One





Herman Henry joined infantry to see the world.

By Lynda Hills

ABORIGINAL WAR VETERANS who went overseas in the Second World War to fight for freedom did not return home to that same freedom. "It's been a bitter pill for me to reread knowing how I served my country, yet I was treated differently," says Ross Modeste.

In the coming year Modeste, along with many other aboriginal veterans, are filing suit with the federal government for discrimination. "I don't expect the Canadian government to give me a fancy living, but accord me justice the same as any one else," says Modeste. "During the war we all became colour blind, nobody had special treatment. Once we put on that khaki uniform, everybody blended in."

At 18, Modeste joined the Twelfth Infantry Brigade, finally winding up in Italy. "Every time we went in to fight we were under strength, but we more than held our own." For Modeste the worst part was his first taste of war action. "It's very scary seeing your own buddies killed a few feet from you. It's also hard not to say, 'gee, I'm glad it's not me.'"

Strange things sometimes happen during war. In London one day, Modeste saw a face from home. "I was going in the Canadian club and I recognized someone coming out. It was Simon McLean (who came from Nanaimo and was serving with the Canadian Scottish). I spoke to him in

our Hul'qumi'num language saying 'how are you?'. Simon looked at me and said 'who are you?'. When I told him he said 'the last time I saw you, you were just a wee boy.'"

For Herman Henry Sr., another aboriginal war veteran, witnessing a friend die one day before the war ended was a difficult blow. "He gave me his Browning pistol and a captured German flag because he knew he was dying," Henry, posted to the Hamilton Light Infantry, joined because he was young and wanted to see the world. He was stationed in England, France, Holland and Belgium. "We were chasing the Germans all over."

In Holland, Henry had his feet badly burned by hot oil. Returning to his unit after two weeks in the hospital he hardly knew anyone because so many men had died or been wounded. "Maybe that's why I'm alive today," Henry saw many people suffering, often carrying people from the field. "People aren't so heavy when they lose an arm or a leg. That was hard to live through."

Ironically, Henry also saw Simon McLean overseas, this time on the front lines in Belgium. "I'll never forget the feeling of seeing that familiar face. We were so glad to see each other," he says. Both men came running towards each other, shook hands vigorously and started talking excitedly. "When we had to part, we waved and

waved till we couldn't see each other any more.

Returning aboriginal war veterans faced different battles when they got home. Coming west on the troop train, from Halifax, servicemen were given ration cards for clothing, gasoline and liquor. "When they came around with the ration cards they did not ask whether I was a status Indian or whether I lived on the reserve," says Ross Modeste "they were issued to us all equally." After few months as a civilian, Modeste ran into another aboriginal war veteran in Nanaimo and used one of his liquor ration cards. "We were having a few drinks in the car when two policemen came upon us and arrested us."

In 1946 it was still against the law for aboriginal people to consume alcohol. "The next morning I was brought before the magistrate and he asked me 'did you make any false statements in order to receive this liquor ration card in Halifax?'. I said 'no sir, when they issued them, I just took it, I thought I was certainly entitled to it.'" Modeste's remaining liquor ration cards were confiscated and he was fined 25 dollars. "That was a sore part in my life," he says "to know that after serving my country overseas I didn't even have the right to consume liquor."

A different war

*Natives who fought overseas
for freedom didn't have that same
freedom at home:
'I was not considered a citizen of the
country that I served.'*



Once we put on that khaki uniform, everybody blended in, says Ross Modeste, in wartime uniform above and as he is today at left.



During the war Modeste remembers comparing pay books with the non-native servicemen. "In theirs, the citizenship said Canadian, but in my pay book the citizenship was blank. I was not considered a citizen of the country that I served." After the war, Modeste could not join the Canadian legion because he lived on the reserve. Native servicemen also had more difficulty starting their own businesses. "We could not apply to the bank for low interest loans," says Modeste. War veterans housing was not applicable to aboriginal servicemen.

Herman Henry also feels he has been treated unfairly by the government. "When we went overseas we were making \$2 a day," he says "they took away my army pension when my old age pension started, saying I made too much money."

Aboriginal war veterans have been waiting a lifetime for fair recognition. "The veterans are getting old," says Henry. "I used to march, but now it's hard to walk."

Lynda Hills is a Cowichan Valley writer.

Serving a country that didn't want him

NATIVE SON: Ross Modeste was proud to serve Canada despite double-standard

AARON BICHARD
The Pictorial

On his eighteenth birthday in 1942 Ross Modeste (Hwitsum) grabbed his lunch kit and left to his job as a signalman logging on Salt Spring Island.

Or so his family thought.
 Turns out he went south to Victoria, joined the Twelfth Infantry Brigade and became one of Canada's First Nations heroes.

"I was trying to think of ways to remember my father," Rosalind Strom said from her sister's home on Cowichan Tribes land. "What came to mind was awesome warrior. He didn't just fight for Canada in the war; he fought for his people."

"Our people have struggled to be recognized as people in this country for a hundred years. He fought as a Canadian and he fought to be a Canadian."

Hwitsum was born Jan. 22, 1925 in Quamichan. He was the grandson of Chief Modeste Tsiumultw, hereditary chief of the Quamichan.

More than a year after enlisting in the army, he was sent to the front lines of Italy where he witnessed atrocities that would disturb him from then on.

"He had nightmares that haunted him all throughout his life," daughter Valerie Modeste said. "It was hard for him to talk about his experiences over there but what he did do was teach us not to fear the dead."

"He said his buddies would be killed all around him while in the trenches and sometimes they had to stay there with them for hours, sometimes overnight. He didn't want to talk about it. It hurt too much."

Hwitsum was wounded and hospitalized twice, and returned home three months after VE Day.

When he returned to Canada, another fight began. Aboriginal war veterans found they weren't entitled to

the same treatment as other soldiers they'd stood shoulder to shoulder with in the trenches.

"It's been a bitter pill for me to take knowing how I served my country, yet I was treated differently," he told journalist Lynda Hills during a 1999 interview.

Hwitsum said even in his pay book during the war he wasn't considered Canadian.

"In (non-aboriginal's pay books) the citizenship said Canadian, but in my pay book the citizenship was blank."

"I was not considered a citizen of the country I served."

In Canada, Hwitsum and other aboriginal people weren't allowed to drink alcohol or vote, which was upsetting. He believed in equality, not segregation.

"He wasn't a perfect man, but he always tried to see the good in people," Strom said.

Modeste agreed.

"He was colourblind, which made it so hard for him to deal with being treated differently."

Hwitsum became involved in politics as the first band manager of Cowichan and the director of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. He also served on committees in the Cowichan for education and Hul'qum'num treaty.

"He always pushed education and equality," Strom said. "He wanted the best for his family and his community."

In 1990 he was able to return to the Canadian battlefields of France, Belgium and Holland with 28 other aboriginal veterans.

Hwitsum died on Dec. 9. This is the first Remembrance Day ceremony after his death.

"He always laid a wreath," Modeste said. "Paying respect was huge for him. The war was a huge part of his life."



Aaron Bichard

Valerie Modeste (left) and sister Rosalind Strom reminisce about their father, Ross Modeste (Hwitsum), who served in the Second World War.

