

Aboriginal Veterans Speech

My name is Anne Tenning and I am a member of the Chemainus First Nation. Today, I am here to pay tribute to the contributions of Aboriginal soldiers in the two World Wars.

Though the actual number of Aboriginal soldiers in the wars is unknown, it is now estimated that there were more than 12,000 Aboriginal soldiers, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit men and women. Even though it was not mandatory for Aboriginals to enlist in the war efforts, they volunteered their services in incredible numbers. Many reserves were emptied of nearly all of their young men.

At this time in Canadian history, Aboriginal people were not even recognized as Canadian citizens. Aboriginals did not have the right to vote, their children were forced to attend residential schools, and the practicing of Aboriginal culture and traditions was illegal. First Nations recruits were often required to become enfranchised, or to give up their Indian status, in order to be considered a citizen and thus able to enlist in the wars. This meant a loss of both cultural identity and Aboriginal rights.

Why then did so many Aboriginal soldiers volunteer to fight in the World Wars? Most of these soldiers fought due to a deep sense of pride and in support of the values of freedom and peace and community. Some of the soldiers were also following in the footsteps of family members who had fought in earlier battles.

Aboriginal soldiers participated in every major battle, including the Dieppe landings and the Normandy invasion. During the wars, Aboriginal soldiers were treated as equals, and several rose to some of the highest ranking military positions. Aboriginal soldiers often drew upon their traditional hunting and military skills, making them valuable as snipers and reconnaissance scouts. Some of the Cree soldiers from the prairies used their traditional languages to serve as “code talkers”, sending out military messages in Cree to the European battlefields. Medals of valour were awarded to hundreds of Aboriginal soldiers.

Tommy Prince, for example, was one of only four Canadian soldiers who earned both the prestigious Military Medal and the Silver Star in the Second World War. He was presented these medals at Buckingham Palace by King George VI himself. Tommy Prince was also a member of the elite specialist unit known as the Devil's Brigade. But when Tommy returned to Canada, he faced the same discrimination faced by other Aboriginal war veterans, who were denied the rehabilitation benefits available to non-Aboriginal veterans.

It is estimated that at least 500 Aboriginal soldiers lost their lives while serving in the two World Wars. We must acknowledge the sacrifices and contributions made by Aboriginal men and women in the war efforts. They displayed immense intelligence, courage, and honour. We should all be proud of the thousands of Aboriginal soldiers who volunteered their lives to uphold the values of this country.

Thank you.