



## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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# Indigenous Peoples and Canada's Military

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## Historical Overview

Indigenous people in North America (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) fought with and against non-Indigenous powers, including the British, French and Americans, since European settlers first arrived in what is now Canada more than 400 years ago. Despite facing unequal treatment within Canadian society, Indigenous people served in the Canadian military in both world wars and beyond. Indigenous veterans have often assumed important leadership roles in their communities, drawing upon and employing their status as veterans in the ongoing struggle for equality and to effect change in Canada.

## War and Indigenous Communities

Historically, wherever geographic, economic and political factors dictated, the British Crown and other imperial powers in North America sought to include Indigenous allies in their military and strategic alliances. For their part, Indigenous groups and individuals either accepted, rejected or modified these overtures in accordance with their own objectives. Indigenous soldiers were active participants in the Seven Years' War, the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and other major conflicts following the arrival of Europeans in North America.

From the First World War onward, military service by Indigenous people from Canada was contentious, and fraught with the potential for unintended outcomes.

Combatants serving overseas risked death and injury. But for Indigenous families and communities, that was only one of several important problems associated with war.

Those at home faced family breakdown. Parents, older siblings and other role models, and caregivers departed for war work or military service. This added to other upheaval, including the transfer of children to Indian residential

schools, challenges to traditional political authority, and the loss of Indian reserve lands through expropriation for military purposes.

During the Second World War, exporting food to allies overseas was a significant part of Canada's war effort. To help meet the demand for food, some Indian residential schools were converted to food production. Indigenous children at those schools were forced into agricultural labour.

Today, for many Indigenous families across Canada, these twin legacies of multi-generational residential school attendance and military service are part of their lineage and their community's history.

More than 4,000 status Indian men enlisted in the Canadian military during the First World War. An unrecorded number of non-status Indian, Métis, and Inuit men also served. The terms "status Indian," "non-status Indian," "Métis" and "Inuit" have different legal and cultural meanings, but all refer to Indigenous peoples.

Canada's two largely Indigenous formations of the First World War were the 107th "Timber Wolf" Battalion and the 114th Battalion (known as Brock's Rangers). Both served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

## Indigenous Military Service Since the First World War

During the Second World War, Canadians in all branches of the fighting services defended Canada or served overseas. Indigenous troops shared not only in the hard-fought victories, alongside their non-Indigenous comrades, but also in the defeats.

The wartime circumstances of Indigenous troops from Canada were unique. Those troops were denied the full rights and benefits of citizenship under Canada's colonial *Indian Act*.

Despite this, they were at the forefront in fulfilling that single most onerous and profound obligation of citizenship: donning the sovereign's uniform and bearing arms against the nation's enemies. After the war, many Indigenous veterans who were leaders in their communities employed their status as veterans to advance the struggle for equality and to effect change in Canada.