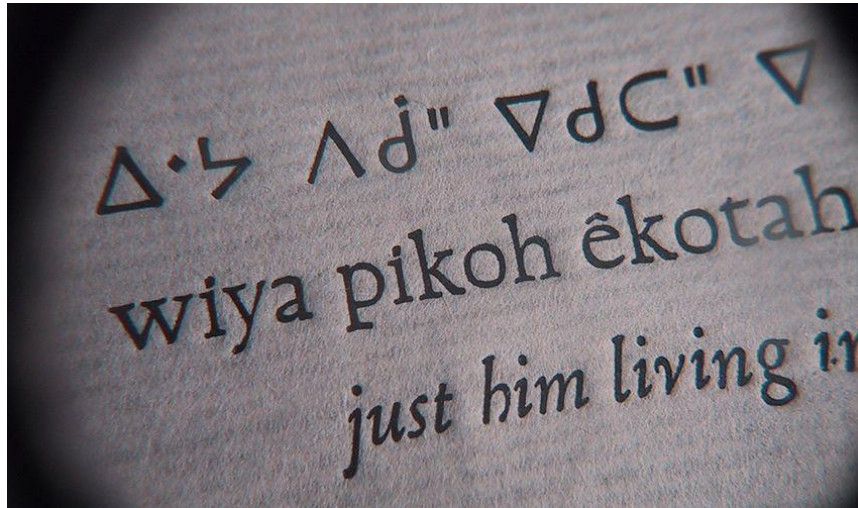


## ***Remembrance Day: Acknowledging First Nations Soldiers***



*The English sentence was translated into Cree before it was read out — you can see a sample of Cree syllabics (letterforms) and how they are pronounced below them. There were many examples of different Indigenous peoples who served as Code Talkers in many different languages.*

Code talkers were First Nations soldiers in World War II who were given a top-secret mission. They were the Canadian military's secret weapon. When the military needed to communicate secret messages, they would use code talkers to send the message in Cree to another code talker. That soldier would translate the message back into English. If the message was heard by the German army, they wouldn't be able to understand the message because they had no idea what language the code was in!

## **Who were the code talkers?**

Because the code talkers were sworn to secrecy about their jobs, many people don't know who they are. But the most famous Canadian code talker was a man named Charles Tompkins, though everyone called him Checker.

Checker was a Metis man from Saskatchewan who spoke Cree. He joined the military in 1940 and was sent to Britain. One day, he was called by the Canadian High Command and not even his commanding officer — his boss — knew why! Checker was told about a top secret, new mission that they wanted him to be part of — The Cree Code Talker Program for the Air Force.



The Cree language didn't have words for things like tank or machine gun so new words had to be made up. Like calling a *Mosquito bomber* a *sakimes* (Cree for *mosquito*). Code talkers were so top secret that their own families didn't even know what they were doing! Checker didn't tell anyone (including his brothers) until he was interviewed about it at the age of 85.

Even though their role in the War was vital, there has been very little honouring of these code talkers by the Canadian or American governments. Often, history books do not acknowledge the important role of the code talkers... and often history books, movies, and documentaries do not mention the many First Nations people who were (and are) soldiers!

## First Nations Soldiers: Past and Present

For example, Francis Pegahmagabow went to a recruitment office after the war was declared in 1914. He wanted to serve and protect Canada. The Ojibwa sniper served in the 1st Infantry Battalion and went on to become one of the most decorated soldiers in the First World War.

When he returned to Canada after the war, his reputation as a brave soldier was not honoured, and he didn't receive the same rights or benefits as white soldiers.

"They'd gone from being a celebrated soldier to just an 'Indian' again," said Scott Sheffield, a professor at the University of Fraser Valley. The racism and prejudice that

First Nations people experienced still continued once they returned from defending Canada.

About 4,000 First Nations men served in the First World War. After the armistice of Nov. 11, 1918, they returned to Canada *still* unable to vote and largely denied any benefits provided to veterans.

Although veterans were eligible to borrow money through the government to purchase farm land to support themselves and make money, it was almost impossible for First Nations veterans to qualify. Worse than that, around 80,000 acres of reserve land that was good for farming was actually taken away from the reserves where many First Nations veterans lived, mostly in the Prairies, and largely given to white veterans.

That didn't stop First Nations people from taking up the call again when Canada joined the Second World War — about 4,300 First Nations people enlisted. Thomas (Tommy) Prince enlisted in 1940 and eventually was assigned to the Canadian-American First Special Service Force. He won many awards for his bravery. Back in Canada after the war, however, Prince ended up living in shelters and on the streets of Winnipeg. Many veterans do not get benefits or support after returning from war... and there were even less programs in place to help Indigenous veterans. Many veterans felt isolated, forgotten, and continued to struggle with trauma.

But Indigenous men and women continued to enlist and serve in the military — from NATO duties during the Cold War to more recent tours in Afghanistan. Now, more people are learning about their sacrifices.

“There is a huge untold story about the diversity of the Canadian troops and the war effort in general,” he said. “Now, with acknowledgement of Indigenous soldiers, it makes Canadians a bit more aware of the diversity in our country's history and the contribution that all groups have made to Canada.”