

Lest We Forget:
Remembering the Contributions and Sacrifices of Indigenous Veterans

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As the old adage puts it, “those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.” While that may be true, history serves a far greater purpose than simply preventing mistakes: It connects us to our roots, helps us to understand the importance of civic contribution, and gives us an appreciation for those who have devoted themselves to the creation of our society. History is a complex tapestry, without which we would have no context for the world around us. As Marcus Garvey famously put it, “A people without knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”¹ As a nation rich in history, Canadians have a strong legacy to live up to. Despite that heritage, however, studies suggest that between 1997 and 2007, historical knowledge among young Canadians fell significantly.² Though not a warlike nation, the valiant actions of Canadians during wartime form a significant part of our history, and countless memorials and monuments have been created across Canada as a way to commemorate and raise awareness about the thousands of soldiers who have fought and in many cases given their lives in service to their nation. Among those, the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument in Ottawa is an important testament to the contributions of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit soldiers during the First World War, Second World War and Korean War, and stands as a continuous modern reminder of the courage and resilience displayed by Indigenous communities in Canada during wartime.

Unveiled in June of 2001, the monument was created by Noel Lloyd Pinay of the Peepeekisis First Nation in Saskatchewan. The Indigenous artist was inspired by his father, who

¹ Cherron Inko-Tariah, “Marcus Garvey famously wrote: ‘A people without knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots’”, Black History Month, October 25, 2020, <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/bhm-intros/marcus-garvey-famously-wrote-a-people%E2%80%AFwithout%E2%80%AFknowledge-of-their-past-history-origin-and-culture-is-like-a%E2%80%AFtree-without-roots/>.

² Caroline Alphonso, “Canadians don't know their history, study shows,” The Globe and Mail, November 9, 2007, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadians-dont-know-their-history-study-shows/article18148571/>.

fought as a paratrooper during the Second World War and was wounded in combat.

Commissioned by the National Aboriginal Veterans Association, the monument is the first in Canada to be dedicated specifically to Indigenous veterans. Built into the statue is a wolf, buffalo, elk, and bear, along with two men and two women that are facing the cardinal directions. In the hands of the humans are two symbols of war and two symbols of peace.³

Understanding the historical context of the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument is incredibly important. For much of Canada's history, Indigenous people have been an extremely marginalized group. From being forced onto small reserves to having their children taken away to residential schools, Indigenous groups have faced extreme persecution. Despite this, many of them chose to fight for Canada during the World Wars and Korean War, at a time when they were not even granted voting rights.⁴ Though it is impossible to give exact numbers, it is estimated that over 4,000 Status Indians fought in the First World War, and more than 4,250 enlisted during the Second World War.⁵ Though only 73 Status Indians are recorded to have fought in the Korean War, it is estimated that several hundred First Nations men fought in the war.⁶ Countless more Metis and Inuit men are known to have fought in those three wars, however as non-Status Indians they were not specially counted, resulting in a lack of clear government documents detailing their enlistment.⁷ Indigenous soldiers fought valiantly throughout the World Wars and Korean War, with one soldier even reaching the distinguished rank of Brigadier. Over 500 Indigenous soldiers are known to have given their lives in service during the World Wars, and

³ David Joseph Gallant, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument," The Canadian Encyclopedia, February 19, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/national-aboriginal-veterans-monument>.

⁴ John F. Leslie, "Indigenous Suffrage," The Canadian Encyclopedia, March 31, 2016, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indigenous-suffrage>.

⁵ Gallant, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument".

⁶ Veterans Affairs Canada, "The Canadian Contribution," February 14, 2019, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/indigenous-veterans/native-soldiers/korea_response.

⁷ Gallant, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument".

more likely lost their lives during the Korean War.⁸ Initially, however, Indigenous veterans received very little acknowledgement for their service, and it was not until the 1970s to the 2000s that they began to receive more recognition. This came about largely due to the creation of organizations to help campaign for restitution of grievances as a result of missing veterans benefits, which many of them did not receive.⁹ Today, Indigenous veterans have received much wider recognition, and the stories of soldiers such as Francis Pegahmagabow¹⁰ and John Shiwak¹¹ are even being taught in high school classrooms.

The National Aboriginal Veterans Monument holds great significance for Canadians of all backgrounds. For far too long, Indigenous veterans have received almost no recognition within Canada, and they could not even lay wreaths at the National War Memorial until 1995.¹² In a small way the monument seeks to rectify that lack of acknowledgement. As the sculptor and artist, Noel Lloyd Pinay put it, “The monument is for my dad and other native vets who were stuffed into obscurity. Even though they had done outstanding things, they seem to have been ignored.... I consider that to be a major injustice.”¹³ While the monument is only a symbol, it still acts as a tangible reminder of the sacrifices made by Indigenous soldiers. The importance of such symbols cannot be overstated. In the words of Saint Augustine, “symbols are powerful because they are the visible signs of invisible realities.”¹⁴ The monument distinctly represents the

⁸ R. Scott Sheffield and David Joseph Gallant, “Indigenous Peoples and the World Wars”, The Canadian Encyclopedia, March 24, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indigenous-peoples-and-the-world-wars>.

⁹ Sheffield and Gallant, “World Wars and Indigenous Peoples”.

¹⁰ Franz M. Koennecke, “Francis Pegahmagabow,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, December 1, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/francis-pegahmagabow>.

¹¹ John Boileau, “John Shiwak,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, July 16, 2019, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-shiwak>.

¹² Right to Play, “Honouring Indigenous Veterans this National Aboriginal Veterans Day,” n.d., <https://www.righttoplay.ca/en-ca/national-offices/national-office-canada/whats-new/honouring-indigenous-veterans-this-national-aboriginal-veterans-day/>.

¹³ Gallant, “National Aboriginal Veterans Monument.”

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, “Symbols Are Powerful Because They Are the Visible Signs of Invisible Realities,” Idle Hearts, n.d.,

invisible reality formed by the contributions made by Indigenous soldiers. The monument does not solely commemorate the contributions of soldiers, however, and this is most clearly expressed through the statue's symbolism. The inclusion of both men and women in the statue represents the idea that both have made important contributions during wartime. All too often the homefront is forgotten in history books, but the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument acknowledges both the actions of soldiers and the responsibility and resilience displayed by those at home. Along with holding weapons, two of the figures also hold symbols of peace (an eagle fan and a peace pipe), which symbolizes the necessary balance between peace and war.¹⁵ The statue suggests the idea that at the heart of many wars lies the desire for peace.¹⁶ The monument also reflects many symbols that are important across various Indigenous cultures. The number four is used throughout the statue, for instance, with the four animals and four humans, which represent the four directions, four seasons of life and four seasons of the year.¹⁷ There is also a sense of balance that comes with the contrasting pairs: two prey (buffalo and elk) and two predators (bear and wolf), two men and two women, two weapons and two symbols of peace.¹⁸ Additionally, the four humans represent the diversity of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples, and the four animals represent spirit guides that bring victory on the battlefield.¹⁹

In the modern world, the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument holds great meaning and importance. As discussed earlier, monuments are physical representations of our history. They stand as reminders of what others have done in service for our country. Without the actions

<https://www.idlehearts.com/1293699/symbols-are-powerful-because-they-are-the-visible-signs-of-invisible-realities>.

¹⁵ Gallant, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument."

¹⁶ Veterans Affairs Canada, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument," March 10, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/7972>.

¹⁷ Gallant, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument."

¹⁸ Veterans Affairs Canada, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument."

¹⁹ Gallant, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument."

of Canada's soldiers, our nation would not be what it is today. Indigenous communities have not stopped serving our nation, however. In 2019, over 2,700 members of the Canadian Armed Forces self-identified as Indigenous, representing approximately 2.8 percent of the military's total personnel (and it's important to note that actual figures may be higher, since self-identification is voluntary).²⁰ Given current events surrounding reconciliation and recognition, the monument takes on even greater significance. As Canadians strive to learn more about the injustices done to Indigenous communities, it is also important to study their contributions to Canadian society. Not least among their contributions are their efforts during times of war, and the monument clearly highlights this idea. As the monument itself says, "This monument is raised in sacred and everlasting honour of the contributions of all Aboriginal Canadians in war and peacekeeping operations."²¹

In the 21st century, war memorials across Canada play an important role in helping to define our Canadian identity and bring us closer to our roots. Far too often, Canadians struggle with a seeming lack of identity and it often appears that Canadian identity is based on what we are not, rather than what we are. In reality, however, Canadians do have a distinct identity that is grounded in the history of our nation. Canadian history is certainly a mixture of both good and bad, and memorials such as the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument remind us of both. Through our history, we can find examples of shining moments, such as the courageous actions of Indigenous soldiers on the battlefield, but we can also find shameful events, such as the lack of recognition for Indigenous veterans. It is this mixture of good and bad, shameful and shining, that in many ways reminds us of where we have come from, but also provides a reminder of

²⁰ National Defence, "Indigenous People in the Canadian Armed Forces," Government of Canada, February 26, 2019, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/06/les_peuples_autochtonesdanslesforcesarmeescanadiennes.html.

²¹ Veterans Affairs Canada, "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument."

where we are going. By connecting us to our roots, memorials also serve to remind us of those who have sacrificed for our nation. In an age of relative ease and luxury, it is all too easy to forget what others have done to bring us to this point. In the words of 20th century American president Franklin D. Roosevelt, “those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy forget in time that men have died to win them.”²² War memorials are tangible reminders of the sacrifices made by soldiers throughout our history. As long as such monuments stand, their memory will never be forgotten.

²² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Proclamation 2524,” Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, December 15, 2017, <https://fdrlibrary.tumblr.com/post/168575371904/for-226-years-the-bill-of-rights-has-guaranteed>.

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