

# Ogitchidaa / Warriors

## Native warriors have long fought on Canada's side

By Maurice Switzer

People often ask why, despite stolen land, and broken treaties, and residential schools, Native peoples have always been in the front lines of those fighting to preserve Canadian freedom.

For one thing, First Nations have a long history of demonstrating respect for the Crown. Most of our treaties were made with the British Crown before there was a Canada, and now Canada is obliged by its Constitution to honour them.

Going back to the time of Tecumseh and the War of 1812, right up to the present day, Indians have fought to defend the British, and now Canadian Crown. I believe our warriors have done so in hopes that Canada will one day live up to the promises made in our treaties.

I also believe that many young Aboriginal men and women in Canada – like poor people everywhere – have often found that wearing their country's military uniform is the only job security available to them. Whatever the reason, Native military service in Canada is a remarkable tradition.

My great uncle, Robert Franklin Sr., was one of 38 men from Alderville who volunteered for duty. That's 38 out of 63 adult males in the community at the time. Their names are carved into Alderville's granite cenotaph, along with those of every

other community member who wore a Canadian military uniform. The story was the same across the breadth of the country. Indians volunteered in higher per capita numbers than any other identifiable group. There were 22 adult males on the Scugog reserve in 1914 – every single man volunteered for military duty.

The truly remarkable thing about the 5,000 Native soldiers who defended the Crown and Canadian flag – the "Forgotten Warriors" of Michael Doxtater's powerful National Film Board documentary – is that Status Indians were exempt from military service. (They were also not entitled to vote, but that's another story.) At the same time the government was resorting to conscription – compulsory military service, like the American "draft" – to

raise an army of Canadian citizens. Indians were volunteering to join up.

Most did their jobs like regular soldiers, but a few, like Wasauksing's Frances Pegahmagahbow – a sniper who recorded 300 "kills" – and Brokenhead's Tommy Prince – the most decorated soldier to wear a Canadian military uniform – really distinguished themselves.

Heroes or not, when they returned home, Native Warriors quickly became mere Indians again at the hands of government agents. Indians who lived on reserve were short-changed of about \$3,500 in resettlement benefits offered most Canadian soldiers, including those who had been forced into service. It took a half century of lobbying by aboriginal veterans for the federal government to finally table a take-it-

or-leave-it-offer to make amends for this shameful discrimination against Canada's staunchest defenders. The 800 eligible Native veterans – and about 1,000 surviving spouses – were offered a mere \$20,000 to settle Canada's 50-year-old debt, a disgraceful attempt to buy them off in their fading years.

There's a First Nation tradition that our every action is to be considered in terms of how it will effect those who follow us seven generations later. Most of us do not weigh our conduct so carefully. But for some it comes naturally.

That's why we stand up and take off our hats when our veterans enter the pow-wow circle.

And that's why we will fight for our treaty rights as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow.



Maurice Switzer

### Nipissing veteran laid phone lines under heavy enemy fire

By Perry McLeod-Shabogiesic

**NIPISSING FN** – The road has been long and hard for 92-year-old veteran Tom Couchie and wife Fran. A private man, he is also very humble about his time in the military and the contributions he and others have made to the freedom of this country. To Tom it was just a job he had to do.



Tom Couchie

Born in 1913 at Duchesnay Falls, Tom was 26 when he enlisted in the army. He was already married to Fran at this time and joined up in Toronto. From there he was sent to Montreal for basic training. He spent the first few years in the Canadian military stationed in different parts of Canada, helping train other soldiers in guerilla warfare because of his experience in the bush. In fact, he helped develop the pop-up targets for rifle field practice that are still used today by the military. From Newfoundland to British Columbia, Tom was given a full tour-of-duty in the country he would soon be defending overseas.

With World War II raging, in 1942 he found himself in England, training with a unit that specialized in signal technology. These communications specialists were skilled in running and repairing phone lines during heavy battle action. The communications lines were vital links between Allied forces to keep troops informed about military strategies.

"I asked to join the Algonquin Squad," said Tom. "They were on the front lines and that was where I wanted to be."

By 1945, Tom's new unit was in heavy action at Hubert Fale near Cannes, France. He recalls the fierce and bloody fighting, with

heavy casualties. They spent their days running and repairing phone lines under heavy German shelling. At night they slept under their own artillery pieces while German positions were blasted. To this day Tom and many other soldiers who tried to sleep under those conditions have suffered major hearing losses along with other injuries.

The enemy wasn't the only thing Tom and his company needed to watch out for. Friendly fire was another danger. Often, as the battle raged on, U.S. and British Air forces would bomb areas occupied by Allied troops. Many on both sides paid war's ultimate price.

Tom recalls being hit by friendly fire and taking cover in a barn. The barn was bombed and collapsed on top of him. "I managed to crawl out," he said. "Afterwards I heard a guy calling so I dug him out. It was kind of funny at the time because as he stuck his head out from the rubble he looked at me and asked me for a smoke!"

Many Germans surrendered to the advancing Allied forces. Towards the end of the war, Tom recalls thousands of Germans giving up.

He especially remembers chumming around with his cousin Lawrence Whiteduck who had also enlisted. Tragically, Lawrence was killed during a bombing raid and Tom never knew where his friend's grave was. He searched for years but was never able to locate his burial site.

In the mid 1980's Tom re-visited France with his son Darrell to seek some kind of closure for his wartime experience. They stumbled across an unknown cemetery and discovered Lawrence Whiteduck's grave.

Tom says his mind was at ease, knowing he had found his cousin and friend.

### Francis Pegahmagahbow 1891-1952

Young and idealistic, Francis Pegahmagahbow of the Parry Island Indian Reserve (now Wasauksing First Nation), near Parry Sound, joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force in World War I. On the battlefields

of France and Belgium he distinguished himself by winning three decorations for bravery, more than any other Canadian aboriginal soldier.

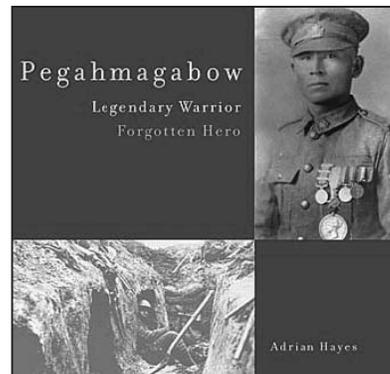
Treated as an equal among his white comrades, he was in for a rude awakening when he returned home to the Reserve after the war and discovered that attitudes, particular that of the tyrannical Department of Indian Affairs, hadn't changed at all. He was still an Indian, and treated as a second-class citizen.

For the rest of his life, Pegahmagahbow championed the cause of native rights, being one of the early activists in this long, exhausting battle to achieve the right of aboriginal peoples to control their own destiny.

Adrian Hayes's well-researched, illustrated biography of Pegahmagahbow will help ensure this long-forgotten hero receives the recognition he deserves for his dedication on the battlefields of Europe and the battlefields of social justice.



Francis Pegahmagahbow



### Spiritual Journey ends at Vimy

**VIMY, France** – A Ceremony of Remembrance was conducted at Vimy to honour Canadians who gave their lives in wartime. Annually conducted the Sunday before Remembrance Day, this year's ceremony was held in advance to allow for the inclusion of a delegation of visiting First Nations, Métis and Inuit Spiritual Elders, Veterans and youth from Canada.

The ceremony at Canadian Cemetery No. 2 on the grounds of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial was the final event in Europe for the members of the Aboriginal Spiritual Journey. They departed Canada October 26th, visited Canadian war memorials and battlefield locations in Belgium and France, and conducted a Calling Home Ceremony involving the customs and traditions of First Nations and Métis peoples and the Inuit to invite the spirits of fallen warriors to return to Canada to rest with their ancestors.

"Canadians played a major role in defending many of the places we

will be visiting," said Ray Rogers, Aamjiwnang First Nation, Chairman of the First Nations Veterans of Canada. "For example, Canada had one of the most important roles in the D-day landings, and made major gains. It gives me great pride that First Nations people participated so that we may live in peace and freedom. On a percentage basis First Nations had the highest contribution rate. I am honoured to attend this special Journey and represent those who are not able to go, including those we have lost and those who are not well enough to travel."

"It is so very appropriate that our last commemorative ceremony is being held at Vimy and that we make this visit during Canada's Year of the Veteran," said the Honourable Albina Guarnieri, Minister of Veterans Affairs. "Because it is here at Vimy Ridge that Canadians would come together as a unified force to fight one of their most significant battles of the First World War. And here, like so many other battlefields, Aboriginal people from Canada

stood their ground," said Minister Guarnieri. "On the Vimy Memorial can be found the names of at least 35 Aboriginal Veterans whose stories will never be known, except for the fact that they never came home."

While in Europe the delegation also participated in ceremonies at two First World War monuments in Belgium – the St. Julien Memorial and Hill 62 – and at Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery in Normandy, France. An Inuksuk now stands next to the Juno Beach Centre, its windows facing Canada and the nearby war cemetery, to serve as a permanent marker of the journey. The delegation returns to Ottawa tomorrow, November 3rd, and will participate in a Ceremony of Remembrance in the Senate of Canada on November 4th before departing for home towns.

Additional information about the Aboriginal Spiritual Journey, including photos and youth delegates' "blogs," can be found on the Veterans Affairs Canada web site, at [www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca).