First Nations’ People’s Involvement in World War One:

The exact number of First Nations people to enlist in the Canadian Expeditionary Force is not exactly known; what is known, however, is that many Native men volunteered to serve in World War One. Behind this effort was a web of colonialism, prejudice, and politics.

Did Native people participate in the war to the extent of their non-Native counterparts? Yes. It has been documented that:

“From a population numbering 7.88 million,¹ over 620,000 Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (C.E.F) between 1914 and 1919. This number included over 4,000 Canadian Indians² from a total 1914 population of 103,774 (excluding non-status Indians, Métis, and Eskimos). This enlistment figure represents 35 percent of the male Indian population of military age, roughly equal to the percentage of Euro-Canadians who enlisted.”³

First Nations people, too, sacrificed their lives in the Great War. “More than 68,000 Canadian soldiers gave their lives during the First World War, including approximately 300 Canadian Indians.”⁴ But for Native people, enlisting in the Canadian military came with strings attached:

“Although the majority of Indian Leaders and peoples offered their immediate support of the war effort, their active participation remained dependent on the existing 1904 Militia Act or, in the absence of any clear policy, on the whims of the federal government. Throughout 1914 the general policy towards Indian service followed contemporary racial assumptions and past policy and practice, and it remained one of exclusion or limited involvement.”⁵

By 1914 Canada had firmly established its dominance over the Native peoples within its expanding borders. The Northwest Rebellion was decades old and numbered Treaties had been established, relegating Native people to an underclass pushed onto reserves.

“By 1914, Euro-Canadian control over land, resources, and government was firmly established, with Indians marginalized to allocated parcels of Crown-owned land. Indian children were forC.E.Fully removed to missions and schools to acquire a European education. Indian cultural attributes were outlawed, and most aspects of life were controlled by Indian Affairs directly, or via local Indian agents. The Indian population of Canada was at the lowest point, having been reduced through warfare, disease, and socio-economic hardship.”⁶

---

¹ “Of the total population, 54 percent were of British ancestry, with 10.89 percent born in Britain itself. Of the 36,267 soldiers of the first C.E.F contingent, 9,635 (27 percent) were English-speaking born Canadians, 1,245 (3.4 percent) French-speaking born Canadians, and 23,211 (64 percent) British by birth.” Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.43
² With regard to American Indians, “An accurate estimate, based on the 1920 annual report of the commissioner of Indian Affairs…and secondary sources, reveals that between 10,000 and 12,000 American Indians served in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) – 6,509 are known to have been drafted and another 5,000 to 6,000 are thought to have voluntarily enlisted.” Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.63
Canada demanded total control over all First Nations, including their participation in the C.E.F. Having Aboriginal people participate with the Allies created conflict between nations and governmental departments. Why?

“Under the British North America Act and the Indian Act, Canadian Indians did not have the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; therefore, the government of Canada did not expect, or need, them to take up arms in a foreign war. Indians remained wards of the Crown.”

“Indians,” (the word used then to describe Native peoples) were considered “minors” who were deemed by the Canadian government as incapable of attaining an appropriate level of “civilization”; thereby necessitating (in the minds of the government officials) the assimilation of Natives. Furthermore, the Native population of Canada was still regarded with suspicion by the white government:

“At the dawn of the twentieth century, consolidation of the Canadian settler-state was ongoing, and the potential for armed Indian resistance still existed, most notably on the prairies. Training and arming Indians in a military capacity, therefore, would be dangerous to the domestic security of Canada. In fact, at the onset of war no imperialist European state or overseas colony, save for France, regarded their indigenous populations as a source of military manpower for a European war. Contemporary science, social biases, and public opinion accepted that certain identifiable ethnic groups lacked the intelligence and integrity to fight modern war. It was also believed that, since these groups were the subjects of vast European empires, prudence warned against allowing them to fight in a European war and thus forfeiting white racial supremacy.”

The suspicion was by and large, unfounded. Rebellions had been enacted by Natives as a reaction to the encroachment of settlement. The extirpation of the buffalo had irrevocably changed the lives and cultures of Plains people. Indian Agents more often than not controlled the movements, activities and finances of Indian Reservations. The centuries of bloodshed in North America and the fact that in the east and in the south there were bona fide warrior societies, elevated the myth of the “Indian Warrior.” Within this framework, the notion of the “Indian warrior” maintained its mythic status, affecting policies concerning First Nations’ enlistment. What did Canadians believe at the time concerning Native culture(s)?

“The idea that Indians possessed innate martial talents was a common belief during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A recent commentator remarked that Indians were natural-born soldiers who ‘possessed the skills and discipline of modern commandos and special forces...who were capable of adapting to whatever situation they encountered.’ Given this belief, then, prudence warned against arming and training Indians in a military capacity, for fear of insurrection.”

The “fear of insurrection,” the belief that Indians would rise up against the Canadian government was, apparently, a real fear at the time. The view of Native people at that time was that Natives could and would be able to aid the Empire, but not too able.
Euro-Canadian feelings towards Natives were a mixture of quaint paternalism and outright xenophobia. In other words, “The calculated decision to admit Indians into the C.E.F was made after carefully weighing military needs, specifically manpower after 1915, against the need to maintain the status quo of Indian-white relations.”

For Native peoples, participating in the war was a means to invigorate their communities and strengthen the sovereign bond between First Nations and England, as many First Nations viewed themselves as signatories with the British Crown, but not with Canadian government. Furthermore:

“Throughout 1914 Indian men rushed to recruiting depots for reasons other than loyalty to the British Crown. Although the warrior ethic had stagnated as a result of residential schooling, religious education, and isolation on reserves, it had not been completely repressed. While many joined for money, adventure and employment, as did their white comrades, scores of others enlisted to revive the warrior tradition and gain social status within their communities.”

The Minister of Militia at the time, Sir Sam Hughes responded to queries about Native involvement in the European campaign thus:

“While British troops would be proud to be associated with their fellow subjects [Indians], yet Germans might refuse to extend to them the privileges of civilized warfare, therefore it is considered...that they had better remain in Canada to share in the protection of the Dominion.”

Furthermore:

“There was also apprehension that including Indians in an expeditionary force could violate treaties, as evidenced by the position of the government during the Boer War. During the negotiations of Treaties 1 through 6 (1871-86) – which covered roughly the southern half of the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and western Ontario – Indian chiefs specifically asked about military service. In October 1873, during the discussions of Treaty 3, governmental representative Alexander Morris was asked by an Ojibwa chief from Fort Frances, Ontario, ‘If you should get into trouble with the nations, I do not wish to walk out and expose my young men to aid you in any of your wars.’ To this Morris replied: ‘The English never call Indians out of their country to fight their battles.”

Yet, Canadian Natives nonetheless participated in the war effort. And though the Canadian attitude eventually relaxed somewhat towards allowing the enlistment of Native (and other non-White) men, at the outbreak of war “Indians” were discouraged from enlisting. “[T]hus, few were accepted for service.”

Halfway through the war, the need for reinforcements altered established norms.

“The stage [of recruitment] from December 1915 to the conclusion of 1916 saw restrictive policies relaxed and formal guidelines issued. By 1916 both ministries [Ministry of Militia and Department of Indian Affairs] were advocating for, and lending support to, Indian recruitment, following the October 1915 British requests for their military employment.”

Generally, however, recruitment of Native men was left up to the battalion commanders.
“The success or failure to attest Indian volunteers, therefore, depended on two factors. The first was the need for battalion commanders to fill their unit quotas. Given the overwhelming response to recruitment, officers had little trouble meeting demands, and, as the statistics show, they filled initial positions with men predominantly of British origins. The second and more likely factor depended on the recruiters’ racial perceptions of Indians with the dichotomy of the noble savage. While many would have viewed Indians with disdain and rejected volunteers, others assumed Indians possessed martial talents and enrolled them accordingly.”

First Nations from across Canada volunteered not only men but also financial support, despite the practice by the Military and Government to initially dissuade Aboriginal participation. “By 24 March 1915 Indian Affairs had received offers of money from Indians across the country totalling $16,968.95.”

Ojibwe people from Ontario (i.e. Saugeen, Cape Croker, Sarnia, Kettle and Stoney Point, Manitoulin Island, Shequiandah and Penetanguishene) offered monies to show support, loyalty, sympathy and respect to the British Flag.

“By the time of the Armistice, donations from Indians [sic] to the various war relief funds totalled more than $44,000 – a sizeable figure for the times. Native women, like other Canadian women, were active in this area. They formed patriotic leagues, Red Cross societies and other charity groups, and then collected clothes, money and food for shipment overseas.”

The need for manpower due to loss of life was tremendous as bloodshed slowed volunteer enlistment, leading to the Canadian enactment of conscription on June 11, 1917. By December 1915, “For the first time in the war, two months after the first British request, Canadian authorities relented and officially allowed Indians into the C.E.F.” Yet at the same time, Black people and Asians were “still unofficially barred from military service.”

Nevertheless, despite this exclusionist policy, many Native men had enlisted prior to the official call. Indeed, “Many of the first Indian soldiers were snipers and scouts, including the famed Ojibwa sniper Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow of the 1st Battalion – the muse for Joseph Boyden’s acclaimed and effectively mainstream, novel Three Day Road 2005.”

Corporal Pegahmagabow “returned home to his Parry Island reserve in 1919, having won the Military Medal three times (one of only thirty-eight Canadians to accomplish this feat) while tallying an unofficial 378 kills and 300 more captured.”

Many Native men proved themselves invaluable as crack-shot snipers:

“Armed with a Ross rifle...men sometimes worked singly, but standard practice was to operate in pairs, one to observe with a telescope or periscope, the other, an expert marksman, ready to shoot. Germans who exposed any part of their body were likely to be fired on, but the highest priority was to locate and eliminate their snipers. Native Indians were among the best of the Canadian sharpshooters who would prove second to none. Natives tended to be patient, steady,
possessed iron nerves and knew how to camouflage themselves so that they could blend with the terrain. A member of the Mississauga tribe, Johnson Paudash (2nd Battalion), brought down 42 Germans – some accounts put the total at 88 – by March 1918. Philip McDonald, an Iroquois from Ontario picked off 40 Germans while Henry “Ducky” Norwest, a Cree, tallied 115 hits...But the deadliest marksman in the Canadian army was Francis “Peg” Pegahmegabow (1st Battalion), who accounted for at least 378 Germans. It is unlikely that any other sniper in either camp approached that total, let alone eclipsed it. 

First Nations men were placed in other roles as well. In an effort to muster a pioneer battalion – one which would perform combat roles as well as minor engineering tasks:

“Lieutenant Colonel Campbell pleaded with authorities to have his battalion re-mustered as a pioneer battalion, citing his Indian soldiers’ ‘ability to adapt themselves without complaint to awkward circumstances and bad weather, which rendered their efficiency as a pioneer battalion far above the average.”

Indeed, despite the place of First Nations communities within the Commonwealth, and the prejudices of military and government officials, First Nations people nonetheless contributed much to the war effort. Due to the great loss of life throughout the war:

“Manpower concerns led to the contentious realization of conscription in August 1917, which initially included Indians. Mandatory service, however, led to a reassessment of their rights and those obligations of the Canadian government under treaties and laws.”

In other words, if a First Nation has active soldiers in the Expeditionary Force, are they considered British, Canadian, or sovereign Natives? How Aboriginal men entered the military was not only a question of personal valor and national pride, but a political dance of an Empire, a colony, and treaty Indians. Indeed, when the Military Services Act (1917) came into effect, many Chiefs and communities wrote letters to the Department of Indian Affairs asking if the conscription of men (when those men were not enfranchised Canadians) was applicable to treaty Indians – because early treaties (like those with the Six Nation Confederacy) stated that Natives were never to be brought out of Canada to fight in British wars, since the Natives were not, in effect, “Canadians.”

It should be known by all Canadians that Canadian First Nations contributed greatly to the war effort in terms of moral support, manpower and money. What follows is a table retrieved from the 52nd Battalion website of First Nations people from that battalion along with transfers, date of death and internment site. Information such as the battle fought in has been added to the list where possible from the book Forgotten Soldiers by Fred Gaffen (1985).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regt. #</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Battalion</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Award or cemetery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>439657</td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Manitobenis (Marcobenis), Antoine</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>17 Aug 1918</td>
<td>Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>784956</td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Maracle, Peter W</td>
<td>129th Bn</td>
<td>03 Oct 1918</td>
<td>Duisans British Cemetery, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>439548</td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Moose, Frederick</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>754976</td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Wabanosse, Michael</td>
<td>119th Bn</td>
<td>26 Aug 1917</td>
<td>Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sergeant</td>
<td>Bouchard, Leo</td>
<td>52nd Bn</td>
<td></td>
<td>Distinguished Conduct Medal Amiens to Cambrai\textsuperscript{xxv}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Kejick, David</td>
<td>52nd Bn</td>
<td></td>
<td>Distinguished Conduct Medal Tilloy. Also spelled Kisek.\textsuperscript{xxvi}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>439699</td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Belanger, Augustin</td>
<td>52nd Bn</td>
<td></td>
<td>Military Medal Ypres\textsuperscript{xxvii}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>439776</td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>DeLarond, Joseph</td>
<td>52nd Bn</td>
<td></td>
<td>Military Medal The Somme. Also spelled De Laronde.\textsuperscript{xxviii}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pte</td>
<td>Godchere, Thomas</td>
<td></td>
<td>17 Sep 1917</td>
<td>Military Medal Vimy Ridge\textsuperscript{xxix}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Port Arthur News Chronicle printed an article, \textit{Twenty Indians in the Ranks of the Fifty-Second} on November 4 1915\textsuperscript{xxx} regarding the Aboriginal men who enlisted. From Red Rock Band: Alex Delaronde, Dennis Delaronde, Joseph Delaronde, Ambrose Martin, Lawrence Martin, Leo Bouchard, Antoine Marcobenis. From Lake Nipigon Band: Joe Odawa. From Frenchman’s Head Band: Alex Chief. From Fort William: Peter Belanger, Augustin Belanger, Frank Michaud, Thomas Louis (with 37\textsuperscript{th}) and Francis Boucher (with 44\textsuperscript{th}). From Lac Seul: Rod Cameron. From Islington Band: J.A.R. Williamson. From Kenora: Chas Beggs. From Fort Nelson: Fred Moose. From Munsee Band: Dan Maddison. And from Dryden: James Loudit. These twenty men were the original Aboriginal men to enlist in the C.E.F. from northwestern Ontario.

In addition, G.F.G. Stanley writes:

“It is worth noting that a number of Indians served in the 52\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion. Twenty Indians were in the ranks of the original Battalion. None of the twenty came home with the Regiment, but others who went overseas with the 94\textsuperscript{th} and the 141\textsuperscript{st} Battalions, C.E.F. were in the ranks of the 52\textsuperscript{nd} when it paraded through the streets when the 52\textsuperscript{nd} returned from overseas. In all, nearly one hundred Indians enlisted with the three C.E.F.
Battalion. One of the originals, Sergeant L. Bouchard, was awarded the D.C.M [Distinguished Conduct Medal]. Private David Kejick was also awarded the D.C.M. for capturing thirty-three prisoners. Private A. Belanger and Private J. DeLarond were awarded Military Medals.\textsuperscript{xxxi}

More recently Janice Summerby (1993) has written that:

“As well, approximately 100 Ojibwa from isolated areas north of Thunder Bay, Ontario made their way to the nearest recruiting centre, in Port Arthur or Fort William. Many of them served in the 52\textsuperscript{nd} Canadian Light Infantry Battalion – and at least six were awarded medals for bravery.”\textsuperscript{xxxii}

T.C. Winegard (2012) states that "sixty-five northern Ontario Ojibwa and Cree" had joined the 52nd (New Ontario) Battalion.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} He also states that, “All thirty-five Ojibwa recruited from Fort William, in northern Ontario, became snipers, including Private Michael Ackabee, whose image graces the cover of [the] book [\textit{For King and Kanata}].\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

Lest we forget.
Command, and, though isolated from the rest of his company and in the midst of a dense fog, he led his men through the enemy barrage to their objective.

(L.G. 3/1916. d. 13-9-17)


iii Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.43


v Winegard, T.C (2012). p.44


viii Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.31

ix Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.48

x Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.45

xi Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.45-6

xii Winegard, T.C (2012). p.9

xiii Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.9

xiv Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.50

xv Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.45-6


xvii Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.61

xviii Ibid.

xix Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.50

xx Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.51


xxiii Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.10

xxiv http://www.52ndbattalion.com/52nd.php?pg=63


xxvi Gaffen, F. (1985). p.18


xxix Ibid.


xxx Stanley, G. (1960). *In the Face of Danger*. Published by the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment. p.39


xxxii Winegard, T.C. (2012). p.73