

## case study

## Aboriginal Peoples and the First World War

Canada's Aboriginal peoples contributed greatly to the war effort, both by giving money to the cause and by volunteering for the armed forces. This was despite the fact that First Nations' land claims were being brought before the government, and they faced racism, bigotry, and poverty. In fact, at the start of the war, the government discouraged Aboriginal peoples from enlisting. Why, then, did they take part in the conflict?

Many Aboriginal peoples felt strongly about their relationship with the British Crown, with which they had signed important agreements. Many were descended from Loyalists who had fought for Britain in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812. In the words of one Aboriginal soldier:

*...[T]he participation of Great Britain in the war has occasioned expressions of loyalty from the Indians, and the offer of contributions from their funds toward the general expenses of the war or toward the Patriotic Fund. Some bands have also offered the services of their warriors if they should be needed.*

—*Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1913–1914*

Young Aboriginal men saw the war as a chance to prove themselves. Most came from isolated communities and thought the war would be an opportunity for adventure. Also, soldiers were paid, so there was an economic incentive for volunteering.

The hunting tradition of many Aboriginal peoples was excellent training for the battlefield, where steady nerves, patience, and good marksmanship made them excellent sharpshooters. Francis Pegahmagabow, an Ojibwa, and Henry Louis Norwest, a Métis, both won Military Medals for their exceptional service as snipers and scouts. Inuit soldier John Shiwak compared sniping to swatching, shooting seals in open water as they popped up to breathe. Often, Aboriginal spiritual traditions went to the Western Front, as recounted by Francis Pegahmagabow:



**FIGURE 2-26** Francis Pegahmagabow won his Military Medal for bravery at Passchendaele.



**FIGURE 2-27** National Aboriginal Veterans Monument in Ottawa

**Thinking Critically** What do you think the various elements of the monument symbolize?

*When I was... on Lake Superior, in 1914, some of us landed from our vessel to gather blueberries near an Ojibwa camp. An old Indian recognized me, and gave me a tiny medicine-bag to protect me, saying that I would shortly go into great danger. Sometimes [the bag] seemed to be as hard as rock, at other times it appeared to contain nothing. What really was inside it I do not know. I wore it in the trenches, but lost it when I was wounded and taken to a hospital.*

—*Francis Pegahmagabow*

In the end, more than 4000 Aboriginal peoples volunteered for service, including nurse Edith Anderson Monture and Boston Marathon winner Tom Longboat, an Onondaga, who served at the Somme.

### Looking Further

1. What motivated Aboriginal peoples to enlist in the First World War? What qualities helped them to excel on the battlefield?
2. Do you think Aboriginal peoples' contribution to the war effort would have been featured in a textbook 50 years ago? Why or why not?