

## **Submission to the Anishinabek News - October 2009 Issue**

**By: Karen Biondi**

**Intergovernmental Affairs**

### **Anishinabek in World War II**

First Nations volunteered to fight in World War Two in numbers which were proportionally higher than any other group in Canada. At least 3000 status First Nations, including 72 women, are known to have enlisted though the real figure is likely much grander. Of these brave fighters there were 17 decorations awarded to this group. It should be noted along with these figures that status First Nations were under no obligation to fight for Canada under their treaties. They volunteered anyway. This act of heroism by First Nations is in slight contrast to the conscription order of 1944; they made the decision willingly while it needed to be mandatory for other Canadians.

The decision to serve in the Canadian Army would be difficult for many First Nations because of the racism they faced. During the first three years of war, they were unable to join the navy or the air force as both had recruitment policies which only allowed for whites of European descent to enroll. On the battlefield however, First Nations shone as many had a keen ear and were excellent marksmen. These skills were not repaid once the First Nation veterans were back in Canada. They were not granted the same benefits or opportunities of other returning soldiers; many received the smallest fraction of what was owed to them (\$2200) which was half of what other soldiers were entitled (\$5500).

Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of the injustice some First Nations faced upon returning home. It was during World War Two, in the year 1942, that Canada used the War Measures Act to take the land from the Stoney Point First Nation. The government claimed the land was needed to build an "Advanced Infantry Centre". The residents were moved off the land with little ceremony and Camp Ipperwash was quickly erected in their vacancy. For Anishinabek men and women who had volunteered to go to Europe to fight for Canada, the return home became more of a readjustment than any other soldier could likely imagine since they no longer had a home to go to.

The bravery of these First Nation men and women was not overlooked by Justice Linden. In his final report of the Ipperwash Inquiry, he stated: "What I find so disturbing in reviewing the evidence of this appropriation is the stark contrast between the ease with which First Nations people gave their loyalty and trust to the government and the ease with which the government of Canada betrayed that trust....at the time of the appropriation, many of the Kettle and Stoney Point men were overseas, serving in the armed forces."

Though the land has now been returned to Stony Point, many First Nations are still fighting for the benefits they earned while fighting for Canada overseas. It wasn't until November 11, 1992, that First Nation war veterans were allowed to place a wreath at the cenotaph during services as opposed to having to wait for the service to conclude to be allowed to do so. It is intensely evident that there is

much progress to be made to recognize the valour, bravery and courage it took for First Nations to stand and fight for a country that did not value or recognize their service equally.