



Joseph Bamberg (left) and George Black, from the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve, were two of at least 4,000 Canadian Indians who left their homes to join the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War. (Woodland Cultural Centre)



Lt. James Moses of Oshkosh, on the Six Nations Reserve, served in both the infantry and air services. In 1918, the aircraft from which he was observing was shot down over France. Both pilot and observer were reported missing in action. (Bass Moses)

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

For four short years our sons fought in European trenches beside their sons, our blood mingled with theirs, as for four hundred years in a different way our bloods had mingled. Five thousands of our Native brothers and now grandfathers saw the European homeland through the sights of rifles and the roar of cannon. Hundreds are buried in that soil, away from the lands of their birth. These Native warriors accounted well for themselves, and the Allied cause. ... They were courageous, intelligent and proud carriers of the shield.⁶

THE RESPONSE

THOUSANDS VOLUNTEER

One in three: That was the proportion of able-bodied Canadian Indian men, of age to serve, who enlisted during the First World War.⁷ Many Natives lived in isolated areas of the country, where the guns of Europe were especially distant. Nevertheless, approximately 4,000 Canadian Indians left their homes and families to help fight an international war that raged in European battlefields.

One year into the war, Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Superintendent General of the Department of Indian Affairs, informed Parliament of the Indian response:

I have pleasure in drawing attention to the fact that the 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.⁸

Over the next five years, Scott would make similar statements in each of Indian Affairs' annual reports, as his employees across the country noted increases in both the number of Indian recruits and the amount of money donated by reserve communities.

Despite these reports, the total number of Native volunteers is unknown.⁹ In late 1915, regional officials of the Department of Indian Affairs were instructed to complete and submit "Return of Indians, Enlistments" forms. However, in his annual reports, Scott stated that not all of the Indian recruits had been identified. Furthermore, since his department's main concern was Status Indians, its records rarely took into account the number of Inuit, Métis and other Canadian Natives who signed up. Enlistments in the territories and in Newfoundland (which had not yet entered Confederation) were also