

Thomas George Prince

(1915-1977)



Thomas George Prince or Tommy Prince, as he is more popularly known, was a war hero and Indigenous activist. He is one of Canada's most decorated Indigenous war heroes. At his funeral, he was honoured by the province of Manitoba, the Canadian, French, Italian and United States governments.

Territory Acknowledgment

Thomas George Prince was born in Treaty One territory, in an area now known as Pertersfield, Manitoba. The main reserve is the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation and Anishinaabe (Saulteaux/Ojibwa) First Nation located northeast of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Government of Canada promised to honour the rights of the Indigenous people on this land under the Treaty One agreement. The government has not upheld their treaty promises. Treaty One was signed by the Anishinaabe and Muskegon Cree peoples. Treaty One is especially important because it was the first of the 11 treaties made between 1871 and 1921. It was made with the understanding that the Treaty would be in place for "as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the river flows." 2021 marked 150 years since the signing of Treaty One.

Early Life and Military Career

Thomas George Prince was one of Harry and Elizabeth Prince's 11 children. He was a great grandson of the famous Saulteau chief, Chief Peguis. He attended the Elkhorn Residential School until eighth grade. His father was a trapper and hunter and taught him to be an excellent marksman while on the reserve.

Prince applied a number of times to join the Canadian military but was turned down because Indigenous people faced a lot of racism. He was later accepted to enlist in the early years of the Second World War.

By June of 1940, he was assigned to the first Field Park Company of the Royal Canadian Engineers. By 1942, he was promoted to sergeant with the Canadian Parachute Battalion. He was selected as part of a special force to train with an American unit nicknamed the "Devil's Brigade." Prince was exceptional as he used the skills he had learned as a marksman from his father while growing up on the reserve.

Thoughtful consideration has been taken to ensure we pay respect to Indigenous peoples in our resources, with Truth and Reconciliation as our mission.

He volunteered for a special mission in Italy in 1944, where he ran a communication line from an abandoned farmhouse to a location very close to a German artillery location. He spent three days in the farmhouse relaying German movements back to his unit. The wire was damaged at one point. Prince disguised himself as a farmer, pretending to do work around the farmhouse and went to fix the damaged wire. German soldiers had no idea. He notoriously even shook his fist at both the Germans and also at his own allies as though he was annoyed by both groups and their fighting. The Germans had no idea, which resulted in the destruction of four German tanks.

In the summer of 1944, Prince led his brigade to a German encampment which resulted in the capture of more than a thousand German soldiers.

Medals

Once the fighting in France was over, King George VI invited Thomas Prince to France to award him with the Military Medal. He was also given the American Silver Star and ribbon on behalf of the American president. He was also awarded the Italy, France and Germany Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp, the War Medal and the Defence Medal. In 1945, he was honourably discharged from the military and returned to Canada.

Racism and Struggles

Despite his service and war medals, on his return to Canada, he still experienced racism. As an Indigenous man, he was not allowed to vote in federal elections. He was also denied the same benefits as other Canadian veterans. Facing unemployment and experiencing discrimination, Thomas Prince re-enlisted in the military, serving with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI).

He trained new recruits to fight in the Korean War and then was a member of the first unit to land in Korea. He led a raid that captured two enemy machine guns. He was injured, spent time in hospital, healed and then returned to Korea for a second tour. He was wounded again however, ending up in the hospital the last time when the Korean Armistice was called in 1953.

Back in Canada again, Prince dedicated his life to increasing education and academic opportunities for Indigenous people. He married and had five children.

