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## THE CREE CODE TALKERS

During World War II, many Indigenous men from Canada chose to enlist in the armed forces for various reasons. Some saw it as a chance to gain opportunities for themselves and their people, and to further the cause of Indigenous rights. However, not all Indigenous men felt this way, as some believed that the war was a “white man's war” and not their concern. Despite their willingness to get involved, non-white men, including Indigenous soldiers, faced discrimination within Canada's defense organizations. The Navy and Air Force only accepted people of white ancestry until 1942-1943, while the majority of Indigenous soldiers were channeled into the Canadian Army. Despite these challenges, an estimated 4,300 soldiers of Indigenous origin joined the armed forces during the Second World War.

Among those who enlisted, a small group of Cree individuals from various Canadian First Nations were selected for a secret mission in London. The mission – born out of the observation of Native soldiers speaking to each other in the field – was to use Native languages as code. The Cree community, in particular, was targeted because many of them spoke both English and one of the five dialects of the Cree language. These men became code-transmitters for the Allied army, using their language – because it was unknown to enemy forces – to

communicate vital information that the Axis forces couldn't decode. This gave the Allies a significant advantage in terms of attacks, movements, and strategies.



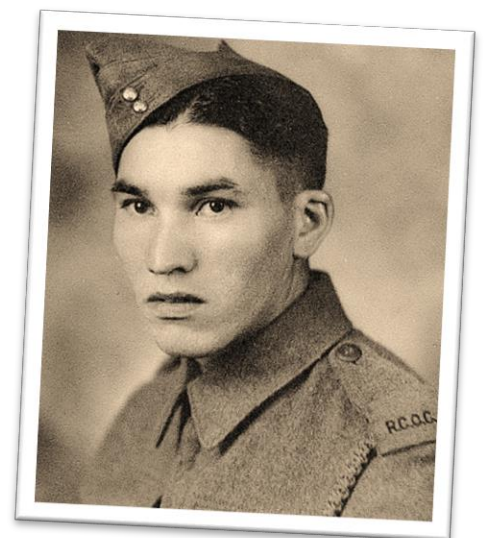
The process was simple: a Cree transmitter would translate information from English into Cree, and another Cree transmitter would translate it back into English. Sometimes, the Cree words would suffice, like calling a Mosquito bomber a “sakimes” – the

Cree word for “mosquito”. Sometimes, though, they had to repurpose existing words in the Cree language to describe things like Mustang aircraft (called “pakwatastim,” meaning “wild horses”) or Spitfire aircraft (called “iskotew,” meaning “fire”).

While the contributions of the Cree Code Talkers were instrumental in the Allies' victory, they and their stories remained largely unknown for many years. The secrecy surrounding their mission and the lack of recognition for Indigenous veterans have contributed to this. It is important to take the time to recognize and honour the Indigenous soldiers, including the Cree Code Talkers, for their sacrifice and contribution to the country. Steps have been taken to recognize Indigenous veterans, but there is still work to be done in ensuring they receive the recognition they deserve.

## Charles “Checker” Tomkins

Charles "Checker" Tomkins was a Canadian Métis code talker who played a crucial role in the Second World War. Born in Grouard, Alberta, in 1918, Tomkins grew up in a family that valued the Cree language. His parents and grandparents taught him to speak Cree fluently, which later made him a prime candidate for the code talker program. In 1940, after marrying Lena Anderson, Tomkins enlisted in the armed forces; after six months of training, he was shipped overseas to Britain.



One day, he was summoned by the Canadian High Command. No one, not even his commanding officer – his boss – knew why.

Checker was told about a top-secret mission that they military wanted him for – the Cree Code Talker program for the Air Force. He helped develop a Cree-language code to report aircraft sightings, which made it difficult for the enemy to monitor and decipher Allied transmissions. Tomkins served in the military for 25 years, earning the rank of corporal. For his wartime service, he was awarded several medals, including the Defence Medal and the War Medal 1939-1945.

As a code talker, Tomkins played a vital role in transmitting top-secret Allied military communications. The Cree language was used as a secret weapon to hide information about troops and supplies from the enemy. Tomkins and his fellow code talkers translated messages containing important information about Allied forces, such as troop movements and supply lines. The messages were coded in Cree, making it impossible for the Germans to understand them. Tomkins served with the US 8th Air Force and the 9th Bomber Command in England,

where he carried out his duties as a code talker. His work was so highly classified that he was under orders not to tell anyone, even his own family, for decades. It wasn't until Tomkins was interviewed at the age of 85 that his story as a code talker became known. His top-secret job as a code talker is still a secret to many Canadians, but it's an important part of our history that should be shared and remembered.



The story of Charles "Checker" Tomkins and the other Cree code talkers is a fascinating and important part of Canadian history. Their contributions during the Second World War were invaluable and helped the Allied forces secure victory. Despite the secrecy surrounding their work, efforts are being made to recognize and honour the code talkers. A documentary called "Cree Code Talker" tells the story of Charles Tomkins and his involvement with the US Air Force and the development of the code talkers communication system. It is important to remember and share the stories of individuals like

Tomkins, who played a significant role in protecting our freedom and ensuring the success of the Allied forces during the war.

## **Danger! Danger!**

The Cree Code Talkers were Indigenous Canadians who came from a long tradition of warriors. For thousands of years, First Nations men have protected their communities and lands. They were regarded with the utmost respect in their communities and were trained from an early age to develop the strength needed to become warriors. Many tribes had special warrior societies with their own ceremonies, songs, dances, and regalia. It was a great honour to be chosen to join these societies.

Despite the hardships that Indigenous Canadians had endured in the past, many of them felt called to serve in the Canadian military during World War II. They cared about their communities and the lands on which their people had lived for thousands of years. Some wanted the benefits of regular food, clothing, and payment. Others saw it as a chance to escape difficult situations, like being in a residential school. And, of course, some also served out of a sense of patriotism, wanting to defend Canada.



During World War II, the Code Talkers faced many dangers as they served their country and the Allied forces. These brave individuals developed and memorized a special code that was used to transmit important messages. They played a critical role in several important campaigns and are credited with saving thousands of Canadian and Allied lives. The Cree Code Talkers endured some of the most dangerous battles and remained calm under fire. They served with honour and distinction, proving their intelligence and bravery.

The dangers faced by code talkers extended beyond the battlefield. Indigenous soldiers were often placed in dangerous positions as scouts, point men, and snipers due to stereotypes about their natural warrior abilities. Many Indigenous soldiers volunteered for these dangerous assignments to fulfill military expectations, follow their tribal military heritage, and boost their own self-confidence. As a result, a high percentage of Indigenous soldiers were wounded and killed in combat. Despite their sacrifices, the contributions of Indigenous soldiers were often overshadowed by the white man in history.

The code talkers faced additional challenges due to racial discrimination. Indigenous people who enlisted in the armed forces experienced racially biased recruitment policies, with the majority funneled into the Canadian Army instead of the Royal Canadian Air Force or the Royal Canadian Navy. The federal government's policy of conscription – the mandating of military training and service – was met with opposition in Indigenous communities, as they believed prior treaties exempted them from compulsory military duty. Limited exemptions were only granted to recruits covered by specific treaties in 1944. Despite these challenges, Indigenous recruits played a crucial role in the war effort and traveled from Canada to England for their postings.

The Cree Code Talkers played a crucial role in World War II by using their Indigenous languages to transmit vital information to the Allied forces. Their contributions improved the speed of encryption and decryption of communications, and helped give the Allies a significant advantage, ensuring the safety and success of military operations. While today, the term “code talker” is strongly associated with the Navajo code talkers, it is imperative to recognize the important contributions made by the Canadian Cree Code Talkers.



Their role in secret communication during wartime highlights the importance of Indigenous languages and the unique skills that Canadian Indigenous communities possess. The code talkers' ability to assert their sovereignty through their language and contribute to the success of the Canadian military and Allied forces showcases the resilience and strength of Indigenous

peoples. It is important to recognize and honour the bravery and sacrifices of these Indigenous soldiers, who asserted their sovereignty and fought for their communities during a challenging time in history. Their bravery and sacrifices are a source of pride for Indigenous communities and all Canadians.

Today, Indigenous communities continue to assert their sovereignty and contribute their knowledge and skills to various fields, including the military. Their rich history and cultural heritage are valued and respected, and efforts are made to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and research methodologies in contemporary practices. In the name of Truth and Reconciliation, it is up to all Canadians to learn and share the stories of the brave Indigenous men, who for so long, had been all but forgotten.

## Vocabulary

Using prior knowledge and context clues from the reading, match the vocabulary word in the first column with the definition in the second column.

___ Axis	a. convert a coded message into understandable language
___ Allies	b. to join or enroll in the armed forces
___ compulsory	c. a person or thing that conducts information
___ conscription	d. the alliance of Britain, France, and Canada during WWII
___ decipher	e. the alliance of Germany, Italy, and Japan during WWII
___ decryption	f. required by or as if by law
___ dialect	g. released from some requirement that others must meet
___ encryption	h. convert information into a code to prevent unauthorized access
___ enlist	i. when a government forces people to join the armed forces
___ exemption	j. a form of a language spoken by a group of people
___ transmitter	k. convert coded information back into its original form

## Multiple Choice

1. What role did the code talkers play in World War II?
  - a. The code talkers played a crucial role in improving the speed of encryption and decryption of communications.
  - b. The code talkers played a vital role in recruiting Indigenous soldiers for the war effort.
  - c. The code talkers played a significant role in developing new codes for communication.
  - d. The code talkers played a minor role in supporting the Navy and Air Force.
  
2. What was the advantage of using the Cree language for code talking?
  - a. The Cree language was easy to learn and understand.
  - b. The Axis forces were unable to decipher the messages.
  - c. The Cree Code Talkers had extensive training in code talking.
  - d. The Cree language was widely spoken by the Allied forces.
  
3. What challenges did Indigenous soldiers face when enlisting in the Canadian armed forces during World War II?
  - a. They were not welcomed by Canadian defense organizations.
  - b. They were only allowed to enlist in the Navy and Air Force.
  - c. They had to learn English before enlisting.
  - d. They were not physically fit for military service.
  
4. How did the Cree Code Talkers' contribution to the war effort impact Indigenous communities in Canada?
  - a. Their efforts helped end discrimination against Indigenous peoples.
  - b. Their success led to increased respect for Indigenous languages and cultures.
  - c. Their role in the war effort was largely ignored by the Canadian government.
  - d. Their contribution had no impact on Indigenous communities.

5. Why did some Indigenous people in Canada have mixed feelings about enlisting in World War II?
  - a. Because they believed it was a “white man’s war” and not their concern.
  - b. Because they saw it as an opportunity to fight for Indigenous rights.
  - c. Because they were not allowed to enlist in the war.
  - d. Because they primarily served in the Canadian Army.
  
6. Why was Charles “Checker” Tomkins chosen as a code talker?
  - a. Because he had a strong background in linguistics.
  - b. Because he was fluent in the Cree language.
  - c. Because he helped develop a secret code.
  - d. Because he had previous experience working with the military.
  
7. How did the use of Indigenous languages in World War II impact the preservation of Indigenous cultures?
  - a. The use of languages in the war accelerated the loss of Indigenous cultures.
  - b. The use of Indigenous languages in the war had no impact on the preservation of Indigenous cultures.
  - c. The use of Indigenous languages in the war helped preserve Indigenous languages and cultures by highlighting their importance.
  - d. The use of Indigenous languages in the war caused some Indigenous communities to abandon their languages.
  
8. Why is it important to recognize and honour the contributions of Indigenous soldiers in World War II?
  - a. Because they were the most skilled soldiers in the war.
  - b. Because they were the only soldiers who could speak multiple languages.
  - c. Because they were the first to develop a communications code for the military.
  - d. Because they fought for their communities and asserted their sovereignty.

