

Tommy Prince

The 1st Special Service Force, a joint Canadian-American group of elite paratroopers, arrived in Italy in November 1943. Taking on the most difficult and dangerous assignments, this force developed such a fearsome reputation that German soldiers started calling them the “Devil’s Brigade.” Among the best of this group was Sergeant Tommy Prince.

Thomas George Prince was born on October 25, 1915, and grew up as part of the Brokenhead First Nation at Scanterbury, Manitoba. Prince was a descendant of Peguis, the Saulteaux Chief who, in the 1790s, led a band of about 200 Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) from the present-day Sault Ste. Marie region to the Red River region in Manitoba.

In June 1940, Thomas Prince was finally accepted in the Canadian army, after having been denied entry several times due to discrimination by recruiters. After doing well as a field engineer with the Royal Canadian Engineers and then moving to the Canadian Parachute Battalion, Prince was selected to train with the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion. Shortly after he joined, the battalion joined with an elite American battalion, and together they formed the 1st Special Service Force: a group of 1600 highly skilled soldiers.

One of the most famous incidents showing Prince’s bravery happened when the force was sent to Italy. Prince was in an abandoned farmhouse just 200 metres from the German line. He was watching German movements and telephoning the information to his unit. When shelling cut the communication line, Prince used ingenuity and courage to solve the problem. He dressed as a farmer, picked up a hoe, and walked into the field in full view of the Germans. Finding the broken wire, he bent down and, pretending to tie his shoe, reconnected the wire. He then calmly returned to the farmhouse and continued his surveillance work.

For his action, Prince was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field. Among the many other medals he won was the Silver Star, an American award for gallantry, which he received for his work in France.

Despite the recognition of his selfless acts, Prince returned to Canada at the end of the war to find that, as an Aboriginal veteran, he would not have the same benefits as other Canadian veterans. In 1946, he became chairman of the Manitoba Indian Association, where he tried to improve the living conditions of First Nations people and lobbied for changes to the *Indian Act*. Frustrated by the lack of action from the federal government, he reenlisted with United Nations troops during the Korean War and was awarded for his service.

Tommy Prince remains the most decorated First Nations soldier in Canada. He died on November 25, 1977. Many programs have been named in his honour, such as the Tommy Prince Scholarship from the Assembly of First Nations and the Tommy Prince Army Training Initiative from the Department of National Defence.

Figure 13-15 Sergeant Tommy Prince (right) stands with his brother, Private Morris Prince, at Buckingham Palace in England, where King George VI presented Tommy Prince with the Military Medal at a special ceremony on February 12, 1945.



EXPLORATIONS

1. Although Tommy Prince’s work with the Manitoba Indian Association did not stop government discrimination against First Nations people, many would argue that Prince did help change discriminatory government policies. Explain how Prince could be seen as a cause of change.
2. Research another First Nations, Métis, or Inuit soldier in the Canadian military who was recognized for bravery during the Second World War. Write a short biography of his or her accomplishments, and share your findings with your class.