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MILITARY SERVICE AND SERVING THE COMMUNITY: HOW THE SECOND WORLD WAR PROPELLED ACTIVISM FORWARD FOR INDIGENOUS AND NATIVE AMERICAN SERVICEWOMEN

ISABELLA SUN

The Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT), originally named the Native American Indian Club of Toronto, was founded in 1950 by community volunteers – the majority of whom were Indigenous women.[1] The club was founded to build a network and create an inclusive social space through shared culture, art, and language in Toronto. Indigenous women-led organizations such as the NCCT were not uncommon to find after the Second World War, since the wartime era empowered many Indigenous women to find and create their place in society. Today, the NCCT continues to prioritize Indigenous community building through promoting traditional knowledge and culture through language courses, art classes, and other events. Although this centre is unrelated to the war effort, it can be considered a by-product of Indigenous empowerment after the

[1] Heather Howard-Bobiwash, "Women's Class Strategies as Activism in Native Community Building in Toronto, 1950-1975," *American Indian Quarterly* 27, no.3/4, (2003): p.106.

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Second World War. Whether Indigenous women voluntarily enlisted or not, the war changed the daily realities of these many women. This article will explore similar themes of Indigenous servicewomen's experiences throughout the Second World War and afterwards in Canada, and compare it with those of Native American servicewomen in the United States. It will highlight how their service affected post-war actions and activism for Indigenous rights in the latter twentieth century.

Indigenous women's experience serving in the military during the Second World War was empowering since they experienced equality in uniform and were provided with an opportunity to travel, earn a living, and further their education. In contrast, after the war, and despite these servicewomen being honoured and seen as "good Indians" for their participation in the war effort, post-war laws and veteran benefits were difficult to navigate as they faced racial and gender discrimination. Due to this juxtaposition, the war served as a catalyst for Indigenous and Native American women's activism since their military experience proved that it was possible to be treated as an equal in a settler-state society. By examining the experiences of Indigenous and Native American servicewomen throughout and after the Second World War, this article demonstrates how the contrast between their military service and life as a native veteran propelled activism forward for a variety of Indigenous issues in the latter twentieth century. Although the term "activism" is normally associated with large widespread movements that work towards a unified goal, it can take place at many levels for various causes. Some examples of Indigenous women's activism after the Second World War were women creating community spaces and groups for Indigenous veterans, women advocating for health regulations for their communities at the state and provincial level, or even women fighting to revoke battle honours of soldiers who killed Native American people at the federal level.

While the Canadian and American militaries and federal governments are very distinct organizations, their qualities as settler colonial societies in close proximity provide many similarities in their treatment of their Indigenous and Native American

members. Moreover, while the military can provide positive experiences through feelings of empowerment and belonging, it is important to recognize that sexism against women and systemic racism against people of colour continues to be present in military culture today. Likewise, the military was, and continues to be, a tool used by settler governments to forcibly displace, silence, and control Indigenous and Native American populations.

As this article attempts to tell the story of these women, the current historiography on Indigenous and Native American servicewomen proved itself to be a challenge. The percentage of known Indigenous and Native American servicewomen is very small compared to the entire war effort – therefore, what was not written about them is equally as important as what is written about them. This includes government legislation, Indigenous grievances, and federal post-war commemoration. Additionally, the role of interviews and newspapers was also integral to the writing of this article to support primary source resources from government institutions. Through these sources, there are many evident patterns within the experiences of these servicewomen and the continuity into veteran hood. The lack of representation within scholarly research for Indigenous servicewomen's experiences in the Second World War means that this article does not aim to encapsulate every woman's experience. Instead, it aims to showcase the military from the perspective of another community, and how it affects post-war society.

The term Indigenous refers to the three groups of people that are Indigenous to Canada – First Nations, Inuit, and Metis, not just Status Indians. Although not all three were recognized by Canada in 1939, they are today. The term Native American refers to any American who self-identifies as such and is affiliated with a tribe. These are very specific concepts, as both Canadian and U.S. federal governments have historically used blood quantum to decide who could identify as Indigenous or Native American, therefore deciding who could receive treaty rights. This is contradictory to Indigenous and Native American values since many tribes and bands use culture, knowledge, and education as values that contribute to identity, rather than blood quantum.

The comparison between veterans' experiences in Canada and the United States is valuable since it demonstrates how two settler states treated their Indigenous populations similarly during the war. Despite the global conflict, the federal agenda of both countries was to enfranchise and assimilate through military policy. The practice of enfranchisement was extremely detrimental to Indigenous people in Canada since it stripped them of specific rights granted by the Canadian government under the *Indian Act*. Stripping them of their Status meant terminating any benefits the individual could receive from treaties granted prior to confederation as well as the *Indian Act*. This expelled them from their bands and reserves, effectively forcing them to assimilate into the settler state. It also included the loss of land claims and various forms of social security. Enfranchisement ruptured many family and cultural ties and was destructive to an individual's identity, well-being, and to the cultural health of the Indigenous peoples as a whole.

The United States did not enfranchise their Native population the way the Canadian government did since they did not have the same status system in the 1940s; they had other tactics – such as denying them tribal sovereignty and forcing conscription onto men – to assimilate Native people into the settler state. Regardless of the different policy structures between Canada and the United States, this comparison demonstrates how both settler states had the same goals, but different tactics. Military participation during the Second World War came with hardships and many strings attached for Indigenous and Native American women but simultaneously empowered them for their post-war lives. The opportunities they gained through the war years demonstrated that they should not be treated as second class citizens, and empowered them to fight for issues that are still held close to Indigenous communities today. This work will look at women's war experiences and how it affected their later activism in four sections. First, it will explore enlistment which demonstrates the overall treatment and view that settler society had on Indigenous women. Second, it will look at their experiences during the war and how it created opportunities for them that did not exist otherwise. The third

section will explore the post-war treatment of Indigenous women in both countries, which mirrors that of their enlistment. Finally, the last section will show the different ways women created their own forms of activism in post-war society.

ENLISTMENT IN CANADA

In Canada, the statistics of Indigenous servicewomen who enlisted during the Second World War are inaccurate as getting recorded as Indigenous depended on whom the state thought qualified as Indigenous at the time. Officially, there were 3,000 Indigenous men and 72 Indigenous women who enlisted in the Second World War.[2] This number is likely to be higher – to declare oneself as Indigenous at the time of enlistment, one had to be a Status Indian. According to the *Indian Act*, one had to be a "male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band, any child of such person, any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person."[3] This conflicted with how Indigenous people self-identified because they valued culture and knowledge more than blood quantum. Moreover, there are many Indigenous communities that function as matriarchal societies, in which their lineage is passed through their mother's side. This definition deeply affected Indigenous women and their children, since they were more likely to be enfranchised and unable to pass their Status on. Additionally, the Canadian government has historically not recognized Metis and Inuit people as those who qualify for Indian Status, which further reduced the number of people who can identify at the time of enlistment. Therefore, between the *Indian Act*-set limitations on Status eligibility and the exclusion of Metis and Inuit people, not every Indigenous person was accounted for in the statistics. In addition, some would choose not to self-identify. For example,

[2]The National Aboriginal Veterans Association, "Service and Alliance Re-Examined: Unity, Dignity, and Healing," *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (October 1993).

[3] Indian Act, R.S.C. 1927, c. 98.

Dorothy Chartrand – a Metis woman – was one of the first Indigenous women to enlist in the Canadian military and she purposefully did not self-identify as Metis in fear of racist treatment. This could have come in the form of rejection from the military or the loss of veterans' benefits. Moreover, many Indigenous servicewomen were forcefully enfranchised by the government after enlisting and failed to receive veterans' benefits after the war.[4] Chartrand's experience is not unique, as she is one of the many Indigenous women who were not included in enlistment data. Many were unwilling, or unable, to identify at the time of enlistment for fear of losing their rights as Status Indians or simply for fear of racism.

Furthermore, the low enlistment numbers for Indigenous women are also due to the fact Indian Agents mainly recruited men, as they were unsure as to whether Indigenous women belonged in the military. Recruiters never focused on women, Indigenous or not, due to many factors that made them ineligible, such as being married with a dependent child.[5] In fact, Canadian policy makers and military strategists were not keen on letting women enlist until 1941, when it became harder to recruit male volunteers. Two years into the war, it was "far more acceptable to mobilize women who were eager to participate…than enlist men who were unwilling."[6] Therefore, Indigenous women enlisted later in the war and were more likely to volunteer when the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) toured and recruited on reserves, or after seeing federal propaganda. An example of propaganda is when the military advertised a picture of Private Mary Greyeyes-Reid, a Cree soldier, being blessed by a "chief" dressed in traditional wear prior to committing to the CWAC.[7] This photo was used to entice other

[4] Judy M. Iseke, "Critical Events: Métis Servicewomen's WWII Stories with Dorothy Chartrand," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 33, no.2 (2013): p. 48.

[5] Iseke, "Critical Events," 48.

[6] Emerald R. Archer, *Women, Warfare and Representation: American Servicewomen in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 77.

[7] Unknown, "Private Mary Greyeyes, Cree, from Muskeg Lake, Cree Nation, Canadian Women's Army Corps, with Harry Ball, Piapot First Nation," Department of National Defence, September 1942.

Indigenous women to join; however, it was an orchestrated photo in which a man posed for twenty-five dollars, and Greyeyes-Reid's dinner was paid for.[8] These performative actions showcased honourable treatment towards Indigenous women who volunteered to serve, but did nothing to address discrimination and barriers they faced throughout enlistment. For example, a CWAC volunteer was to have "exemplary character and possess suitable temperament" and a good "appearance and general smartness."[9] This can be extremely difficult for Indigenous women because of the decades of "lazy Indian" stereotypes projected and reinforced by the Canadian settler state. Regardless, Indigenous women were more likely to join the CWAC instead of the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division (RCAF WD) or the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRENS) since the latter organizations required servicewomen to be a "British subject, of white race."[10] This requirement was removed in 1941; however, there remained education requirements that Indigenous women did not normally have the opportunity to meet prior to the war. In addition, the Navy was reluctant to remove the race requirement, since as "the smallest of the three-armed forces, [it] never had a problem finding recruits."[11] This is no different for the requirement for male enlistment since the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force upheld the same requirements for men. Although women were not the priority in the recruitment strategy of the Canadian military, settler women had the option to join if they wanted prior to 1941, whereas Indigenous women had extra barriers based on race and educational background. The lower number of Indigenous women in the RCAF WD and WRENS, as well as the low numbers in the CWAC demonstrate that Indigenous people and people of colour were not seen as the prime candidates for the military until ultimately deemed necessary, even in a time of warfare. These restrictions, along with being unable or unwilling to self-

[8] Grace Poulin, *Invisible Women: WWII Aboriginal Servicewomen in Canada* (Thunder Bay: DG Poulin, 2007), p.156.

[9] Archer, *Women, Warfare and Representation,* p.78.

[10] Iseke, "Critical Events," 38.

[11] Matthias Joost, "Racism and Enlistment: The Second World War Policies of the Royal Canadian Air Force," *Canadian Military History* 21, no. 1 (2015), p.19.

identify, contribute to the low participation statistics of Indigenous women. Realistically, there were a lot more women who participated that are not accounted for.

ENLISTMENT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The process of enlistment for Native Americans in the United States was very similar to Canada's. In fact, the driving factor behind Native American women's enlistment were the effects of the Great Depression on tribal territory. Throughout the 1930s, Native American communities were affected by the closure of schools and medical clinics, and droughts that occurred in the early twentieth century which affected livelihoods and community health.[12] Despite the United States' later entry into the war, the outbreak of the Second World War offered an opportunity for women to earn a living and support their families at a time where resources were scarce. Despite "women's newly won suffrage and civic participation"[13] being one of the main themes of the American woman's experience prior to the Second World War, this was inapplicable to Native American women since they were not granted the right to vote or become citizens of the United States, making them ineligible for military service. While a small number of Native women – exceptionally – served in the First World War, society's full acceptance of Native women to the war effort was very significant. This is due to the stronger need for a workforce during the Second World War that provided a mass opportunity for Native American women to become employed, whereas white women were able to do so in the previous war. This inclusion was very empowering for many Native American women since it provided the financial opportunity they needed after the Great Depression. However, similar to Canada, the enlistment statistics of Native American servicewomen were inaccurate. According to data from the United States Armed Forces, approximately twenty-five thousand Native Americans enlisted, eight hundred of them being women. The statistics are likely higher, but the federal government lacked a legal

[12] R. Scott Sheffield and Noah Riseman, *Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War: The Politics, Experiences and Legacies of War in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2p. 40.

[13] Archer, *Women, Warfare and Representation,* p. 19.

definition of who can identify as "Native American."[14] In fact, various acts enacted by Congress prevented Native people from identifying as such. For example, in 1924, the *Citizenship Act* was enacted, making all Native American people born in the United States citizens. There were many groups that were in opposition to this act, such as the Seminole tribe and the Iroquois Confederacy, because they never consented to citizenship and it was detrimental to their identity and sovereignty. Moreover, the *Nationality Act* of 1944 erased all rights that Native Americans had prior to any treaty signed with the federal government.[15] This was detrimental to their identity as Native American since they were stripped of the rights they received from the federal government and were unable to identify as Native American at the time of enlistment. This not only removes them from their tribe, but it is likely that most Native Americans would not be recorded as such if they enlisted after 1944. These laws targeting the Native population demonstrated the federal government's continuous agenda to assimilate the Native population into the settler state society, whether it was conscientious and deliberate or not. This was slightly different from Canada's policies since Canada did not have official citizenship until 1947. [16] Rather than officially making Indigenous peoples in Canada citizens, they stripped them of treaty rights and Status rights to enfranchise them. The Canadian and American federal governments had similar tactics to reach the same end goal. Moreover, neither recognized the sovereignty and identity of the Native populations in the settler state, and despite their sacrifice for the colonial state, they attempted to assimilate them.

In brief, the Second World War was significant to both Indigenous and Native American women since they were able to take advantage of the advancement of women's participation in the workforce and society. Although the enlistment process proved difficult to many, the fact that they were able to participate was empowering – to

[14] Sheffield and Riseman, *Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War*, p. 64.

[15] Lin Poyer, *War at the Margins: Indigenous Experiences in World War II* (University of Hawaii Press, 2022), p. 15.

[16] "Canadian Citizenship Act, 1947," Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, Canada, 10 February 2023. https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-citizenship-act-1947

volunteer meant to earn a salary, receive training, and education, which was an opportunity that many Indigenous and Native American women did not have prior to the Second World War. Despite these women's sacrifices, both Canadian and American federal governments sought to enfranchise and assimilate their Indigenous populations.

REASONS TO SERVE

There were many Indigenous and Native American women who persisted and served despite the many barriers they faced to enlist. There were many reasons to serve regardless of the discrimination that lay ahead. In fact, many Canadian government sources stated that Indigenous women served, and presently serve, for the monarch and their country. This is an exaggeration – like their male and white counterparts, they chose to enlist since it offered work, education, travel, and a sense of community with their people.[17] Moreover, in 1939, the sense of pride and patriotism in Canada was almost non-existent; many French-Canadian settlers and Anglo-Canadian settlers felt more of a bond to their own communities and enlisted more for their own reasons than the nation's at large.[18] In reality, enlisting provided an opportunity to travel and a salary. This was unusual for Indigenous women, as their communities disproportionately suffered from the consequences of the Great Depression due to the lack of resources on reserves, as well as racial prejudices that impeded them from job opportunities.[19] However, it does not mean that women's motivation to join was purely economic. For example, two Indigenous women in Canada had two different stories. Virginia Pechawis of Mistawasis

[17] Sheffield and Riseman, *Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War,* p. 90.

[18] Robert Engen, *Strangers in Arms: Combat Motivation in the Canadian Army, 1943-1945* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2016), 199.

[19] R. Scott Sheffield, *The Red Man's on the Warpath: The Image of the "Indian" and the Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 16.

enlisted because the military offered her an escape from her father whom she did not get along with.[20] In contrast, in an interview with Irene Hoff from Odanak, Hoff stated that she had two brothers in the U.S. forces and volunteered to go overseas because she wanted to take the nursing and first aid courses the military offered.[21] Other Indigenous women joined because their friends dared them, or participated for a sense of community within their own people.[22] The Canadian government saw enlistment as "an opportunity to demonstrate [Indigenous] loyalty to the King and Queen,"[23] however, the previous reasons demonstrated that Indigenous women had their own reasons unrelated to the colonial state – similar to the motives of Indigenous men and their white counterparts.

Although the Canadian and American federal governments encouraged Indigenous and Native American women living in Canada and the U.S. to enlist, it does not mean that either government supported them in return. The war provided an opportunity for both governments to use the shrinking federal budget to rid themselves of the responsibilities of the American Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Indian Affairs.[24] Therefore, despite their sacrifice, many barriers and difficulties were created for Indigenous and Native American women by the settler states. In the United States, Native Americans were subjected to the *Citizenship Act* prior to the war, therefore they were assimilated into the state regardless of whether they enlisted. Moreover, they were discriminated against due to their culture and practices, but not to the same degree as Black women who enlisted. This was similar in Canada, where enlistment jeopardized

[20] Brad Bellegarde, "Oldest Sask. Female Indigenous Veteran Remembers Time in WWII," *CBC*, 10 November 2016. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/world-war-ii-veteran-mistawasis-first-nation-1.3842447

[21] Irene Hoff (Abenaki veteran) in discussion with John MacFarlene, 2001, 2003/29, Indigenous People in the Canadian Forces, Directorate of History and Heritage, Ottawa, ON.

[22] Muriel Stanley Venne, *Our Women in Uniform* (Calgary: Bunker to Bunker Publishing, 2003), p. 31.

[23] Whitney P. Lackenbauer; John Moses; R. Scott Sheffield, "The World Wars," Department of National Defence, accessed 10 February 2023, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/popular-books/aboriginal-people-canadian-military/world-wars.html .

[24] Poyer, *War at the Margins*, p. 130.

their Indian Status and they were also discriminated against based on racial prejudices.[25] This is apparent in the qualifications of each military branch, and the treatment they received once joining. Furthermore, the Canadian federal government was eager to showcase biographies of Indigenous veterans who excelled in the military but did not describe the racist prejudices and obstacles that enlistment presents itself.[26] Although these women officially represented less than ten percent of the participation rates for both countries, it is significant since it represented the advancement of the place of Indigenous and Native American women within their communities, and the nation at large. Their enlistment was the beginning of their journey – many women "accepted the war as their generation's challenge" which further empowered them in the post-war era. [27]

SERVING THE COUNTRY: EXPERIENCES OF DUTY IN CANADA

Although enlistment was the beginning of the military experience for Indigenous and Native American servicewomen, there was a stark contrast between their daily lives and the equality the military uniform provided. In fact, many found the military experience to be empowering, since Indigenous servicewomen felt that it was one of the first times they felt comradery and equality with their white counterparts. For example, every servicewoman's military experience began with basic training. For Virginia Pechawis of Mistawasis, basic training took place in Regina; however, women's training was also held in other city centers.[28] Although many servicewomen struggled with the transition into basic training, many Indigenous servicewomen compared the experience

[25] Iseke, "Critical Events," 39.

[26] "Indigenous Veterans" Veterans Affairs, Remembrance, History, accessed 17 Dec 2020, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/historical-sheets/indigenous-veterans.

[27] Poulin, *Invisible Women* p.133.

[28] Iseke, "Critical Events," 39, and Bellegarde, "Oldest Sask. Female Indigenous Veteran."

to residential school.[29] This was similar for Native American women who enlisted and had previous experiences at a Boarding School – an institution similar to Canadian Residential Schools. Both institutions were created to assimilate Native people into European society, through forcing them to cut their hair, speak English (or French), and lose their cultural identity. Indigenous and Native people were forcibly removed from their Tribes and Bands to go to these schools to do forced labour and education, all while experiencing abuse at the hands of the Catholic church, who worked with the government to create these schools. Many Indigenous and Native American children died at these schools, and suffered emotional, physical, sexual, and cultural abuse. While the implementation of residential schools created generational trauma and divide through the abuse of young children with no free will; basic training provided a pattern of stability, rigidity, and continuity.[30] Due to the similar sense of rigidity and hierarchy at basic training and residential schools, allowed for a degree of "ease" of transition for many women.

Following basic training, they were placed in a variety of work positions, such as "transport drivers, hospital assistance, administrative clerks, cooks, equipment assistants, fabric workers, telephone operators, general duty personnel, and mess women."[31] For example, Mary Greyeyes-Reid was posted as a cook in the CWAC, then was posted as a laundry assistant in England during the war.[32] Likewise, Flight Control Operator Theresa Lovie in the RCAF WD was responsible for "sheet exchange" – a position in the laundry unit.[33] These roles are similar to those of residential schools; however, where in residential schools forced labour and abuse onto children, the military experience provided equality in uniform through paid labour. This was very empowering for Indigenous women since it demonstrated that their labour and actions

[29] Poulin, *Invisible Women*, p. 149.

[30] Poulin, *Invisible Women*, 146.
[31] Ibid., 128.

[32] Ibid., 156.

[33] Venne, *Our Women,* 45.

could contribute to a shared goal. Furthermore, upon beginning their duties, all women understood that their placements were created to free men up from routine responsibilities.[34] This created bitter feelings among men towards women since men were pushed to the front lines with the introduction of women in support roles.[35] This tension made women work harder to prove themselves as useful and valuable as the men in the military. This could have also been very discouraging for Indigenous women, but they found themselves among white women completing the same responsibilities and upholding respect for one another. Although there were instances of poor treatment from men, Indigenous women found comfort in knowing their equality to other women. In fact, Indigenous women rarely spoke about discrimination based on gender while working in the military. This was very motivating and empowering since it demonstrated that their labour went towards a rewarding goal, and they knew that everyone was also working towards it.

Outside of housekeeping responsibilities, select Indigenous women were offered further education for administrative roles – for example, Leading Aircraftwoman Betsy Houle of the RCAF WD was educated to become a secretary for a control tower in Vulcan, Alberta. Likewise, when Airwoman Marguerite St. Germaine enlisted, she made it clear to the recruiter that she did not want to perform housewife duties. Upon joining the RCAF WD she was offered an opportunity to take night school after her daily training to study to become a stenographer. This opportunity was extremely important to St. Germaine as it opened doors to forms of education that were not available prior to the war. St. Germaine stated that "we were all there as a team with an important job to do. I now realize that it was because of this philosophy and sense of oneness that I never experienced any oppression from being Aboriginal and a woman as well."[36] Likewise, Dorothy Chartrand was in a communications position where she was educated in Morse

[34] Iseke, "Critical Events," 39.

[35] Archer, *Women, Warfare and Representation*, p. 36.

[36] Venne, *Our Women,* 49.

code, flag, and light signals. This allowed Chartrand to be promoted to Sergeant, a rank rarely achieved by women, much less an Indigenous woman.[37] These are rare instances where Indigenous women are provided with training and experience they would not have had access to. For many, it was empowering to feel fulfilled in a male-dominated setting, at a time when women were normally not accepted into these spaces. Although these women held different positions in the military, a pattern emerged – they claimed to have faced little to no discrimination from their peers and superiors based on their Indigenous identity. For example, Private Mary Cardinal spoke fondly about her service, saying that "it taught us to get along with others, no matter their race or creed."[38] Although select testimonies are not descriptive of the Indigenous servicewoman's military experience, it is important to note a consistent pattern of experiencing equality in uniform, which further empowered them in their post-service years.

While Indigenous women primarily reported positive experiences while on duty, Indigenous women's behaviour still had to be modified in different aspects to maintain respect from their peers. Many white servicewomen have said that they felt the need to work harder to gain respect from their male peers; Indigenous servicewomen navigated the military system with their gender and identity in mind. For example, although servicewomen with Indian Status could enter the canteen, the 1927 *Indian Act* made it illegal for those with Indian Status to consume alcohol or be found with any in their possession.[39] These women worked as hard as their peers, but they were unable to enjoy the same benefits. Moreover, many Indigenous women did not want to enter wet canteens since they did not want to give reason to portray stereotypes of the "drunk Indian." Furthermore, sexual discrimination was rampant in the military, which was more likely to be directed towards women because of existing stereotypes but went

[37] Iseke, "Critical Events," 48.

[38] Venne, *Our Women,* 72.

[39] Indian Act, R.S.C. 1927, c. 98.

unreported.[40] These differences between a man and a woman's military experience, nonetheless an Indigenous servicewoman's experience, demonstrate how military culture and the experience of equality in uniform can be different for each service member. Moreover, many Indigenous servicewomen met their life partners in the military. Although this was a happy occasion, these women faced the possibility of losing their Indian status depending on whom they married, which initiated enfranchisement and assimilation into the settler state. For example, if an Indigenous servicewoman met a white soldier while serving and got married, the woman immediately lost their status through the regulations of the 1927 *Indian Act*.[41] This was not applicable if an Indigenous man married a white woman. The social experiences of these servicewomen in the Second World War demonstrated that equality with their white peers and counterparts was possible while in uniform, but aspects of gender and racial inequalities within the military were omnipresent in social life outside of their duties.

SERVING THE COUNTRY: EXPERIENCES ON DUTY IN THE U.S.

In the United States, the military experience itself was very similar to Canada's. In Grace Gouveia's studies on "American Indian Women's Roles in WWII," she found that Native American women were, for the most part, accepted into the military by their peers.[42] In fact, because of the citizenship that was forced onto Native American people in 1929, they experienced less discrimination and physical harm than what was directed to Black soldiers of the time. While black soldiers were segregated into their own units, Native soldiers were amalgamated into white units – what mostly separated them was

[40] Poulin, *Invisible Women,* 164.

[41] Indian Act, R.S.C. 1927, c. 98.

[42] Grace Mary Gouveia, "We Also Serve: 'American Indian Women's Role in WWII," *Michigan Historical Review* 20, no. 2 (1994), 159.

their culture and religious practices.[43] Moreover, their roles within the U.S. military were very similar to those of Indigenous women in the Canadian Forces. For example, servicewomen who were forced into Boarding Schools found similarities in military life, and daresay excelled – inspections, marching, and drilling were parts of their daily lives as children, and military life was a continuation thereof. Although Boarding Schools were extremely harmful to their identity and childhood, the experience of success and uniformity in the military allowed the feeling of equality with their peers in uniform. Although equality within the military is linked to one's performance, which can create a toxic environment, it also allowed for a sense of pride and a form of encouragement for many women. Likewise, the jobs for women were very similar to those of the Canadian army, and for some, their military experience provided an opportunity for education. Some examples of the jobs Native Americans did while in service included Grace Thorpe's as an army recruiter, Laura Beltz Wright's as an Alaska Territorial Guard[44], and Julia Hashanany's and Marcella LeBeau's as nurses in the Army Nurse Corps. Other jobs included auxiliary roles such as "mechanics, ambulance drivers, pilots, administrators, and nurses in non-combat roles."[45] Each servicewoman had a different role and their experiences differed from the next. The pattern that emerged from their experiences was the opportunities and equality that were presented to them during the Second World War. Moreover, through these responsibilities and roles, they inadvertently participated in the advancement of Native women's place in society that occurred during the Second World War. In the role of a soldier, Native American women were equal to their white settler counterparts. This was very empowering for Native American women and

[43] Poyer, *War at the Margins*, p.15.

[44] "Scrapbook: WAC Photographs and Clippings," 17 October 1943, Grace F. Thorpe Collection, National Museum of the American Indian Archive Center, Smithsonian Institution; Thomas A. Snapp "Laura Wright says, 'I don't know why but I've always seemed lucky.'" *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner,* March 1961.

[45] Matthias Voigt, "Warriors in Uniform: Race, Masculinity, and Martial Valor among Native American Veterans from the Great War to Vietnam and Beyond," in *Warring over Valor: How Race and Gender Shaped American Military Heroism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. Simon Wendt, (Ithaca: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 89.

enabled many veterans to continue demonstrating to others that they were capable and qualified to find their place in many aspects of society.

For the most part, the military experience of Indigenous and Native American servicewomen provided an experience in which they were not treated as second-class citizens. It was a time in which they were wholly accepted into settler-state society and were proud of their Indigenous and Native American heritage. Moreover, Indigenous and Native American servicewomen earned a salary, albeit small.[46] This was empowering to servicewomen, since they not only earned a salary in a male-dominated environment, but they were active within the settler state economy. Many were able to send an income back to their families who were struggling in the aftermath of the Great Depression, as well as the shrinkage of the budget of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs.[47] This contributed to the empowerment of many Indigenous and Native American women during wartime. This is vital to the progression of Native activism because they were equals to their peers while in uniform, but, as the war ended, the post-war governments made it clear that they remained second-class citizens undeserving of benefits.

POST-WAR TREATMENT IN CANADA

The re-integration of Indigenous and Native American veterans into a post-war settler-state was not a smooth transition. In Canada, many Indigenous women veterans stated that they no longer felt the same acceptance they once did, whether it be by their own community or the nation by large. For example, despite honourable discharge, many Indigenous servicewomen were not made aware of the benefits that were available, such

[46] Venne, *Our Women, pp.*.18.

[47] Sheffield and Riseman, *Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War,* p. 240.

as the ones outlined in the *Veterans' Land Act*.[48] This act was paramount to the wellbeing as a veteran, since it provided access to loans and grants to purchase land, housing, livestock, and appliances. Likewise, some noted that the program was discontinued by the time they were made aware of veterans' benefits. On the contrary, Dorothy Chartrand, a Metis soldier who did not identify as Indigenous, noted that she did not have trouble learning or accessing benefits.[49] Although this is one person's experience, Chartrand's experience differs from a servicewoman with Indian Status since the government had no issue informing white – or white-passing, in Chartrand's case – servicewomen of available benefits. It begs the question of whether Chartrand would have received benefits if she had enlisted as a Status Indian. Moreover, of those Indigenous servicewomen who benefitted from the *Veterans' Land Act*, there was a fundamental problem: the Canadian government was giving Indigenous land as a benefit. Virginia Pechawis stated in an interview in 2016 that she was given land near her Metis community by the Canadian government. The problem was that the land was inherently Metis land. Why was Pechawis rewarded for her service by returning stolen land that belonged to her people?[50] Furthermore, the *Veterans' Land Act* rarely benefitted servicewomen, because they had to prove that they were single and had previous farming experience since the land was for agricultural use.[51] If servicewomen were married at the time of their discharge, they were unable to receive benefits because their "husband [should be] capable of supporting her."[52] The rules surrounding veterans' benefits after the war demonstrated that although they experienced equality in uniform during the war, the Canadian government did not consider them equal. The Canadian government treated them as second-class citizens, completely disregarding their contribution to the

[48] Venne, *Our Women, p.* 77.

[49] Iseke, "Critical Events,"p. 48.

[50] Brad Bellegarde, "Oldest Sask. Female Indigenous Veteran Remembers Time in WWII," *CBC*, 10 November 2016; https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/world-war-ii-veteran-mistawasis-first-nation-1.3842447

[51] Canada, Department of Mines and Resources, *The Veterans' Land Act, 1942: A Summary of Its Aims, Scope and Main Details*, Ottawa, (1942), p. 3.

[52] Poulin, *Invisible Women,* p. 131.

war effort. This was demeaning for many women, since the government did not always reward their sacrifice with the benefits it offered to others. Their treatment post-war combined with the empowerment they felt throughout the war motivated many women to fight for their place within post-war society.

POST-WAR TREATMENT IN THE U.S.

Native American servicewomen experienced similar treatment in the United States post-war. In fact, in 1941, the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs predicted that Native American servicewomen and men "will be among the first to be affected by the shrinkage of employment opportunities subsequent to the war."[53] Due to the little funding dedicated to Native communities being redirected towards the war effort, many Native American communities lacked the funds to keep schools and medical clinics open. Therefore, when Native American servicewomen returned home, they found their communities extremely neglected and rampant with poverty. Furthermore, many of these veterans were ineligible for benefits under the *Dawes Act*, in which beneficiaries could obtain tribal land in their names. Between 1946 and 1950, many Native men and women attempted to claim this reserve land, but bureau officials denied their requests because they assumed these veterans would sell tribal land to settlers.[54] The state's assumptions thereby preventing them to access land, combined with the ravaged state of their communities upon the return of Native American veterans, motivated many Native American women to fight for their place in society.

[53] Sheffield and Riseman, *Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War*, 240.

[54] Ibid., 261.

INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM

There was a strong correlation between the military experience and post-war behaviour of Native American and Indigenous veterans. This was due to the discontinuity of the treatment they experienced between their military service and their years as a veteran. For example, in Indigenous and Native American communities, those who returned from the war were historically celebrated and honoured as Elders.[55] Returning home from fighting fascism overseas to a settler society that did not recognize their honourable service and continued to discriminate against the rights of Indigenous people sparked many forms of action among veterans.[56] Although discouraging, it was a strong motivating factor. Some examples of action included being recognized as an Elder, creating Indigenous community spaces in large city centres, or lobbying for environmental protection of Indigenous land nationwide. This differed from other forms of activism led by white women because they focused on women's civil rights and gender equality for white women during the early years, and Indigenous activism focused on Indigenous well-being. This came in the form of fighting for land claims, health care, the continuation of family rights and Indian status, and environmental activism.

As the Second World War drew to a close, many Indigenous women veterans returned home and witnessed the effects of the war on their communities. Their time in the military empowered them in many ways, and many women saw it as their responsibility to continue fighting for the wellbeing of their people.[57] For example, Corporal Bertha Houle from Clear Hill, Alberta served in the RCAF WD. She obtained land under the *Veteran's Land Act* and faced discrimination within her Metis community

[55] Voigt, "Warriors in Uniform," 87.

[56] "Forgotten Warriors," directed by Loretta Todd, (Ottawa: National Film Board, 1997).

[57] Poulin, *Invisible Women,* p. 133.

because she was a woman.[58] At the time, it was uncommon for a woman to own land because federal laws that essentially equated women to property. But after her experience during the war, where she experienced equality and acceptance within the military, she decided to fight against prejudice. Consequently, Houle founded the Voice of Alberta Native Women's Society in 1968 to give a platform to issues that are important to Indigenous women. This organization later became the Native Women's Association of Canada, wherein Houle was the first president.[59] She was adamant on the construction of Indigenous women's agency within the country through creating equal opportunities within the workforce and education, as well as bringing light to the changing needs and issues regarding Indigenous women. Moreover, in the 1970s, Houle continued to advocate for women's and children's rights, and became a board member of the Child and Family Services Authority for the Province of Alberta. She took on this role through fighting for the rights of Indigenous foster children and providing educational resources within her community. Houle said that "I do this because as a veteran I know our children are the future of our country and by working with and for them, the result will be a better world."[60] Prior to her death in 2014, Houle received the awards of the Golden Jubilee Medal, the Officer of the Order of Canada, and the Diamond Jubilee Medal.[61] Houle's post-war activism is an example of how her military experience empowered her to fight for the progression of Indigenous women's rights within her community and province.

Likewise, Private Gladys Marjorie Irish signed up for the Canadian Women's Army Corps on a dare by her friends – it ended up being a very good experience as it was an opportunity to earn a living after the Great Depression. Gladys Irish enjoyed her experiences, and noted that she never experienced discrimination from her superiors or

[58] Venne, *Our Women,* 19.

[59] "Bertha Clark," Indspire, Events, Indspire Awards, accessed 18 Dec 2020 https://indspire.ca/laureate/bertha-clark-jones-2/.

[60] Venne, *Our Women, ;p.*19.

[61] "Bertha Clark-Jones," The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed 17 Dec 2020, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/bertha-clark-jones.

her peers in the army. In an interview with Gladys Irish after her discharge, she stated that "I felt very proud and important to wear the uniform that told anyone at a glance that I was a woman serving her country. I am still proud of it today."[62] When she returned home, she married her childhood friend who had also joined the army. Irish was recognized as an Elder in her community as well as within the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women and participated in a seniors group three times per week.[63] Glady Irish's experience demonstrates how she gained empowerment through her military service and continued to stay active within her community post-war. This participation is a form of activism because it is necessary for community building and the perpetuation of Indigenous culture.

Furthermore, another woman's experience that highlights post-war activism is Private Teresa Dion's. She enlisted in the CWAC in 1942 and after her discharge, she was not "offered the information on any veteran's benefits or of the Veterans land Act [sic.] that would have entitled [her] to own land; during or after the war, and by the time [she] found out and applied for the benefits [she] was told that they were discontinued."[64] Despite this discrimination for being a Metis woman, Dion continued to strengthen her ties to her Metis roots instead of assimilating into the settler state. She was a member of the Aboriginal Veterans Committee and a board member of the Métis Children's Society board member in British Columbia. Moreover, she was recognized as an Elder in her community and was the assistant curator at the Michif Cultural Historical Society. Dion spoke fondly of her military experience, and felt that she "gained many positive experiences from [her] time in the Army, that now [she was] able to continue [her] life as a productive citizen of [her] country."[65] Dion's post-war life demonstrated how she left

[62] Venne, *Our Women, p.* 32

[63] Ibid., 36.

[64] Ibid., 77.

[65] Venne, *Our Women,* 80.

the military and continued to hold strong ties to her Metis heritage, which allowed her to share her knowledge and culture with others.

Marjorie Irish's, Bertha Houle's, and Teresa Dion's experiences demonstrate how Indigenous women became active in society after their military service. Whether it may be through starting women's organizations, participating in seniors' groups, or propagating Indigenous culture, these are all ways to find one's place in society. While there are only three women described here, there are many other women who also participated in creating space for Indigenous people after the war, whether it be at the community, provincial, or federal level.[66]

NATIVE AMERICAN ACTIVISM

The patterns of Native American activism were also apparent in the United States, and they are more documented than those in Canada. The first example of Native American activism is Grace Thorpe, a member of the Sac and Fox nations, who served in the Women's Army Corps and is a renowned activist for Native rights.[67] During her military career, she served in the Philippines, New Guinea, and Japan. Through her experiences, she found the inspiration to serve as an environmental activist for tribal lands when she returned home.[68] In her book that advocated for the removal of nuclear waste on tribal territory in the United States, she wrote:

[66] Poyer, *War at the Margins*, 174.

[67] "Grace Thorpe: Rosie, WAC, and Activist," The National WWII Museum, The War, Profiles, Accessed 17 Dec 2020. https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/grace-thorpe-rosie-wac-activist

[68] Grace Thorpe, "Our Homes are not Dumps: Creating Nuclear-Free Zones," *Natural Resource Journal* 26, no. 4 (1996).

> I was a corporal, stationed in New Guinea, at the end of World War II when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. . . No safe method has yet been found for the disposal of such waste, the most lethal poison known in the history of humanity... The utilities are using our names and our trust lands to bypass environmental regulations. The issue is not sovereignty. The issue is Mother Earth's preservation and survival. The issue is environmental racism.[69]

This demonstrates how her experience in the military highlighted many environmental injustices that Native Americans disproportionately felt the negative impacts of. Not only did she advocate for the removal of nuclear waste on tribal territory, but she was also one of the first Native Americans to occupy Alcatraz in the early 1960s – the protest to give surplus federal land that, according to the 1868 treaty, was allotted to the Sioux people.[70] Thorpe was also very active in other cases for surplus land, which was extremely important since it allowed Native American people to receive their stolen land back. Moreover, Thorpe had responsibility for the organization of the National Indiana Women's Action Corps, an organization that fought for the rights of Native American women in the United States. Although Thorpe was involved in a plethora of activism, ranging from surplus lands, environmental stewardship, and Native American women's rights, her story is similar to other women veterans. Her involvement in the Second World War empowered and allowed her to return home with a soldiers' mindset, which propelled her post-war activism in many fields as a veteran.

[69] Thorpe, "Our Homes," 955, 960.

[70] "Scrapbook: Return Surplus Lands in Indian People," 1971, Grace F. Thorpe Collection, National Museum of the American Indian Archive Center, Smithsonian Institution.

Another example of Native activism is Marcella LeBeau, also known as Wignuke Waste' Win, who was a registered nurse in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during the Second World War.[71] LeBeau noted that while she was in the military, she never experienced discrimination for being Native American or a woman; however, when she returned home, she experienced discrimination in many forms. For example, she could not purchase rubbing alcohol or vanilla extract due to the laws that were in place against Native Americans.[72] This follows the pattern of many veterans returning home to unequal societies, after being treated equally during the course of the war. Due to the degrading state of her community post-war, she utilized her knowledge from her military experience as a nurse by working for the Indian Health Service in her tribal territory for thirty-one years. Her background as a nurse provided her with the knowledge to advocate for health promotion within her community, which was exhibited through her role in passing the smoke-free air Act in the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, in which smoking was banned in tribal chambers.[73] Moreover, LeBeau recognized that many Native American veterans were not commemorated for their honourable service and sacrifice equivalent to their peers. Consequently, LeBeau advocated revoking the Medals of Honour of the U.S. Cavalry Servicemen who murdered Lakota men, women, and children in the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre.[74] Her legacy is felt in many ways, and she was introduced into the South Dakota Hall of Fame and awarded the French Legion of

[71] United States of America, Congress, "TRIBUTE TO MARCELLA RYAN LEBEAU," *Congressional Record Vol 165 No. 156.*

[72] Kimmy Scherer, "100 Years Young: Marcella LeBeau joined by family and friends near and far for celebration," *West River Eagle*, 16 Oct 2019.

https://www.westriverеagle.com/articles/100-years-young-marcella-lebeau-joined-by-family-and-friends-near-and-far-for-celebration/

[73] "Marcella LeBeau, South Dakota State University, Citation for Honorary Degree, Doctor of Public Service, accessed 17 Dec 2020, https://www.sdstate.edu/graduation/commencement-program/marcella-lebeau.

[74] Levi Rickert, "100-Year-Old Lakota Marcella LeBeau Among Recipients for NCAI Leadership Awards," *Native News Online*, 12 Feb 2020. https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/100-year-old-lakota-marcella-lebeau-among-recipients-of-ncai-leadership-awards?fbclid=IwAR0brzi3nrN4lphwszz6dRG3gYbq7y4sL9dLaZzB3P4NxOl02lCBt0blep8

Honour. LeBeau's activism demonstrated how veterans' activism can take place in many forms, whether it was in healthcare or in reconciliation.

Art was another form of post-war Native American activism. Corporal Eva Mirabel from the Taos Pueblo Reservation enlisted in 1943 and served through the end of the war. Prior to the war she took a great interest in art and studied it at Boarding School. During the war, she was assigned to make many posters, cartoons, and murals. After her discharge, she continued to practice and experiment with her art. She stated that Americans were educated in foreign art from all around the world, but failed to see that the most important forms were those that were native to America.[75] Her murals and art can be viewed at various institutions, such as the Santa Fe Indian School, the Smithsonian, and the Museum of New Mexico. Mirabel's activism differs from Thorpe's and LeBeau's because Mirabel was creating space and propagating Native American art in the United States instead of fighting for a specific cause. This is extremely important for sharing and preserving Native American culture, something that the government was trying to eradicate through assimilation.

Ella Narcho Rumley from the Tohono O'odham Nation is another woman who enlisted during the war and continued to strengthen ties between Native American people after the war. She enlisted in the Women's' Army Corps during the Second World War and enjoyed her time in service because she was able to meet many other Native women in other units.[76] Despite this vast network of Native women, Rumley also experienced discrimination in many forms during her time in the army but stood up to it every time. Many of those who knew her said that Rumley always "urged generations of

[75] "Eva Mirabal, Taos Pubuelo Painter," Adobe Gallery, 10 Feb 2023, https://www.adobegallery.com/artist/Eva_Mirabal_Eah_Ha_Wa_1920_196817139281

[76] Pamela Diane Bennett, "Sometimes Freedom Wears a Woman's Face: American Indian Veterans of World War II," PhD diss., (University of Arizona, 2011), p. 105.

… tribe members to be proud and stand up for themselves."[77] In fact, when she was discharged in 1945, she continued to work on injustices that were very pertinent to the Tohono O'odham Nation. For example, she worked for the Bureau of Ethnic Research to document and computerize genealogical information from her people. Moreover, she worked as an Equal Employment Officer with the Indian Health Service and encouraged women to apply for work. Rumley tirelessly worked to help create space and empower other Native American men and women after the war; she always helped other Native Americans to gain access to health care, scholarships, social security eligibility, and other community services. She was honoured and recognized by her community and many organizations, and at her funeral in 2004 she was given "full military honours conducted by Tohono O'odham veterans."[78] Rumley's work contributes to the advancement and propagation of Native American culture. Computerizing genealogical information from the Tohono O'odham Nation, it allows them to preserve their history digitally. These examples demonstrate how activism post-war can manifest in many forms for different issues and are all equally important.

Grace Thorpe, Marcella LeBeau, Eva Mirabel, and Ella Rumley had different avenues of post-war activism yet military service for all women inspired and empowered them to push forward in post-war society. This also demonstrates that Native American activism also focused on issues pertinent to their people – it was not one form issue that was collectively fought against. These forms of activism differ from one form to the next, but what they have in common is the attempt to create space for Indigenous and Native American populations.

[77] Women's Plaza of Honour, "Ella Gloria Narcho Rumley," the University of Arizona, 10 February 2023, https://plaza.sbs.arizona.edu/honoree/2613

[78] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The comparison between military service and post-war treatment of Indigenous and Native American servicewomen demonstrated that the sacrifice of these soldiers did not mean that the government would return the favour and aid them. Although there were cases of Indigenous and Native American women who received benefits in exchange for their sacrifice, this was not the case for all veterans. Many veterans experienced the effects of this one-way relationship, as they struggled to receive veterans' benefits, and returned home to a post-war society that continued to discriminate against them due to their heritage and gender. The war was a catalyst that propelled Indigenous and Native American activism forward since the transition between the military and veteran-hood empowered these women to serve their country for a different cause. The post-war activism of these Indigenous and Native American servicewomen is extremely important in the history of these communities. They were not only creating a space within the military for Indigenous communities, but they continued to participate and advance the place of Indigenous peoples within the settler state. This is not limited to the Second World War, as many Indigenous and Native American women who enlisted in the latter twentieth century also continue to follow their footsteps. Indigenous and Native American women veterans continued to fight for their community through personal activism, and it is evident in the stories of multiple veterans. The legacies that Second World War veterans left behind continue to be felt within their communities and in the nation at large, and are all important to the historiography of Indigenous and Native American women's activism.

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