

SGT. THOMAS GEORGE PRINCE, SS, MM (1915-1977)

The Early Years 1915-1939

Thomas George Prince was born in 1915 and was a citizen of the Brokenhead First Nation located about 80 km north of Winnipeg. He was the great-great-grandson of Chief Peguis who played so prominent a role in the early history of the Red River Settlement. As a young man, Prince earned a reputation as “a good, honest, hard worker” who helped support his family and community as a hunter, trapper and farm labourer. His fiery spirit was balanced with a quiet demeanour and keen sense of humor. Prince received his formal education at the Elkhorn Residential School where he developed a strong interest in the military through his participation in the school’s cadet corps.

Tommy Prince In The 1st Special Service Force (The Devil’s Brigade)

With the onset of World War II, Prince voluntarily embarked upon what would become a distinguished military career. He was quick to respond when the call went out in 1940 for volunteers even though First Nations citizens were exempt from war duty. His outstanding courage in covert operations and on the front lines resulted in an exemplary military record.

As a member of the Devil’s Brigade (a combined airborne unit composed of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and the American First Special Force), Prince distinguished himself in land reconnaissance. Near Littoria, Italy, he posed as a local peasant farmer and repaired a severed communications wire – in full view of enemy troops. In southern France, he scouted behind German lines and located an encampment area and reserve battalion. He then walked 70 km across rugged mountainous terrain to report the information and then joined his comrades in the ensuing battle.

Prince’s courage and disregard for his own personal safety in the performance of duty inspired his comrades and earned him glowing citations. In 1945, he was summoned to an investiture by King George VI at Buckingham Palace where he was decorated with the Military Medal for “exceptional bravery in the field”. Acting on behalf of the president of the United States, George VI also awarded the Silver Star to Prince in recognition of his “gallantry in action”, his “keen sense of responsibility” and “devotion to duty.”

Prince was also recommended for the French *Croix de Guerre* but the messenger was killed en route before he was able to reach the Commander-in-Chief, Charles de Gaulle.

At the close of the war, Prince was honourably discharged on 15 June 1945.

Tommy Prince in the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry

Following a short period as a civilian, Prince once again volunteered for military duty and served with the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in Korea. Much of his service was spent on the front lines and in enemy territory. He received recognition for his scouting abilities, for his leadership of snatch patrols, and for

heading up the sniper unit. He was also among those who fought at the now-celebrated Battle of the Kapyong River Valley.

During his service with the 2nd Battalion, a severe arthritic condition in his right knee necessitated his return to Canada where he served at Camp Borden, an army training camp in Ontario. But by 1952, he had applied for another tour of duty that placed him on the front line with the 3rd Battalion of the Princess Patricias. On one occasion he carried an injured comrade back to camp while suffering from a severe wound in the knee. Following his return to Canada, Prince underwent surgery for his knee, and was discharged from service with a small pension in the fall of 1953.

The Legacy of Tommy Prince

In 1955, a man walked away from an accident scene after risking his life to successfully save a person who had fallen into the river off the Alexander dock. A bystander recognized the rescuer and gave his name to newspaper reporters. His name was Tommy Prince.

Tommy Prince has become an outstanding role model for the Aboriginal community. He demonstrated that an opportunity and good training can lead to success and he did so in an exemplary manner. In his conduct and through his service to Aboriginal community and the Canadian nation, Prince epitomized the traditional spirit and bravery of a true "Warrior". He was a natural leader, an educator, an entrepreneur, lobbyist, politician, visionary and statesman. A fiercely independent individual, Prince never looked for sympathy when times were tough and undertook to be self-supporting by taking on every type of job.

In 1945, when the Canadian Government appointed a joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons to review the Indian Act, the Manitoba Indian Association selected Prince as their spokesman. In a brief presented to the Parliamentary Committee on 5 June 1947, Prince eloquently pointed out that over 3,000 Aboriginal men had served in the army and should be granted leadership opportunities. He called for the recognition of treaty rights, the abolition of the Indian Act, and urged Aboriginal representatives to travel to London to make a special appeal to King George VI (the great-grandson of Queen Victoria with whom the first treaties were signed).

The Passing of a Warrior

Despite Prince's outstanding military record as one of Canada's most highly decorated Aboriginal soldiers, his love for his country and his quest for peace, Prince was not given the appropriate respect he deserved from Canada until much later in life. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (Kapyong Barracks) honoured him with a special salute and citation on the Brokenhead Reserve in August 1975. In October 1976, the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood awarded Prince with a Certificate of Merit "for his years of dedicated service to the Indian People of Manitoba."

When Prince passed on to the Spirit World on November 25, 1977 at the age of 62, he left behind a legacy that will continue to give inspiration to those who take the time to read the story of this brave Warrior. Prince was given a military funeral and fittingly laid to rest in the military section of Brookside Cemetery in the company of comrades who had risked their lives for Canada. As Prince's body was given back to Mother Earth, a drum group made up of young men from his home community chanted the "Death of a Warrior Song."