Lesson Plan 1: Aboriginal People in WWII

Generalization
The Second World War altered both the nature of warfare and the international balance of power. Examine the impact of the Second World War.

Rationale
Canadian history tends to ignore the numerous Aboriginal people who volunteered to serve Canada during WWII. It is important for Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students to recognize the contributions that Aboriginal veterans made for Canada.

Objectives
Knowledge
- Develop an understanding as to why Aboriginal men volunteered to serve in WWII
- Recognize the many contributions of Aboriginal veterans
- Examine the impact of WWII upon Aboriginal peoples

Skills
- Critically evaluate the lack of recognition that Aboriginal veterans received after the war ended
- Analyze information and perspectives from a variety of sources
- Express ideas clearly and concisely in written and oral form

Attitude
- Develop an appreciation of the contributions of Aboriginal veterans
- Respect Aboriginal veterans decisions to volunteer

Teacher Information
Aboriginal people have a long history in participating in armed conflicts. Most notably Aboriginal people played an important role in the War of 1812 as they stood by in alliance with Canadian Militia and British Soldiers in defense of Canada’s borders from the treat of United States invasion. It is no surprise that over 6,000 Aboriginal men volunteered for both world wars.

The second World War lasted six long years. In that time it is estimated that approximately 3,090 Aboriginal men and women volunteered for service. Many argue that this number is significantly higher as it does not take into account Aboriginal people who did not sign treaty or
who were Métis. Historically, the stories of Aboriginal veterans have not been available or have not been shared with mainstream Canadians. It is an important part of history that has been left out of the books.

During the call for soldiers there was much controversy surrounding the questionable and unresolved matter of Aboriginal citizenship. In some instances Aboriginal volunteers were told they could not enlist and retain their Indian Status, others were told upon returning from war that they were not eligible for veterans benefits unless they renounced their Indian Status. Enfranchisement was suggested in order for the Aboriginal veteran to be able to vote. Another problem arose during the war when some Aboriginal wives did not receive the same amount in spousal benefits from the government. Despite the question of citizenship and its related problems, many Aboriginal men chose to enlist for a variety of reasons. Aboriginal people were behind the war effort even though they could not vote and were not considered to have full Canadian citizenship.

Certainly economic hardship played a role in Aboriginal men’s decision to enlist as well as the fact that it was an opportunity for many young men to travel outside of their reserve area for the first time. Many Aboriginal volunteers experienced culture shock when they arrived in major centers to begin military training. Many of these young men had never been a part of mainstream society let alone military life. The language barrier also was an issue as many Aboriginal men from remote communities had little knowledge or skill in speaking English.

Many Aboriginal men enlisted to show their support and loyalty to the British Crown. A large proportion of Aboriginal volunteers came from western Canada. The Calgary Highlands and the Edmonton Regiment Infantry Battalions both attracted a high number of Aboriginal volunteers.

Aboriginal veterans occupied many different roles with WWII. While most Aboriginal people served in the infantry there were some men who occupied roles in the air force. Aboriginal soldiers were snipers, scouts, code talkers, and military leaders. Aboriginal veterans participated in every major campaign and battle including the Dieppe and Normandy invasion. Aboriginal veterans earned at least 18 decorations for bravery and battle and at least 16 Aboriginal and Métis soldiers became prisoners of war by the Japanese in Hong Kong.

Aboriginal people also got involved in the war by working in war factories and industry, donating their own money to organizations such as the Red Cross. Aboriginal people also raised funds and relief items. In some instances reserve lands were used for rifle ranges, defense posts, and airports.

Over 200 Aboriginal soldiers lost their lives in WWII.

*Introductory Activity*

Distribute the following Facts about Aboriginal Veterans of WWII to the students:
Facts about Aboriginal Veterans of WWII

- Over 3,090 Aboriginal men and women volunteered for WWII
- Most of the volunteers came from western Canada
- Over 200 Aboriginal soldiers lost their lives
- Over 18 Aboriginal men earned decorations recognizing their bravery in battle
- Most Aboriginal men served in the infantry
- Aboriginal veterans were a part of every major campaign and battle during the war including Dieppe and the Normandy Invasion
- 16 Aboriginal and Métis soldiers were taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese in Hong Kong
- Aboriginal people did not have the right to vote or have full Canadian citizenship at the time of WWII, yet many chose to volunteer for the war effort
- It wasn’t until November 11, 1992 that Aboriginal Veterans were allowed to place a wreath at the cenotaph during the official memorial service. Prior to that they had to wait until the official service was over to recognize their fallen comrades
- Racism was a real issue that faced Aboriginal soldiers throughout WWII

It is recommended that the teacher share additional information as provided in the Teacher Information section to ensure that students understand the reasons for Aboriginal involvement in the war effort and the issues that faced them.

Main Lesson

There are hundreds of Aboriginal veterans whose stories have not been shared. Their contributions made a huge difference to the Canadian war effort. Students will conduct a research project on an Aboriginal veteran to highlight their contribution and achievements within WWII. Students should share their information in poster format and try to include pictures and
drawings to give authenticity to their presentation. Students will also be expected to give a brief presentation on their Aboriginal war veteran hero.

Supplementary Lesson
Students will examine the issues that faced Aboriginal veterans once they returned home from war.

1. What is enfranchisement?
2. What are the implications of enfranchisement?
3. In what year did Aboriginal people receive the right to vote in Canada?
4. Why do you think the government refused benefits to those Aboriginal veterans who did not want to give up their status?
5. Why do you think Canadian history has tended to ignore the contributions and achievements of Aboriginal veterans?
6. What were the issues surrounding conscription in WWII. How did they differ from WWI?
7. Why do you think Aboriginal people were opposed to conscription?
8. Give examples of how racism was a reality for Aboriginal soldiers.
9. Do you think Canadian society has become less racist towards Aboriginal people since WWII?
10. In what ways did Aboriginal people contribute to the war on the home front?