**Records of Service: The Tomkins Brothers Transcript**

**Anthony Wilson-Smith:**Hi, I am Anthony Wilson-Smith, president and CEO of Historica Canada. The way we see the world today is informed a lot by our past, both the good and the bad. This is where our podcasts come in. Podcasts like “[Residential Schools](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools-podcast-series)”, a three-part series created to honour the stories of survivors, their families, and communities and to commemorate the history and legacy of Residential Schools in Canada.

**Riley Burns:**“I didn’t want to be an Indian, I didn’t know who in the hell I wanted to be. I wasn’t accepted by the white man; I was accepted by my own people in my reserve.”

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**FRENCH AD READ**

**Frank Tomkins:**“One of my brothers, he was a code talker, too. His name was Peter. He was a hardworking man, you couldn’t find a better man to work, but come pay day, you know, we’d go on a toot, ‘til it was time to go back to work, and he’d drink to get drunk and then he’d cry, sit there and cry, ‘I should have been killed, I should have been killed.’”

**Maia Foster:**Welcome to “Record of Service”, a podcast presented by Historica Canada. I’m your host, Maia Foster. In this series we bring you interviews with Canada’s veterans—their stories of life, loss, and service. In this episode, we hear from Frank Tomkins.

Just a warning to those that may be listening with young ones around, today’s story contains mature content.

For some Indigenous people, joining the Canadian Armed Forces during the World Wars provided certain benefits, like the opportunity for employment and the chance to claim rights and challenge social barriers. Of course, not all felt this way. Some saw the wars as "white people's" wars, and therefore chose to stay out of it. And while opportunities were afforded to Indigenous participants during the conflict, they often ended when the war did.

Frank is Métis, which--it should be noted--he pronounces as ‘meat-is’. He was a Private in the Canadian Army during the Second World War, and one of more than 4,300 Indigenous people to serve at home and abroad during that time.

At 18, Frank enlisted in the Canadian Army. It was 1945 and near the end of the Second World War. Frank had been inspired by his four brothers who had gone overseas. Here he talks about why members of his community joined up:

**Frank Tonkins:** “In our part of the country they’d just about cleaned out all the men because in those days there was a shortage of work to start with. This was of course, [about] employment, as well as doing something for your country. There was a great number of people from my part of the country that [were] in the Armed Forces. Altogether, I think 27 of my immediate family group that [were] in the service here in the Second World War and I had a couple of uncles in the First World War.”

**MF:**Incredibly, two of the Tomkins brothers served in top-secret roles as code talkers. While we don’t have any information about Peter, Charles was recruited by the United States Army Corps Head Quarters.

**FT:** “This American officer approached my brother Charles and of course asked a few questions as to how many Cree-speaking and English-speaking people that he knew. And of course, he named my brother, Peter, and there [were] a few others from his hometown that he knew. There was McDermott, Walter McDermott and Archie Plante.”

**MF:**When Charles was stationed in England, he was summoned with 100 other Indigenous soldiers without any indication of what they would be doing. The Canadian Military Head Quarters representatives paired up soldiers who spoke the same Indigenous language. Charles was paired with another Cree speaker to test his fluency. The partners returned accurate translations and Charles was assigned to the US 8th Air Force and the 9th Bomber Command.

**FT:** “The American army of course were the ones that were really interested in code talkers and what they were used for in the early part of the war was they were placed—first they did a little bit of training, you know, how to interpret certain types of aircraft and stuff. And then they were placed at different airports and then they'd send a message in Cree—how many aircraft, what kind of aircraft was going to be going on this bombing run in England and would translate it back into English.”

**MF:**To clarify, code talkers first translated the Allies’ messages into their languages and then were sent into the field, where another code talker translated the message back into English. The information and orders were then passed up to commanders. Some of the words, like plane, bomber, and machine gun did not exist in Indigenous languages. For these, code talkers needed to repurpose existing words. For instance, Charles Tomkins would translate Mustang aircraft to the Cree word for a wild horse: *pak-wa-tas-tim.*

During both World Wars, hundreds of Indigenous servicemen from across North America transmitted classified information in their languages and stymied the efforts of the enemy trying to decode Allied messages. Charles Tomkins did not reveal his secret role until the end of his life and many code talkers never spoke of their work.

**FT:** “My grandmother, being a Plains Cree and a widow of Poundmaker, quite a family history there, and her uncle was Big Bear. You know, he was quite active during the uprising. And of course growing up on the reserve and with the customs and all, she was a strong believer in the Indian ways and she taught my brothers an Indian song they were to sing if they were ever in combat and in a very dangerous position, to sing this war song that she taught them.”

**MF:**The Tomkins family history has a connection to the North-West Resistance of 1885. The Resistance was a five-month insurgency by Metis and First Nations against the Canadian government, in what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. The nations had legitimate grievances with the government’s colonial policies and the encroachment of settlers on their territories.

The resisters were eventually quashed by federal troops and jailed. Louis Riel was tried and hanged for treason, and six Cree and two Assiniboine warriors were hanged at Battleford. Indigenous peoples who had been oppressed and abused under the treaties of the 1870s found that they were further subjugated and more closely administered by the government of Canada.

Frank Tomkins’ grandfather was Irish, but he was raised by a Cree nanny and he spoke Cree fluently. He was captured during the North-West Resistance while repairing a damaged telegraph wire and he observed much of the conflict.

Here’s Frank describing his grandfather’s experience after the fighting ended:

**FT:** “He ended up at the Trial of Louis Riel and he was really sympathetic with the Métis cause because he said that the Métis were right, and Louis Riel was, in trying to get something done for the Métis people. After that, later on, my grandfather got a job as a farm instructor in Poundmaker’s reserve, and that’s where he met and married my grandmother. And speaking Cree fluently, of course, he just naturally fit in.”

**MF:**Around this time, the Government of Canada also began establishing industrial schools across the Prairies. These schools were eventually part of the national system of residential schools designed to assimilate Indigenous youth into white society. On a large scale, children were removed from their families and stripped of their languages, cultures, and ways of knowing.

As a child, Frank was a student at St. Bernard Residential School in Grouard, AB, where he was witness and subject to countless abuses. He remembers one instance in which a nun enlisted students to assist in the punishment of a classmate.

**FT:** “Of course, the way it was in those days, nobody helped him. You know, nobody did nothing. We were so brainwashed in residential school. My dad happened to come visit one day and I told him what happened, and he went to the priest of course to complain. And I got the biggest licking I ever had in my life. She used one of these things on me. It was only because I was young and agile that I could move quick enough – she only hit the flesh of my legs and my backside. If she had hit a bone, I’m sure it might have broken a bone or something. That’s how severe a beating I got in residential school.

“I told my father. That’s when he says, ‘To hell with this’ He took us out of school and moved us to this other place called Joussard.”

**MF:**At the close of the Second World War, the Federal Government enacted legislation to benefit returning service personnel. The program offered vocational training, land grants for farming and business loans. However, these benefits were seldom extended to Indigenous veterans.

**FT:** “There was discrimination after the war for most of the Aboriginal veterans. In the Legion, and you could say the same for just about any veteran’s organization, the executive on these organizations were white.”

**MF:**For the Tomkins family, access to the benefits outlined in the Veterans Charter was routinely denied.

**FT:** “Preference was given to white veterans on everything and I’ll give you an example of this: my brothers they made frequent trips to Edmonton to try to get a grant or a loan to start up something, like commercial fishing - it was mostly commercial fishing and mink ranching in those days. They went to Edmonton to try and get a grant. Trains in those days ran 3 times a week, so if you went to Edmonton you had to have an overnight gig where you come home again. So, they’d go to Edmonton – they made about 3 trips to Edmonton – and come back tomorrow, come back next week. Finally, they gave up. And I’d say about 99% of the Métis people and Indian people that tried that were given the same response, ‘Come back next week.’”

**MF:**Fifteen non-Indigenous men from Frank’s hometown received the grants denied to his family. These men would go on to establish successful businesses in mink ranching and commercial fishing.

**FT:**“This was the treatment our people got after the war.”

**MF:**“Record of Service” is a production of [The Memory Project Speakers Bureau](https://www.thememoryproject.com/) and archive, connecting veterans and Canadian Forces members with school and community groups from coast to coast. The Memory Project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. We are program of Historica Canada, a non-profit offering programs that you can use to explore, learn and reflect on Canadian history, and what it means to be Canadian.

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If you liked this episode and want to learn more about the history of Indigenous-Crown relations in Canada, check out the [Treaties](http://education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/260) and [Residential Schools](http://education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/647) learning tools at [education.historicacanada.ca](http://education.historicacanada.ca/).

Additional text for this episode comes from our sister program, [The Canadian Encyclopedia](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en). You can find links to their articles on [Louis Riel](https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/louis-riel), [Poundmaker](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/poundmaker), [Big Bear](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/big-bear), [Indigenous Veterans](https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indigenous-peoples-and-the-world-wars), and more, at [thecanadianencyclopedia.ca](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en).

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Next time on Record of Service:

**Edward Carters-Edwards:**“So we thought, once we’re here, we will never get out alive. Nobody will ever know we’d been here. Nobody even knows where we are! You could hear the moans and groans and agonies of people being tortured by the Gestapo. You could hear shots ringing out.”

