

# VOICES OF THE CDA

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## The Journey Towards Closer Partnership Between Indigenous Peoples and the Canadian Armed Forces



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### On the Cover

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Canadian Ranger Solomon Awa demonstrates igloo building to students of the Air Operations Survival (AOS) Course in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, January 28, 2020

Photo: Cpl Brian Lindgren, Canadian Armed Forces photo

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The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is at an “inflection point”<sup>1</sup> with respect to its organizational identity and culture. It is currently navigating a number of reckonings as it tries to address social justice issues, particularly the meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.<sup>2</sup> These efforts include implementing the *Calls to Action* put forward by Indigenous Peoples of Canada through the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)*, which incorporates the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*.

Beyond questions of policy compliance and program implementation, reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples also invites deeper reflection on identity, culture, and purpose within the Canadian Armed Forces. For generations, Indigenous Peoples have maintained traditions of service, stewardship, and warrior responsibility that predate Canada itself and have endured despite profound historical injustice. These traditions speak to values that are not foreign to the profession of arms: commitment to community, respect for land, adaptability in the face of uncertainty, and service rooted in responsibility rather than reward. Exploring how Indigenous perspectives on service and warriorhood might inform the CAF’s evolving institutional culture is not about appropriating identity or redefining military purpose, but about understanding whether a closer partnership can help the CAF better articulate who it is, why it serves, and how it sustains trust with the society it protects.

Beginning with a policy review and relevant vignette, this article explores how the CAF can continue its journey to meaningfully engage with Indigenous Peoples through transformative action, aligned with both the

TRC and UNDRIP. It examines some of the progress and setbacks over the past years in these same spaces and proposes opportunities to advance reconciliation. Lastly, this essay briefly comments on the wisdom that can be drawn from Indigenous warrior culture and how it can broadly inform CAF’s organizational transformation in that specific cultural space, while understanding that this is a continuous and generational journey to reframe indigeneity’s place within the CAF and, in turn, Canada writ large.

## **Background - Reconciliation Framework and Context**

### Call to Action and UNDRIP

The Calls to Action and UNDRIP Article 30 could act as mechanisms through which Indigenous values and thinking could be reflected within the CAF through an Indigenous designed and led mandate that focuses on recognizing and valuing land, cultures, and histories.

Many opportunities are available to the CAF to implement elements from the *TRC Calls to Action* as well as the *UNDRIP*<sup>3</sup> which would allow movement towards a more transformational level of engagement that considers Indigenous values. Below are two specific examples within the TRC that could be of particular interest to the CAF:

57<sup>th</sup> TRC Call to Action. This article challenges the federal government to educate public servants on the history of Aboriginal Peoples. This type of action would include “skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights and anti-racism.”<sup>4</sup>

79<sup>th</sup> TRC Call to Action. This article challenges the government “to develop a reconciliation framework for Canadian heritage and commemoration” and put in place mechanisms to promote the “contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canada’s history.”<sup>5</sup>

Further, UNDRIP includes highly relevant text when it comes to Indigenous rights specific to the undertaking on military activities:

UNDRIP Article 30. The article highlights the role of demilitarizing Indigenous lands in fostering global peace, economic and social progress, and international cooperation. Further, Article 30 states that military activities should not occur on Indigenous lands unless necessary for public interest or agreed upon by the Indigenous Peoples. It also mandates that states conduct effective consultations with Indigenous representatives before using their lands for military purposes.<sup>6</sup>

The opportunity to undertake such an examination would adhere to the articles put forward through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People – specifically that they would be empowered to decide on the validity of such an initiative, in addition to the approach, design and implementation of any ensuing actions. This is best embodied in Article 3 which recognizes the right of Indigenous Peoples to “self-determination” as well as Article 11, mandating signatories to recognize the “right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs... past, present and future.”<sup>7</sup>

Further, as a signatory of the UN Declaration, Canada is required to “take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of these rights in addition to

“obtain[ing] their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, reconciliation within the CAF is not solely a matter of aligning programs with policy commitments, but of ensuring that Indigenous Peoples are meaningfully engaged as partners in decisions that affect them. This requires approaches to planning and implementation that emphasize early engagement, transparency, and shared understanding, consistent with both the spirit and intent of the Declaration.

Moving forward on implementing any of the above TRC calls to action and UNDRIP articles would require meaningful integration of Indigenous leadership into the CAF planning process from the onset, giving them equal voice and, if applying the letter of the law, veto power in the development of paths forward. Relinquishing this degree of control over institutional changes of this magnitude would require a significant leap of faith on the part of the CAF, but doing so would represent a transformational step forward in restoring trust and partnership between Indigenous Peoples and a Canadian Institution.

### **Inspiration from the Past – One Indigenous Family’s Legacy of Service**

This section introduces the case of the Pinesi family to illustrate the generational impacts Indigenous service has had on Canada, from its earliest conflicts to the present day. Understanding reconciliation in the context of the Canadian Armed Forces requires moving beyond abstract policy commitments to examine lived experience, particularly the sustained decisions by Indigenous individuals and families to serve in uniform across generations. These choices

were rarely incidental and were often made in full awareness of the discrimination and marginalization Indigenous service members would face. Instead, they were frequently rooted in deeper traditions of warrior responsibility, protection of land, and service to communities that long predate Confederation. By examining the military history of Indigenous families such as the Pinesis, it becomes possible to better understand the motivations, values, and identities that continue to draw Indigenous Peoples to military service, and to consider how this perspective might inform the CAF's ongoing journey toward reconciliation and cultural transformation.

The Pinesis's legacy of service begins with the son of Chief Wambolak: Grand Chief Pierre Louis Constant Pinesis. Pierre Louis Constant Pinesis was appointed Grand Chief by King George IV's Governor General, Sir James Kempt, in 1830. His warriors and four sons had previously fought with the British in 1812, notably at the Battle of Beaver Dams, and their involvement in this historic conflict marked a significant moment in the family's history. During the War of 1812, Grand Chief Pinesis and his sons' role in the war showcased their commitment to protecting their lands and allies. Their participation was instrumental in several key victories including the historical and pivotal defeat of the Americans at Queenston Heights.

Throughout the generations, the descendants of the Grand Chief continued to defend Canada and contribute to global peace and security. The family served in numerous conflicts, including the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War. In the latter part of the 20th century, Chief Wendy Jocko became another of Grand Chief Pinesis's inheritors to choose military service, extending the family's legacy of

service to Canada's peacekeeping legacy in Bosnia and Croatia. The family tradition was again passed down to Chief Jocko's son, James Scott McMullin. He continued this tradition of military service with the 1st Battalion of The Royal Canadian Regiment.

The story of Grand Chief Pinesis's family is a testament to an enduring warrior spirit among Indigenous Peoples and their remarkable journey of resilience, bravery, and dedication to their land, identity, and heritage. Their family military story represents one among countless other Indigenous families who have served Canada. Indigenous soldiers have a long history of participation in the armed forces, contributing significantly to various military efforts. These contributions are woven into the fabric of their communities and the broader narrative of their Nations.<sup>9</sup>

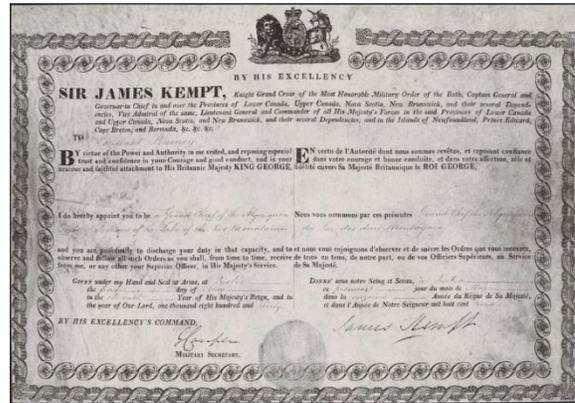


Figure 1 - Chief Pinesis's certificate of appointment as Grand Chief. Library and Archives Canada MG19 F 14

The CAF would benefit from reflecting on what it can learn from Indigenous service families to better enhance and enable their journey towards reconciliation, especially given that these families chose service knowing the discrimination they would face. Deeper understanding of this uniquely Indigenous motivational mindset would help inform the CAF's current cultural

transformation that rests on the pillars of teamwork, identity, leadership, and service with a warrior ethos tied intimately to honour, resourcefulness, adaptability, and mission focus.<sup>10</sup> There is a great deal of potential wisdom to be drawn from stories like those of the Jocko family and their generational draw towards military service.<sup>11</sup>

### **Current State of Affairs in the Canadian Armed Forces**

Culture change in the CAF has been a journey fraught with challenges, obstacles, and periodic course corrections. For instance, relaxed rules on personal grooming have been met with mixed feedback from CAF members.<sup>12</sup> Examples such as this illustrate the complex reality that cultural change is met with resistance and the institution will likely continue to face hurdles as Canadian culture and values are themselves moving targets in continuous and not necessarily linear motion. In spite of this, the CAF has made notable strides specifically in the area of Indigenous engagement. For example, the Indigenous Entry Programs aim to increase overall Indigenous representation in the CAF from 3.0% in August 2024 to 3.5% by 2026.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a budget of \$9.5 million has been approved for the CAF to put in place an Indigenous Reconciliation Program.<sup>14</sup> The following section outlines several of the CAF's initiatives intended to strengthen engagement with Indigenous Peoples and support reconciliation. While these programs represent steps in a positive direction, the data that follows illustrates that Indigenous participation in the CAF has nevertheless remained relatively flat and, in recent years, has declined.

In the context of the North and the Inuit, the CAF has expanded its engagement activities

such as by participating in the creation of the Inuit Nunangat Policy, the Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee (ICPC), and the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF) Leadership Committee, all aimed at improving engagement by being an active stakeholder.

Furthermore, the CAF has set up five summer training programs under the banner of the CAF Indigenous Entry Program (CAFIEP). These programs “are six weeks in duration, combining a variety of military training and Indigenous cultural teachings”<sup>15</sup> and aim to develop valuable skills such as self-confidence, self-discipline, teamwork, time management, respect, and fitness.<sup>16</sup> Participation also earns graduates their Basic Military Qualification (Reserve) which they can use to join local reserve units if they happen to have any close to their home communities.

The CAF also established the Indigenous Leadership Opportunity Year (ILOY) in 2007, which encourages Indigenous candidates to enroll at the Royal Military College and receive “exposure to the CAF military and academic disciplines.” These initiatives are designed to provide opportunities for Indigenous individuals to explore military careers while respecting and incorporating their cultural heritage.<sup>17</sup> Both the ILOY and CAFIEP represent promise in improving engagement between the CAF and Indigenous Nations.

Year	DND Goal	CAF Rates Reported
2001	1.8%	2.2%
2011	2.8%	2.9%
2015	2.5%	3.1%
2019	2.6%	3.1%
2020	4.2%	3.4%
2024	3.5%	3.0%
2025 (May)	3.5%	2.9%

Table 1 - CAF goals and reported rates on Indigenous participation<sup>18, 19, 20</sup>

While the ILOY and CAFIEP are positive steps towards better engagement between the CAF and Indigenous Nations, the hard numbers related to Indigenous representation have not markedly changed over the last twenty years (Table 1) and in most recent years actually declined.

Possible solutions will require ongoing support and resources for candidates, both during and after their involvement in these programs. Understanding what caused the decline over the last four years is critical for the CAF attaining its Indigenous recruitment goals. Additionally, continued efforts to increase Indigenous knowledge within the CAF is essential to developing solutions to reverse this trend. The CAF has made efforts in this area such as by appointing an Indigenous Advisor to the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group, a role that has existed for over twenty years. The efforts made by the CAF over the last decade, while not yielding measurable positive results, nonetheless demonstrate willingness for a more transformational level of engagement.

**Areas to Grow and Possible Next Steps in the Reconciliation Journey**

While the initiatives described above reflect a genuine effort by the CAF to engage more meaningfully with Indigenous Peoples, they also suggest that progress to date has been

uneven. The following section identifies areas where additional reflection and adaptation may help strengthen reconciliation efforts and support more durable, trust-based partnerships moving forward. However, meeting reconciliation goals will require continued efforts in a number of different spaces explored below.

Indigenous Elder Engagement

Elder involvement in supporting the RMC Kingston ILOY program, as well as other Indigenous programs within the military, is of immense importance because the guidance and wisdom they offer play a crucial role in bridging cultural gaps and fostering a deeper understanding of Indigenous heritage among candidates. Elders bring a wealth of traditional knowledge and cultural insights that are invaluable to the success of these programs. Their presence ensures that the initiatives remain grounded in Indigenous values and traditions, providing candidates with a holistic and culturally enriched experience. This connection to cultural roots is essential for the personal growth and leadership development of Indigenous candidates within the military context.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, involvement of respected elders enhances the credibility and acceptance of the initiatives within Indigenous communities. It demonstrates a commitment to honoring and integrating Indigenous perspectives, thereby fostering trust and collaboration between the military and Indigenous Peoples. Their support also provides a sense of continuity and mentorship for the candidates. Elders serve as role models and advisors, offering guidance and support that extend beyond the duration of the program.

In short, the support of elders is vital to the success and cultural integrity of the RMC Kingston ILOY program and other similar

Indigenous initiatives within the military. Their contributions help create a nurturing and empowering environment for Indigenous candidates, fostering mutual respect and understanding between the military and Indigenous communities.

### Leveraging Honorary Appointments

The tradition of appointing notable Canadians as Honoraries to military units has been a practice of the Government of Canada for over a century. The first Honorary Colonel was Lieutenant-Colonel the Honorable J.M. Gibson, appointed in 1895 to the 13th Battalion of Infantry. There are various honorary roles in the Canadian Army, including Colonel-in-Chief and Honorary Colonel, with Reserve Army units typically having both an Honorary Colonel and an Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel. Sir Robert Borden noted that these appointments help engage influential individuals with the Militia, a sentiment that remains relevant today.<sup>22</sup>

Honoraries serve as custodians of Regimental traditions and advise Commanding Officers on most matters, excluding operational issues, while units select individuals they believe will effectively advocate for their interests.<sup>23</sup>

These positions provide a vehicle through which engagement with Indigenous elders and leaders could be leveraged. The CAF has already set out to increase the representation of women in these roles with great success, having seen the percentage of these roles held by women increase from 6% in 2017 to 39% in 2023.<sup>24</sup>

This model can be applied to increase Indigenous elder and leader representation in the CAF. According to the 2021 Census, more than 1.8 million people in Canada

identify as Indigenous, which represents 5% of Canada's total population.<sup>25</sup> There are close to 300 honorary colonels in the Navy, Air Force and Army, meaning a program similar to that targeting women would serve to recruit 15 or so Indigenous voices to the CAF, who could in turn speak to improving engagement and reconciliation as well as perhaps be veterans themselves.

Such an approach towards a more compelling relationship with Indigenous voices would enhance the discussion of CAF cultural change and its intrinsic connection to reconciliation. Further, it would go a long way towards enacting the Calls to Action of the TRC.

### Inspiration from the New Zealand Model

Valuable lessons can be drawn from the Māori of New Zealand. The Māori, similar to Canadian Indigenous Nations, suffered discrimination over the last centuries.<sup>26</sup> Impacts among Māori, as is the case in Canada, included "loss of culture, language, and identity; social challenges, including health, educational attainment, income, and unemployment rates."<sup>27</sup>

Valuable insights for Canada can be drawn from the experience of the Māori and their engagement with the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). While the historical, legal, and societal contexts differ, the NZDF's efforts to incorporate Māori perspectives into military culture and professional education demonstrate how Indigenous knowledge and traditions can be integrated in ways that strengthen institutional identity and cohesion. Importantly, these initiatives have been framed not as a single reform or endpoint, but as an ongoing journey toward greater mutual understanding and respect.<sup>28</sup>

The ability of Māori communities to engage with the New Zealand state and its defence institutions has been shaped by a number of contextual factors, including the Treaty of Waitangi, which establishes the foundational relationship between the Māori and the Crown. Other elements — such as the recognition of the Māori language as an official language, New Zealand's bicultural national framework, and the relative demographic concentration of Māori communities — have also influenced how this relationship has evolved. While these conditions differ from those in Canada, they do not diminish the relevance of the NZDF experience. Rather, they highlight that progress emerged through sustained partnership, institutional openness, and a willingness to embed Indigenous perspectives within military education and practice.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the New Zealand model has not resolved all social or economic disparities between Māori and non-Māori populations. Nevertheless, the NZDF's approach illustrates how defence institutions can engage Indigenous knowledge in a manner that supports cultural recognition, professional development, and organizational learning. These experiences offer potential points of inspiration for Canada, not as a template to be replicated, but as evidence that meaningful collaboration between Indigenous Peoples and military institutions is both possible and valuable.<sup>30</sup>

#### Inclusion of Indigeneity into CAF Identity

A concerted effort to re-imagine Canadian military identity could include more transformational Indigenous elements that more accurately reflect Canada's unique national identity.<sup>31</sup>

When joining a profession that asks for one's unlimited liability,<sup>32</sup> one can reasonably assume that such a commitment is tied to a core national narrative that, in turn, feeds into a desired organizational culture. Until now, this narrative has centered to a large degree on the British Monarchy in English Canada and the *Canadiens* narrative in French Canada with associations to pre-revolutionary France. Both of these may become less relevant as the Canadian population's diversity increases with 39.4% of the population either being immigrants or children of immigrants.<sup>33</sup> The challenge with both these narratives rests in their being limited to the two settler nations of Canada at the complete exclusion of the hundreds of other nationalities and cultures that define the Canadian mosaic.

This is where the advantages of an Indigenous led and informed project related to transformational engagement become most pronounced. Indigenous cultures are diverse and reflective of the vast geography of Canada. They are identities that have no global imperial legacy, are unique to North America and, as such, have the potential to inspire Canadians irrespective of their country of origin. All Canadians could learn to find a part of themselves in Indigenous cultures and, in turn, create that common bond required for soldiers to understand their organization, foster a collective identity, and recognize why they serve. The challenge, however, will remain how to achieve inclusion without appropriation.

#### Inviting Indigenous Thought

A valuable approach for the CAF would include inviting Indigenous elders or community leaders to participate in decision-making processes. This would ensure that Indigenous perspectives and

traditional knowledge are respected and incorporated, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indigenous cultures within the CAF.

By actively involving Indigenous leaders in these discussions, the CAF can benefit from the unique insights that these leaders bring. This approach would not only enhance the cultural competency of the CAF but would also build trust and collaboration between the military and Indigenous Nations.

Moreover, such exchanges can serve as a platform for the CAF to communicate its own values and objectives, creating a two-way dialogue that promotes mutual respect and understanding. The incorporation of Indigenous thinking into military strategies can lead to more holistic and sustainable decision-making processes, benefiting both the military and the communities they serve.

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge can also enhance environmental stewardship and sustainable practices within military operations. Indigenous land management and ecological practices could inform the CAF's approach to environmental conservation and resource use.

In this paper, "Cultural Integration Sessions" are understood as structured opportunities for engagement in which Indigenous elders, knowledge holders, and community representatives may be invited to contribute perspectives to selected CAF planning, policy development, or professional development activities. Such sessions would be designed to complement existing decision-making processes, rather than replacing them, and could be tailored to specific contexts or initiatives. Engagement would be guided by established protocols and conducted in a manner that respects

Indigenous governance structures and cultural practices.

Within this framework, Cultural Integration Sessions could enable dialogue between CAF personnel and Indigenous participants on matters such as values, priorities, environmental considerations, and broader societal impacts. When undertaken at earlier stages of program or policy development, these engagements may help surface considerations that are difficult to integrate once initiatives have already taken on scale and form. In this way, Indigenous perspectives could inform deliberations in a manner that is both timely and contextually appropriate, while remaining consistent with institutional authorities and responsibilities.

More broadly, the concept of Cultural Integration Sessions reflects an effort to move toward more deliberate and sustained forms of engagement. Such sessions may also provide a forum in which historical context can be acknowledged and mutual understanding strengthened over time. By creating space for Indigenous knowledge to be considered alongside other inputs, the CAF may be better positioned to support inclusive practices, environmental awareness, and long-term relationship building, while maintaining operational effectiveness and institutional coherence.

For the above approaches to provide optimal outputs, Indigenous advisors and leaders should be brought into decision-making processes early and often as they can facilitate engagement and relationship building with Indigenous elders and leaders. Too often Indigenous insights are brought into processes too late, when programs have already taken on scale and form. This can lead to prior work needing to be undone due to critical steps having been missed.

## Conclusion

The intimate connection between Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the military goes back to the very first Europeans who settled in North America. This relationship has not been universally positive, but the Indigenous military connection was far from accidental. “From the beginning, the European strategy in the Northern half of North America was to govern and defend via patterns of alliances with Aborigines...this was the Canadian strategy for two and a half centuries.” If not for these alliances, Canada may not have existed, with the Battle of Queenstown Heights being one of many historically significant examples where the support of Indigenous Peoples was pivotal to the survival of the Nation.<sup>34</sup>

Historical examples, in addition to the military history of Indigenous families such as the Jockos, help build a greater understanding of past and current motivations of Indigenous Canadians to choose military service. In the case of the Jocko family, the desire to serve is rooted in a generational spirit of protecting their homeland. The warriors and soldiers of the Jocko family, like many others, were guided by deeper principles: the traditional Indigenous values of protecting the land, defending communities, and upholding sacred responsibilities as warriors.

These warriors served not just for Canada as a nation-state, but for the ancient territories their ancestors had stewarded for millennia. They served a country that denied them basic citizenship rights, confined them to reserves, and even stripped them of their Indigenous status for joining the military.<sup>35</sup> But their service transcended these practices, carrying forward a tradition of Indigenous military service that predates Canada itself. In essence, what draws so many Indigenous

Peoples to this day, is a profound commitment to protecting their People’s future, while honoring their past. Families like the Jockos serve, not because it is easy, but because it connects them to their ancestral role as guardians of these lands, a responsibility that runs deeper than any uniform or flag.

If the CAF can overcome its institutional inertia in leading change, it may find leadership and inspiration from Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Their identities, values, cultures, and traditions have been part of Canadian cultural fabric longer than anything else. They have transcended Canada’s military, civil, and commercial life for centuries,<sup>36</sup> without which Canada may very likely have become an extension of the United States. Canadians and Canadian identity have already been intimately shaped by Indigenous Peoples. The author John Ralston Saul writes,

*“Our challenge is to learn how to recognize that we have trained ourselves not to see. We must remove the imaginative and historical veils that we have used to obscure this reality. That means trying to identify the elements that make this Aboriginal presence real to both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal.”<sup>37</sup>*

Should Indigenous Peoples in Canada find this idea worth exploring and the CAF listen and share in the thought leadership of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, positive outcomes may manifest in what the military could look like in the decades to come. It remains the authors’ contention that the very existence and richness of Indigenous culture today is a testament to its poignancy, relevance, and resilience—the same qualities and values desired by the CAF in its culture

transformation journey to reimagine its identity and warrior ethos.

By embracing the strengths of Indigenous warrior culture, the CAF has an opportunity to build a more inclusive, resilient, and mission-ready force. A genuine partnership that honors Indigenous perspectives could not only enrich the military's identity but also set a precedent for reconciliation and meaningful cultural integration in other institutions across Canada.

## Endnotes

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