

Courage and Honour

The Life of Thomas Prince

BY GALADRIEL WATSON



Photo by Mr. Steve White

Thomas George Prince was the great great-grandson of Peguis, the famous Saulteaux chief who led his people from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, to the Red River in Manitoba, where they settled in the late 1790s. With his bravery as a soldier and his skill as a leader, Thomas lived up to the high standard set by his great great-grandfather.

Thomas was born in a tent in Petersfield, Manitoba, on October 25, 1915. When he was five, his family moved to the Brokenhead Reserve, 80 km north of Winnipeg. This is where Thomas grew up.

ONE OF CANADA'S MOST DECORATED
ABORIGINAL WAR HEROES AND A
PROMOTER OF ABORIGINAL RIGHTS.
BORN OCTOBER 25, 1915, IN PETERSFIELD,
MANITOBA. DIED NOVEMBER 25, 1977, IN
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA.



Thomas George Prince—Aboriginal war hero and promoter of Aboriginal rights.

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Thomas received the U.S. Silver Star for gallantry in action.▶

As a teenager, he joined the cadets, a program that teaches young people about the military and provides some training.

During this time, he became a very good marksman with a rifle.

When World War II started in 1939, Thomas was 24 years old. He volunteered for service, and in 1942, he received special training as a paratrooper. Only nine people out of 100 finished this difficult course. Thomas was one of those nine. He then became a member of the 1st Special Service Force, a group of the toughest men from both Canada and the United States. It was so feared by the German soldiers, it became known to them as the Devil's Brigade.

AN EXCELLENT SOLDIER

As well as being a brave soldier, Thomas turned out to be a pretty good actor. On February 8, 1944, the enemy and Allied forces were facing off against each other. Between the two sat an abandoned farmhouse. It would be a very useful spot from which to spy on the enemy. Thomas volunteered to run a telephone wire to the farmhouse. From there, he was able to watch the enemy and phone information back to his commanders.

The plan worked until a sudden flash of artillery fire broke the telephone line. Thomas was determined to fix it. He found old clothes and dressed up as a farmer. He then grabbed a hoe and went outside. Acting as if he were angry with both sides, he pretended to work the land while following the wire.

When he came to the break, he bent down and pretended to tie his shoe but actually repaired the wire. He worked the land a bit more, then returned to the farmhouse. Imagine doing all this while being closely watched by the enemy!

TIMELINE	
October 25, 1915	Born in Petersfield, Manitoba
June 3, 1940	Joined the Canadian military
July 9, 1942	Joined the 1st Special Service Force
February 8, 1944	Pretended to be a farmer to repair a telephone wire, earning the Military Medal for his act of bravery
September 1–5, 1944	Travelled over rugged terrain without sleep and food, helping the Allies win two battles and earning the Silver Star for gallantry in action
June 15, 1945	Discharged from the Canadian military
December 1, 1946	Elected as chairman of the Manitoba Indian Association
December 7, 1950	Landed in Korea to help fight the Korean War
October 28, 1953	Discharged from the Canadian military
November 25, 1977	Died in Winnipeg

THOMAS PRINCE'S HONOURS

- The Tommy Prince Barracks in Petawawa, Ontario
- The Tommy Prince Drill Hall and Tommy Prince Drive in Wainwright, Alberta
- The Sergeant Tommy Prince Army Training Initiative
- The Tommy Prince Award, a scholarship of the Assembly of First Nations (formerly the National Indian Brotherhood)
- The Tommy Prince Scholarship at Sault College, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario
- Tommy Prince School on the Brokenhead Reserve, Manitoba
- Sergeant Tommy Prince Street and a mural at 1083 Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg, Manitoba
- The Sergeant Tommy Prince Military Medal Cadet Corps in Winnipeg, Manitoba

The enemy never suspected a thing, and Thomas continued spying on them from the farmhouse. As a result, the Allies were able to destroy four enemy positions. Thomas' act of bravery was recognized with the Military Medal. This was Thomas' most famous exploit, re-enacted in the movie called *The Devil's Brigade*.

Later in 1944, Thomas and a private

penetrated enemy lines near L'Escarène. They helped a French force win a battle, returned with information about the enemy, then helped their own force win a battle. At the end of it all, they had walked 70 km across rugged mountains and had gone without food or sleep for three days. For this, Thomas was awarded the Silver Star from the U.S. military.

As he rose through the ranks, Thomas never let his men forget that he was a Canadian Aboriginal person with a proud heritage. He was discharged from the military in June 1945.

HOME AGAIN

Back on the Brokenhead Reserve, life proved difficult, so Thomas moved to Winnipeg. There he started a successful cleaning business.

At the same time, the Government of Canada was revising the *Indian Act*, which determines how the government treats Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people of Manitoba were concerned with issues such as housing, education, and hunting and trapping rights. In 1946, the Manitoba Indian Association chose Thomas to be their chairperson.



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Derek Ruttan

▲ Thomas received many military medals, including the Military Medal presented to him by King George VI at Buckingham Palace in 1945.

Thomas consulted with the Aboriginal people of Manitoba, then presented their concerns to the Canadian government in a clear, well-prepared report. Unfortunately, the government implemented only a few of his requests. Although the government never gave Thomas' demands the attention they deserved, his own people recognized his efforts. The National Indian Brotherhood started a scholarship in his name as part of the Heroes of Our Time Native Scholarship series.

While Thomas was busy championing these rights, his cleaning business failed. He decided to rejoin the military and spent the early 1950s fighting in the Korean War. Again his bravery won him more medals, but arthritis in his knees ended his military career. In October 1953, the Canadian military discharged him.

Thomas faced many hardships from then on. Although he was recognized during Remembrance Day ceremonies, he struggled through everyday life. The skills he had used on the battlefield didn't seem to be needed in 1950s Winnipeg. Like many soldiers, he had a hard time fitting back into society. He also had a hard time because many employers wouldn't hire an Aboriginal person, even though he had fought heroically for his country. This led to money problems.

Thomas turned to alcohol to try to blot out the mental pain of the difficulties he faced and the physical pain of his arthritis. He married Verna Sinclair and had five children, but alcoholism tore his family apart. Realizing it was causing many of his problems and destroying his life, he made the decision to stop drinking alcohol. His strong character helped him to fight and beat this enemy, too.

Thomas was discharged from the Canadian military in 1953. ▶



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On November 25, 1977, at age 62, Thomas died in Winnipeg. Over 500 people attended his funeral, including representatives from France, Italy, and the United States. He was remembered as a brave leader and a shy, kind, and gentle man. He had once told the media that his fellow soldiers “were a great bunch of guys. I’m here because they kept me safe and brought me home.”

In all, Thomas earned nearly a dozen medals. He also earned a Certificate of Merit recognizing his years of dedication to the Aboriginal people of

Manitoba. A school on the Brokenhead Reserve is now named after him, as well as a street in Alberta and a military building in Ontario, among others. A second scholarship at Sault College in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, was established in his name. You can also see him painted on a mural at 1083 Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg.

Over the past century, thousands of Aboriginal people have fought with the Canadian military. Thomas is remembered as one of the best. ■