

From Sniper to Chief: The Amazing Journey of Francis Pegahmagabow

Over 650,000 Canadians fought in World War I (WWI), but one soldier stands out for his bravery and fearlessness. Francis Pegahmagabow was one of WWI's most highly decorated Indigenous soldiers and the most lethal sniper. After the war, he returned to Canada to passionately advocate for Indigenous rights.

Pegahmagabow was born on March 9, 1889. He was an Ojibwe Anishinaabe and part of the Wasauksing First Nation. Raised by an elder, Pegahmagabow spent his childhood fishing and hunting in the traditional ways of the Anishinaabe, learning valuable skills he would need in the future.

On August 13, 1914, ten days after the declaration of war, 25-year-old Pegahmagabow volunteered for the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion. He landed in France in February 1915.

Pegahmagabow was assigned two of the war's deadliest jobs: working as a scout and as a sniper. The average lifespan of a sniper in WWI was six weeks. He fought in several major battles, including the Second Battle of Ypres, the Battle of Passchendaele, and the Hundred Days Offensive. Pegahmagabow survived the whole war and became the deadliest sniper in WWI, with 378 confirmed kills.

He was one of the most decorated First Nations soldiers in Canadian history. He was awarded the Military Medal in 1916 and earned two bars, becoming one of just 37 Canadians to earn that medal.

He returned to Canada as a decorated veteran but remained an Indian, facing discrimination and strict control under the Indian Act. He became a political leader in the Wasauksing First Nation, advocating for change. He was elected chief of the Wasauksing First Nation and, eventually, Supreme Chief of the native Independent Government, which later became the Assembly of First Nations.

Pegahmagabow died in 1952 and is buried in a military grave in Parry Sound. A bronze statue of Pegahmagabow stands in Parry Sound, and his military medals and headdress are on permanent exhibit at the Canadian War Museum.

Pegahmagabow's legacy continues as an example of a life of service and determination. He was famous for his bravery, fearlessness and struggle for his people's rights.