

# CORPORAL FRANCIS PEGAHMAGABOW CANADA'S MOST DECORATED FIRST NATION SOLDIER AND WORLD WAR I'S TOP SNIPER

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**Introduction:** Francis Pegahmagabow (9 March 1891-5 August 1952) was the most decorated Canadian First Nation soldier in the First World War. He was awarded the Military Medal (MM) plus two bars for bravery in Belgium and France. Pegahmagabow was one of 39 members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) to receive two bars to the MM.



He was the most effective sniper of World War I on either side. He was an expert marksman and scout, credited with killing 378 Germans and capturing 300 more.

**Early Life:** Francis Pegahmagabow was born on what is now the Shawanaga First Nation reserve. His father was Michael Pegahmagabow of the Parry Island First Nation and his mother, Mary Contin of the Henvey Inlet First Nation, located further up the Georgian Bay's north shore. An Ojibwa, he grew up at the Parry Island (Wasauksing) Band, near Parry Sound, Ontario. Prior to the war Pegahmagabow worked as a marine fireman for the Department of Marine and Fisheries on the Great Lakes.

**Wartime Experience:** Pegahmagabow enlisted with the 23rd Regiment (Northern Pioneers) in August 1914, almost immediately after war was declared. Within weeks of volunteering, he became one of the original members of the 1st

Canadian Infantry Battalion, which, along with the rest of the 20,000-strong 1st Canadian Division, landed in France in February 1915.

Sniping was the specialty of the man his fellow soldiers called "Peggy." Using the much maligned Ross rifle he was credited with killing 378 enemy soldiers, the highest score of any other sniper in WW I. In addition, Pegahmagabow developed a reputation as a superior scout. He was so skilled at reconnaissance that it was said that he used to "go behind enemy lines, rub shoulders with the enemy forces and never get caught."

The 1st Battalion experienced heavy action almost as soon as it arrived on the battlefield. It fought at Ypres, where the enemy introduced poison gas, and on the Somme, where Pegahmagabow was shot in the leg. He recovered and made it back in time to return with his unit to Belgium.

It was during his first year on the Western Front that he became one of the first Canadians to be awarded the Military Medal (MM). The commendation read:

*"For continuous service as a messenger from February 14th 1915 to February 1916. He carried messages with great bravery and success during the whole of the actions at Ypres, Festubert and Givenchy. In all his work he has consistently shown a disregard for danger and his faithfulness to duty is highly commendable."*

In November 1917, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion joined the assault near the village of Passchendaele. With two British divisions,

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the Canadian Corps attacked and took the village, holding it for five days, until reinforcements arrived. The Allies suffered 16,000 casualties at Passchendaele, and Corporal Pegahmagabow earned his first bar to the MM.

His citation read: *"At Passchendaele Nov. 6th/7th, 1917, this NCO did excellent work. Before and after the attack he kept in touch with the flanks, advising the units he had seen, this information proving the success of the attack and saving valuable time in consolidating. He also guided the relief to its proper place after it had become mixed up.*

Pegahmagabow would earn his second bar to the MM during the final months of the First World War in the Battle of the Scarpe (part of the 2nd Battle of Arras). The commendation read:

*"During the operations of August 30th, 1918, at Orix Trench, near Upton Wood, when his company were almost out of ammunition and in danger of being surrounded, this NCO went over the top under heavy MG and rifle fire and brought back sufficient ammunition to enable the post to carry on and assist in repulsing heavy enemy counter-attacks."*

Pegahmagabow was one of those rare Canadian soldiers who enlisted in 1914 and fought to the end of the war.

**Post-War:** In April 1919, Pegahmagabow was invalided to Canada, having served for nearly the entire war. Afterward, he joined the Algonquin Regiment in the non-permanent active militia and, following in the steps of his father and grandfather, became chief of the Parry Island Band and later a councillor. He is remembered for

ensuring that the culture of his people was not lost and, while chief, he encouraged the study and practice of the band's traditions.

During World War II, he worked as a guard at a munitions plant near Nobel, Ontario while serving as a Sergeant-Major in the local militia.



**1945**

A member of Canada's Indian Hall of Fame, Pegahmagabow died on the reserve in 1952.

**In Memoriam:** In a ceremony held 27 August 2003 at the Canadian War Museum (CWM), Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow's medals were donated to the Museum by his children, Marie Anderson and Duncan Pegahmagabow. Included in the donation were his wedding certificate and photo album, as well as his headdress from his service as chief of the Parry Island Band.



**Cpl. Pegahmagabow's Medals**

His memory is also commemorated on a plaque honouring him and his regiment on

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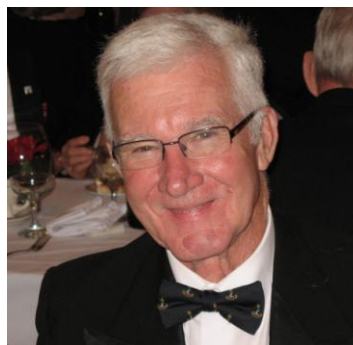
the Rotary and Algonquin Regiment Fitness Trail in Parry Sound.

Most recently he was honoured by the Canadian Forces, who named the 3rd Canadian Ranger Patrol Group HQ Building at CFB Borden after him. Canadian novelist Joseph Boyden's 2005 novel *Three Day Road* was inspired in part by Pegahmagabow.

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