

MEDALS AND MEMORIES

From Far and Wide ...

Character Education

- Explore how crisis and diversity build character
- Discuss how role models affect the development of character
- Consider how travel and exposure to different cultures help to broaden a person's view on the world

Facts

- Canadian soldiers fought in all theatres of war during WWII. For example, 7,400 Canadians received the African Star; 5,500 Canadians, the Burma Star. 100,000 Canadians served in Italy with 6,000 of them killed there
- At the height of WWII there were 2.5 million troops from the Indian sub-continent; they earned 31 Victoria Crosses
- In WWII, 20 per cent of all French Forces were soldiers from Africa; there were 17,000 Senegalese military deaths

Before the Reading

- If your grand-parents or great-grandparents served in World War II, where did they serve?
- Make a list of all the World War II movies you know. Here are a few to get you started: *Casablanca*, *Band of Brothers*, and *Valkyrie*. Why do you think there are a great many movies centered on war?
- Globalization is often used to describe economic or communications developments that brought the countries of the world closer together. How did World War I and World War II start the globalization ball rolling?

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Tul Bahadur Pun

In Mogaung, Burma 65 years ago, a young Rifleman seized a Bren gun and started firing from the hip as he charged a heavily bunkered Japanese position. Rifleman Tul Bahadur Pun was the last man standing of his platoon from the 6th Gurkha Rifles as the sun came up behind him. He and two other men had made it 510 meters but there were 27 meters over open ground, deep mud, shell

holes and fallen trees to go. Against all odds, the 21 year old Rifleman, a clear target for the enemy, took the bunker and provided the covering fire that allowed the remainder of his platoon to reach their objective, a railway bridge. Pun received the Victoria Cross for valour during his World War II service for the British Army. Today, Pun is still firing from the hip and again almost the last man standing as he fights the British Government for veteran Gurkha pension and settlement rights. The much decorated soldier who attended Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953 and had tea with the Queen mother won his own battle to settle in the U.K. in 2007 after much publicity surrounding his case. However, Rifleman Pun has not stopped fighting as there are still 27 meters to go and he hopes to achieve his objective once again—equality for Gurkha veterans.

Reading

In the same way that Canadian soldiers in World War II served in far-flung reaches of the globe that they never thought they would see, soldiers from the British Commonwealth and from the French colonies saw action in parts of Europe that would have seemed as foreign to them as the African deserts were to the Canadians. Imagine African Tirailleurs from Chad, Tunisia and Morocco facing the winters of Europe.



Robert "Kurt" Lavack

Canadian veteran **Robert "Kurt" Lavack**, a pilot with the RAF during WWII saw action in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Circumstances of war placed the young lad born in a small town Manitoba and raised in British Columbia, side by side with men and women from South Africa, the British Isles, New Zealand and

Australia. Their lives depended upon their capacity to work together effectively under fire in areas of the world that none of them had ever seen. World War II provided a crash course in geography and human relations. Those who served were altered forever—no matter from where they hailed.

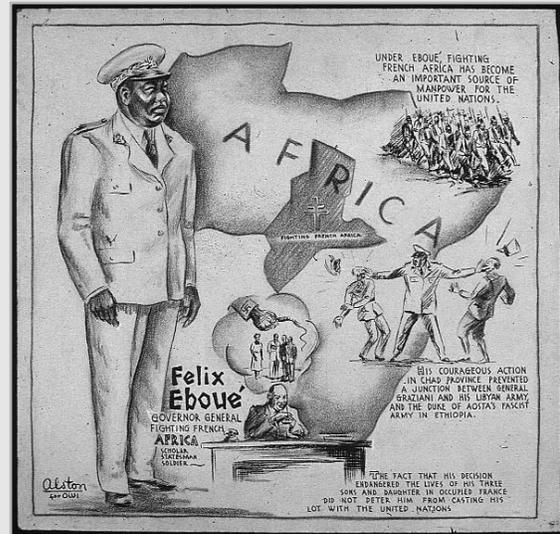
In the post-war years, many of the citizens of the countries who had committed themselves to the democratic cause in WWII came from far and wide to make Canada their home. Each year on Remembrance Day their children and grand-children celebrate the brave veterans of Canada, men and women of a wide range of national heritages, who sacrificed their lives to protect democratic freedoms. These Canadian sacrifices serve as a wonderful reminder to celebrate the men and women from Africa and the Indian sub-continent who spilled their blood for democracy as well—for freedoms that their children and grandchildren enjoy, perhaps now in Canada.



Havildar Lachhiman Gurung
Photo: Alan Abercrombie

A sampling of some of the Victoria Cross recipients from different parts of the Indian sub-continent, demonstrates that soldiers from Nepal, Pakistan and India, fought with unparalleled courage, determination, confidence and strength of character. **Lachhiman Gurung**, a Rifleman in the 8th Gurkha Rifles, British Indian Army, was one

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Félix Adolphe Éboué, born in French Guyana, educated in France to be a civil administrator was considered to be the most influential black man of World War II. In 1940 with France defeated and governed by collaborationists headed by Pétain in Vichy, **Éboué**, as Governor of Chad was faced with the difficult decision of siding with the Vichy government or supporting the Free French forces who had joined the Allied nations to fight the Axis powers. **Éboué** chose to back De Gaulle's government in exile. As the first major colonial official to take this stand at a critical hour in the war's progress, **Éboué** helped push other French colonies in Africa over to the Allies. In 1941, a grateful De Gaulle appointed **Éboué** Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa, a position from which **Éboué** brought substantial manpower, materials and strategic locations to the Allies. Thanks to **Éboué**, British and American planes were landed and assembled in Nigeria, flown eastward to Khartoum in the Sudan and then northward to the Middle East. For his significant contributions to the war effort, among which was the outfitting of Fort Lamy, Felix **Éboué** was made an Officer of the Legion of Honour and received the Companion of Liberation and Colonial Medals, the latter with clasp. Felix **Éboué**'s ashes are interred in France's Pantheon; he is the first black man to be thus honoured.

of the last WWII recipients of the Victoria Cross when he was cited for his actions on May 12 to 13, 1945, at Taungdaw, Burma (now Myanmar).

Rifleman Gurung was in the most forward post of his platoon when it took the brunt of an attack by approximately 200 Japanese soldiers. The *London Gazette* of July 24, 1945, stated, "Twice he hurled back grenades which had fallen on his trench, but the third exploded in his right hand, blowing off his fingers, shattering his arm and severely wounding him in the face, body and right leg. His two comrades were also badly wounded but the rifleman, now alone and disregarding his wounds, loaded and fired his rifle with his left hand for four hours, calmly waiting for each attack which he met with fire at point blank range. Afterwards, when the casualties were counted, it is reported that there were 31 dead Japanese around his position which he had killed, with only one arm." Lachhiman Gurung recovered from his wounds, but, lost his right eye and the use of his right hand. He went on to achieve the rank of Honorary Halvidar before retiring to his village in Nepal.



Sepoy Ali Haidar

Ali Haidar, an ethnic Pashtun born in Kohat which is now part of Pakistan, earned his V.C. in Italy. April 9, 1945, near Fusignano, when Sepoy Haidar's company the Frontier Force Rifles was ordered to establish a bridgehead over the Senio River, only he and two other

men managed to get across the river which was under heavy German machine-gun fire. Haidar attacked the first German strongpoint while covered by the other men and in spite of being wounded, put it out of commission. Haidar was again wounded as he crawled towards the second German strongpoint. In spite of his two injuries, the stalwart soldier threw a grenade and charged the post wounding two of the enemy and taking the other two prisoners. The rest of Sepoy Haidar's company crossed the river to establish the bridgehead. Sepoy Haidar retired with the rank of Havildar.



2nd Lieut. Premindra Singh Bhagat Photo: Royal Engineers Museum

Second Lieutenant Premindra Singh Bhagat, educated at the Royal Indian Military College before attending the Indian Military Academy, was only one of two Indian officers to earn a Victoria Cross. Bhagat earned his V.C. near Metemma, Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) for his actions with the 21st Field Company of Bombay Sappers and Miners

between Jan. 31 and Feb. 1, 1941. After the capture of Metemma, the Second Lieutenant's section was detailed to accompany mobile troops in fortified Bren Carriers to clear the road and adjacent areas of mines. The Allied objective was to drive the Italians commanded by the Duke of Aosta from Abyssinia. In a period of 96 desperate hours and over a distance of 89 km, Premindra Bhagat led the column that detected and cleared 15 minefields. His citation read, "Speed being essential, he worked at high pressure from dawn to dusk each day. On two occasions when his carrier was blown up with casualties to others, and on a third occasion when ambushed and under close enemy fire he himself carried straight on with his task. He refused relief when worn out with strain and fatigue and with one eardrum punctured by an explosion" The Italians surrendered May 17, 1941. Second Lieutenant Premindra Singh Bhagat retired in 1974 as a Lieutenant General after a distinguished military career.



Sepoy Bhandari Ram

Sepoy Bhandari Ram of the 10th Baluchi Regiment was a Hindu from the Simla Hills. He had already taken part in the 25 day battle of Ngakyedauk Pass in northern Arakan which had finally put an end to Japan's highly taunted March on Delhi, when General Sir William Slim determined to use two Indian and two West African divisions to clear Arakan. Nov. 22, 1944, in East

Mayu, Arakan, Sepoy Ram's company was ordered to attack a strongly held Japanese bunker position which was on the top of a precipitous slope. Sepoy Ram was in the leading section of the platoon that had already reached within 45.7 meters of the top by means of a dangerous narrow ridge when they were peppered with heavy machine-gun fire. Sepoy Ram was wounded in the left shoulder and leg and his platoon pinned down when with

a supreme effort he crawled up to the Japanese gun while within full view of the enemy. When Sepoy Ram reached within 13.7 meters of the enemy's gun nest, they hurled grenades at him which further wounded him in the face and chest. Bloodied but undaunted, Ram crawled the last few meters to hurl a grenade into the enemy position at close range. Inspired by his superhuman courage, the platoon rushed up and captured the position. The citation read, "It was only after the position had been taken that he lay down and allowed his wounds to be dressed."

There are 27 further Victoria Cross stories and 36,000 untold stories of the soldiers from the Indian sub-continent who gave their lives in WWII.

The stories of soldiers from the African continent are more difficult to find, even though they contributed significantly to the defeat of the Axis powers in Africa. Senegalese units were among the first to answer Charles De Gaulle's cry for a Free French Army. The Senegalese comprised most of the infantry in the epic march of Philippe LeClerc's French Equatorial Forces that marched across the Sahara to join the British 8th Army that attacked Rommel's forces at the Mareth Line. They were also part of the Allied stand at Bir Hakeim in June 1942. Four Senegalese battalions fought at El Alamein in Egypt.

Edward Bimberg in *Tricolor over the Sahara*, described an incident with General LeClerc's 3rd Battalion de Marche (BM3) of the 2nd Free French Army that he had marched across Africa to the Red Sea. Proud to be French soldiers, the warriors proved themselves at the capture of Mersa Taclai. It was at Cub-Cub, the entrance to a mountainous region in Eritrea that the Senegalese earned their reputation as fierce fighters and guardians of the water.

Cub-Cub was surrounded by low hills traversed with trenches and solidly held by the Italians. The curdling cries and savage attacks of the tirailleurs awed the defenders to such an extent that they stayed dazed in their trenches and soon surrendered. Cub-Cub was home to important wells and as a result the Senegalese gained the name of 'guardians of the water'. Since water was paramount in all African campaigns, the Senegalese tirailleurs became celebrated for locating and delivering water, even under severe fire.

After 1942, the traditional position of the use of African soldiers only on African soil, changed so that eventually more than 160,000 Africans were sent abroad to fight. They were deployed to Ceylon and Burma to fight the Japanese and fought in the Mediterranean campaign supporting the Allied advance through Italy from 1943–1945.

The predominantly black 9th Division of the Division D'Infanterie Coloniale took the island of Elba and landed in southern France. By the time of the Armistice, manpower from outside France made up 20 per cent of the French Army including such units as the elite 1st Moroccan Division, seven other North African divisions and three African divisions. France's claim to have continued to resist and fight was built to a large degree on the contributions of its African troops—some 400,000 of them.

General Mark Clark in his autobiography *Calculated Risk* praised the role of the French Expeditionary Corps in the Battle of Rome. "The French surprised the enemy and quickly seized key terrain ... The 1st Motorized Division helped the 2nd Moroccan division take key Mount Girofano and then advanced rapidly north to S. Apollinare and S. Ambrogio. In spite of the stiffening enemy resistance, the 2nd Moroccan Division penetrated the Gustav Line in less than two day's fighting The next 48 hours on the French front were decisive. The knife-wielding Goumiers swarmed over the hills, particularly at night, and General Juin's entire force showed an aggressiveness hour after hour that the Germans could not withstand For this performance, which was to be a key to the success of the entire drive on Rome, I shall always be a grateful admirer of General Juin and his magnificent FEC."

There are medal recipients who ably represent the fighting spirit of the many nameless WWII combatants from Africa. **Indriss Doursan** who was born in the Bongor district of Chad, received France's highest honour, the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur, as well as the Companion de la Liberation, the Medaille Militaire, Croix de Guerre and a further three medals. A volunteer in the Senegalese Tirailleurs, he was promoted to sergeant in July 1940 just before joining the Free French 10th Company de Marche (BM3) which fought at Cub-Cub and Keren in 1941. He received the Croix de la Liberation from General De Gaulle in Qastina for his valiant conduct at Cub-Cub. Continuously rising in rank, Doursan served in Syria, at the siege of Bir-Hakeim in Libya, in Tunisia and Morocco before retiring in 1948 to the Chad military where he rose in rank to Regimental Sergeant-Major.

Aloysius Odervole of Nigeria and **Albert Idohou** and **Agoussi Wabi** from Porto Novo in Dahomey (now Benin) heeded General de Gaulle's call to take part in the resistance in East Africa. They worked with Free French spies in Dahomey organizing their placements, all the time risking discovery as their government was allied with Vichy. When their actions were uncovered, a military tribunal in Dakar

sentenced them to death. All three were executed by firing squad Nov. 10, 1941. They received the Legion of Honour, Companion of Liberation and Croix de Guerre with palm.

Mohammed Bel Hadj of Algeria who earned the Companion of Liberation in Nov. 1945, the Military Medal in Jan. 1943 and the Croix de Guerre and three other medals, had a career with the enemy until he deserted in Aug. 6, 1941, to join the Free French. Promoted to Sergeant-Major in 1941 he joined the 22nd North African Company that fought in Libya. In June 1942 Bel Hadj twice risked his life to save his commanding officer at Bir Hakeim. In 1944 Sergeant-Major Bel Hadj moved to the Italian campaign, advancing as Regimental Sergeant-Major to take part in the liberation of Provence. Promoted to sub-lieutenant he participated in the Alsace campaign. Jan. 9, 1945, when he stepped on a mine during a patrol on the lower Rhine River, Bel Hadj knew that his number was up. He told the medic, "Lieutenant Bel Hadj is going to die, but that means nothing. Vive la France!"

Just as Canada's Victoria Cross recipients represent only a fraction of the valour and sacrifice of Canadians during WWII, these few men from Africa and the Indian sub-continent present only a small glimpse into the realities of the global nature of World War II. What is certain is that Canadian students, no matter what their heritage, have reasons to explore World War II further.

After the Reading

- List all the medals in this reading. Which ones did you NOT know about?
- Look up all the countries and places mentioned in this reading
- Why is information about theatres of war, other than Europe, so hard to find?
- Of all the stories in this reading, whose story touched you most and why?

Extensions

- You have to be able to read French, but, the website www.ordredelalibration.fr/fr_compagnon/73.html unlocks the mystery of African medal recipients. Because the French colonial soldiers were part of the Free French Army, they received their recognition from France.

Research three further recipients of France's highest honours

- Felix Éboué earned all of France's top French honours, and, he is also the first black person to have his ashes placed in the Pantheon. Research Éboué's history to discover why he is so honoured
- So how good a researcher are you? Find out what you can about a Fulani-born Nigerian named Charles Maigumeri who was an ordinary soldier like the hundreds of thousands of Africans who served in the British Army in WWII. It is time to write new histories. Be a part of it!

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