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Indigenous participation in the Canadian Armed Forces:

Efforts towards Reconciliation?

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples have a long history of service in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), notwithstanding the power dynamics of settler colonialism.¹ Historically, Indigenous individuals joined the Canadian military despite at times facing discrimination related to their identity.² In 1989, the CAF established the first program in partnership with Indigenous communities called Bold Eagle. The program had a positive impact on the socio-economic conditions of Indigenous participants and created a meaningful connection between communities and the CAF.³ Since the establishment of Bold Eagle, the CAF has developed additional programs for Indigenous peoples and initiatives that incorporate cultural components. These programs and initiatives have created opportunities for employment and leadership for Indigenous individuals that contribute to the reconciliation efforts in Canada.

Canada has a fast-growing Indigenous population of about two million, comprising three main groups recognized under the Canadian Constitution: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. These groups are diverse and constitute more than 600 Indigenous communities speaking over 70 Indigenous languages. Indigenous peoples represent about 5% of Canada's multicultural population of over 41 million⁴ but only 3% of the CAF self-identifies as Indigenous. For Indigenous peoples, serving in the military means facing many challenges including cultural adaptation, language barriers, and travelling from remote communities. While Indigenous representation in the military remains below the target set by the CAF Employment Equity Plan,⁵ it has been growing steadily thanks to the CAF programs for Indigenous peoples and other initiatives.

This policy brief outlines the present approach of the CAF towards Indigenous military participation drawing from a pilot research project involving 32 informal and background consultations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders held in April and May 2024. The consultations covered a wide range of topics related to Indigenous participation and engagement in the CAF, which are not fully explored here, such as the Canadian Rangers, a subcomponent of the Canadian Army Reserve operating in Canada's northern and remote communities with significant Indigenous representation.⁶



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In this policy brief, the focus will be on CAF programs for Indigenous peoples along with related CAF Indigenous initiatives.

The analysis suggests that Indigenous programs and initiatives have a dual purpose of increasing Indigenous participation in the military and promoting national reconciliation, although challenges remain. The authors acknowledge being Caucasian female scholars of immigrant background with an interest in diversity in military organisations including the experience of Indigenous peoples in Defence. Recognizing there are limitations to doing research in this space as non-Indigenous scholars, the goal of the project is to contribute perspectives and recommendations on the participation of Indigenous peoples in the CAF in a way that is culturally sensitive and appropriate towards Indigenous peoples and cultures.

CAF programs for Indigenous peoples

The CAF has implemented three distinct sets of programs for Indigenous peoples aimed at attracting and recruiting Indigenous individuals: the summer training programs, the CAF Indigenous Entry Program (CAFIEP), and the Indigenous Leadership Opportunity Year (ILOY).⁷ These programs are offered in both English and French, Canada's official languages, and advertised through the CAF recruiting website as "unique educational programs and entry plans for Indigenous Peoples" aiming to provide Indigenous applicants with opportunities to learn about military life, have challenging and rewarding educational and leadership experiences, with all expenses covered and no long term commitments.⁸ While there are differences across programs including delivery, content, duration, and location, they all offer various forms of cultural and spiritual support or teachings by Indigenous elders and counsellors.

The summer training programs comprise five 6-week programs offered in various military bases across Canada. Bold Eagle is the longest running (since 1989) and most popular program and, in 2019, it reached 229 enrolments. It is open to Indigenous peoples living in Western Canada or Northwestern Ontario, and participants train in Wainwright, Alberta. Raven was established in 2003, has a naval orientation, and runs on Vancouver Island in Esquimalt, British Columbia. It is open to Indigenous peoples across Canada. Black Bear started in 2008, is open to Indigenous peoples across Canada, and runs in Oromocto, New Brunswick. Carcajou is a bilingual program established in 2017 and running in Valcartier, Quebec. Grey Wolf was also established in 2017 for Indigenous peoples across Ontario and participants train in Meaford, Ontario. All these programs are run by the Canadian Army apart from Raven which is conducted by the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). Currently, no programs are run by the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF).

These programs are intended to combine military skills development and Indigenous cultural awareness. In the first week participants focus on Indigenous cultural teachings followed by five weeks of military training. Participants are temporarily enlisted in the Reserves, offered travel and accommodation arrangements, provided with food, clothing, and equipment, and are paid for their time during the program. Upon successful completion, participants receive the Reserves Basic Military Qualification (BMQ) and can either remain in the Reserves, transfer to the Regular Forces, or be released from service.

CAFIEP is a shorter program specifically designed for individuals considering a military career and wanting to experience military life before making a long-term commitment.

Established in 1997, this program provides a concise, intensive introduction to the military environment, facilitating informed career decisions. In three weeks, participants become familiar with military life, including exercises similar to Basic Training and realistic military experiences. The CAFIEP does not include scheduled Indigenous cultural activities and teachings; however, civilian Indigenous counsellors, who may also be recognized as elders by their communities, are available to provide culturally appropriate support to participants during and after the program such as smudging or sharing circles, as needed. Participants can either train at the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, in Quebec, or at Canadian Forces Base Halifax, in Nova Scotia. Participants are not enlisted in the CAF, rather, they are enrolled as civilians as this is considered a “try before you buy” program. Costs associated with travelling to and from the program are covered. Until 2022, participants used to receive financial compensation to attend this program; however, this is no longer the case as there was no authority to offer compensation because they are not hired by the CAF and do not provide a service. As an alternative incentive, CAFIEP participants who successfully complete the program are eligible for an accelerated pay increment if they join the CAF as Non-Commissioned Members (NCMs) and complete BMQ.

The ILOY offers a full academic year at the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) in Kingston, Ontario. Participants are enrolled in the Regular Forces as Officer Cadets, receive free tuition and books, and are paid at their military rank level. ILOY students participate in academic life as well as cultural activities with an elder, military training, sports, and activities to develop leadership skills. On completion, ILOY graduates who meet the academic requirements can apply to continue at RMC in a degree program as a member of the CAF under the Regular Officer Training Plan (ROTP), apply to join the CAF as NCMs, or be discharged from the military.

CAF Employment Equity Efforts

The CAF Indigenous programs are part of initiatives aiming to mitigate barriers to employment for Indigenous peoples in accordance with the Employment Equity Act (EEA) enacted in 1986 and revised in 1995.⁹ Canada instituted the EEA to correct the historical disadvantage experienced by four designated groups: women, Indigenous peoples,¹⁰ persons with disabilities, and visible minorities. The EEA establishes that employers must remove barriers to employment unrelated to ability, must accommodate within reason legitimate differences between groups, and can put in place special measures to improve employment of the four designated groups.¹¹ The CAF officially came under the EEA in 2002 with special provisions allowing for military operational effectiveness.¹²

The CAF programs for Indigenous peoples are mentioned in several Defence documents and policies as initiatives or action items to improve diversity representation and attract and recruit Indigenous peoples including the 2017 Defence Policy, Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE),¹³ the 2016 Diversity Strategy,¹⁴ and the CAF Employment Equity Plan 2021-2026.¹⁵ The new Defence Policy *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence* makes no mention of the CAF Indigenous programs but there are several instances where the policy refers to partnerships with Indigenous peoples and northern communities.¹⁶ Although some critics believe that policies such as *Our North* and its predecessor SSE simply

list a “flurry of activities” without actually allocating necessary resources,¹⁷ the CAF data on Indigenous programs since 2008 show that they have consistently attracted Indigenous peoples to the military.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it remains unclear how many Indigenous individuals join the military without participating in these programs.

During the consultations, some expressed concerns that recruiters may be funnelling Indigenous individuals interested in a military career into these programs primarily to fill their billets and meet the reporting requirements of the CAF EE Plan, without considering if these programs are the most suitable path for each individual. This may affect satisfaction with the entry experience in the military and retention after the programs. For example, if an Indigenous individual meets the academic requirements and wishes to apply to join the CAF through the ROTP to become an officer, directing them to the ILOY program adds an extra year to their degree completion, despite the financial compensation they receive. In our consultations, we found that although there are Indigenous recruiters, some of whom are Indigenous, they receive little training on Indigenous attraction.

The CAF EE Plan 2021-2026 acknowledges that the CAF has made little progress since the first plan was issued in 2015, including in Indigenous employment and retention.¹⁹ As mentioned, the CAF programs for Indigenous peoples have contributed to the rising Indigenous representation rates over the years, currently, 3% of the Regular and Reserve Forces combined. However, this rate falls short of the goal set in the CAF EE Plan of 3.2% by 2022 and 3.5% by 2026²⁰ and is below Indigenous participation rates in the Canadian labour market of 4.9% in 2021, expected to double in the coming years.²¹

Enrolments across the Indigenous programs are consistent and peaked between 2017 and 2019 but dropped to zero in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have since been recovering slowly. Retention numbers are low, especially a year from completion. For example, in 2019, Bold Eagle’s intake was 229 with 157 graduates, 43 of whom enlisted in the Reserve Forces and 14 in the Regular Forces. Only three were still in the CAF a year after graduation. Retention rates of the CAFIEP are significantly low, and enrolments dropped below double digits since the financial compensation was removed in 2022. The ILOY is a small program, offering 32 positions each year that have never all been filled since its inception in 2008. Enrolments peaked at 27 in the academic year 2018-19 but retention was low. However, the program’s success rates are good, including the retention of officers one year after graduation.

Reconciliation

The success of the CAF programs for Indigenous peoples cannot be measured merely by enrolment numbers and retention after graduation. While the CAF Indigenous programs are not specifically labelled as supporting reconciliation, they can be considered as part of the Department of National Defence/CAF (DND/CAF) efforts toward that. In the CAF EE Plan, the Indigenous programs are referred to as “Service to Canada”,²² one of the three ethical principles guiding the military profession, namely “respecting the dignity of all persons, service to Canada before self, and obeying and supporting lawful authority”.²³ This underscores that CAF Indigenous programs should be seen as more than a recruitment strategy. They serve Canada by providing employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples,

fostering leadership and healing, promoting a cohesive society that can repair relations impacted by colonial history and align with the national reconciliation efforts.

In Canada, the journey towards reconciliation and building renewed relationships with Indigenous peoples began in 1998 sparked by a report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples including a chapter on the Indian residential schools. In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established to investigate the history and document the personal stories of survivors of the residential schools and, in 2015, it defined reconciliation as the process of “establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.”²⁴ To advance reconciliation and redress the legacy of residential schools, the TRC issued 94 calls to action addressing the federal, provincial, and territorial governments of Canada and the wider Canadian society.²⁵ The calls to action include improved education, health, and employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples.

Our consultations revealed that some Indigenous peoples see the military as an institution that can promote their interests and positive relations in Canadian society in line with national reconciliation goals. Several participants pointed to the history and success of the first Indigenous summer program, Bold Eagle, which started 13 years prior to the CAF falling under the EEA in 2002. Bold Eagle was created in 1989 as a local initiative between the Prince Albert Grand Council (then the Prince Albert Tribal Council) in Saskatchewan and the CAF to offer basic military training to First Nations youth during the summer. The following year, realising the potential to foster positive relations, and with the involvement of the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and the Canadian Forces Prairie Militia Area (PMA), the program was opened to all of Saskatchewan and enhanced by including a cultural component for participants and military staff. Notably, the FSIN and the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans’ Association (SFNVA) agreed to provide Elders for the program which was later expanded to all Indigenous youth in other provinces as well.²⁶ By engaging Indigenous youth for the summer, creating job opportunities and career pathways, and fostering positive relations between armed personnel and Indigenous communities, Bold Eagle not only established a model for programs to come but can also be seen as starting the Indigenisation of the military.

We found that the CAF has created several roles for Indigenous peoples to represent their interests including the Defence Indigenous Advisory Group (DIAG) established in 1994, well before the CAF officially fell under the EEA.²⁷ Originally intended to identify systemic barriers to Indigenous employment in Defence, the DIAG now has more extensive functions to gather and represent Indigenous Defence members, increase Indigenous awareness in Defence, and provide advice and guidance to senior leadership on all matters Indigenous including the implementation of the TRC’s calls for actions, Indigenous community relations, and the cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous Defence members. The DIAG operates on three levels, the local level of the Bases, Wings, and Units, the regional level of the provinces, and the national level of DND/CAF. Each level has two co-chairs, a military and a civilian, which elect regional co-chairs, which elect national co-chairs.²⁸ There are also Defence EE Champions who are senior officers or executives appointed to contribute to corporate goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion and support members

of the four EE designated groups, as well as 2SLGBTQI+ members. The Defence Team Champion for Indigenous Peoples is traditionally the Commander of the Canadian Army. Although there is no requirement for the Champion to be Indigenous, from June 2022 to July 2024, the Defence Team Champion for Indigenous Peoples was Lieutenant-General Jocelyn Paul, a First Nations and member of the Huron-Wendat.²⁹ Lieutenant-General Paul is also the first Indigenous officer to be appointed as Commander of the Canadian Army.

Our consultations also revealed that many Indigenous members of the Defence Team use their positions and roles to promote Indigenous awareness, community engagement, and positive relations between the military and Indigenous communities that align with the scope of reconciliation. Indigenous CAF members often promote a positive image of the military to their families and communities during visits or after their service. However, during our consultations, some said that they sometimes choose not to wear their CAF uniforms when visiting Indigenous communities to avoid sparking tensions with community members who hold anti-military views. We found that the memory of the 1990 Kanesatake Resistance (Oka Crisis) which involved the confrontation between a group of Mohawk protesters, on the one hand, and the Quebec police, the RCMP, and the Canadian Army, on the other hand, is unhealed and a source of mistrust.³⁰

DIAG co-chairs and base elders gather and consult with Indigenous CAF members to help them navigate a career in the military openly as an Indigenous person. They provide advice on matters such as racial discrimination and culturally appropriate protocols including braids, and offer spiritual guidance through rituals. Indigenous recruiters who have been in the position for a long time have invested their efforts to establish connections with communities surrounding military bases. Community members are increasingly consulted on matters relevant to them. They are also invited to military bases to speak on Truth and Reconciliation Day and other events, and the military is invited to local powwows and to carry the Eagle Staff, creating meaningful collaborations.

Since the institution of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021, Defence has embraced the language of reconciliation to promote initiatives that support Indigenous Defence members and engagement with non-military Indigenous communities. For example, early in 2024, the Assembly of Defence Team Indigenous Advisors (ADTIA) was created to support reconciliation efforts.³¹ The idea of ADTIA was proposed at the Defence Working Group on Indigenous Reconciliation in October 2023 and approved by the Defence Director General of Indigenous Affairs. The mandate of ADTIA is to create a body to coordinate all Indigenous Advisors across Defence, share best practices, and ensure lines of communication that serve the Indigenous military community. In 2023, DND issued a grant scheme, the DND Indigenous Reconciliation Program, to fund initiatives that help build and maintain relationships between Indigenous communities and DND/CAF.³² The Program offers up to \$1.5 million to Indigenous peoples, governments, organisations, and entities to support costs associated with targeted or occasional events that encourage dialogue between Indigenous communities and military establishments.

Recommendations

Our research points to the following recommendations that will position the CAF to further promote reconciliation, as well as improve Indigenous attraction, recruitment, and representation in the CAF.

- 1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the CAF programs for Indigenous Peoples to identify gaps and areas for improvement.** While the various programs have many strengths, the consultations also revealed some challenges including the inability to fill each course. In discussing the summer programs for Indigenous peoples, it was uncovered that they are not all as well run as Bold Eagle, which should represent the standard for other programs to follow. For example, a graduate of the Grey Wolf program had a very negative experience due to issues with the staff running the course who did not appear to have completed any meaningful Indigenous cultures and awareness training. The program was subsequently paused for a few years until it was revamped. Additionally, the RCAF should also consider developing its own summer program to create a path for Indigenous peoples to join the Air Force, considering that it has the lowest Indigenous representation among the three services namely 2.6%, compared to 3.2% in the Army and 3.0% in the Navy.³³ In our consultations, we found that the objectives of the ILOY program are unclear and contested between the military staff who see it as an “opportunity” regardless of the outcome, and the academic faculty who are more concerned about academic standards. In an attempt to bring some clarity, in May 2024, the Canadian Defence Academy (CDA) the Training Authority responsible for ILOY, issued the ILOY mission statement emphasizing the program’s goals of fostering leadership and personal growth in a challenging and supportive learning environment. It also identifies that the ILOY aims to contribute to the CAF’s Indigenous outreach efforts and provide Indigenous participants with the opportunity to serve Canada in a leadership role, potentially through employment in the CAF.³⁴ To date, the new ILOY mission statement is not published on the CAF recruiting website, and the draft ILOY Qualification Standard and Plan is yet to be approved. Furthermore, it was mentioned that ILOY students would prefer to be better integrated with the rest of the ROTP Officer Cadets at RMC and would like to have more freedom to select courses based on their interests and academic background. In other words, it should not be a one-size-fits-all program and students should have individual learning plans. We were informed that in the future, ILOY students will be able to audit a course at RMC; however, by definition, auditing will not earn academic credit. CAFIEP is a recruitment tool for Indigenous peoples considering a career in the CAF.³⁵ However, through our consultations we discovered that it is not a very attractive program for Indigenous candidates. Removing the stipend to attend CAFIEP in 2022 was detrimental to Indigenous attraction as demonstrated by the significant drop in enrolments. Participants in our consultations also noted that the time of year when CAFIEP takes place, in May and October, clashes with both school attendance and Indigenous hunting and gathering season, which affects the ability of Indigenous men in particular to attend, especially if unpaid. We also consulted with someone who joined the CAF through CAFIEP who said that they did not have access to Indigenous elders and were not made aware of the DIAG. We recommend identifying options to compensate or reward CAFIEP participants, regardless of if after graduation they

decide to join the CAF or not, as well as moving the dates when the program is offered, and incorporating scheduled cultural events by Indigenous elders or counsellors rather than on an “as needed” basis.

- 2. Invest in Indigenous recruiters, ideally who are Indigenous, and are willing to be in the position long-term.** Our research found that recruiters’ training in Indigenous cultures and attraction strategies may be insufficient and that although the CAF Indigenous programs are mentioned in their training, familiarising with them is left to recruiters’ discretion. Due to the short duration of their postings (2-3 years), many recruiters do not invest the necessary time in this area. This gap may be partially addressed in future by a recently launched in-person course called “Indigenous Cultural Orientation” which will be compulsory for recruiters involved with Indigenous applicants and communities. The objectives of the course include interacting with Indigenous peoples, describing DND/CAF initiatives concerning Indigenous people, and incorporating Indigenous considerations in planning activities with Indigenous communities. The effectiveness of this new course will have to be assessed in due time. We spoke with Indigenous recruiters, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have been in the position long-term, often as reservists, who are deeply familiar with Indigenous attraction and shared stories of successful recruitment and community engagement. The CAF should create more of these recruiting positions and foster their activities. It is also recommended that Indigenous recruiters be Indigenous, when possible, to facilitate interactions with Indigenous communities and individuals. However, this may not always be possible due to the low number of Indigenous serving members. That said, we observed that recruiters who are non-Indigenous can also be successful Indigenous recruiters if equipped with Indigenous cultural competency.
- 3. Become a culturally safe place for Indigenous members.** Our research indicates that many Indigenous individuals view a military career as a significant economic opportunity, often persevering through challenges, hardships, and racism to secure a better future for themselves and their families. The CAF should position itself as an employer of choice for Indigenous peoples by fostering an environment that promotes career progression, cultural safety, and inclusion. This includes adding assessments to the mandatory cultural competency training to ensure effectiveness, establishing Indigenous mentoring programs and talent development programs, enforcing zero-tolerance policies towards racism, and creating effective mechanisms to report abuse that do not weigh on the victim. The CAF must also implement the recommendations issued in the 2022 Report by the Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination.³⁶
- 4. Indigenise the military.** The CAF has made progress towards creating an environment where Indigenous peoples can freely express their cultural identity, including using traditional languages, attire, and ceremonies.³⁷ However, there are still challenges relating to Indigenous cultural expression including the ability to perform smudges and sacred fire ceremonies and to embrace cultural attires and hairstyles, especially when senior leadership is opposed. Our research shows that beyond the programs for Indigenous peoples, there is little cultural and spiritual support for Indigenous members of the CAF at the Unit level and it is often at the discretion of senior leaders to uphold Indigenous safe spaces and practices, thus revealing a disconnect between policies and implementation. Additionally,

events organised by Indigenous elders and advisors tend to be ignored by non-Indigenous personnel, and often Indigenous members themselves cannot attend because of very busy schedules. We recommend that the CAF should: provide Indigenous cultural and spiritual support across CAF Bases and Wings; have more Indigenous members in senior positions; offer compulsory in-person training in Indigenous cultural awareness tailored to senior leaders; strengthen mechanisms to report discrimination against Indigenous members; and integrate Indigenous knowledge in military education programs.

- 5. Increase support for non-military Indigenous community engagement that is culturally appropriate and addresses the legacies of injustice.** The CAF should strengthen engagement with Indigenous communities both near military bases and in remote areas through outreach programs and partnerships. These initiatives should be viewed not only as recruitment opportunities, but also as meaningful moments of engagement and collaboration aimed at addressing historical injustices. For example, one Indigenous recruiter told us that they invested time in engaging with all Indigenous communities affected by a Defence project to ensure appropriate consultation and support for the use of land and resources. Another Indigenous member of Defence shared that they have been working with Defence senior leadership to facilitate an official apology by the CAF to an Indigenous community near a military base whose perception of the CAF remains negatively influenced by the Army engagement at Oka in 1990. Initiatives like this should be strongly supported by the CAF leadership rather than being left to individuals' discretion and goodwill.

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