

## A Closer Look at Those Who Served During the First World War

**Overview:** This activity invites participants to analyze 5 biographies of individuals who served during the Great War. The 5 individuals came from different places, had different upbringings and experiences in the war, but they were all leaders in some way.

*Time required:* 1-1.5 hours

### Facilitator's plan:

- Divide participants into small groups
- Provide each group or each participant with the biographies. If the format is virtual (video conference), email the biographies ahead of time, if possible
- Groups will read the biographies and complete the chart below to help them answer the discussion questions

*Note for facilitators:* depending on the age or reading level of participants, some of the biographies may be dense. Alternate activities are provided after the questions to allow participants to demonstrate their learning in different ways.

### Sources consulted:

The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica Canada  
Canadian Heritage  
Canadian War Museum  
Dictionary of Canadian Biography  
Eric Story "“The Awakening Has Come”: Canadian First Nations in the Great War Era, 1914-1932." *Canadian Military History* 24, 2 (2015)  
Government of Canada  
Library and Archives Canada  
Legion Magazine  
Niagara Military History Museum  
Parks Canada  
Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library  
Veterans Affairs Canada

## Activity:

### Context:

Individuals from many backgrounds served with the Canadian forces during the First World War. Some had a family history of military service or an established career with the military; others had never experienced war. Some commanded soldiers or nursing sisters; many more served as soldiers and nurses.

Leadership skills, actions and qualities were displayed by individuals across all ranks. Read the following short biographies to learn more about 5 such individuals. Working in groups, fill out the following table as you read each of the biographies to help you answer the questions below.

Name	Early life (place of birth, education, family, military service before 1914)	First World War military service details	Leadership qualities, skills, characteristics, experiences, etc.	Awards, achievements or other recognition
Jean Brilliant				
Julian Byng				
James Grant				
Margaret Macdonald				
Francis Pegahmagabow				

## **Jean Brillant (1890-1918)**

Jean Brillant was born in Assemetquaghan, Quebec, in 1890 to a family with a history of military service. He was educated in New Brunswick and in Quebec, and worked as a telegraph operator for a railway.

Jean had already served with the Canadian Militia when he enlisted to serve in the First World War. He was appointed lieutenant of 189th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in early 1916. He went overseas later that year and was assigned to the 22nd Battalion (French Canadian) after arriving in France in October. He took part in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 and was hospitalized twice over the course of the following months.

Jean was awarded the Military Cross (which was awarded to Commissioned officers with a rank below captain) for bravery for his conduct during a raid on the night of May 27-28, 1918. On August 8, 1918, during the Battle of Amiens, he captured a German machine gun that was preventing part of his company from advancing. Though wounded, he remained in command and led two platoons in the successful capture of another German position that was endangering his men. He suffered a second wound as a result. On August 9, he was critically wounded in leading another attack and died the next day at the age of 28.

For his actions on August 8, he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest British decoration which is "awarded for most conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour, self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy".

## **Julian Byng (1862-1935)**

Julian Hedworth George Byng was born in 1862 to parents George Steven Byng, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Strafford, and Harriet Elizabeth Cavendish, a family with aristocratic status and a history of military service. He became a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant with the local militia at sixteen years of age. In 1883, the future King Edward VII (a friend of his father), offered him a place in his own regiment, the 10<sup>th</sup> (Prince of Wales Own) Royal Hussars. He served in Lucknow, India, and later in Sudan. During this time, he also became friends with another future monarch, King George V.

Byng served during the South Africa War from 1899 to 1902 with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. In 1909, he was promoted to Major-General and made Divisional Commander of the newly formed Territorial (land) Force. From 1910-1914, he commanded British forces in Egypt.

At the outbreak of the First World War, he was appointed Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division and served with distinction at the Battle of Ypres in 1914. He was then sent to the Middle East where he assumed command of the 9<sup>th</sup> Army Corps at Gallipoli. Recognizing the ineffectiveness of continuing the campaign in the region, he organized the successful withdrawal of all British forces from Suvla Bay; one of the few military commanders to leave this campaign with his reputation not only intact but enhanced.

Julian Byng commanded the Canadian Corps from March 1916. He was an effective and competent commander, transforming the Canadian Corps into a professional fighting force, culminating in the victory at Vimy Ridge. He was very popular with his Canadian soldiers, who called themselves, "The Byng Boys". Byng was promoted to full General in June 1917. He took



command of the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, and played a key role in several battles that ultimately led to the end of the war.

After the war, Byng's star kept rising and he received the title, Baron Byng of Vimy in 1919. He served as Canada's Governor General from 1921-1926, and was later titled Viscount Byng of Vimy. On his return to England, he was appointed Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police Force and promoted to the military rank of Field Marshal. Sir Julian Byng died in 1935.

### **James Grant (1897-1959)**

James Grant was born in 1897 in St. Catharines, Ontario. Before the war, he worked as a labourer.

When the First World War broke out, many Black Canadians were eager to serve. However, prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes within the military and beyond created barriers: many who tried to enlist were initially rejected because of the colour of their skin. After protest from the Black community and their supporters - and when Canada needed more men to join the fight due to casualties in battle - Black volunteers were increasingly accepted. It is estimated that as many as 2,000 Black men served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War. James Grant was one of these men. His brother, John Grant, served with the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Canada's first and only all-Black battalion.

James enlisted in 1916 and went overseas later that year. After training in England, he arrived in France in March 1917. James served as a gunner and later a driver of a horse team.

Researchers have identified at least 30 Black men who served or supported the Battle of Vimy Ridge. It is believed that James served at Vimy with the Canadian Field Artillery's 23rd Howitzer Battery.

James was awarded a Military Medal for bravery during the Battle of Passchendaele later in 1917. His battery was short on ammunition and despite facing heavy shell fire, he made two trips to retrieve additional supply. Newspaper reports at the time identified him as the first Black man to receive the medal.

He was demobilized in 1919. In 1920, he married Sadie Summers, and the couple went on to have 5 children. The family later moved to New York, where James worked for the city of Niagara Falls, NY.

### **Margaret Macdonald (1873-1948)**

Margaret Clothilde Macdonald was born in Bailey's Brook, Nova Scotia in 1873. She trained as a nurse at New York City Hospital, Harlem Emergency Hospital, and Queen Alexandria's Imperial Nursing Service in London.

Her military nursing service included caring for the wounded aboard an American military ship during the Spanish-American War and serving during the South African War between 1900 and 1902, as was one of 8 nurses to treat Canadians. She was appointed to the Canadian Army



Medical Corps in 1906. In 1911 she went abroad to observe and study the British nursing service in order to help improve recruitment, training and efficiency for nursing in Canada.

At the start of the First World War, Margaret was in charge of recruiting nurses for overseas service. She arrived in Europe in October 1914 and was appointed Matron-in-Chief with the rank of major in November, making her the first woman in the British empire to hold this rank. She was in charge of the more than 2,500 Canadian military nurses who served overseas. Nurses faced dangerous and difficult conditions while treating the wounded, often working very close to the front. In late 1915, Margaret was awarded the Royal Red Cross, which was given to nurses who displayed devotion, competency or bravery while on duty.

Margaret returned to Canada in 1919. After a long military nursing career, she retired in 1923.

### **Francis Pegahmagabow (1891-1952)**

Francis Pegahmagabow was born in what is now known as the Shawanaga First Nation in Ontario in 1891. He was Ojibwe Nishnaabe and part of Wasauksing First Nation. He learned to fish and hunt as a child, and from a young age, started working at lumber camps and fishing stations. Determined to complete his schooling, he spent five months at school in Parry Island in 1912.

At the start of the First World War, despite efforts of the Canadian government to discourage Indigenous men from enlisting, Francis pursued. Both his father and grandfather were chiefs of Wasauksing First Nation, and Francis believed that serving in the war was an important way to become a community leader like his ancestors. He was among the first men to enlist in August 1914. Francis went overseas in October of that year and arrived in France in February 1915. He fought during the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, and was promoted to the rank of lance corporal soon after. His reputation as a scout and sniper grew during the war. Those who knew him believed that his strong Nishnaabe spiritual beliefs and determination to maintain his cultural traditions along the front lines contributed to his ability to work alone during dangerous missions.

In 1916, Francis earned the Military Medal (awarded for acts of bravery in the field) as a messenger during action at Ypres, Festubert and Givenchy. He was later promoted to corporal and received the first bar to his Military Medal (awarded for additional acts of bravery) during the Battle of Passchendaele in November 1917. Francis earned a second bar during the final months of the war in 1918. He was one of only 39 Canadians to be honoured with two bars.

Francis returned to Canada in 1919. Despite serving for nearly the entire war and being recognized as a war hero, Francis, like other Indigenous veterans, continued to face discrimination and a denial of civic rights such as the right to vote. To push for better treatment of Indigenous veterans and peoples, Francis turned to politics. At the local level, he became chief of Wasauksing First Nation (like his father and grandfather before him) from 1921-1925, and a band councillor from 1933-1936. During this time, he pressured the federal government for change. He also worked with early national and provincial Indigenous rights organizations.

Francis died in 1952 and is recognized as an Indigenous rights advocate and community leader.



### **Activity Questions:**

Are there common leadership qualities among all individuals? Explain your answer

What leadership qualities do you think were the most essential during wartime service, and why?

Who among these individuals would you have most wanted to serve with? Explain your answer.

How do you think each person's early life would have impacted their wartime or post-war actions?

During the war, many military medals are awarded for actions that are deemed brave and courageous. What other kinds of actions deserve recognition?

Extended activity: research someone in your local community who served during the First World War and answer the questions above.

### **Alternate activities using different media:**

**Social Media Platform.** Using a social media platform such as Snapchat, Tiktok, Instagram, or simply by recording on a phone/tablet, create five short videos about one of the people you've read about. The goal of these videos is to teach viewers about the individual you have chosen, including their experience in the First World War.

Video #1 – Introduce the person and their life before the First World War. Topics to consider include place of birth, education, family, any military service before 1914.

Video #2 – This video will focus on the person's military service in the First World War. Topics to consider include when or why did they join, what did they do in the war, and what was their experience in the war.

Video #3 – This video should consider the person's leadership experience. Consider the person's leadership qualities, skills, characteristics, experiences, etc. Remember that leadership comes in all forms!

Video #4 – This video will focus on the awards, achievements, and other recognition that the person received both during and after the First World War.

Video #5 – An optional video to add anything else you would like to share about the person.

**Movie Trailer:** Select one of the five biographies and create a movie trailer about the individual. The movie trailer could be filmed using a tablet, cell phone, laptop, or any other available device. Your movie trailer should highlight four important aspects of the person's life and should include information on:



- Early Life: where the person was born, their education, family, and if they served in the military before 1914.
- First World War: details about the person's experience in the war.
- Leadership: highlight the person's leadership qualities, characteristics, and skills, experiences, etc.
- Achievements: outline any awards or recognition earned during or after the war.

**Biography Box:** using a recycled box (like a cereal box), create a colourful, creative biography box that teaches viewers about the person you have selected. It can include text and images.

- Early Life: highlight where the person was born, their education, family, and if they served in the military before 1914.
- First World War: details about the person's experience in the war.
- Leadership: highlight the person's leadership qualities and skills, characteristics, experiences, etc.
- Achievements: outline any awards or recognition earned during and after the war.

*Materials needed:* cereal box, glue, scissors, paper, pencils, markers.