

Italian author dies in Canada, fulfilling his life's destiny

NEYAASHIINIGMIING – Soldiers from Neyaashiinigiing (Cape Croker) and Saukiing Anishnaabekiing (Saugeen) who fought in the Second World War are among the numerous Indigenous people from Canada and the United States highlighted in Matteo Incerti's novel.

Written in Italian, 'I pellerossa che liberarono l'Italia,' translated to English, means "The First Nations who Saved a Nation."



The Italian author wanted to tell the stories of the First Nations soldiers who served in the Italian Campaign and recognize their bravery and extreme sacrifice.

"Reliving lost threads in time, bringing to light the scattered memories of these peoples, who have been discriminated [against] for centuries," Incerti wrote, [this] "is a way to revive their awareness of the message of peace and brotherhood brought by their cultures."

Incerti came to the traditional territory of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON) People on Aug. 12 to meet and thank the relatives of the great soldiers

he wrote about in his book. His journey was to take him to several locations across Canada to honour First Nations soldiers, including Tommy Prince and David Greyeyes.

That night he wrote on his social media page, "A journey that starts like this. Immersed in a forest of trees and stars with a Full Moon rising over Georgian Bay on Cape Croker's Ojibwa Reserve, home of many American heroes."

Less than two days later, Incerti died suddenly from a massive heart attack while fulfilling his life's destiny, to stand on the soil once occupied by those men and women who were a considerable part of liberating Italy during the Second World War.

A greatly anticipated welcoming gathering scheduled as a part of Incerti's visit was still held at the Maadookii Seniors Centre in Neyaashiinigiing without the guest of honour.

Instead, the people mourned Incerti's passing, telling stories of their short time with him and honouring his memory, making plans to commemorate this man who opened the door for the stories to be told and heard worldwide about the brave and noble Indigenous warriors from Canada.

"Many veterans were remembered, and their descendants saw fleeting glimpses into the sacrifices made by their ancestors. Threads of their life's tapestries were gazed upon, revealing the beauty of the whole," the granddaughter of a First Nations soldier mentioned

in the book, Jessica Johnston, said. “We spoke our collective prayers that went to his family and brother Michele Incerti with special intent of comfort to his mother.

“We marveled at how his will was such, that it made obstacles (that would hinder many of us) – mere stepping stones to him. He somehow found the secret to bring the energy of his youth, and carry it with him the rest of his days. One can only imagine a lifetime spent in his presence, would be filled with electric moments. Our community spirit is with your family at this time.”

They talked about how Incerti will help people to understand the experiences of the First Nations soldiers from Canada and the United States.

The trauma of war combined with the suffering from residential schools, where many First Nations soldiers resided before enlisting to fight for a country that was committing genocide on their people, was sometimes too hard to handle.

Memories of fathers awakening households with ear-piercing screams in the middle of the night, reliving the trauma that comes with fighting in a war. Guilt from breaking Indigenous ways of life and the Ten Commandments by killing others caused great grief and sorrow to many who returned.

We now know that war can cause post traumatic stress, but at that time, there was no help for the First Nations who returned from war.

Many returned to empty reserves, devoid of children, who were still being taken from their homes and placed in the residential school system and full of grief-stricken mothers, sisters, aunties, and grandmothers.

Several were denied essential benefits and help, living their lives in confusion and shame. They were abandoned by a country that used them to fight a war that was not theirs, ridiculed by the general population of Canada, and left to fight a new battle on their own land.

“I am happy to have been able to write about these unspoken heroes of the Italian Campaign. I believe all allied soldiers who lost their lives in Italy between 1943 and 1945 deserve more attention. The ‘D-Day Dodgers’ were not on vacation, as the famous song says. Tens of thousands died in Italy. To share the stories of such simple yet heroic men is meaningful from a historical point of view,” Incerti said.

“A citizen who ignores the history of his/her own nation is like a tree without roots, liable to fall at the first gust of wind,” he added. “Being aware of our history is necessary in order to avoid committing the same mistakes over and over again. Instead of destroying statues I think it is vital to enhance education, social rights, and why not, even explain the dark side of certain historical figures. Education is always a better alternative to destruction. We must build bridges, not dig grooves between the people of the world.”

Lila Johnston (McLeod), daughter of Mary and John McLeod (who served in the First World War and was a member of the Veteran’s Guard in the Second World War), sat quietly with her thoughts, taking it all in.

The older woman remembers her brothers and sister, who all went to fight in the Second World War. Unfortunately, two of her brothers never made it home, and two were wounded.

In 1972, Mary Louise McLeod became the first Indigenous Memorial Cross Mother to lay a wreath at the National War Memorial in Ottawa on behalf of all Canadian mothers.

Private Alfred Joseph McLeod, born on Oct. 10, 1914, enlisted in the Perth Regiment R.C.I.C. on Sept. 28, 1939, in Stratford and died from wounds sustained during battle on Jan. 17, 1944, at the age of 29. Alfred rests at the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery in Italy.

There are 1,615 graves at this cemetery, over 50 are unidentified, and 1,375 are Canadian.

Trooper John Joseph McLeod (Jack), born Sept. 28, 1922, joined the 1st Hussars, R.C.A.C. on June 16, 1940, in Owen Sound. He was killed in action at 21 years old on July 27, 1944, and buried at the Bayeux War Cemetery in Calvados, France.

Johnston had been looking forward to sharing memories and stories with Incerti, and the tears began to flow as Rozella Johnston, who was an instrumental part in organizing his visit, presented the elder with gifts brought from Italy by the author.

Incerti came bearing gifts for those who helped him learn about the soldiers from Neyaashiinigiing and those who were left behind.

Included in these gifts was a small, nondescript box. What was inside that box was the cause of the significant swelling of emotion that struck Johnston and everybody in the room.

Soil, gently and respectfully gathered from her brother Alfred's grave, was presented to Johnston amid tears for the past and present.

The 88-year-old grandmother held a private ceremony on Saturday, Aug. 20 at St. Mary's cemetery in Neyaashiinigiing, quietly adding the soil from her brother's grave in Italy to her mother's grave, symbolically putting them back together to rest for eternity.

Her son, Corporal Darren Johnston, is a United States Marine Corp veteran who fought in Desert Storm.

Lila's grandson, walking in the footsteps of his forefathers, recently enlisted.

The First Nations who Saved a Nation was translated into English by Angela Arnone, and the information is currently being verified by relatives and friends before being released.

According to veterans.gc.ca, "at least 3,000 First Nations members, including 72 women, enlisted, as well as an unknown number of Inuit, Métis, and other Indigenous people. The actual numbers were no doubt much higher.

"The brave Indigenous men and women who left their homes during the Second World War to contribute to the struggle for peace were true heroes. The extra challenges that they had to face and overcome make their achievements all the more notable.

To learn more about their achievements and sacrifices, please refer to the Veterans Affairs Canada publication "Indigenous Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields," visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call 1-866-522-2122 toll free.

Cory Bilyea, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter, Wingham Advance Times

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'It's paradise here'

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Submitted photo
Italian author Matteo Incerti wrote a book about the Canadian and American Indigenous soldiers in WW2 called "The First Nations who saved a Nation."

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Cory Bilyea Photo

U.S. Marines Corporal Darren Johnston, Beth McLeod, Lila Johnston, Wendall Nadjjwon, Patrick Lavalley and Jean Akiwenzie attend an event that was meant to introduce Italian author, Matteo Incerti to the residents of Neyaashiingmiing (Cape Croker), instead mourning the guest of honour. Incerti passed away on the reserve north of Wlarton on Aug. 14, 2022.

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Submitted photo

Matteo Incerti visits the grave of an Indigenous soldier from Neyaashiingmiing at the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery in Italy, in an undated photo.