

# DECODING THE STORY OF AN AKWESASNE HERO



For years, Pat Oakes knew almost nothing about her father's experience in World War II. A Senior Advisor of Indigenous Relations at OPG, Oakes believed that Alex Oakes —an Akwesasne Mohawk —served as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division. But in a surprise announcement last September, his mysterious past was suddenly decoded.

"As it turns out, he was a Code Talker," says Oakes. An elite group, the Akwesasne code talkers used the Mohawk language to transmit secret messages between units. Oakes' father was stationed in France and the Netherlands, and received two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star for Valor. He sadly passed away in 2008.

"I had no idea about this part of his past," said Oakes. "When I was a child, he would tell stories about the war. But he would never say anything specific, just that he was on secret missions. He never revealed what those missions were."

The Code Talkers were honoured this May in a special ceremony held in Akwesasne, which straddles the Canada-U.S. border along the St. Lawrence River near Cornwall. Standing in her father's place, Oakes was given one of 17 silver Congressional Medals (pictured left). She was accompanied by Levi Oakes, her cousin and the last living Code Talker.

The Congressional medal is the highest award that can be presented to an individual by the U.S. Congress. The Akwesasne medals were specially made by the U.S. Mint to commemorate the Mohawk Code Talkers, and are adorned with icons of Mohawk culture.

"My father was a proud Mohawk speaker," Oakes says. "We are so honoured and very proud of him and all the Mohawk Code Talkers and veterans who sacrificed a lot for our freedom."

Oakes' father's contributions go beyond the war effort. After the war, he played a key role in the Akwesasne community. He became Grand Chief in the 1960s, leading the community with quiet compassion. He also formed a veterans group for disabled residents who had been involved in several conflicts, including WWII and Vietnam.

"He was a gentle giant, a big man but sensitive and caring," says Oakes. "Community members would come in and talk and he would just listen. He really wanted to help them."

Unwavering in his sense of duty, Oakes' father never forgot his wartime experiences. "When he was 76, he was invited by a four star general to go to France," recalls Oakes. "When he was leaving, he told the general he wanted to leave the same way he arrived more than 50 years ago. Wearing his army uniform, he marched seven miles through a nearby French town as residents waved and saluted him."

A leader in her own right, Oakes is an active member of the Akwesasne and urban Aboriginal Toronto community. She also coordinates OPG's Native Circle, a support group for Indigenous employees. The Native Circle organizes OPG's National Aboriginal Day programming, as well as the John Wesley Beaver Educational Award Luncheon.

