

Native Americans and the U.S. Military

20th Century Warriors: Native American Participation in the United States Military

(Prepared for the United States Department of Defense by CEHIP Incorporated, Washington, DC, in partnership with Native American advisors, Rodger Bucholz, William Fields, Ursula P. Roach. Washington: Department of Defense, 1996.)

A Long Tradition Of Participation

American Indians have participated with distinction in United States military actions for more than 200 years. Their courage, determination, and fighting spirit were recognized by American military leaders as early as the 18th century.

I think they [Indians] can be made of excellent use, as scouts and light troops. --Gen. George Washington, 1778

Many tribes were involved in the War of 1812, and Indians fought for both sides as auxiliary troops in the Civil War. Scouting the enemy was recognized as a particular skill of the Native American soldier. In 1866, the U.S. Army established its Indian Scouts to exploit this aptitude. The Scouts were active in the American West in the late 1800s and early 1900s, accompanying Gen. John J. Pershing's expedition to Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa in 1916. They were deactivated in 1947 when their last member retired from the Army in ceremonies at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. Native Americans from Indian Territory were also recruited by Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and saw action in Cuba in the Spanish-American War in 1898. As the military entered the 20th century, American Indians had already made a substantial contribution through military service and were on the brink of playing an even larger role.

Contributions In Combat

It is estimated that more than 12,000 American Indians served in the United States military in World War I. Approximately 600 Oklahoma Indians, mostly Chotaw and Cherokee, were assigned to the 142nd Infantry of the 36th Texas-Oklahoma National Guard Division. The 142nd saw action in France and its soldiers were widely recognized for their contributions in battle. Four men from this unit were awarded the *Croix de Guerre*, while others received the Church War Cross for gallantry.

The outbreak of World War II brought American Indians warriors back to the battlefield in defense of their homeland. Although now eligible for the draft by virtue of the Snyder Act, which gave citizenship to American Indians in 1924, conscription alone does not account for the disproportionate number of Indians who joined the armed services. More than 44,000 American Indians, out of a total Native American population of less than 350,000, served with distinction between 1941 and 1945 in both European and Pacific theaters of war. Native

American men and women on the home front also showed an intense desire to serve their country, and were an integral part of the war effort. More than 40,000 Indian people left their reservations to work in ordnance depots, factories, and other war industries. American Indians also invested more than \$50 million in war bonds, and contributed generously to the Red Cross and the Army and Navy Relief societies.

Battle-experienced American Indian troops from World War II were joined by newly recruited Native Americans to fight Communist aggression during the Korean conflict. The Native American's strong sense of patriotism and courage emerged once again during the Vietnam era. More than 42,000 Native Americans, more than 90 percent of them volunteers, fought in Vietnam. Native American contributions in United States military combat continued in the 1980s and 1990s as they saw duty in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf.

Native Americans As Warriors

As the 20th century comes to a close, there are nearly 190,00 Native American military veterans. It is well recognized that, historically, Native Americans have the highest record of service per capita when compared to other ethnic groups. The reasons behind this disproportionate contribution are complex and deeply rooted in traditional American Indian culture. In many respects, Native Americans are no different from others who volunteer for military service. They do, however, have distinctive cultural values which drive them to serve their country. One such value is their proud warrior tradition.

In part, the warrior tradition is a willingness to engage the enemy in battle. This characteristic has been clearly demonstrated by the courageous deeds of Native Americans in combat. However, the warrior tradition is best exemplified by the following qualities said to be inherent to most if not all Native American societies: strength, honor, pride, devotion, and wisdom. These qualities make a perfect fit with military tradition.

Strength

To be an American Indian warrior is to have physical, mental, and spiritual strength. A warrior must be prepared to overpower the enemy and face death head-on.

We honor our veterans for their bravery and because by seeing death on the battlefield, they truly know the greatness of life. --Winnebago Elder

American Indian soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen have fought heroically in all of this century's wars and armed conflicts. They have not only been formally recognized for their bravery through military decoration but through anecdotal observation as well.

The real secret which makes the Indian such an outstanding soldier is his enthusiasm for the fight. --U.S. Army Major, 1912

More important, however, is the warrior's spiritual strength. Many traditional cultures recognize that war disrupts the natural order of life and causes a spiritual disharmony. To survive the chaos of war is to gain a more intimate knowledge of life. Therefore, military service is a unique way to develop an inner strength that is valued in Native American society.

Having a strong sense of inner spirituality is also a part of the Indian character. Many Native Americans are raised on rural or remote reservations, an environment that fosters self-reliance, introspection, and a meditative way of thinking. These character traits can be very beneficial when adapting to the occasional isolation of military life in times of both peace and war.

Honor, Pride, Devotion

Warriors are honored - honored by their family and their tribe. Before going into service and upon their return, warriors are recognized by family and community. Recognition takes place through private family gatherings, or through such public ceremonies as tribal dances or intertribal ceremonies.

My people honored me as a warrior. We had a feast and my parents and grandparents thanked everyone who prayed for my safe return. We had a "special" [dance] and I remembered as we circled the drum, I got a feeling of pride. I felt good inside because that's the way the Kiowa people tell you that you've done well. --Kiowa Vietnam Veteran

Being a warrior in traditional American Indian society gives one a sense of pride and a sense of accomplishment at a time in life when self-esteem is just developing. Becoming a warrior brings status to young men and women in their culture. The ceremonies that honor the warrior create a special place in the tribe's spiritual world.

After I got home, my uncles sat me down and had me tell them what it [the war] was all about. One of them had been in the service in World War II and knew what war was like. We talked about what went on over there, about killing and the waste, and one of my uncles said that God's laws are against war. They never talked about those kinds of things with me before. --Cherokee Vietnam Veteran

United States military service provides an outlet for Native Americans to fulfill a cultural purpose rooted in tradition -- to fight and defend their homeland. This purpose is particularly important since it comes when young people of the tribe are normally not old enough to assume a leadership role in their traditional culture. The cultural expectation to be a warrior provides a purpose in life and is an important step in gaining status in Native America culture.

When I went to Germany, I never thought about war honors, or the four "coups" which an old-time Crow warrior had to earn in battle....But afterwards, when I came back and went through this telling of war deeds ceremony... lo and behold I [had] completed the four requirements to become a chief. --Crow World War II Veteran

Native American warriors are devoted to the survival of their people and their homeland. If necessary, warriors will lay down their lives for the preservation of their culture, for death to the American Indian warrior is but another step in the advancement of life. It is understood that the warrior's spirit lives on eternally. So, warriors do not fear death, but rather regard it as the ultimate sacrifice for their own and their people's continued survival.

Wisdom

The warrior seeks wisdom. Wisdom, as used in this context, means the sum total of formal learning and worldly experiences. In wartime, those Native Americans seeing heavy combat had to learn how to survive, often using skills that may unit commanders thought were inherent to the American Indian's cultural background. A Sac and Fox/Creek Korean veteran remarked:

My platoon commander always sent me out on patrols. He. . . probably thought that I could track down the enemy. I don't know for sure, but I guess he figured that Indians were warriors and hunters by nature.

Many American Indians (as well as non-Indian volunteers) joined the military in World War I to satisfy their sense of adventure. Most had never left the confines of their hometown, much less marched on the battlefields of Europe. These experiences provided a wisdom through exposure to other people and cultures. This was sometimes threatening to the elders of a tribe, who feared that this newfound worldliness would cause unwanted change to their culture. Over time, however, this wisdom of worldly events and peoples was accepted by tribal leaders. Today, Native Americans are increasingly exposed to the non-Indian world through movies and television. Although the military is still an avenue for seeing the world, it has, in the latter half of the 20th century, also provided other types of wisdom. Military service offers excellent educational and job skill opportunities for Native American men and women who frequently come from educationally disadvantaged communities.

Wisdom can also be gained from interaction with others. Military policy in the 20th century has preferred assimilating the American Indian into regular units. Although some divisions had more Native American troops than others, there were never all-Indian units. This meant that Indians and non-Indians were placed in close-knit groups, perhaps each experiencing each other's culture up close for the first time.

There was a camaraderie [in the Air Force] that transcends ethnicity when you serve your country overseas in wartime. --Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Cheyenne Korean veteran

Similarly, intertribal relationships were developed, sometimes with a person who was a traditional "enemy." Many times these intercultural and intertribal contacts broke through stereotypes and resulted in lifelong friendships, friendships that otherwise might never have been cultivated.

Thanks to my military service [in the Navy], I now have friends in 500 tribes. --Lakota Korean veteran

The Warrior Tradition Carries On

The requirements for successful military service -- strength, bravery, pride, and wisdom - match those of the Indian warrior. Military service affords an outlet for combat that fulfills a culturally determined role for the warrior. Therefore, the military is an opportunity for cultural self-fulfillment. By sending young tribal members off to be warriors, they return with experiences that make them valued members of their society. Finally, the military provides educational opportunities, which allow Native American veterans to return to their community with productive job skills to improve their quality of life.

With the 21st century on the horizon, the United States military can be expected to provide continuing opportunity for Native American men and women. For their part, Native Americans can be expected to carry on their centuries-old warrior tradition- serving with pride, courage, and distinction.