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*The Native American: Warriors in the U.S. Military*

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** The Native American: Warriors in the U.S. Military

**Author:** Major Brian Gilbertson, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** Native American warriors made significant contributions to the United States military; they had to overcome many obstacles, but their continued service brings benefits to both the Indian and the military.

**Discussion:** Native Americans fought alongside European American soldiers against common enemies from the birth of our nation. Native American warriors helped to shape the history and character of the nation we live in. Their service in the military has unquestionably strengthened the United States and helped her achieve success on the battlefield from the American Revolution through the Global War on Terror. This paper examines Native Americans' contributions to the military. Common stereotypes plague Native Americans, particularly through Hollywood, which fails to portray their actions justly for the American public. People continue to hold onto images of a vanishing race, a noble savage, and/or a bloodthirsty killer when they think of the American Indian warrior. This paper identifies some obstacles Indians face while serving in the United States military, and further defines why they continue to serve in such high numbers. They have become partners with the military who were once their primary threat. Military service evolved into a conduit to revitalize tradition and ceremony, where once it was the military that sought to bring an end to those same traditions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between the Native American warrior and the United States military became inextricably linked. If the U.S. military continues to cultivate and promote cultural diversity it will grow in its depth of skill and ability. This paper attempts to answer the following questions: what does it mean to be a warrior within Native American society? What are the contributions these warriors made in American military history? What obstacles did American Indians face in serving the United States military? And, how did they overcome those obstacles to the mutual benefit of themselves, and the military?

**Conclusion:** Native American warriors truly made significant contributions to the United States military. While overcoming obstacles and stereotypes, they continue to forge a strong partnership that provides mutual benefit to the Indian and the military.

## *Preface*

This paper is intended to showcase the contributions Native American warriors have made to the United States military. It is my goal to highlight some of the challenges they face when choosing to serve in the military, and explain the warrior culture that makes American Indians apt to volunteer their service in high numbers per capita. My interest in the topic stems from my adoption into the Ho-Chunk nation, or Wisconsin Winnebago tribe. When I received my commission as an officer in the Marine Corps, I underwent a ceremony granting me status as a warrior in the tribe. A group of veterans and elders from the tribe conducted the ceremony. That day I received the warrior name “Wunk-Ija-Huga,” translated as “One Who Comes From Above.” In accordance with pilot tradition, a group of my peers decided to grant me their version of a warrior name, and my call sign has been “Tonto” ever since.

I chose to explore the topic to break down myths and misperceptions of Native American warriors, and to shed some light on their rich history of service in the military. Cultural diversity and awareness are cornerstones of our nation that give it strength. The military engages diverse populations across the world, both in cooperation and in conflict. It is essential that we recognize our own diversity in order to capitalize on the benefits it may bring. Familiarity with a tribal warrior culture is advantageous for current and future engagements. The military often refers to the “warrior ethos,” this paper is intended to display that ethos through another lens.

Dr. Pauletta Otis was my mentor for this project. She kept me honest and on track throughout the process and provided the inspiration I needed to see it to completion. I also recognize the help I received from Bill and Wil Hultgren, my warriors in the battle with grammar and the passive voice. To my family and my elders, any success I may have in the military is

because of your support. The most important thanks go to my wife, Darcy. Nothing is possible for me without you. Your strength, patience, and empathy inspire me. Thank you.

In honor of those who have gone before us. You are always in our hearts.

### **AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER:**

People associate many terms with the indigenous peoples of this country. This paper uses the terms Native Americans, American Indians, Natives and Indians interchangeably. Other terms such as Original Americans, First Peoples, Indigenous Peoples, and Amerinds are also used. No single term is universally popular. Native Americans generally prefer to be called by the name of their individual Nation, Tribe, or Band. Even that is complicated by the fact that most Nations are currently known today by what other tribes labeled them in the past. However for simplicity sake, and to bypass that argument, this paper will use multiple terms interchangeably with no disrespect intended.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

As far back as colonial times, Native Americans fought alongside European American soldiers against common enemies. They carried on longstanding warrior traditions of defending their people and their homeland. Native American warriors helped to shape the history and character of the nation we live in. Their service in the military has unquestionably strengthened the United States and helped this country achieve success on the battlefield from the American Revolution through the Global War on Terror. *This paper will advance the argument that Native American warriors made significant contributions to the United States military; they had to overcome many obstacles, but their continued service brought benefits to both the Indian and the military.*

A warrior is one who has engaged in or has experienced warfare. The term will be used throughout this paper to describe Native Americans as well as members of the military. Common stereotypes plague Native American warriors. Hollywood fails to portray their actions justly for the American public. People continue to hold onto images of a vanishing race, a noble

savage, or a bloodthirsty killer when they think of the American Indian warrior. Regardless of challenges they face, Native American warriors choose to defend this nation in high numbers. This paper will examine the culture of the warrior to explain why they serve. The following questions will be answered: what does it mean to be a warrior within Native American society? What are the contributions these warriors made in American military history? What obstacles did American Indians face in serving the United States military? And, how did they overcome those obstacles for mutual benefit?

### **HISTORY:**

In reviewing the history of the Native American warrior, this paper will begin by briefly examining European and Indian relations and the struggles that often occurred between them. The paper will then define what it meant to be a warrior within the tribe. This is a *brief* examination of the history of the Native American warrior. Detailed analysis of the broad history of the native peoples cannot be condensed into one book, let alone one paper.

Native Americans were the first inhabitants of North America. Their history is often overlooked or misunderstood. They populated the American continents for thousands of years before European contact. Scientists theorize that they traveled a land-bridge across the Bering Strait from Asia to North America during the ice age. The migration continued south and east across both American continents. The landscape of the Americas varies greatly, and as these first inhabitants spread from north to south and shore to shore, they formed many distinctly different tribes or nations. They adapted to their unique environments and made keen use of all that nature provided. They became proficient fishermen, hunters, and farmers. Native Americans were a deeply spiritual people who worshipped the land and many natural deities.

Exact figures on their population are unknown. “However, archaeological excavations, and scrutiny of descriptions left by the first European explorers on our coasts, now suggest an initial number of around 20 million Indians.”<sup>1</sup> Early explorers struggled to identify both the volume of people they encountered as well as their diversity and origins. Christopher Columbus labeled the peoples of the American continents as “Indians” because he mistakenly believed he had landed his expedition somewhere in the Indies.

Early interactions with Europeans were varied and complex; this is a recurring theme throughout history and this paper. From Spanish conquest, to French trade partnerships, and land disputes with English settlers, every contact between Europeans and Native Americans was unique. It is an unpleasant truth that Europeans committed acts of genocide on the indigenous people. However, historians agree that the most significant causal factor in the decline of the Indian population in the Americas was the spread of disease. “For the New World as a whole, the Indian population decline in the century or two following Columbus’s arrival is estimated to have been as large as 95 percent.”<sup>2</sup> Europeans brought measles, smallpox, cholera, and other diseases that reduced the Native American population and wiped out entire tribes. One might question why this chapter in American history is glossed over in our educational system.

In an attempt to define contemporary American identity, Samuel Huntington claims that American “ancestors were not immigrants but settlers, and in its origins America was not a nation of immigrants, it was a society, or societies, of settlers who came to the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”<sup>3</sup> Huntington’s remarks typify the efforts of some historians to downplay the significant role of the indigenous people on American history and to justify their treatment. Huntington goes further to justify European expansion by claiming, “apart from Indian tribes which could be killed off or pushed westward, no society was there.”<sup>4</sup>

Cultural bias plagues many historians, but it is important to view history through multiple lenses, and not just through the eyes of the victor.

One recurring theme between white and Indian relations remained consistent: when they did not destroy the Indians by force, white men continued to remove Natives from their homelands and maintained a universal policy of violating treaties. This paper is not meant to focus on injustices done to American Indians, but rather to focus on a particular part of their culture: the warrior. The true origin of this relationship must be taken into consideration to fully grasp how much Native Americans gave and continue to give to the people of this nation. As Al Carroll writes, "...because we concentrated on justice and injustice, we have gone blindly by the very core of a great people who have much to offer the world of our time."<sup>5</sup>

Prior to Columbus' journey, warrior societies existed in most of the tribes across America. The centuries following European contact brought about significant change for Native Americans and their warriors. The advent of the fur trade strategically changed warfare; ritual war ended, and war of conquest took root in America. As a result, warrior hood changed as well.<sup>6</sup> A dramatic example of this change - and the resulting stereotypical image of a Plains Indian - appeared with the introduction of the horse. Tom Mails writes, "Introduction of the horse to the plains between 1620 and 1800 changed the balance... It was within this cauldron of pressure that the warrior, or war societies, many of which were of ancient vintage, altered their nature and came to the fore."<sup>7</sup>

Native Americans did not live a completely peaceful existence prior to European contact. Intertribal warfare existed from the earliest of times. However, "the aims tended to be raiding for sustenance, prestige, or revenge rather than total warfare designed to conquer territory or political subjugation."<sup>8</sup> European expansion and forced Indian removal to other lands created

immense pressure on tribes across America. Violence between whites and Indians, and between opposing tribes increased as a result. Native Americans and Europeans developed a shared military history through years of fighting. Yet, they took fundamentally different views of war and its purpose. For Europeans, war was a means to an end for political purposes, even before Clausewitz labeled it as such. For Indians, however, warfare included a deeply spiritual significance.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between Native American warriors and Europeans was not solely adversarial. Indians served alongside their white counterparts in the United States military once a common enemy was identified. When European powers fought each other for dominance in North America, many Indians became engaged in the struggle. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Native Americans allied with Europeans to wage battle against other Europeans and neighboring tribes. Alliances with Indian tribes significantly influenced many of the battles that were fought on American soil. Gaining the allegiance of one tribe often meant the addition of another enemy on the field of battle from an opposing tribe. “It is apparent, in fact, that were it not for either using Indian allies or adopting to unconventional [from a European standpoint] tactics, the whites might have lost every single engagement with Native American warriors.”<sup>10</sup>

Warriors played a central role in Native American societies. Their responsibilities included the following list from Thomas Mails’ *Dog Soldier Societies of the Plains*. Warriors were charged with preserving order in the camp during camp moves and during hunts. They were the ones who punished offenders against the public welfare. Warriors guarded the camp against attacks. They took command during battle and placed themselves in the most dangerous places. Warriors fostered rivalry to cultivate bravery, and ministered the tribe’s feasts and

dances. They were the keepers of tradition and heritage. Warrior societies filled the roles of the military, the police, the courts, the civic leaders, and the historians.<sup>11</sup>

“Traditionally a warrior society carried out an amalgam of the roles of policing and supervising hunts and raids, teaching the young, caring for the elderly and helpless, punishing criminals, and carrying out a wide variety of rituals that varied greatly from tribe to tribe.”<sup>12</sup> Al Carroll continues to assert, “Those roles changed over time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, policing was taken care of by outside agencies, but many other aspects were now handled by veterans as the remaining part of the warrior society.”<sup>13</sup>

The people in these societies made up the most renowned warriors of the tribe. “They not only related the legends of their orders as the protectors of the tribe, they were living legends in themselves, and their impact upon receptive young minds was phenomenal.”<sup>14</sup> Stories of their bravery were revered and celebrated through song. This reverence is deeply spiritual and plays an important role in tribal societies.

Ceremonies remain an important part of the spirituality, tradition, and culture of warrior societies. Ceremonies before war protect and prepare the warrior for combat. “Ceremonies after the war honor his service and like the songs reintegrate him into the community and out of the unnatural state of war.”<sup>15</sup> This discredits a widespread misperception and stereotype that Native Americans are part of a bloodthirsty and aggressive warring society. “Native martial traditions generally taught that war was an unnatural state, one requiring extensive ritual preparation to enter into and even more extensive purification to return to a normal and balanced spiritual and mental state afterward.”<sup>16</sup> The next section will examine how Native American warriors contributed to United States military efforts throughout American history.

## Contributions of Warriors in the Military:

### **American Revolution:**

Native Americans had no universal policy during the American Revolution. Some chose to ally themselves with the British, others served as Minutemen for the colonist rebellion, and many others remained neutral. Their contribution to the war went beyond direct participation. Americans often attributed their victory in the Revolutionary War to the use of Indian tactics.<sup>17</sup> That is a bold statement, but Americans clearly changed their tactics in battle more significantly than their British regular army counterparts. Indians continued to fight for Americans after the revolution, not just as allies, but also as soldiers in the military.

### **Civil War:**

As many as 20,000 American Indians served in the military during the civil war.<sup>18</sup> Similar to the American Revolution, Native Americans held no universal policy during the war. Tribes aligned themselves according to treaties and proper defense of their homelands. Indians held prominent positions on both sides of the conflict. A Cherokee leader, Stand Watie, was a Confederate brigadier general and at one point was given operational control over white troops.<sup>19</sup> General Ulysses S. Grant's adjutant was a Seneca: Colonel Ely S. Parker wrote the document of surrender at Appomattox, and was later promoted to brigadier general.<sup>20</sup>

### **American Indian Wars:**

The American Indian wars, generally considered to have ended in 1890,<sup>21</sup> were a tumultuous time for Native American warriors. Many tribes resorted to violence as their final effort to defend their tribal lands, their culture, and their identities. Most treaties made during the period (1790 through 1861) were not only land cessions but also military and political pacts which obligated tribes to ally with the United States in time of war.<sup>22</sup> The Indian Scouts are the

most famous example of Natives serving in the military during that period. Often the United States military used these scouts to locate an enemy they would otherwise never have found. Indian Scouts were used in nearly every venture to track down “renegades” who refused to stay on the reservations.

In virtually every major battle and campaign of the American Indian Wars, significant contingents of Native Americans served as scouts or outright combatant units alongside the soldiers of the United States government.<sup>23</sup> Their contributions were fundamental to American success. “Oglalas made up most of the force that arrested and killed Crazy Horse in September 1877; Teton Indian police fought the Ghost Dancers and killed Sitting Bull at Standing Rock in 1890, and Geronimo was finally tracked down and forced to surrender in Skeleton Canyon in 1886 by Apache Scouts in the service of the U.S. Cavalry.”<sup>24</sup>

Effective employment of Indians on a campaign often dictated the success or failure of American efforts. Dakota governor Newton Edmunds believed that Indian Scouts were typically more effective than twice their number of white soldiers.<sup>25</sup> Indian participation and bravery was not unnoticed by the United States military. Between 1872 and 1890, sixteen American Indian members were awarded Medals of Honor for bravery in action.<sup>26</sup> The west was not won by the white man alone. Native Americans played a significant role in “Manifest Destiny.”

After the Indian Wars, America lost its military connection with Native Americans for a time. General Hugh Scott noted; “It seems a remarkable thing that British officers could make efficient soldiers of Egyptians, who have been slaves for three thousand years, but American officers could not make soldiers out of Indians, who had fought us successfully for a long period, and who when suitably armed and mounted were the best lighthorsemen the world has ever seen.”<sup>27</sup> For nearly a quarter of a century after the wars in the west concluded, America would

maintain an internal nationalistic focus. Eventually, as the rest of the world became embroiled in “The Great War,” Native Americans would once again offer their warriors for military service.

### **World War I:**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the world was at war, Native Americans joined the fight to defend their homeland against German aggression. Nearly 17,000 Indians served in the military during World War I. They served at twice the per capita rate, when compared to the rest of the U.S. population.<sup>28</sup> Their numbers were not the only significant part of their war contribution. Some Choctaws, for example, transmitted orders over the telephone in their tribal language.<sup>29</sup> It was America’s first experiment with an unbreakable code the Germans were unable to decipher.

Due in large part to their perceived natural abilities and skill at warfare, Indians received dangerous assignments. “Native soldiers had a far higher casualty rate than that of any other group: five percent of Natives died in combat while less than one percent of all other members of the American Expeditionary Force in France died.”<sup>30</sup> This theme of exploiting Indian courage in battle remained a part of American military methodology through Vietnam.

It is noteworthy that Native American warriors chose to fight for the United States even though about half of them did not hold citizenship during all of World War I. The absence of formal recognition by the United States government did not stop Indians from feeling obligated to defend their nation. The issue was resolved eventually. By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, all American Indians were United States citizens.<sup>31</sup>

### **World War II:**

During the Second World War, American Indians played a significant role in the Allied victory. The most famous and widely publicized story was that of the Code Talkers. Their legacy of transmitting an unbreakable code over the radio waves during the war proved vital to

the success of the Americans battling throughout the Pacific. It is arguably still the Navajo people's "greatest symbol and source of cultural pride."<sup>32</sup> While the Navajo contribution of over 400 code talkers remains the most publicized, Native Americans from across the continent played a crucial role in "code talking," including members from Wisconsin and Michigan.<sup>33</sup>

"In 1941, armed with optimism and having declared Indians to be fellow Aryans, Josef Paul Goebbels, German Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, predicted that American Indians would rather revolt against the United States than fight against a Germany which had promised to return their expropriated land to them."<sup>34</sup> Native Americans were not fooled by this ploy. They displayed their loyalty proudly. Native American warriors responded in unprecedented numbers to America's call for volunteers immediately after Pearl Harbor and continued throughout the war years, because they clearly understood the need for defense of one's own land.<sup>35</sup> Approximately 44,500 Indians served in the military during World War II. This represented more than ten percent of the approximate 400,000 member Native American population.<sup>36</sup>

When America reinstated the draft, Native Americans responded with nearly one hundred percent registration rate of eligible men, setting the standard for Americans.<sup>37</sup> Many did not wait to be drafted and promptly volunteered their service to the military. "Since when," one incredulous tribal member supposedly sneered, "has it been necessary for the Blackfeet to draw lots to fight?"<sup>38</sup> Army officials maintained that if the entire population had enlisted in the same proportion as Indians, Selective Service would have been unnecessary.<sup>39</sup>

The fight against the Axis powers was personal for Native Americans who despised the aggression displayed by evil dictators. Many more Indians tried to enlist in the United States military than were ultimately qualified to do so. Language, age and physical attributes or

deficiencies denied many Indians the opportunity to serve. Although the Navajo claimed a large rejection rate of 45 percent, they responded to the nation's need by sending 3,000 people, or 6 percent of their population, into military service.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, many tribes openly declared war against the Axis powers. Through these war declarations, Native American tribes proved that they supported the war from a tribal perspective, both on the battlefield and in the courts.<sup>41</sup>

Participation in the war effort was not restricted to military volunteers alone. From 1942 to 1945, 40,000 Indians, both men and women, left their reservations for jobs in the defense industry.<sup>42</sup> They contributed all means of support including tribal land resources such as oil and timber. Many Natives outside the military took a personal responsibility to assist in the war effort at home. Indians planted a total of 36,200 Victory Gardens to fulfill both their own needs and the government's obligations.<sup>43</sup> Indians were key financial contributors to the war effort as well. By 1944, Native Americans purchased \$50,000,000 in war bonds.<sup>44</sup>

World War II brought profound change to people across the globe, and Native Americans were no exception. Al Carroll notes this in his book *Medicine Bags and Dog Tags: American Indian Veterans from Colonial Times to the Second Iraq War*. He writes, "No other war brought such cultural and social change [to Native Americans] in such a short time."<sup>45</sup> Veterans of the war came back as changed men and women. The warrior societies were reinvigorated, and they began to have much in common with Anglo-American veterans groups, such as the American legion.<sup>46</sup> The bonds of war not only brought them together to re-instill traditions of their past, it gave them a renewed sense of purpose and identity.

#### **Korea:**

"About 29,700 American Indians served in the Korean War."<sup>47</sup> They fought alongside fellow Americans with honor. "Three American Indians who served during the Korean War

received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award given to a member of the U.S. military for valor in action against an enemy force.”<sup>48</sup> One of the Natives earning the award was Mitchell Red Cloud Jr., a Wisconsin Winnebago. Mitchell previously served in the Marine Corps in World War II. In Korea, he was a corporal in the U.S. Army when he sacrificed his life to buy time for his fellow soldiers. “Refusing assistance he pulled himself to his feet and wrapping his arm around a tree continued his deadly fire again, until he was fatally wounded. This heroic act stopped the enemy from overrunning his company's position and gained time for reorganization and evacuation of the wounded.”<sup>49</sup> His actions fill the Ho-Chunk Nation with pride to this day.

### **Vietnam:**

During the Vietnam War, approximately 42,000 Native Americans served in Southeast Asia either as advisors or as combat troops.<sup>50</sup> “Still more Indians entered the service during the period but did not go to Vietnam ... Their proportional numbers in combat more than doubled their number in the general population.”<sup>51</sup> Native American contribution to the war effort is even more striking when you consider the following. “Approximately one out of four eligible Native Americans served in the military forces in Vietnam, compared to one out of twelve in the general American population.”<sup>52</sup> Despite the decreased popularity of the war, Indians devoted themselves to the cause.

Many Indians did not simply enlist into the military and chance being assigned a supportive role. They volunteered specifically for such combat arms roles as the infantry. Indians served in elite combat units in disproportionate numbers.<sup>53</sup> High risk occupational specialties did not come without cost; some 31 percent of Native Americans received wounds in action.<sup>54</sup> In addition to the number of wounds they received, the number of citations and medals awarded to them for valor in combat were exceptionally high. “It seemed obvious that these men

not only saw battle in all its terrible aspects but had faced it with remarkable bravery and determination.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Counter Culture:**

From colonial times through the present day, Native Americans have served in the United States military in every conflict around the world. The relationship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century between American Indians and the United States military has not been without conflict. In 1973, a famous standoff took place at the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre. “For more than two months a lightly armed and outnumbered group of Natives used a mix of traditional and modern military ways and counterculture protest to hold off a heavily armed and technologically sophisticated force of lawmen and vigilantes who worked for the most powerful nation on the planet.”<sup>56</sup> This is just another example of the complicated history of the relationship between Native Americans and the military.

### **STEREOTYPES: (obstacles to service)**

The next section of this paper will examine common stereotypes of Native Americans. Many of these stereotypes have been obstacles that Indians needed to overcome to serve in the military. Some have actually been enablers to that same end. The stereotype begins when one reflects on the word “warrior.” That word conjures several common images. One image is that of a fantasy character with sword in hand, while another is typically a Native American painted for war with feathers atop long black hair. A professional wrestling organization used this image to market one of their athletes. “The Ultimate Warrior” was adorned in war paint, flowing locks, and moccasins. The word often has the connotation of a bloodthirsty and ruthless killer, generating a negative response. Misperceptions continue today as some people believe Indian

males were required to kill an enemy before they could marry - similar to the myth of Marines killing a family member in order to enlist.<sup>57</sup>

When white Americans think of the Indian warrior, many either picture a proud and noble member of a vanishing race, or a reckless savage who doesn't know when he is beaten. People are influenced by false images portrayed in Hollywood. In many cases, films portray Indians as enemies of the state. This predictably hinders the progression of understanding and acceptance. Many young students in our public education system are surprised to learn Indians still live in America today.<sup>58</sup>

Hollywood continues to influence world opinion of the Native American Warrior. At the same time, it continues to fail and insult the real veterans and warriors that it portrays on screen. Hollywood casted Elvis Presley, Charles Bronson, and Tony Curtis to portray major Indian characters in films. In fact, Curtis once played Ira Hayes in a film. Hayes is highly respected among Marines and fans of the Marine Corps. He was one of the flag raisers on Iwo Jima, and a Pima Indian. This sort of character branding did not die with the golden age of the silver screen. In recent times we see the continuation of the Indian stereotype with characters such as Billy Bear in *The Predator*, or Billy Jack in a series of movies. Native Americans deserve some champions in the movie industry to tell their stories honestly.

A common theme is that the Indian has natural tendencies towards warfare. They are thought to be excellent trackers, hunters, and ruthless killers. The image of the Indian as a natural warrior had a positive impact on the reputation of Native Americans serving in the military. "Because Indians supposedly possessed special abilities, Americans expected tribesmen to excel as soldiers, and news coverage fulfilled these expectations."<sup>59</sup> Biology was also used as a vehicle to continue the myth. "People believed they were particularly adept at

scouting, because of their acute sense of perception... long sleek muscles were built for endurance and superior coordination.”<sup>60</sup>

As American Indians joined the United States military, other soldiers often assumed they naturally excelled at being warriors. Therefore Indians were welcomed as valuable assets to the military organization. This reputation eased the racial tensions and difficulties that Native Americans confronted in their military service when compared to other minorities. They have been accepted by the white majority within the military when other minorities were excluded purely based on stereotype. However, this is a double-edged sword. An Indian who was born and raised in the city would still be at a disadvantage when compared to someone who was taught survival skills and raised in the country. The deeply ingrained white stereotypes of Indians gave Native Americans a degree of status within the military, but it also endangered their lives.<sup>61</sup> This is one exception where the stereotype is an advantage, and not an obstacle to be overcome by the Indians, but still comes with added risk.

Many question why Native Americans choose to fight for a nation that tried to dispossess them. This uncertainty exists today among both whites and Indians. As a Native American warrior currently serving in the United States Marine Corps, the author has been asked that question by people from multiple ethnic backgrounds, including other Natives. As Al Carroll writes, “A most common view carried on is seeing Native veterans as ‘Tontos,’ faithful companions and servants to white needs or wishful thinking, the ‘good Indians’ as opposed to those they see as ‘bad Indians’, who demand their rights or talk about topics such as sovereignty and genocide.”<sup>62</sup>

There is an unfounded belief that continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that some Natives who join the military are abandoning their heritage and attempting to drop the “Native” and the hyphen to

become simply “American.”<sup>63</sup> It is a false assumption that Indians choose the military to join white society and stop being “Indian.” When this accusation is expressed by other members of the tribe, it can cause a deep internal struggle for the warrior.

### **WHY NATIVE AMERICAN WARRIORS FIGHT: (overcoming obstacles)**

The Native American warrior tradition continues today as thousands of Natives are serving proudly in the military. This paper outlined the importance that warriors have played in traditional Native American societies. The United States military has become, de facto, the only way an Indian can join the society of warriors. There has historically been a strong sense of honor placed on being a warrior. That sense has not been lost over time. Native Americans continue to hold deep respect for their warriors. These warriors are currently wearing the uniforms of the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines.

Some claim that Natives use military service to preserve, protect and revive aspects of the traditional culture of their people and spirituality. Native traditions in the military are stronger on a cultural and spiritual level than those of any other ethnic group in the United States.<sup>64</sup> Particularly in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during a major governmental push for the assimilation of Native Americans into mainstream society, these warriors who served in the military used American patriotism to mask their cultural traditions that would otherwise have been blocked by white authorities. For example, Indians revived banned traditional ceremonies by using patriotic symbols such as the American flag to deceive their white authorities.<sup>65</sup> To white onlookers the flag was an indication that the Indians were assimilating. The Indians viewed the flag as a symbol of the land that their ancestors protected. Parading the American flag to the tune of traditional Native American drum music and dance exemplifies how suppressed cultural traditions were carried on through military service. The Native American

warriors were able to continue the traditional roles of their ancestors while still being allowed to celebrate through ceremonies that otherwise would have been banned because of the drive for assimilation. "In short, he was a warrior and, whether clad in traditional dress or in olive drab, he had reaffirmed his tribal identity. It seems they have given military service meaning within the context of their own tribal social structures, beliefs, and customs."<sup>66</sup>

The idea of "country" means something slightly different to Native Americans than to others in America. Indians in the military defend their "nation," the land their ancestors lived on and the society that they defend today. As one Native warrior eloquently states, "We are dedicated to our country, the physical land, not the country as most other groups think of it. This is our country. It makes no difference whose name is on the deed."<sup>67</sup> Most Americans feel a justifiable pride in their country, but American Indians hold this feeling on a more spiritual level than most.

Bill Cody Ayon, a Cheyenne said, "I would like to remind everyone that no matter what tribe, ethnicity, or cultural affiliation you belong to, service to your country is the greatest honor of all."<sup>68</sup> He continues, "I feel it is an honor to defend what is America now... I am still carrying on the tradition that was passed on to us, which is to defend our homeland. That aspect hasn't changed. Whether it is an American flag or a camp circle of lodges... To me there is no irony in that... There is only honor in defending what is yours, what is your way of life."<sup>69</sup> For Native Americans caught between two opposing forces of maintaining tradition and assimilation, the military provided many warriors with a gateway to both. In essence, the military grants them an acceptance into both cultures and helps ease the struggles of Native people trying to find their place in America.

Al Carroll argues, “To Native people World War II became an opportunity to use the institution widely thought of as the source of their defeat, the military, as the means to strengthen old traditions and start new ones.”<sup>70</sup> Prior to the battle for Okinawa, some of the code talkers gathered to write a Navajo version of the Marine’s Hymn and sang together before the battle.<sup>71</sup> Traditional drum music and warrior songs were modified to match patriotic tunes and some were even sung in English. Songs continue to be written about battles in Iraq and Afghanistan. In another example of evolving tradition, multiple tribes, including the Lakota, adopted a new custom wherein only veterans who served honorably in wartime could give Indian names to children in traditional naming ceremonies.<sup>72</sup>

Multiple warrior societies exist within most tribal organizations. For example the Ho-Chunk Nation, more commonly referred to as Wisconsin Winnebago, has several groups of warriors, each belonging to a particular “warrior bundle.” The “bundle” has two meanings; it is both an identification of a group of warriors, as well as a physical collection of sacred items that binds the group of warriors together. The group identity allows Native American warriors to share in reverence their past success in battle. The bundles, in their physical form, hold powerful medicine to protect the warriors and give them courage in combat. Warrior bundles strengthen relationship ties within the tribe and help reinforce traditional values. They also promote healing when a warrior returns from war. “A war-related ceremony shares the returning warrior’s guilt and battle-induced stress with the community and reaffirms individual and community identity.”<sup>73</sup>

According to the 2009 Population Representation in the Military Service study, Native Americans continue to serve in higher percentages compared to their total population than any other racial or ethnic group.<sup>74</sup> Some think the lack of economic opportunities on reservations

make the military a more appealing option for American Indians. That may explain why some Native Americans join the service. However, the cultural heritage and honor of the warrior society, central to the theme of this paper, certainly play a more significant role in the Indian's decision to join the military. Family and tribal tradition, as well as sense of duty, far outweighs other factors such as money or acceptance by whites.<sup>75</sup> Although tribesmen publicly declared patriotism to be their prime motivation for entering the armed forces, privately they reaped far greater psychological and social benefits within their own communities.<sup>76</sup> To most Native Americans, war is a rite of passage that transforms them from boys to men. "It was more than simply a painful human experience; it had spiritual significance as well."<sup>77</sup>

#### **SHARED SYMBOLS: (synergy)**

Continued service by Native Americans in the United States military is a mutually beneficial and synergistic relationship. Many of the responsibilities Native American warriors held in traditional societies are the same responsibilities that men and women in uniform hold today. Just as the job description is similar between warrior and soldier, so is the Native American warrior culture similar to that of soldiers and Marines. This section will examine some of the similarities in tradition and symbolism between the Native American warrior culture, and the culture of the United States military. As an example, both groups honor the Stars and Stripes more than most. However, as previously discussed, the flag has multiple meanings for the Indian.

Samuel Huntington talked about America's national identity and its origins. He asserted that "identities are, overwhelmingly, constructed. People make their identity, under varying degrees of pressure, inducements, and freedom."<sup>78</sup> It is also common to further define your group identity in opposition to another group. In many ways, a tribe's enemy defined them.

Their heroism and valor increased if their enemy was also honorable and valorous. A love/hate relationship persists through war.<sup>79</sup> This is true in the case of the warrior and the military. Much of the early history of the Army was spent with its primary opponent being the American Indian warrior. Extensive exposure on the battlefield between these two groups redefined both their roles in society and their identity. After the American Indian wars concluded and more Native Americans began joining the service in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the respect these groups had for each other was apparent through many symbols.

Native American symbols exist in numerous places within the military. Nearly every aircraft in the United States inventory has a tribal name associated with it. Also many unit patches have traditional American Indian symbols embedded in them. Native American symbols are common for units in close proximity to an Indian reservation, where many Natives populate the ranks, and for units with a history of battle in the American Indian wars. It is significant that very few Native American groups rally to protest the use of tribal symbols and epithets when used in conjunction with the United States military. Sports teams who attempt to use Indians as symbols receive a different response from Native Americans. Indian symbols in the military are generally looked at as honorable recognition of Native American heritage, while Indian symbols in sports are often seen as offensive.

Symbols of success in battle for warriors in the United States military are displayed on uniforms through ribbons and medals the soldiers have earned. Similarly, “a man frequently painted his horse to represent a valorous act in which the man had won honors, or he might paint the animal in a manner intended as a symbolic representation of a vision.” This was true for their faces and bodies as well. E.A. Burbank, a well-known artist said, “Most White people assume that the Indians smeared their war paint on indiscriminately, but the truth is that each daub has a

significance, as does each feather an Indian wears.”<sup>80</sup> Military personnel sometimes use war paint as well, in the respect that they use camouflage on their faces and hands, they tend to use the same pattern over time. It may not be spiritual, but it becomes part of their identity and transitions them into a combat mindset.

When military personnel “leave the wire” to go into combat zones, they first suit up with protective gear provided by the government. When warriors prepared for combat, they too put on protection against injury and death. John Stands In Timber explained: “There were many ways to perform ceremonies on the body. The warriors depended on being protected by the power that came from them. They could ride close to the soldiers and not be harmed.”<sup>81</sup>

Personal medicine is used by Native Americans and Anglo-Americans alike, although this is not immediately apparent. Indians often carry with them sacred objects for protection such as medicine bags, tobacco pouches and so on. Anglo-Americans often carry Bibles, crosses, rosary beads, and playing cards. Whether they admit to it, they rely on these items to provide them with a measure of protection, in the same fashion as the Native American carrying his tobacco pouch. From a scientific perspective, such a form of protection is nonsensical. A spiritual man believes it to be true because he has seen the proof. It is not the goal of this paper to be the judge over which practice is superior; it is merely to point out the similarity in the preparation measures these warriors take.

### CONCLUSION:

The history of the relationship between the Native American warrior and the United States military is complex, underappreciated, and understudied. Both sides were greatly affected by early interaction and years of conflict. However, the relationship between the two was not solely adversarial. From early colonial times there were also many partnerships. With the

conclusion of the American Indian wars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, conflict between the two has been the exception rather than the norm.

Native American service in the military has unquestionably strengthened the United States and helped her to achieve success on the battlefield. The most famous examples are the Code Talkers from World War II. Yet, the common stereotypes that plague Native Americans, particularly through Hollywood, still fail to portray their actions justly for the world to see. The American public still holds images of - a vanishing race, a noble savage, or a bloodthirsty killer - when they think of the Native American warrior. American children still participate in games of cowboys versus Indians.

Native Americans still face challenges when deciding whether to join the military. The honor of becoming a warrior and joining a prestigious class of tribal society is one of the strongest influences in favor of joining the service. Since Vietnam, however, many Indians struggle with the idea of serving the institution that brought about demise to their cultures and the ways of life they seek to rekindle. An early account from a Pequot soldier said "I could not think why I should risk life and limb in fighting for the white man whom had cheated my forefathers out of their land and become as bad as them."<sup>82</sup>

The Native American warrior culture changed over time, and the United States military was central to that change. Military service provides the primary means for an Indian to join the ranks of the honored warrior society. Although the roles and responsibilities of the warriors changed within the tribal organization, the honor bestowed upon them is undiminished. Warriors no longer only defend their lands against white incursion. Now they are part of a larger organization that defends all American lands. Warriors no longer defend just tribal sovereignty, but national sovereignty. They are partners with the military, once their primary threat. Military

service evolved into a conduit to revitalize tradition and ceremony, where once it was the military that sought to bring an end to those same traditions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the link between the Native American warrior and the United States military became inextricably linked. Although the military may continue to exist without Indians serving, the warrior will cease to exist without continued service in the military.

Native and Anglo Americans are now more respectful of each other's culture. The government no longer sponsors attempts at assimilation, and the American Indian Movement no longer advocates armed resistance. Relationships between tribal governments and the United States government are imperfect, but the marriage between Native American warrior and the military has been a successful endeavor. It is a symbiotic and synergistic relationship that should be studied, protected, and reinforced. Sun Tzu said, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."<sup>83</sup> Part of the quote charges that we study who we are and where we came from to understand our strengths and weaknesses. If the military continues to cultivate and promote cultural diversity it will grow in its depth of skill and ability. There will be fewer "blind spots" to threaten our success. By viewing the world through multiple lenses of various cultures like the Native American warrior, we will have a more robust capability to adequately fulfill our obligations to our society. *Native American warriors truly made significant contributions to the United States military. While overcoming obstacles, they continue to forge a strong partnership that provides mutual benefit to the Indian and the military.*

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## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W.W. Norton, 1997), 211-212.

<sup>2</sup> Diamond, 211-212.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Huntington, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Al Carroll, *Medicine Bags and Dog Tags: American Indian Veterans from Colonial Times to the Second Iraq War* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 65.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas E. Mails, *Dog Soldier Societies of the Plains* (Marlowe and Company, 1998), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Carroll, 102

<sup>9</sup> Holm, 22

<sup>10</sup> Holm, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Mails, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Carroll, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Mails, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Carroll, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Carroll, 102.

<sup>17</sup> Holm, 22

<sup>18</sup> Carroll, 92, Holm 93.

<sup>19</sup> Holm, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Holm, 94.

<sup>21</sup> The Wounded Knee Massacre took place in December, 1890, and is generally accepted as the end of the American Indian Wars, although conflicts continued in the southwest until the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>22</sup> Holm, 92

<sup>23</sup> Michael Clodfelter, *The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865*. (McFarland & Company Inc., 1998), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Clodfelter, 15

<sup>25</sup> Clodfelter, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Holm, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Holm, 98.

<sup>28</sup> Holm, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Holm, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Carroll, 105.

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- <sup>31</sup> Carroll, 116
- <sup>32</sup> Carroll, 21
- <sup>33</sup> Jere Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II.* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999), 66.
- <sup>34</sup> Franco, 41.
- <sup>35</sup> Franco, 41.
- <sup>36</sup> Franco, 62.
- <sup>37</sup> Franco, 42
- <sup>38</sup> Franco, 62
- <sup>39</sup> Franco, 62
- <sup>40</sup> Franco, 61.
- <sup>41</sup> Franco, 67.
- <sup>42</sup> Franco, 80.
- <sup>43</sup> Franco, 114.
- <sup>44</sup> Franco, 101.
- <sup>45</sup> Carroll, 129.
- <sup>46</sup> Carroll, 11
- <sup>47</sup> William Pencak, *Encyclopedia of the Veteran in America, Volume 1* (ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009), 44.
- <sup>48</sup> North Carolina Museum of History,  
<http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/collateral/articles/f05.service.in.war.pdf>
- <sup>49</sup> Medal of Honor citation, <http://www.msc.navy.mil/inventory/citations/redcloud.htm>
- <sup>50</sup> Holm, 10.
- <sup>51</sup> Holm, 11.
- <sup>52</sup> Holm, 123.
- <sup>53</sup> Holm, 19.
- <sup>54</sup> Holm, 20.
- <sup>55</sup> Holm, 18.
- <sup>56</sup> Carroll, 170.
- <sup>57</sup> Holm, 67.
- <sup>58</sup> Author's note: several friends of mine are elementary teachers. When they share stories of my deployments with their students about a Native American fighting in the war, many do not believe that Indians are still alive.
- <sup>59</sup> Franco, 132.
- <sup>60</sup> Franco, 133.
- <sup>61</sup> Holm, 137.
- <sup>62</sup> Carroll, 7.
- <sup>63</sup> Carroll, 5.
- <sup>64</sup> Carroll, 9.
- <sup>65</sup> Carroll, 109.

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- <sup>66</sup> Holm, 101.
- <sup>67</sup> Carroll, 5.
- <sup>68</sup> Steven Clevenger, *America's First Warriors: Native Americans and Iraq* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 2010), 18.
- <sup>69</sup> Clevenger, 54.
- <sup>70</sup> Carroll, 115.
- <sup>71</sup> Carroll, 127.
- <sup>72</sup> Carroll, 110.
- <sup>73</sup> Holm, 4.
- <sup>74</sup> Population Representation in the Military Services 2009. <http://prhome.defense.gov/MPP/ACCESSION%20POLICY/PopRep2009/appendixa/appendixa.pdf>
- <sup>75</sup> Holm, 119.
- <sup>76</sup> Franco, 65.
- <sup>77</sup> Holm, 168.
- <sup>78</sup> Huntington, 22.
- <sup>79</sup> Holm, 45.
- <sup>80</sup> Mails, 73.
- <sup>81</sup> Mails, 31.
- <sup>82</sup> Carroll, 91.
- <sup>83</sup> Sun Tzu translated by Samuel B. Griffith, *The Art of War* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 84.