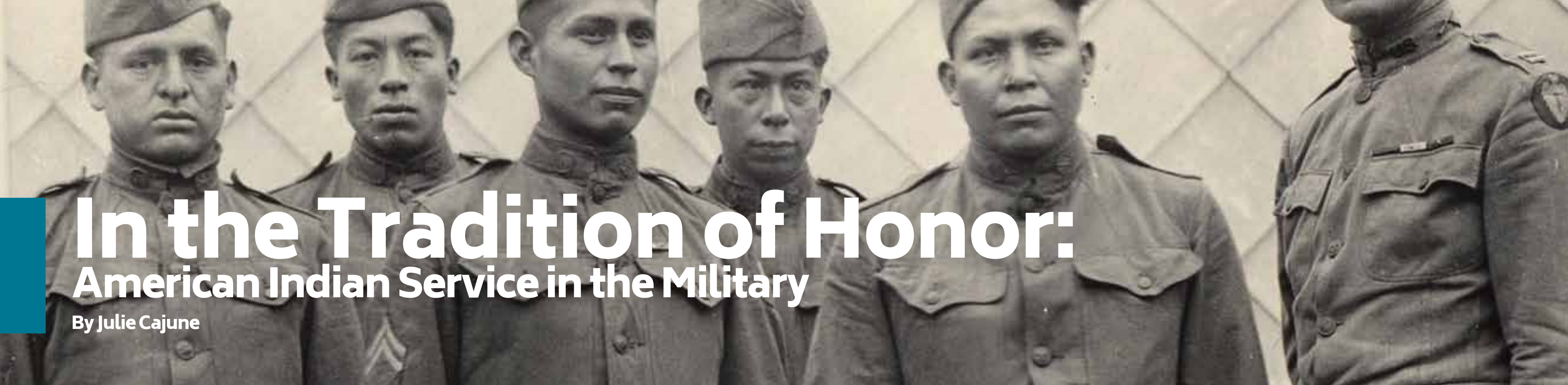


In the Tradition of Honor:
American Indian Service in the Military

By Julie Cajune

This brief history of American Indian military service is provided as a common ground for building relationships with tribes. Understanding the role of traditional warriors that evolved into military service can serve as a starting place of shared values.

Historic highlights include:

- *Traditional Leadership and Warrior Status*
- *American Indian Political Systems and Military Societies*
- *Joseph Medicine Crow: Traditional Crow Values in World War II*
- *Traditional and Contemporary Native Women as Warriors*
- *Records of American Indian Military Service in Major U.S. Campaigns*
- *Contemporary Status of American Indian Veterans*

American Indians have proudly worn our nation's uniform in every one of our conflicts... American Indians per capita—have had the highest percentage of their people in military service, exceeding every American ethnic group. - Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Former U.S. Senator, Colorado

Throughout Indian Country, veterans have enjoyed a status of particular respect. Military service has been and remains an honorable way to serve your people. From the days of long ago to the present, American Indians have willingly taken on the role of warrior and protector. This long-standing tradition transitioned from fighting to protect tribe and territory to fighting to protect country by serving in every branch of the U.S. Military Services.

While American Indian nations have distinct and unique cultures, they share the ideal of fulfilling a generational responsibility to one's community. This responsibility at times requires personal sacrifice for the safety of family and tribe. Such sacrifices bring honor and status to the individual. Honor was, and continues to be, a quality to strive for, and a characteristic essential for any leadership role. Traditional rank in leadership was attained through honorable living rather than through material possessions or wealth.

These shared values and ideals were expressed in diverse social and political structures of traditional American Indian societies. Many tribal nations had complex kinship systems that guided specific relationships and behaviors. Layered over family systems were religious, political, and military societies. Each tribe's system of governance served to sustain well-being and harmony among its citizens.

The Northern Cheyenne Tribe had a sophisticated system of governance that

was established by the Cheyenne prophet and culture hero, Sweet Medicine. Stories of Sweet Medicine have been passed down through oral history and he is said to have lived before horses and the coming of the white man. Through his teachings, military societies and the Council of forty-four chiefs were established. Several traditional Cheyenne military societies remain active today, carrying on ceremonial duties.

Stories of warrior deeds have been passed down through tribal oral tradition. Both the training of warriors and their honorable deeds are known in most Native communities. These traditions and stories are a source of pride. The traditional training of warriors persisted into the twentieth century in some tribes. This is evidenced by the life of Joseph Medicine Crow.

Mr. Medicine Crow recounted his training by his grandfather in the book *Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond:*

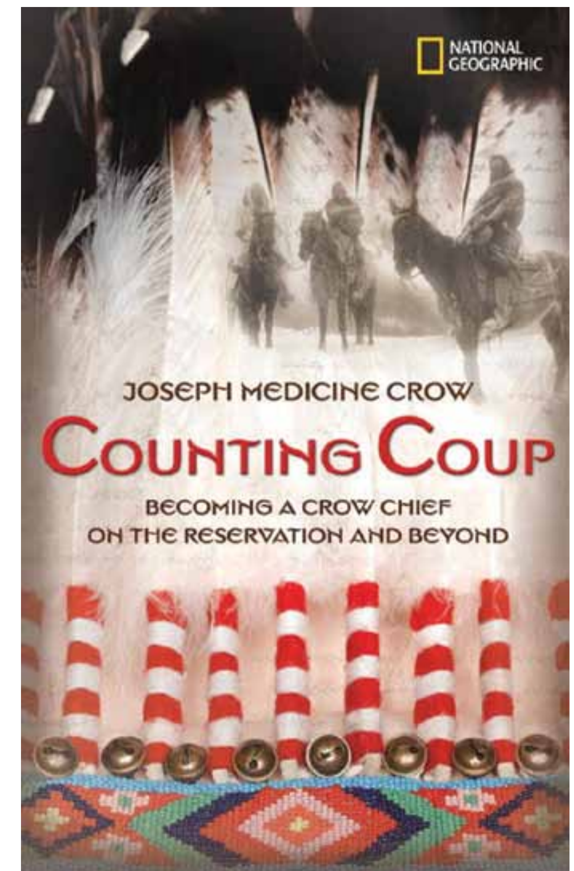
Although my grandfather Yellowtail had not been a warrior, he raised me to be one, to be tough and strong like the old-time warriors. When I was about six or seven, he started my physical-education regimen. I remember it was cold, maybe November, and snow was on the ground.

One morning grandfather said, "All right, get up! Put on your pants and shirt. That's all. Don't put on your shoes. Now, run around the house once, in the snow-barefoot." So I did. I'll tell you my feet were really cold when I came back in.

Well, the next day, he said, "Run around the house twice." Then it was three or four times, until I got up to twenty. I had to run around that house each morning no matter how cold it was outside. He gradually saw to it that my feet were tough and able to withstand the cold."

Then one morning he said, "All right, now the next one. Don't put your clothes on. Run over to that sagebrush over there, " pointing to a bush about 50 yards away. "Run over there and when you get there, flop down on your back and roll over. Roll over about four times one way and then the other way and come back." I did that. He made me do that every day. The second day I rolled a little farther – five or six times. Some days it was below zero outside, it was hard to do, but the training never stopped (Medicine Crow and Viola 2006).

Mr. Medicine Crow did become a warrior and he served as a Private in the United States Army, Company K, 411th Infantry, and 103rd Division during World War II. Upon his return from Germany, he recalled his war deeds to elders and realized he had completed the four requirements to become a chief: captured a well-guarded horse, took an enemy's weapon, counted coup (an honor earned by touching or striking an enemy during battle), and led a war party and returned safely. It is both interesting and remarkable to note that one of his war deeds in Germany included stealing horses from the enemy. One would think this to be a deed of the past, but Mr. Medicine Crow did indeed steal horses from a group of about fifty of Hitler's SS officers who were on horseback. Mr. Medicine Crow received the Presidential



Counting Coup, Joseph Medicine Crow

Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Joseph Medicine Crow shows a drum to President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama during a reception for recipients and their families in the Blue Room of the White House on Aug. 12, 2009.

Image courtesy of the White House; photo by Pete Souza

Pencil sketch of Kʷilqs by Father Nicolas Point from the Father Pierre Jean De Smet papers.

Image courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries, no. 537-7-37-58

Medal of Freedom in 2009. Medicine Crow provided the following outline depicting the rank and deeds of traditional warriors and leaders while making some comparisons to contemporary servicemen.

It should be noted that historically Indian women were also known to be warriors. Kʷilqs was a Pend d'Oreille woman living in the mid-nineteenth century when her people's territory was being invaded by multiple hostile tribes. Kʷilqs chose to be a warrior and did so with distinction. Her war deeds were illustrated by Nicolas Point, a French Jesuit Missionary, and were recorded in a letter to future U.S. President James Garfield.

There is a woman still living I believe amongst them, whose history had the romance of Joan d'Arc—she is now about 60 years of age, would never marry, always took care of the sick and wounded and led the tribe in all of its battles. In hand to hand encounters she has killed more Blackfeet than any half dozen of the bravest warriors. She made so many narrow escapes that the Indians, both friends and foes, thought she bore a charmed life and her very appearance in the fight was encouragement on one side and dread on the other (Library of Congress 1872).

Kʷilqs chose the role of warrior. At other times, women took courageous actions to protect their families. Buffalo Calf Road

THE MAKING OF A CROW INDIAN CHIEF

LEVEL	REQUIRED ACTIONS	REQUIRED ATTRIBUTES
Chief of All Chiefs	Capturing a Well-Guarded Prize Horse	Must Have Wisdom in Human Affairs so as to Keep the Tribe in Unity
"Owner of a Camp" or Head of a Band	Taking Away Enemy's Weapon	Must Have Upright Character and Good Personality; Always Honest, Fair and Kind
Pipe Carrier or Field Commander	Counting Coups	Must be Benevolent to all his People and See that all are Provided with the Necessities of Life
"A Good Man" or Chief - Completed the Four Deeds	Leading a War Party and Returning Safely	Must have Good and Strong Medicine or Spiritual Insight to Cope with Unusual and Supernatural Situations
Chief Scout - Lieutenant, Platoon Leader and Up	No Information	No Information
Scout - Top Sergeant	No Information	No Information
Warrior - Enlisted Man	No Information	No Information
Helper - PFC	No Information	No Information
Water Boy - Orderly	No Information	No Information

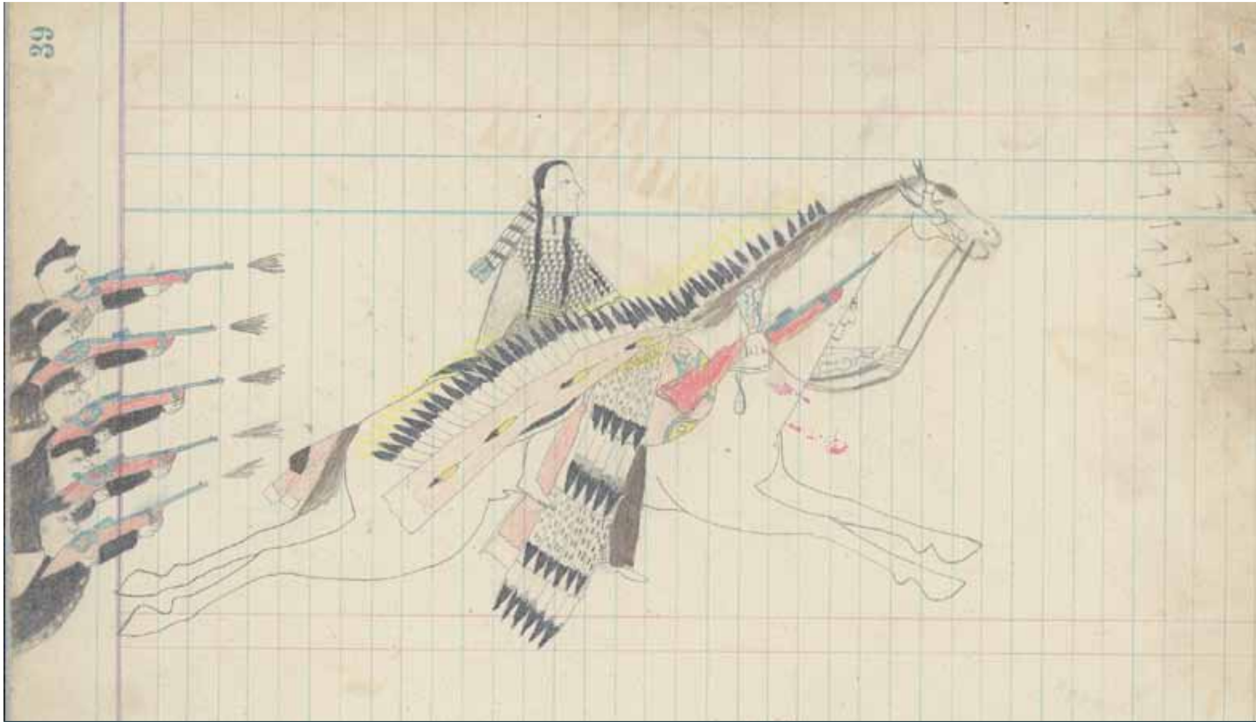
Cultural Heritage Series, Crow History, MSU, 1982

Woman made this decision during the Battle of the Rosebud in 1876. Buffalo Calf Road Woman was accompanying several hundred Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, including both her brother and husband, as they were attempting to halt General George Crook.

During the battle Buffalo Calf Road Woman lost sight of her brother. When she finally spotted him, he was surrounded by Crow Indian scouts and white soldiers waiting for a chance to count coup on him. Chief Comes In Sight fought fiercely with great skill, but his horse was shot and killed during the fight leaving him vulnerable to the circling soldiers and scouts. Buffalo Calf Road Woman charged the hostiles, dodging bullets, and grabbed her brother, carrying him to safety on her horse. This brave rescue on her part caused the Cheyenne to rally and defeat General Crook and his soldiers. The Cheyenne refer to the battle as The Fight Where the Girl Saved Her Brother (Ambler et al. 2008).

Buffalo Calf Road Woman, posing for ethnographer and photographer, Edward S. Curtis circa 1905.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-8814



Ledger art by Yellow Nose, (1848-1910), depicting Buffalo Calf Road Woman saving her wounded brother, Chief Comes In Sight, while under fire from U.S. soldiers during the Battle of the Rosebud.

Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute National Anthropological Archives, NAA INV 08704700

American Indian women today continue the tradition and honor of protecting their people through military service. Lori Ann Piestewa, a member of the Hopi Tribe, chose this respected path. Lori enlisted in the Army, following in the footsteps of her grandfather who served in World War II and her father who served in Vietnam. Piestewa was the mother of two young children who were being cared for by her parents.

"We're going in," Lori wrote in an e-mail, "Take care of the babies, and I'll see you when I get back."

Lori, a member of the 507th Army Maintenance Company, was traveling with her crew in a convoy in the early days of the Iraq War when the caravan ran headlong into an ambush near Nasiriyah on March 23, 2003.

The first woman killed in the Iraq War, and the first American Indian woman to die in combat in the U.S. Armed Forces, Lori was 23 years old, and a Hopi warrior (King 2011).

Lori's story resonated with the country, perhaps because she was a young mother and certainly because she made the ultimate sacrifice in service to her country. People across the nation honored Lori's sacrifice with an enormous outpouring of support for her family that she left behind. A grassroots movement coalesced to change the name of Arizona's Squaw Peak to Piestewa Peak. The name change became official in 2008. Lori's story adds to the legacy of American Indian women warriors.

The traditional ideals that inspired warriors of the past continue to affect individual choice for military service today. The courage, intelligence, and honor of our cultural ancestors are a source of pride. The honor of serving your people through the military was a natural evolution from the old warrior days. At the turn of the 19th Century, young Indian men had lost the opportunity to distinguish themselves in battle, so it was not surprising for them to seek this out during World War I.

When the United States officially entered World War I in April of 1917, there was a debate about American Indian military service. The debate was not over whether Indians could serve in the military, but rather if they should serve in segregated units like African Americans.

The debate may have been in part due to American Indian people not being citizens of the United States or perhaps it was simply a continuance of the practice of racial

REMARKS No. 2

(Write here any Items of Interest connected with your War experience).

While taking active part in the battle
at Chateau Thierry latter part of July
1918 I was gassed and just barely
escaped, this world war in which
I took part is something that will
be in my memory for ever, I know
I might get killed yet I know that
I ought to do something for my Country
as we Indian's are the real American's
so I enlisted, and seen some hard
times yet I am glad I have done
my duty and I got back safely
home, I cannot relate my whole
experience there but do hope this
be sufficient.

Owen Hates Him.

WWQ-divA.025 p4

Joseph Dixon sent out thousands of questionnaires between 1919 and 1920. Dixon wanted to demonstrate the commitment American Indians had toward both the United States and the war effort, regardless of the status of their citizenship. This excerpt is taken from page four of Owen Hates Him's questionnaire, a Cheyenne River Sioux, serving as a Private with the 147th Field Artillery, Battery C during WWI.
The document reads: ***"While taking active part in the battle at Chateau Thierry latter part of July 1918 I was gassed and just barely escaped, this world war in which I took part is something that will be in my memory forever, I know I might get killed yet I know that I ought to do something for my country as we Indian's are the real American's. so I enlisted, and seen some hard times yet I am glad I have done my duty and I got back safely home, I cannot relate my whole experience there but do hope this be sufficient."***

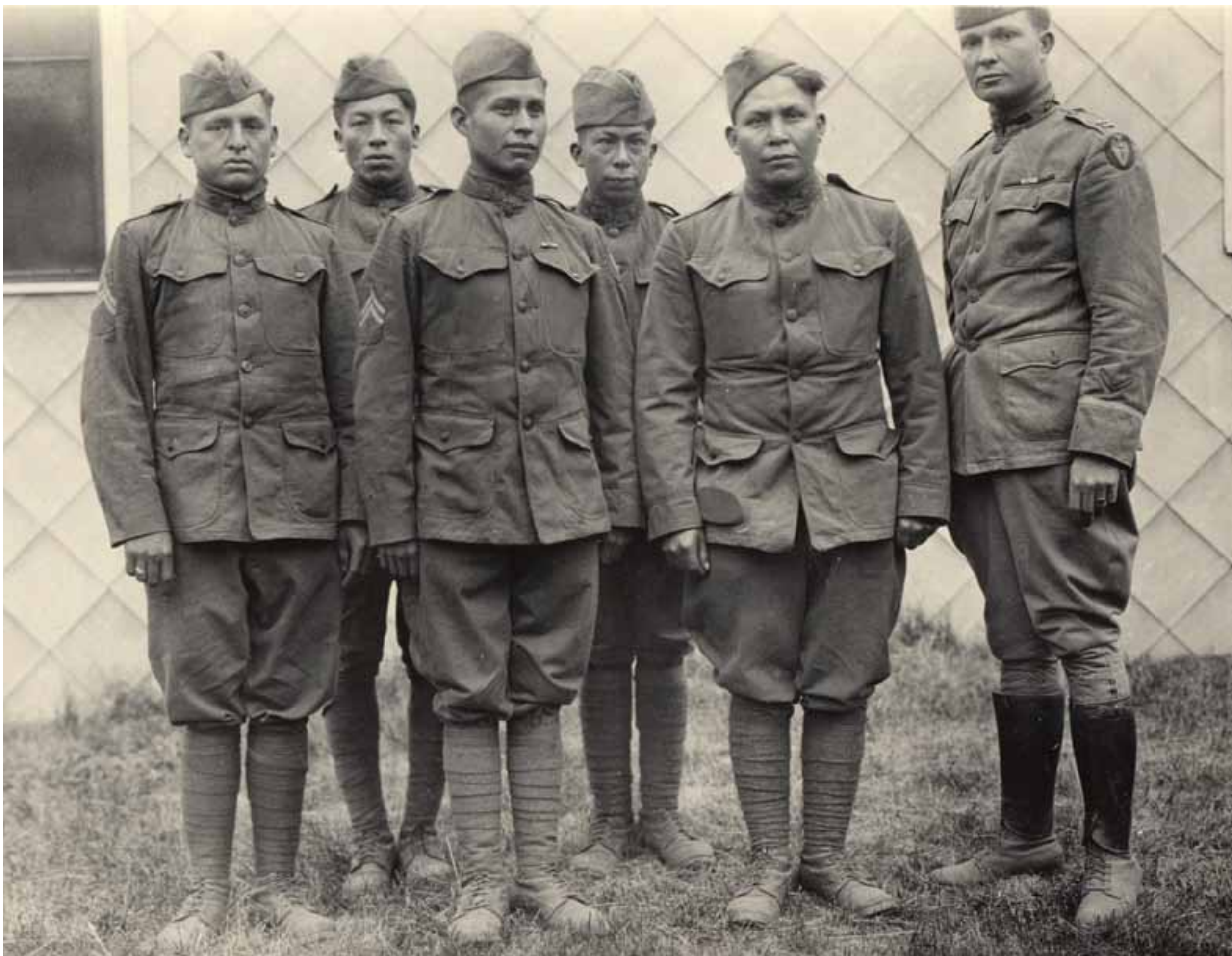
Image courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Wanamaker Collection WWQ_divA_025

segregation. Whatever the reason, Indian men were not dissuaded and they volunteered by the thousands. Records vary as to the total number of American Indians that served in World War I, fluctuating between 12,000 and 17,060. The statistic that remains constant however is that two thirds of the Indians that participated were volunteers. One third were subject to the draft. Perhaps at first thought this may not seem remarkable at all, but we must consider that just 27 years prior, hostilities between American Indians and the U.S. Cavalry were at a climactic point in the West—specifically, the Wounded Knee Massacre that ended with the loss of so many lives, including women and children. This underscores the extraordinary act of Indian men voluntarily enlisting in World War I.

Indian men not only enlisted but they served their country with distinction. A 1921 New York Times article by Dr. J. K. Dixon recounted, "One hundred and fifty American Indians received decorations." The article provided several specific descriptions of heroism and noted that General Pershing created a list of the one hundred bravest heroes of the war including "Corporal Sevalia, an Indian who swam the Meuse under heavy gun fire, carrying a cable for a pontoon."

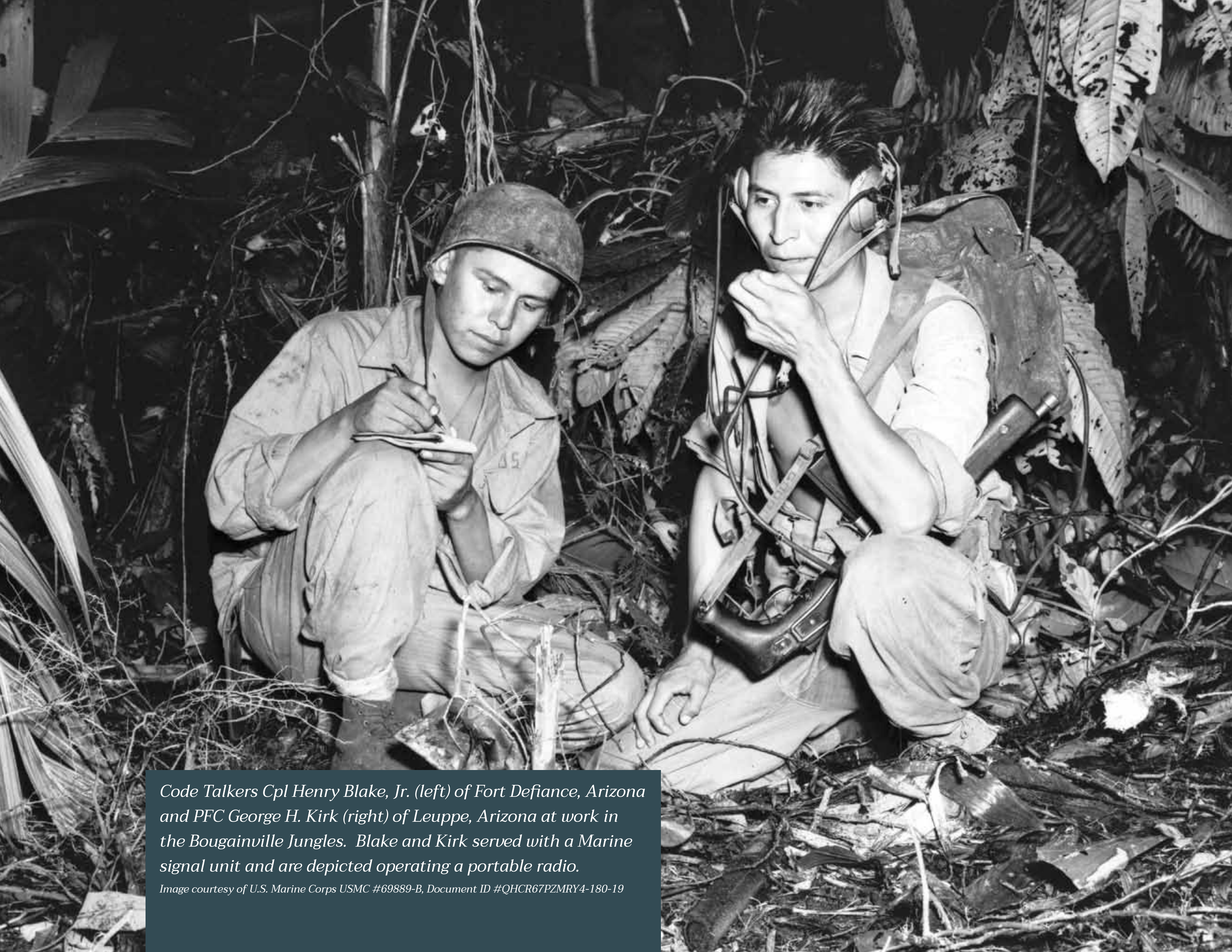
A little known contribution of American Indians during WWI was the use of tribal languages to send coded messages. When most people think about Indian "codetalkers," they are usually referring to the Indian veterans of WWII. However, it was a group of Choctaw soldiers in 1918 that presented the strategy of their language as a code.

> *One Choctaw was placed at each of the Allied field camps to send and receive messages in the Choctaw language...According to tribal records, nineteen Choctaw served in the communication corps as what became known as "codetalkers," though they've never been officially recognized for their contribution by the U.S. government. They were however, honored by the French government in 1989* (Robinson and Lucas 2008).



The Choctaw "Telephone Squad," also known as the CodeTalkers at Camp Merritt, New Jersey, June 7, 1919.

Image courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Wanamaker Collection 1962-08-6452



Code Talkers Cpl Henry Blake, Jr. (left) of Fort Defiance, Arizona and PFC George H. Kirk (right) of Leuppe, Arizona at work in the Bougainville Jungles. Blake and Kirk served with a Marine signal unit and are depicted operating a portable radio.

Image courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps USMC #69889-B, Document ID #QHCR67PZMRY4-180-19

While the Choctaw servicemen went without recognition, all World War I Indian servicemen were acknowledged with the granting of full U.S. citizenship in 1919. It was another five years before all other Indian people were granted citizenship.

The warrior tradition persisted with the enlistment of 25,000 American Indians during WWII. We know too, that poverty played a role in enlistment. Reservation unemployment rates were high. At this time many Indian people had been through both the boarding school and public education systems. Many came home to their communities with few job prospects. The other motivation for military service was patriotism—a love for your country and your land. Certainly Indian people remained attached to their homelands that had supported them for millennia as stated by Thomas Yallup, a Yakama Indian.

Navajo Code Talkers Private First Class Preston Toledo (left) and Private First Class Frank Toledo (right), cousins, attached to a Marine artillery regiment in the South Pacific relay orders over a field radio.

Image courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps USMC #57875, Document ID #QHCR67PZMRY4-180-12

Navajo men serving with a Marine Signal Unit on Bougainville. Front row, left to right: Pvt. Earl Johnny, Pvt. Kee Etsicitty, Pvt. John V. Goodluck, and PFC David Jordon. Rear row, left to right: Pvt. Jack C. Morgan, Pvt. George H. Kirk, Pvt. Tom H. Jones, and Cpl. Henry Bake, Jr.

Image courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps USMC #69896, Document ID #QHCR67PZMRY4-180-20

As Americans, in fact the original Americans, this war really and truly means something to us. Our young men have gone forth to war and have been cited for bravery just as in 1918. Because we are Indians doesn't mean that we do not have as much at stake in the land as you do. Our stake may not mean so much in dollars, but in respect and feeling it means as much and probably more, because of our religion about the land and its resources (Robinson and Lucas 2008).

The most famous Indian veterans of WWII were the Navajo Code Talkers. The "original twenty-nine" were recruited from the Navajo Reservation.

While in training, the original group invented 220 terms over a period of months and then graduated from Camp Elliott in southern California. Once trained, the Marine Corps sent the Code Talkers to the Pacific Front to a number of islands, including Bougainville, Guadalcanal, Peleliu, and Guam. The Code Talkers remained on active duty until the war ended (Crum 2014).

Reservation economics continued to be a factor during the Korean War. Crow Indian veteran Ronald Stewart said, "I joined the army in 1952 at the age of twenty. I needed a job and really didn't have any skills. After six weeks of basic training, I was sent to the frontline in Korea. I served in the army until 1954 and was discharged. I wasn't treated any different than any of the other soldiers." (Robinson and Lucas 2008).

By the time of the Vietnam War, Indian Country had weathered termination policy and was entering the era of self-determination. The 60s and 70s were times of united activism and asserting tribal sovereignty across the country.

This was the social and political context of the 60s and 70s in Indian Country. It is significant to point out then that of the 45,500 Indians in military service during the Vietnam War, 90 percent of them chose to enlist. It is regretful that many veterans of the Vietnam War did not receive the appropriate recognition for their service due to the opposition to the war. This was not the case in Indian Country.

Indian communities share the belief and tradition in honoring all of their veterans. Most tribes have contemporary warrior societies that veterans belong to. For example, when an Indian veteran dies in the Confederated and Salish Kootenai tribal community, members of the warrior society attend the wake, taking turns standing at attention by the casket until the wake is completed which can take from one to

Dan Waupoose, a Menomini chief, kneeling with a rifle and wearing a feathered headdress during training in Algiers, La., WWII, August 24, 1943.

Image courtesy of the National Archives, no. 80-G-153531

three days. The respect and honor shown bring great comfort to the family during their loss.

Indian Country serves its veterans in other ways. Returning from war is difficult and certainly the recent conflicts have demonstrated the stress and emotional cost on servicemen and women. What was once an unknown acronym, PTSD, is now a common household term. Indian people share knowledge to support healing and cleansing after participating in and witnessing war. While not all Indian veterans choose to utilize ceremony and tradition as one of the roads back to everyday living, those that do demonstrate the power of ritual to heal.

"My Navajo religion is my religion that I'll never forget. They did a protection ceremony for me before I went overseas, and that's what brought me back. And when I got back, they did another one to purify my soul. This one medicine man did that for me." Harold Foster, Navajo Codetalker (Robinson and Lucas 2008).

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana wanted to do something significant to honor tribal member veterans. The tribal council decided to commission a new Veteran's Memorial. There was an older installation on the tribal complex grounds that included names of veterans. The council contracted with tribal-member artist Corky Clairmont to design and build the new memorial. Mr. Clairmont created a uniquely tribal memorial of a towering eagle made of

(Left) The Eagle Circle Veterans Wall of Remembrance, at the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribal government complex on the Flathead Reservation, Pablo, Montana.

Image Courtesy of Bethany D. Hauer

(below) Private First Class Louis Charles Charlo who was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star for his heroic attempt to rescue a wounded fellow soldier, Private Ed McLaughlin from the Iwo Jima battlefield known as the Meat Grinder.

Image courtesy of Bethany D. Hauer

black stone with its wings extended. Writing and images are etched into the stone on both sides. An image of Louis Charles Charlo is on the memorial along with a brief record of his military service as a marine in WWII. Louis was the great grandson of Small Claw of the Grizzly Bear (Chief Charlo), who was the principal leader of the Montana Salish from the time of his father, Plenty Horse's death in 1870 until his own death in 1910.

Private First Class Louis Charlo was part of the fierce battle for Iwo Jima, and was in one of the two patrols on the mission to reach the summit of Mount Suribachi. Only one group, the one that Charlo was in, reached the summit that morning and raised the first flag on Iwo Jima. The group returned to their platoon and a second group made the ascent, including Charlo. When this second group reached the summit they found a length of pipe to secure to it the U.S. flag from the USS *Missoula*. This of course is the iconic flag raising that is etched in the minds of Americans when they think of the battle for Iwo Jima. In this flag raising, Ira Hayes, a Pima

Raising of the first flag on Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima, February 23, 1945. The flag was taken from the USS Missoula and Private First Class Louis Charles Charlo, of the Montana Bitterroot Salish helped to raise this flag during the battle.

Image courtesy of the Defense Department - U.S. Navy; photo by Lou Lowery

Indian from Arizona is prominently featured and was later utilized in public relations for the war effort. Louis Charlo's patrol who made it to the top and raised the first flag have been lost in obscure history. But Charlo's deeds remain alive among the members of his community, and now are recorded on the tribal veteran memorial in Pablo, Montana.

In the last letter Charlo wrote to his parents, sometime during that following week, he wrote, "I was part of the fracas atop Suribachi." Louis Charlo died less than a week later, killed as he was attempting to rescue Private Ed McLaughlin, a wounded buddy stranded in an area of the Iwo Jima battlefield known as the Meat Grinder. Charlo was carrying McLaughlin on his back and both were killed just a few feet from safety, according to Ray Whelan, Charlo's platoon leader (McNeel 2011).

Paramarine Private First Class Ira H. Hayes, nicknamed "Chief Falling Cloud", at Marine Corps Paratrooper School, December 1943. Hayes was one of the four Marines who raised the second U.S. flag over Iwo Jima.

Image courtesy of the National Archives no. 80-G-153531

The Veteran Warrior Society on the Flathead Indian Reservation, home of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, is working to see that Louis Charlo is granted the Medal of Honor posthumously. Montana Senator Max Baucus was able to have Charlo's Bronze Medal changed to a Silver Medal. The Veteran Warrior Society hopes this is a step forward to acknowledging Charlo's heroic actions they believe are deserving of the highest recognition.

There are so many stories similar to that of Louis Charles Charlo. Not every action of sacrifice and courage is known or acknowledged. Long ago battle deeds were told among the tribe and warriors were honored with eagle feathers and status in the community. Certainly today, it is impossible to recognize all those deserving. This underscores the need for respect afforded to all those in military service. Indian Country has honored this need. ■

Ambler, Marjane, Richard Little Bear, Dave Wilson, Linwood Tall Bear, Joan Hantz, Carol Ward, Bill Wertman, Montana Legislature, and Office of the Governor. *We, the Northern Cheyenne People: our land, our history, our people.* Chief Dull Knife College: Lame Deer, Montana, 2008.

Crum, Steven. *Native American Veterans of the 20th and 21st Century*, Unpublished Manuscript, 2014.

King, Patti Jo. "Remembering Lori Ann Piestwa: Hopi Woman Warrior," Indian Contry Today, April 13, 2011, http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/04/13/remembering-lori-ann-piestewa-hopi-woman-warrior-27896

McNeel, Jack. American Indian Marine Was Part of Iwo Jima, But Kept Out of Spotlight. Indian Country Today, November 7, 2011. http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/11/07/american-indian-marine-was-part-iwo-jima-kept-out-spotlight-60406

Medicine Crow, Joseph and Herman Viola. *Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond*. National Geographic Children's Books: Washington D.C., 2006.

Robinson, Gary and Phil Lucas. *From Warriors to Soldiers: The History of Native American Service in the United States Military*. iUniverse, 2008.

Stands In Timber, John and Margot Liberty. *Cheyenne Memories*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1998.

U.S. Library of Congress. James A. Garfield papers. "Henry R. Crosbie July 23, 1872 Letter to James A. Garfield," Series 1. vol. 9:77-93, Reel 131.