

Native Americans in World War II

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In 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "This generation has a rendezvous with destiny." When Roosevelt said that he had no idea of how much World War II would make his prophecy ring true. More than fifty years later, Americans are remembering the sacrifices of that generation, which took up arms in defense of the nation. Part of that generation was a neglected minority, Native American Indians, who flocked to the colors in defense of their country. No group that participated in World War II made a greater per capita contribution, and no group was changed more by the war. As part of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, it is fitting for the nation to recall the contributions of its own "first citizens."

The Vanishing American

At the time of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World, the Native American population living in what is now the United States was estimated at about one million. By 1880, only 250,000 Indians remained and this gave rise to the "Vanishing American" theory. By 1940, this population had risen to about 350,000. During World War II more than 44,000 Native Americans saw military service. They served on all fronts in the conflict and were honored by receiving numerous Purple Hearts, Air Medals, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Stars, Silver Stars, Distinguished Service Crosses, and three Congressional Medals of Honor. Indian participation in World War II was so extensive that it later became part of American folklore and popular culture.

The Warrior Image

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor seemed to awaken an ancestral warrior spirit in many Native Americans. Thousands of young Indians went into the armed forces or to work in the war production plants that abruptly emerged during military and industrial mobilization. A 1942 survey indicated that 40 percent more Native Americans voluntarily enlisted than had been drafted. Lt. Ernest Childers (Creek), Lt. Jack Montgomery (Cherokee), and Lt. Van Barfoot (Choctaw) all of the famed 45th "Thunderbird" Infantry Division won Medals of Honor in Europe. Childers had first distinguished himself in Sicily, where he received a battlefield commission. Later in Italy, unaided and despite severe wounds, he destroyed three German machine gun emplacements. During the Anzio Campaign in Italy, Montgomery attacked a German strongpoint single-handed, killing eleven of the enemy and taking thirty-three prisoners. During the breakout from Anzio to Rome, Barfoot knocked out two machine gun nests and captured seventeen prisoners. Subsequently, he defeated three German tanks and carried two wounded men to safety. All of these exploits reinforced the "warrior" image in the American mind. Maj. Gen. Clarence Tinker, an Osage and a career pilot, was the highest ranking Indian in the armed forces at the beginning of the war. He died leading a flight of bombers in the Pacific during the Battle of Midway. Joseph J. "Jocko" Clark, the first Indian (Cherokee) to graduate from Annapolis, participated in carrier battles in the Pacific and became an admiral. Brumett Echohawk (Pawnee), a renowned expert in hand-to-hand combat, trained commandos.

A Tradition as Fighters

The Iroquois Confederacy, having declared war on Germany in 1917, had never made peace and so automatically became party to World War II. The Navajo and other tribes were so eager to go to war that they stood for hours in bad weather to sign their draft cards, while others carried their own rifles so they would be ready for battle when they joined up. Unwilling to wait for their draft numbers, one-fourth of the Mescalero Apaches in New Mexico enlisted. Nearly all the able-bodied Chippewas at the Grand Portage Reservation enlisted. In a story that has been attributed to many other tribes as well, Blackfeet Indians mocked the need for a conscription bill. "Since when," their members cried, "has it been necessary for Blackfeet to draw lots to fight?"

The annual enlistment for Native Americans jumped from 7,500 in the summer of 1942 to 22,000 at the beginning of 1945. According to the Selective Service in 1942, at least 99 percent of all eligible Indians, healthy males aged 21 to 44, had registered for the draft. War Department officials maintained that if the entire population had enlisted in the same proportion as Indians, the response would have rendered Selective Service unnecessary. The overwhelming majority of Indians welcomed the opportunity to serve. On Pearl Harbor Day, there were 5,000 Indians in the military. By the end of the war, 24,521 reservation Indians, exclusive of officers, and another 20,000 off-reservation Indians had served. The combined figure of 44,500 was more than ten percent of the Native American population during the war years. This represented one-third of all able-bodied Indian men from 18 to 50 years of age. In some tribes, the percentage of men in the military reached as high as 70 percent. Also, several hundred Indian women served in the WACS, WAVES, and Army Nurse Corps.

The "Chiefs" Go to War

In spite of years of inefficient and often corrupt bureaucratic management of Indian affairs, Native Americans stood ready to fight the "white man's war." American Indians overcame past disappointment, resentment, and suspicion to respond to their nation's need in World War II. It was a grand show of loyalty on the part of Native Americans and many Indian recruits were affectionately called "chiefs." Native Americans responded to America's call for soldiers because they understood the need to defend one's own land, and they understood fundamental concepts of fighting for life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness.

Even the clannish Pueblo tribe, whose members exhibited a historical suspicion of the white world, contributed 213 men, 10 percent of their population of 2,205, to the armed forces. Wisconsin Chippewas at the Lac Oreilles Reservation contributed 100 men from a population of 1,700. Nearly all the able-bodied Chippewas at the Grand Portage Reservation enlisted. Blackfeet Indians enlisted in droves. Navajo Indians responded by sending 3,600 into military service; 300 lost their lives. Many volunteered from the Fort Peck Sioux-Assinibois Reservation in Montana, the descendants of the Indians that defeated Custer. The Iroquois took it as an insult to be called up under compulsion. They passed their own draft act and sent their young braves into National Guard units.

There were many disappointments as well-intentioned Indians were rejected for the draft. Years of poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, and general bureaucratic neglect had taken its toll. A Chippewa Indian was furious when rejected because he had no teeth. "I don't want to bite 'em," he said, "I just want to shoot 'em!" Another Indian, rejected for being too fat to run, said that he had not come to run, but to fight.

The Swastika Shadow Over Native Americans

World War II signalled a major break from the past and offered unparalleled opportunities for Indians to compete in the white man's world. Because the Choctaw language had befuddled German code-breakers in World War I, the German government feared the likelihood of Indian communications specialists as World War II loomed. During the 1930s, Nazi agents posing as anthropologists and writers on reservations tried to subvert some Indian tribes and learn their language. Pan-Nazi agitators from the German-American Bund tried to persuade Indians not to register for the draft. Third Reich Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels predicted Indians would revolt rather than fight Germany because the Swastika was similar to an Indian mystical bird symbol depicting good luck.

Goebbels went so far as to declare the Sioux to be "Aryans," but the Indians knew that as a Mongoloid race, they would be enslaved by the Nazis. Fascist attempts to convert Indians to their cause not only met with failure, but it may have encouraged Indians to register for the draft in the large numbers they did. About 20 percent of the Indian population, 80,000 men and women, marched off to fight in the armed forces and at the home front against Adolph Hitler, a man they called, "he who smells his moustache." Benito Mussolini fared little better, as the Indians called him "Gourd Chin."

Indians saw the Axis Powers as a threat to their liberty, and the Indian tribes responded patriotically. The Chippewa and Sioux joined the Iroquois in declaring war on the Axis. Indians took extreme measures to get into the war. Illiterate Papago Indians memorized a few English phrases and learned to write their names when called to the induction centers. The Navajo, also rejected in large numbers for not speaking English, were extremely determined to serve. They organized remedial English training on their reservations to qualify for service in the armed forces.

The draft created a structure within which Indians and whites had to operate together for the defense of their country. The draft set Indians on a new course where they would be integrated into military life with their white counterparts. Their lives and their land-based society would never be the same. The Indians' success in weakening racial barriers in the armed forces during World War II presaged the rise of the Civil Rights movement later.

The Home Front

Well-known American humorist Will Rogers, a Cherokee from Oklahoma, said, "The United States never broke a treaty with a foreign government and never kept one with the Indians." Nevertheless, the government of the United States found no more loyal citizens than their own "first Americans." When President Roosevelt mobilized the country and declared war on the Axis Powers, it seemed as if he spoke to each citizen individually. Therefore, according to the Indians' way of perceiving, all must be allowed to participate. About 40,000 Indian men and women, aged 18 to 50, left reservations for the first time to find jobs in defense industries. This migration led to new vocational skills and increased cultural sophistication and awareness in dealings with non-Indians.

The purchase of Treasury Stamps and Bonds by Indian tribes and individuals was considerable. By 1944, war bond sales to Indians had reached \$50 million. Indians also made generous donations to the Red Cross and other organizations, giving what they had. All of this from a minority group at the bottom rung of the economic ladder.

Some 2,500 Navajos helped construct the Fort Wingate Ordnance Depot in New Mexico, and Pueblo Indians helped build the Naval Supply Depot in Utah. Because of their hunting, survival, and navigational skills in the harsh regions of the north, Alaskan Indians

were involved in territorial defense. The entire football team at the Santa Fe Indian School volunteered for the armed forces after the 1942 homecoming game.

Women took over traditional men's duties on the reservation, manning fire lookout stations, and becoming mechanics, lumberjacks, farmers, and delivery personnel. Indian women, although reluctant to leave the reservation, worked as welders in aircraft plants. Many Indian women gave their time as volunteers for American Women's Volunteer Service, Red Cross, and Civil Defense. They also tended livestock, grew victory gardens, canned food, and sewed uniforms. A wealthy Kiowa woman in Oklahoma sent a \$1,000 check to the Navy Relief signed with her thumbprint. Alaskan women trapped animals to earn war bond money. By 1943, the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) estimated that 12,000 young Indian women had left the reservation to work in defense industries. By 1945, an estimated 150,000 Native Americans had directly participated in industrial, agricultural, and military aspects of the American war effort.

The Indian Service sent 1,119 of its 7,000 employees into military service. Of these, 22 died, while 7 won Silver or Bronze Stars. In 1942, the Japanese captured 45 Aleuts on Attu. Only 24 returned from captivity in Japan, where they had worked in clay pits.

The federal government designated some Indian lands and even tribes themselves as essential natural resources, appropriating tribal minerals, lumber, and lands for the war effort. After the war, Native Americans discovered that their service for the war effort had depleted their resources without reward. Indian lands provided essential war materials such as oil, gas, lead, zinc, copper, vanadium, asbestos, gypsum, and coal. The Manhattan Project used Navajo helium in New Mexico to make the atomic bomb. The war effort depleted the Blackfeet's tribal resources of oil.

Tell it to the Marines

German soldiers during World War I had been befuddled by Indians who transmitted messages over field phones in the Choctaw language. The 32d Infantry Division, Third Army, used Indians from Michigan and Wisconsin to work with microphones and to transmit messages in the Louisiana Maneuvers of 1940. During World War II, the U.S. Marine Corps recruited Navajo Indians for the same purpose. Navajo marines used their language as a battlefield code that the Japanese never broke. The Navajo Code Talkers became the most celebrated and publicized of the radio units.

Marines were "elite" fighters and welcomed Indians because of their warrior reputation. The Navajo marines ended their ceremonial chants by singing the Marine Corps Hymn in Navajo. Their eloquence came naturally to Indians because theirs is an oral culture. Navajos formed special all-Navajo Marine Corps signal units that encoded messages in their native tongue. Taking advantage of the flexibility and range of the Navajo language, they worked out translations of military and naval terms so that orders and instructions could be transmitted by voice over the radio in a code the Japanese were never able to break. They were used first in late 1942 on Guadalcanal. Special Code Talker units were eventually assigned to each of the Marine Corps' six Pacific divisions. By war's end, over 400 Navajo had served as Code Talkers. Untold numbers of Marines owe their lives to the Navajo Code Talkers.

Indians also excelled at basic training. Maj. Lee Gilstrap of Oklahoma, who trained 2,000 Native Americans at his post, said, "The Indian is the best damn soldier in the Army." Their talents included bayonet fighting, marksmanship, scouting, and patrolling. Native Americans took to commando training; after all, their ancestors invented it. One Sioux soldier, Kenneth Scisson of South Dakota, became an American commando unit's leading German-killer. On a single patrol, Scisson added ten notches to his Garand rifle. Native Americans endured thirst and lack of food better than the average soldier. They had an acute sense of perception and excellent endurance, along with superior physical coordination.

Indians first saw action in the Pacific theater. Over 300 Indians, including a descendant of the famed Apache chief Geronimo, took part in the defense of Bataan and Corregidor. Over 2,000 Indian farmers, workers, and businessmen in Oklahoma and New Mexico trained and fought as part of the 45th Infantry Division for 511 days of combat in Italy and Central Europe. The "Thunderbirds" had the highest proportion of Indian soldiers of any division, but Indians served conspicuously in the 4th and 88th Divisions, the 19th and 180th Infantry Regiments, and the 147th Field Artillery Regiment, and in sundry Oklahoma National Guard units.

For Native Americans, World War II signalled a major break from the past. Many Indians in the military made a decent living for the first time in their lives. By 1944, the average Indian's annual income was \$2,500, up two and one-half times since 1940. Military life provided a steady job, money, status, and a taste of the white man's world. Indians learned assertiveness they could use in their fight for equal rights after the war.

The Warriors and War Workers Return

The war, therefore, provided new opportunities for American Indians, and these opportunities disrupted old patterns. The wartime economy and military service took thousands of Indians away from the reservations. Many of these Indians settled into the mainstream, adapting permanently to the cities and to a non-Indian way of life. Moreover, thousands returned to the reservation even

after they had proved themselves capable of making the adjustment to white America. Those who left traditional cultures did not necessarily reject their heritage. Instead, they forged a new Pan-Indian identity to cope with the differences they perceived between themselves and whites.

World War II became a turning point for both Indians and Caucasians because its impact on each was so great and different. Whites believed that World War II had completed the process of Indian integration into mainstream American society. Large numbers of Indians, on the other hand, saw for the first time the non-Indian world at close range. It both attracted and repelled them. The positive aspects included a higher standard of living, with education, health care, and job opportunities. The negatives were the lessening of tribal influence and the threat of forfeiting the security of the reservation. Indians did not want equality with whites at the price of losing group identification. In sum, the war caused the greatest change in Indian life since the beginning of the reservation era and taught Native Americans they could aspire to walk successfully in two worlds.

A good deal of credit must go to the Native Americans for their outstanding part in America's victory in World War II. They sacrificed more than most—both individually and as a group. They left the land they knew to travel to strange places, where people did not always understand their ways. They had to forego the dances and rituals that were an important part of their life. They had to learn to work under non-Indian supervisors in situations that were wholly new to them. It was a tremendously difficult adjustment; more than for white America, which had known modern war and mobilization before. But in the process, Native Americans became Indian-Americans, not just American Indians.