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The Role of Native American’s During World War II

Dec 17, 2013 | World War II

For the most part, the role of Native American’s during [World War II](#) is greatly overlooked. In fact, Native American’s made a greater per capita contribution to the war than any other group.



It is estimated that approximately one million Native Americans lived in what is now known as the United States when Christopher Columbus arrived. Less than 400 years later, the population had dwindled down to around 250,000 Indians. By 1940, that number had risen to around 350,000. Of that 350,000, 44,000 of them saw military service during WWII. The Native Americans were involved in all conflicts and received numerous medals, awards and citations. Three even received the Congressional Medal of Honor – Lt. Ernest Childers from the Creek tribe, Lt. Jack Montgomery, a Cherokee Indian and Lt. Van Barfoot a Choctaw.

The United States Enters the War and So Do the Native Americans

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the Medal of Honor

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, many Native Americans either enlisted in the armed forces, or went to work in the war plants. According to one survey, by 1942 the majority of the Native Americans in the service had enlisted voluntarily.

Back in 1917, the Iroquois Confederacy had declared war on Germany. At the start of WWII, they still had not made peace and were more than ready to fight. Other tribes were also ready as well. Some were willing to wait for hours in bad weather in order to sign their draft cards. Others showed up with their rifles, ready to fight. It is estimated that about a quarter of the Mescalero Apaches enlisted voluntarily. This was the same for many of the remaining tribes throughout the United States. These Native Americans were prepared to overlook their past disappointments and resentments. They understood the importance of defending one's own land.

By mid-1942, the annual enlistment for Native Americans was approximately 7,500. By the beginning of 1945, the yearly average had jumped to 22,000. Selective Service reported in 1942 that 99% of all Native Americans who were eligible for the draft (healthy males between the ages of 21 and 44) had registered for the draft. On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, approximately 5,000 Indians were in the service. That number escalated to over 44,000 (both reservation and off reservation) by the time the war ended. This accounted for more than ten percent of the Indian population during the war time-frame.

In addition to the Indian males who served during the war, the women of some of the tribes also contributed serving in the WACS, WAVES and Army Nurse Corps.



Beatrice (Coffey) Thayer

Language Barriers

During [WWI](#), the Choctaw language baffled German code-breakers. With World War II looming in the not too distant future, Germans feared Indian language would once again be used against them. Throughout the 1930s, German Nazis, infiltrated the reservations disguised as anthropologists and writers in an attempt to learn the language while others



attempted to dissuade the Indians from registering for the draft. Some German Nazis believed the Indians would chose to revolt rather than fight against Germany since the Swastika was quite similar to a symbol used by the Indians (though once they learned of the Nazi Swastika, the Navajo discontinued using the symbol). Not only did the Germans fail to convert the Indians, some speculate it was the fuel that encouraged them to register in such staggering numbers. In all, an average of 80,000 men and women (roughly 20% of the Indian population) fought in the armed forces both at home and abroad.

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Some of the tribes had to memorize key English phrases and learn how to write their name. Others, such as the Navajo were so determined, they began remedial English training classes on the reservations in order to qualify for the military.

The way the draft was structured meant Indians and whites would need to operate together while defending the United States. As a result their lives, as well as their land-based culture would be forever changed.

On the Home Front

As war was declared on the Axis by President Roosevelt, it felt as if he were speaking to each and every citizen individually. The Indian tribes interpreted this as meaning all would be permitted to participate. As a result, an estimated 40,000 Indians (men and women ranging in age from 18 to 50) left their reservations for the very first time and sought jobs in the defense industry. As a result, they acquired vocational skills, increased their cultural sophistication and elevated their awareness when dealing with non-Indians.

Additional support from the Tribes came from their large purchases of Treasury Stamps and Bonds and in way of donations to the Red Cross. In 1944, it is estimated that Indians purchased close to \$50 million in bonds.

Also at home, an estimated 2,500 Navajos participated in the construction of the Ft. Wingate Ordnance Depot in New Mexico. The Pueblo tribe assisted with the building of the Naval Supply Depot in Utah, while the Alaskan Indians were engaged in territory defense.



Back on the reservations, the women assumed the traditional duties of the men. In addition to sewing uniforms, tending livestock and canning food, they also manned the fire lookout stations and learned to be mechanics, lumberjacks and farmers. Despite their reluctance in leaving the reservation, many of the women worked in aircraft plants as welders. Others donated time to the Red Cross, the Civil Defense and the American Women’s Volunteer Service.

Native Americans in the USMC

After the successful use of the Choctaw language (to befuddle the Germans) in World War I in sending messages to field phones, the USMC began recruiting Navajo Indians for the same purpose. They would become known as the [Navajo Code Talkers](#). Their code allowed for faster transmitting and deciphering and it was a code the Japanese were never able to

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break.

The Marine Corps welcomed the Indians. They respected their warrior reputation; a reputation they felt matched their own ‘elite’ fighters. When the Marine Navajos ended their ceremonial chants, they would do so by singing the USMC Hymn in their native tongue. They started a signal unit comprised of all Navajos in order to encode messages in their native tongue. They formed their own words for various military and naval terms so they could

transmit orders and/or instructions. The Code Talkers were first used in 1942 on Guadalcanal, but eventually, they were each assigned to one of the USMCs six Pacific divisions. By the end of the war, more than 400 Navajos had served as Code Talkers, a service which is credited with saving countless lives.

Other Areas of Service

Native Americans excelled at basic training, were proficient in [marksmanship](#) and bayonet fighting and were capable of enduring thirst and food deprivation better than the average soldier. The Native American soldier had an acute sense of perception, excellent endurance and exceptional physical coordination.

Along with the Pacific Theater, the Indians also saw action in Bataan and Corregidor, Italy and Central Europe.

Post World War II

After the war was over, many of the Native Americans remained in the mainstream (as opposed to returning to the reservation). Leaving their traditional culture was not rejection of their heritage. Instead, they began to identify and cope with various differences they saw between themselves and the white man. Others, despite learning to make the necessary adjustments to live in white America, still chose to return to their reservations. Despite a better standard of living and job and education opportunities, these Indians were not willing to give up the security offered by the reservation.

The Native Americans, no doubt, played an outstanding role in America’s WWII victory despite the challenges they faced both as individuals and as a group. They left the comforts of the only land they ever knew and travelled to far away strange places where people did not understand their traditions. They gave up their dances and rituals and had to learn how to adapt to working under a ‘white man’. Despite all this, the Native Americans did learn to adapt to their various World War II roles and in the process, they went from being American Indians to Indian-Americans.

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