

## **U.S. Military Changes Role of Women in combat: Native American Women Warriors in History**

Roy Cook: edit

Leon Panetta, the U.S. Secretary for Defense, January 2013, [announced](#) that the ban on women undertaking combat roles in the U.S. military, specifically the infantry and armor regiments, will be lifted.

This isn't a 'shoot from the hip' decision with no considered thought; it is a debate that has been circling for decades. There is now, more than ever, sufficient evidence to indicate that certain woman have the right qualifications, as well as the physical and psychological attributes, to operate with the same effectiveness as their male counterparts in combat roles.

The question should not reside upon gender, but the ability to get the job done. We all have strengths and weaknesses.

### **Patriotic Native American Warriors**

American Indians have participated with distinction in United States military actions for more than 200 years. Sadly, very little is known about the contributions of Native American women to the United States military.

Historians have only recently rediscovered and verified the actions of an Oneida woman, Tyonajanegen, an Oneida woman who fought on the side of the United States at the Battle of Oriskany, in New York, in 1777. A bloody, six hour enemy engagement, Tyonajanegen fought by her husband's side on horseback. When her husband became wounded in the wrist she continued to reload his gun so he might continue to fight. Tyonajanegen, also armed with a pistol, used her weapon against the enemy.



The story of Sacajawea, the Shoshone woman who kept the Lewis and Clark expedition of November 1804 is well known. She helped save the expedition several times from starvation, disaster and mis-direction thanks to her negotiating skills, knowledge in medicinal herbs and knowledge of the terrain. Much of what is common knowledge is romantic history,

however. Sacajawea is best remembered as a guide across the Northern Plains. Her people, the Lemhi Shoshone, or Snake People, spent much of the year traveling in small groups. From about 1700, the Shoshone had horses, probably pintos and Appaloosas acquired from the Nez Perce. In the fall of 1800, when Sacagawea was around 10 years old, her group was camped near the three forks of the Missouri River. Suddenly, a band of Hidatsa (also called Minataree) attacked. The Shoshone bows and arrows were useless against the Hidatsa's rifles. Sacagawea and others were captured and taken back to the Hidatsa villages near present-day Stanton, North Dakota.

In historical reality, she served as an interpreter for members of the intelligence gathering expedition. In command but they were unfamiliar with any Indian languages. "Bird Woman's" service is described in the journals kept by Army Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark during the Military expedition in preparation for the future 'manifest destiny' invasion.

In her book, Life among the Paiutes, Sarah Winnemucca, describes how the women of her tribe took part in war, giving, as an example, her sister-in-law.

“One splendid woman that my brother Lee married after his first wife died, went out into the battle-field after her uncle was killed, and went into the front ranks and cheered the men on. Her uncle’s horse was dressed in a splendid robe made of eagles’ feathers and she snatched it off and swung it in the face of the enemy, “... and she said she took her uncle’s place, as brave as any of the men.”

Minnie Hollow Wood, Sioux and is said to be at one time the only woman of her tribe so entitled to wear a Eagle feather bonnet. This came from taking part in combat against the U.S. Calvary at the Little Big Horn battle.



Minnie Hollow Wood and husband Hollow Wood, 1927 image

### **Arizona Oodham Military Service:**

From earliest European contact the Oodham have always been described as generous people. They sheltered the Pee Posh (or Maricopa Indians) who fled attack by hostile tribes, and who also became part of the Gila River community.



Anyone who followed west along the Gila River, the main southern route to the Pacific, encountered these peaceful and productive traders who gave hospitality to travelers for hundreds of years. "Bread is to eat, not to sell. Take what you want," they told Kit Carson in 1846.

One of the first accurate accounts of an Indian and American military alliance is recounted in the Pima calendar sticks which



relate that the Pima and Maricopa joined with white soldiers in a campaign against the Apaches under White Hat, in 1856 or 1857. As long as whites were just passing through, the protection (Pima and Maricopa) provided for their supply trains was sufficient. Pima and Maricopa fulfilled this need with regular punitive raids against the

Apaches several times a year, keeping them away from Pima lands but stopping short of attacking their enemies' mountain rancherías (village-camps). The Oodham warriors were there to defend the people when the US military left Arizona in 1861 to fight in the US civil war. The Oodham (Pima) were the only armed force to defend the peaceful settlements from the Apache raids in the Arizona territory.

In 1865 and 1866, Pima and Maricopa and Hispanic soldiers served in the first USA Arizona Volunteer Infantry. Arizona Governor Goodwin appointed Thomas Ewing, a teamster from the Pima Villages, to recruit Maricopa Indians, and former sergeant John D. Walker to recruit the Pima.

### **Apache Women Warriors:**

The most gifted and least known Indian woman warrior was Lozen, Warm Springs Apache, who fought with her famous brother Victorio. Lozen chose the path of a warrior – a choice respected by her people.

Lozen had the gift of discerning the location of the enemy and, it has been said, that if she had been with Victorio when his band was ambushed by the Mexican army he would not have been killed. One story that demonstrates her bravery tells of her crawling into a line of fire to get a bag of bullets desperately needed by the poorly armed Apaches. Lozen later joined Geronimo, who would eventually choose her as a messenger to arrange the meeting with the American military when he finally surrendered. Lozen was the other war woman who eventually rode with Geronimo and, with Dahteste, convinced him to surrender to the white military in 1886.

She was also taken to the prison in Florida, and later was transported to Mount Vernon Barracks in Alabama. Lozen died there, presumably of tuberculosis, at the approximate age of 50.

### **American Military Indian Scouts:**

Scouting the enemy was recognized as a particular skill of the Native American soldier. In 1866, the U.S. Army established its Indian Scouts to exploit this aptitude. The Apache Scouts were active in the American West in the late 1800s and early 1900s, accompanying Gen. John J. Pershing's expedition to Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa in 1916. They were deactivated in 1947 when their last member retired from the Army in ceremonies at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona.

Native Americans from Indian Territory were also recruited by Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and saw action in Cuba in the Spanish-American War in 1898. As the military entered the 20th century, American Indians had



already made a substantial contribution through military service and were on the brink of playing an even larger role.

During the Spanish American War, Miss Delia Randall, a young Carlisle school graduate, Indian woman from the Fort Hall Reservation, offered in 1898 to “go to the seat of war and care for the sick and wounded.” A somewhat dramatic statement but certainly, as a trained nurse, service was her calling.

Four Native American Catholic Sisters from Fort Berthold, South Dakota worked as nurses for the War Department during the Spanish American War (1898). Originally assigned to the military hospital at Jacksonville, Florida, the nurses were soon transferred to Havana, Cuba. One of the nurses, Sister Anthony died of disease in Cuba and was buried with military honors.

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

Fourteen Native American women served as members of the Army Nurse Corps during World War I, two of them overseas. Mrs. Cora E. Sinnard, a member of the Oneida Tribe and a graduate of the Episcopal School of Nursing in Philadelphia, served eighteen months in France with a hospital unit provided by the Episcopal Church.



Charlotte Edith (Anderson) Monture

Charlotte Edith (Anderson) Monture of the Iroquois Nation also served as an Army nurse in France. Charlotte was born in 1890 in Ohsweken, Ontario, Canada. In 1917, she left her job as an elementary school nurse to join the Army Nurse Corps. She later referred to her service in France at a military hospital as "the adventure of a lifetime." Charlotte passed away in 1996, at the age of 106.

The outbreak of World War II brought American Indians warriors back to the battlefield in defense of their homeland. Although now eligible for the draft by virtue of the Snyder Act, which gave citizenship to American Indians in 1924, conscription alone does not account for the disproportionate number of Indians who joined the armed services. More than 44,000 American Indians, out of a total Native American population of less than 350,000, served with distinction between 1941 and 1945 in both European and Pacific theaters of war. Native American men and women on the home front also showed an intense desire to serve their country, and were an integral part of the war effort. More than 40,000 Indian people left their reservations to work in ordnance depots, factories, and other war industries. American Indians also invested more than \$50 million in war bonds, and contributed generously to the Red Cross and the Army and Navy Relief societies.

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

### **Strength**

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

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

American Indian male and female soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen have fought heroically in all of this century's wars and armed conflicts. They have been formally recognized for their bravery through military documentation and decoration.

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

More important, however, is the warrior's spiritual strength. Many traditional cultures recognize that war disrupts the natural order of life and causes a

spiritual disharmony. To survive the chaos of war is to gain a more intimate knowledge of life. Therefore, military service is a unique way to develop an inner strength that is valued in Native American society.

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

### **Honor, Pride, Devotion**

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

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

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

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

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

a purpose in life and is an important step in gaining status in Native America culture.

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

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

## **Wisdom**

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

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

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



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

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

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

For Indian women of World War II patriotism and the desire to support their men was a common theme for many. Alvanita Lucero Romero, of the Taos Reservation, had three brothers who were Japanese POWs, as well as, a husband and another brother serving. This inspired her to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). Some, such as Grace Thorpe, daughter of famous Indian athlete Jim Thorpe, felt the lure of adventure and travel and joined the Woman's Army Corps. One young Klamath woman, thought, as a member of the WAAC she was "receiving a valuable addition to her education."

In World War II, nurses were routinely exposed to enemy fire. Marcella Ryan LeBeau, Cheyenne River Sioux, remembers the daily buzz bomb attacks of her hospital while in Belgium. In her own words she recalls the night a German pilot strafed the nurses living area:

"On Jan 5, 1945 the 76th was strafed by a German pilot with a 50 mm machine gun. I stood in the door way of my tent ward A-1 and watched him strafe the nurses area-stopping just before he reached the hospital area."

Nearly 800 Native American women served in the military during World War II. Elva (Tapedo) Wale, a Kiowa, left her Oklahoma reservation to join the Women's Army Corps. Private Tapedo became an



Elva (Tapedo) Wale

"Air WAC," and worked on Army Air Bases across the United States.

Corporal Bernice (Firstshoot) Bailey of Lodge Pole, Montana, joined the Women's Army Corps in 1945 and served until 1948. After the war, she was sent to Wiesbaden, Germany, as part of the Army of Occupation.



Beatrice (Coffey) Thayer

Beatrice (Coffey) Thayer also served in the Army of Occupation in Germany. Beatrice remembers being assigned to KP with German POWs, who were accompanied by armed guards. Beatrice was in Germany when the Berlin Wall went up, and remained in the Army until the 1970s.

Alida (Whipple) Fletcher joined the Army during World War II and trained as a medical specialist. She was assigned to the hospital at Camp Stoneman, California, which was an Army port of embarkation for the Pacific. Alida was on duty the night two ships loaded with explosives collided at a nearby ammunition dump, killing approximately 400 sailors and wounding many more. The wounded were brought to the hospital where Alida worked. She remembers that night as the most tragic of her life.



Alida (Whipple) Fletcher



First Lieutenant Julia (Nashanany) Reeves, a member of the Potawatomie Indian Tribe of Crandon, Wisconsin, joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1942, and was assigned to one of the first medical Units shipped to the Pacific. The 52nd Evacuation Hospital Unit was sent to New Caledonia before its members had received their Army uniforms. When the hospital ship Solace arrived at New Caledonia, Julia was assigned temporary duty aboard the ship. The following year, Julia was transferred to the 23rd Station Hospital in Norwich, England, where she was stationed during the invasion of Normandy. She remained in Norwich through V-J Day, returning shortly afterward to the United States. During the Korean War, Julia mobilized with the 804th Station Hospital.

Private Minnie Spotted-Wolf of Heart Butte, Montana, enlisted in the Marine Corps Women's Reserve in July 1943. She was the first female American Indian to enroll in the Corps. Minnie had worked on her father's ranch doing such chores as cutting fence posts, driving a two-ton truck, and breaking horses. Her comment on Marine boot camp "Hard but not too hard."

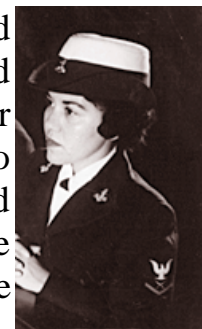


Ola Mildred Rexroat

Ola Mildred Rexroat, an Oglala Sioux from Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, joined the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) directly out of high school. Her job was to tow targets for aerial gunnery students at Eagle Pass Army Air Base in Texas. Towing targets for student gunners was a fairly dangerous assignment, but "Rexy" was happy to be able to contribute to the war effort in a meaningful way. After the war ended, Ola joined the Air Force and served for almost ten years.

During the 1950s and 1960s, fewer women felt the call to military service. The services, however, were in desperate need of womanpower during the Korean conflict and the Vietnam War, and conducted extensive recruitment campaigns aimed at young women. Many Native American women answered their country's call. Sarah Mae Peshlakai, a member of the Navajo Tribe from Crystal, New Mexico, enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in 1951 and served until 1957. Peshlakai trained as a medical specialist and was assigned to Yokohama Army Hospital in Japan, where she helped care for casualties from the Korean battlefields.

Verna Fender entered the Navy during the Korean Conflict and trained at Bainbridge, Maryland. She was severely injured during basic training and was sent to a Navy hospital for physical rehabilitation. Undeterred, Verna returned to Bainbridge and completed her training. The Navy assigned Verna to its base in San Diego, California, where she completed her 3-year term of enlistment, working in the departments of berthing and sectioning, supply, and ordnance.



Verna Fender

Shirley M. Arviso, a Navajo of the Bitter Water Clan, served in the Navy from 1953 through 1963. She was the Communications Officer in charge of a group of people who decrypted classified messages.

Shirley Apple Murphy, Pine Ridge Lakota, served in the US Navy during the Korean conflict. (More details to follow.)



Pearl Ross, a member of the Arikara Tribe from the Fort Berthold Reservation, joined the Air Force in 1953, and trained as a medical specialist. Her first assignment was to the Air Force hospital in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Pearl was then assigned to Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska, where she worked in the 865th Medical Group at SAC HQ. During the Vietnam era, she saw many men who had been wounded in the combat theater.

Pearl volunteered for overseas duty, but was turned down because the Air Force was hesitant to send women to Vietnam.

Barbara Monteiro joined the WAC in 1963 and took her basic and secretarial training at Ft. McClellan, Alabama. Her first duty assignment was to Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, where she worked for three years in the travel office and motor pool in support of troop readiness during the Vietnam War. In 1966, Monteiro was assigned to Ft. Richardson, Alaska, where she served as an administration specialist at the Education Center for a year.

Lance Corporal Valla Dee Jack Egge of Dougherty, Oklahoma, served in the U.S. Marine Corps in the early 1960s as the executive secretary to two commanding generals of the Parris Island Marine Corps Base, South Carolina.

Increasing numbers of women, including Native Americans, entered the military in the 1970s and 1980s. Patricia White Bear joined the Navy in 1981. She trained as an instrument man and served at sea repairing, adjusting and calibrating the wide variety of mechanical measuring instruments used aboard ships. Dolores Kathleen Smith, a Cherokee, graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1982. She completed navigator training and was assigned to a KC-135 unit. She served in the operational plans division of her unit and also as an instructor before retiring as a captain from the Air Force in 1990.

Darlene Yellowcloud of the Lakota Tribe was inspired to join the Army because so many of the men in her family had served. Her grandfather, Bear Saves Life, was killed in action in France during World War I. Her father, brothers, brothers-



in-law, uncles and cousins were all veterans. Darlene was assigned to the U. S. Army in Korea as a Specialist 4th Class.

As of 1980, at least sixty Native American women were serving in the Eskimo Scouts, a special unit of the Alaska National Guard. The Eskimo Scouts patrol the western coastline of Alaska and the islands separating Alaska and Russia. The Scouts are the only members of the National Guard who have a continuous active duty mission. This unit was organized during World War II, and the wives of scout battalion members have always been involved in patrol missions. Women were admitted as official members in 1976, and only then began to receive pay, benefits and recognition for their work. Scouts currently patrol ice flows in the Bering Straits, monitor movements on the tundra, and perform Arctic search and rescue efforts as required.

Native American women lost their lives in the service of their nation. Katherine Matthews of Cherokee, North Carolina, joined the Navy in the late 1970s and trained as an Aviation Machinist's Mate. She died while serving in California in 1985. Terri Ann Hagen, a former Army medic, was a member of the Army National Guard when she was killed fighting a fire on Storm King Mountain in Colorado in 1994.



Army Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa, 23, of the Hopi Nation was a member of 507th Maintenance Company from Fort Bliss and was ambushed near Nasiriyah, Iraq, on March 23, 2003. Lynch, Johnson and others were taken prisoner. Nine Soldiers, including Piestewa, were killed in action. She was posthumously promoted to Spc. 4 Lori Piestewa.



As of 1994, 1,509 Native American women and Native Alaskan women were serving in the military forces of the United States. Thousands more have served in the military over time.

Native American contributions in United States military combat continued in the 1980s and 1990s as they saw duty in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf.



## Resources:

- [Alaska Natives in the Military - The Alaska Territorial Guard](#) *Added 11/9/01; updated 9/18/05*
- [American & Canadian Indians In The Military](#) *Added 10/1/99*
- [Code Talkers](#) *Added 4/4/00; updated 4/17/04*
- [Indians in the War](#) - full-text PDF of a government publication written in 1945, from Southern Methodist University Library. *Added 3/30/03*
- **NEW** [National Native American Veterans Association](#) *Added 9/18/05*
- [National Native American Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#) *Added 7/23/99; updated 4/17/04*
- [Native American Affairs and the Department of Defense](#) - abstract of a Rand report *Added 5/1/98*
- [Native American Heritage Month](#) - a web page from 2001 from the Department of Defense, celebrating Native soldiers. *Added 11/1/04*
- [Native American Vietnam Veterans](#) *Added 7/23/99; updated 4/17/04*
- [Native American Women with Military Service](#) *Added 3/30/03; updated 9/18/05*
- [Native American Women Veterans](#) *Added 11/1/04*
- [Native Americans in the Spanish American War](#) *Added 3/27/05*
- [Native Soldiers](#) - info on First Nations soldiers from Veterans Affairs Canada. *Added 11/9/01*
- [North American Iroquois Veterans Association - NAIVA](#). *Added 4/7/00; updated 9/1/08*
- [Support Our Troops](#) - contact information for Native soldiers from the American Indian Chamber of Commerce of Oklahoma. *Added 3/30/03; updated 9/18/05*
- [20th Century Warriors: Native American Participation in the United States Military](#) *Added 10/1/99*
- [Windtalkers - The Story Behind the Movie](#) *Added 3/30/03*

## Related Resources

- [American Indian Medal of Honor Recipients](#)
- [Photo Section Images](#)
- [Indians in the War \[World War II\]](#)
- [Navajo Code Talkers in World War II: A Bibliography](#)
- [Navajo Code Talker Fact Sheet](#)
- [Navajo Code Talker Dictionary](#)