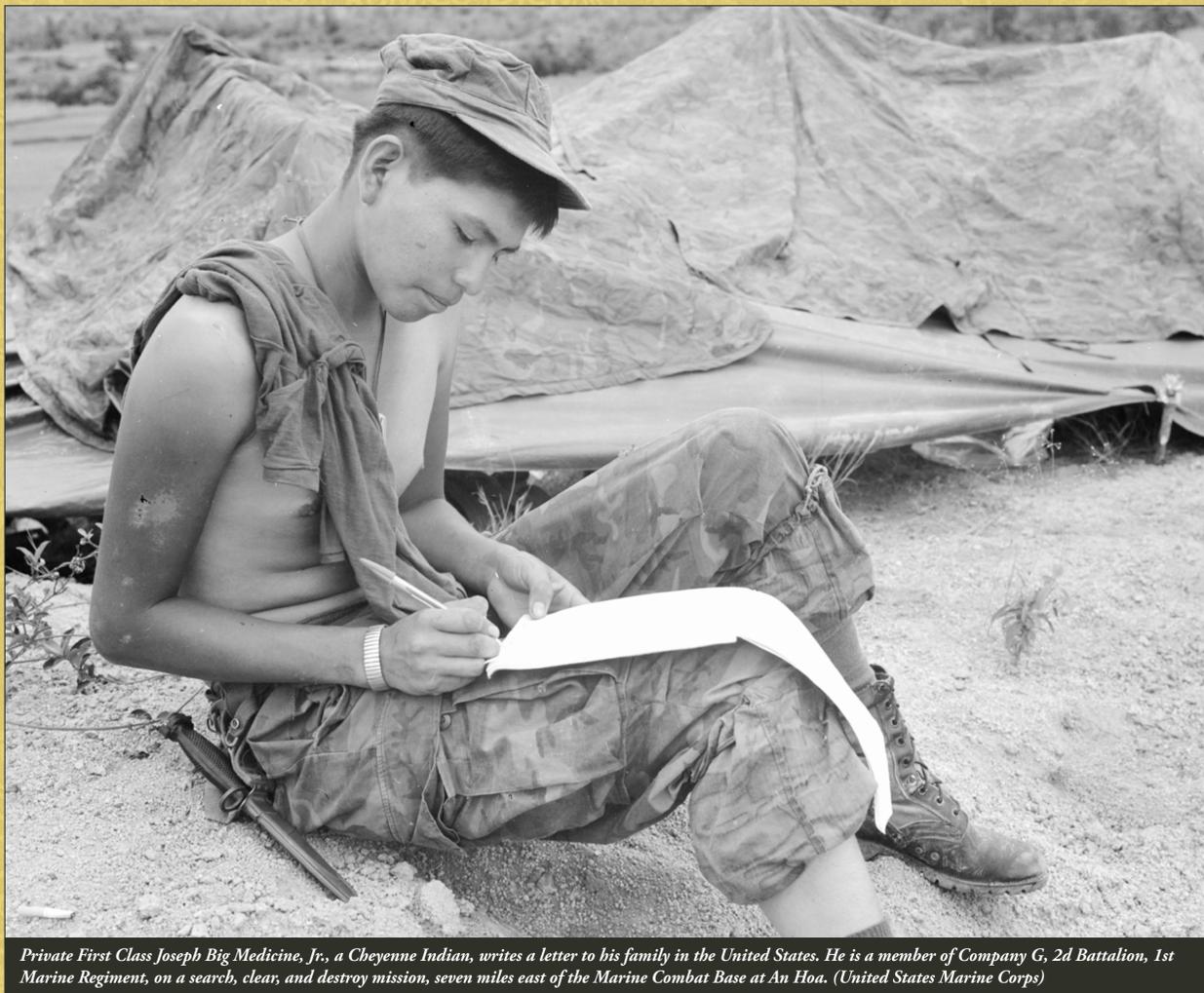




NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

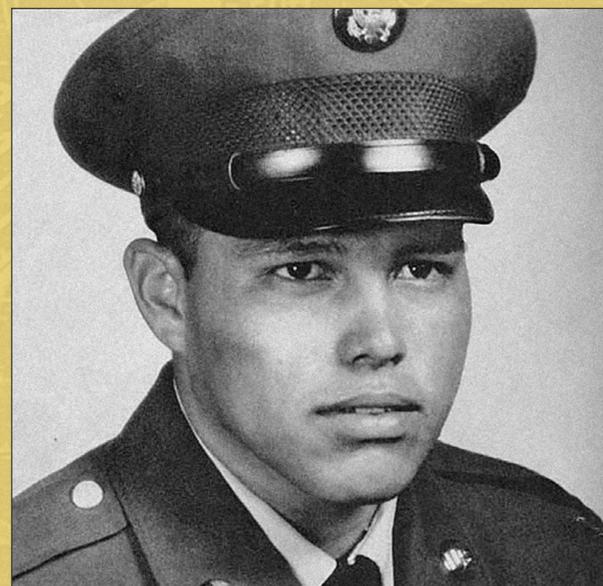
PART 1 OF 2



Private First Class Joseph Big Medicine, Jr., a Cheyenne Indian, writes a letter to his family in the United States. He is a member of Company G, 2d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, on a search, clear, and destroy mission, seven miles east of the Marine Combat Base at An Hoa. (United States Marine Corps)



"God is with the point man" reads the markings on Lance Corporal Franklin "Chief" Jackson's flak jacket. Racial stereotypes in American society sometimes led to the notion that Native Americans were natural warriors. Some Native servicepeople embraced this image and volunteered to "walk point." (United States Marine Corps)



Billy Walkabout, a Cherokee of the Blue Holly Clan (Anisahoni), served in Vietnam as an Army Ranger in 5th Company, 58th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. In November 1968, Walkabout's long-range reconnaissance patrol was ambushed southwest of Hue. For his heroic actions returning fire and securing a landing zone for helicopters to medevac the wounded, Walkabout received the Distinguished Service Cross (Upgraded from a Silver Star). Walkabout is believed to be the most decorated Native American in the Vietnam War. He perished at the age of 57 due to multiple health problems resulting from exposure to Agent Orange. His body lies in Arlington National Cemetery. (National Archives)

Native Americans served valiantly in the Vietnam War as they have in all of the United States' conflicts.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Department of Defense did not keep records on the numbers of Native Americans who served in the armed forces, but scholars estimate that as many as 42,000 Native Americans served in the Vietnam War. Unrecognized by the Department of Defense or service branches, these Native American servicepeople were sometimes mislabeled as whites, Latinos, or even Mongolians. Although exact numbers are impossible to verify, some studies find that Native Americans were more likely to serve in combat units. One assessment of 170 Native Vietnam veterans found that 41.8 percent of those surveyed served in infantry units while nearly another quarter served in airborne or artillery units. Several sources insist that 232 Native Americans died in the Vietnam War and are listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

Motives for Service

Native Americans enlisted or accepted induction into the military during the Vietnam War for a variety of reasons. Patriotism and concern for democracy's survival in the Cold War surely inspired many Native Americans in the same ways that these motivations affected members of all races and ethnicities in the United States. Other sources of inspiration may have been more specific to Native communities' traditions and cultures. Historically, in Native societies, most men share the collective responsibility of protecting the tribe or community from outside aggression. Native American beliefs commonly insist that military service and the experience of combat steels young men, transforming them into future leaders. Proximity to danger, violence, and death, these traditional views maintain, implants wisdom, acumen, and respect in those who pass the test of combat. Furthermore, in some Native communities, traditional practices require that men demonstrate martial and religious prowess to be considered full-fledged members of the nation. During the Vietnam War, young Native Americans surely heard stories of their fathers' and grandfathers' service in the world wars and Korea, and they viewed the conflict in Southeast Asia as their opportunity to demonstrate prowess and to earn the esteem of their elders and peers. Moreover, some Native societies traditionally afforded young, unmarried men little social prestige within the tribal community. For young men in these

environments, military service offered an opportunity to escape the hometown and return an independent and mature member of the tribe or community. Additionally, some Native Americans may have enlisted or accepted induction because they believed they owed service to the United States as a result of treaties that their nations had concluded with the Federal Government in the past. These individuals likely acknowledged that the United States repeatedly broke its treaty promises with Indian nations, but members of these nations may have remained committed to uphold the alliances their ancestors had made with the United States. Lastly, there surely were some Native Americans who volunteered for military service during the Vietnam War in order to escape poverty and the lack of opportunities in the cities, small towns, and Indian Reservations where they lived.

"Indian Scout Syndrome"

In Vietnam, Native American servicepeople faced racist attitudes held by non-Native officers and enlisted men. Some scholars have labeled this prejudice "Indian Scout Syndrome." This racist caricature, which existed long before the Vietnam War, assumed that Native Americans possessed superior senses and an instinctive understanding of nature. Therefore, all Indians were natural scouts, trackers, or snipers. This stereotype sometimes led to higher numbers of Native Americans being assigned to the most dangerous duties in combat units, such as having to "walk point" or go on reconnaissance patrols. Some Native Americans embraced this warrior image and volunteered for the most dangerous missions. Sergeant Billy Walkabout, a Cherokee from Oklahoma who served as an Army Ranger with the 101st Airborne Division, was the most decorated Native American serviceman in the Vietnam War. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for heroic combat actions outside of Hue in November 1968. Although numerous Native Americans such as Walkabout took pride in the warrior ethos, it is likely that many Native Americans fell victim to a different type of discrimination. Accounts from Vietnam reveal that some officers assigned Native Americans to the most mundane and menial tasks as a result of stereotypes that regarded Indians as untrustworthy, lazy, or stupid.

Anxieties prompted by cultural and racial differences between the Americans and Vietnamese even found their way into the Vietnam-era parlance used by servicepeople. Firebases were colloquially known as "Fort Apaches," and former Communists who chose to collaborate with the South Vietnamese or Americans were "Kit Carson Scouts." The phrase "Indian Country" referred to remote areas in the Vietnamese jungles and mountains infested with the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese. Patrols in "Indian Country" likely meant ambushes and booby traps, and, since these encounters happened far from urban areas, media reporters, and high-ranking officers, the normal rules of engagement sometimes were believed to be suspended. In one study, some Native American veterans expressed dismay that atrocities they had witnessed in Vietnam's "Indian Country" mirrored crimes the United States government had committed against their own people. To some observers, the war in Southeast Asia resembled a foreign invasion in which outside militaries targeted civilians, stole land, and resettled survivors in refugee camps. Meanwhile, some Native servicepeople expressed sympathy for indigenous Montagnard peoples, who wished to maintain their independence, practice their traditional lifestyles, and remain outside of the conflict.

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NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 2 OF 2



Vietnam Air Force Medical Corps Veteran, Roger Williams, carries the United States Air Force flag during a parade to celebrate the grand opening of the National Museum of the American Indian on September 21, 2004, in Washington, D.C. (United States Air Force)



The National Native American Vietnam Veterans Memorial stands in The Highground Veterans Memorial Park in Neillsville, Wisconsin. The Congress of Native American Indians gave approval for the design of the memorial in 1994. Harry Whitehorse of Madison, Wisconsin, a World War II veteran, designed the sculpture, which features a Native soldier in Vietnam-era fatigues holding a rifle and eagle staff. The names, ranks, homes of record, and dates of casualties of all known Native Vietnam dead are recorded on four black granite panels surrounding the memorial's statue (The Highground Veterans Memorial Park).

Native veterans from all recent wars including Vietnam display national, tribal, and service flags at the opening inauguration of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, in 2004. Native Vietnam veterans became involved in political and cultural movements of every size and stature following their service in the armed forces. Some entered radical politics, such as the Red Power movement of the 1970s, but many more served on tribal councils and sought engagement in schools and universities, religious groups, and Native cultural centers. (National Archives)

Native American cultures often practice traditional martial rituals for warriors before they depart for war and when they return from combat.

Cultural Attitudes and Practices in War

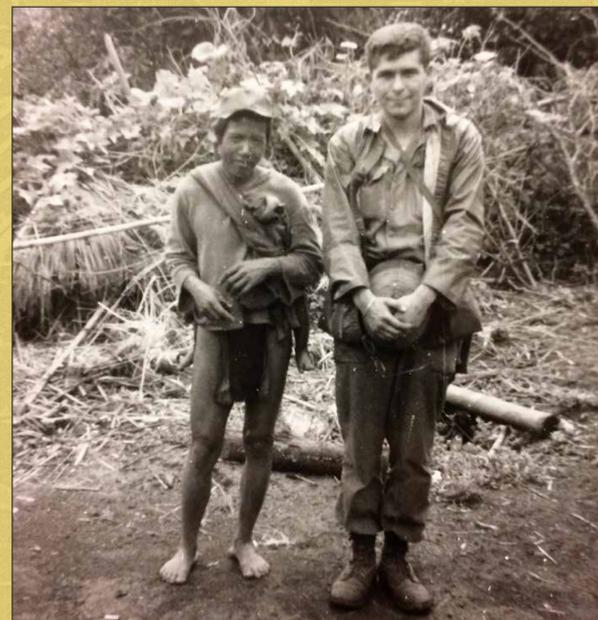
Native American societies often practice traditional martial rituals for warriors before they depart for war and when they return from combat. These practices existed long before the 1960s—there are accounts of similar rituals during World Wars I and II—but Native Americans continued these traditions during and after the Vietnam War. Numerous nations require veterans to perform specific ceremonial and religious functions at powwows and tribal gatherings. In many cases, older males count coup, or recount stories of martial prowess to reinforce tribal solidarity, language, history, and identification with the homeland. Other ceremonies mark the transition from war to peace and vice versa. The Navajo, for example, have been known to perform a dance ceremony called the “Enemy Way” for members of the tribe on their departure and return from war. This ceremony reenacts a traditional story as a means for suspending the rules prohibiting violence before the warrior departs, and it restores the rules of peacetime upon the warrior’s return. Navajos and Cherokees employ similar ceremonies intended to exorcise the

demons of war from those reentering the peaceful community. In other nations, medicine men or shamans perform rituals to help individuals heal the scars of combat or protect loved ones at the front. Elders and parents often provide gifts and tobacco, and say prayers to ensure protective medicine watches over warriors when they are away. Although servicepeople in the Vietnam War departed and returned at different times, evidence suggests that Native American communities continued to employ traditional ceremonies throughout this era. The practice of certain rites and traditions may have become more widespread after the war as a result of the hardships suffered by Native servicepeople in Vietnam.

Coming Home and Recovery

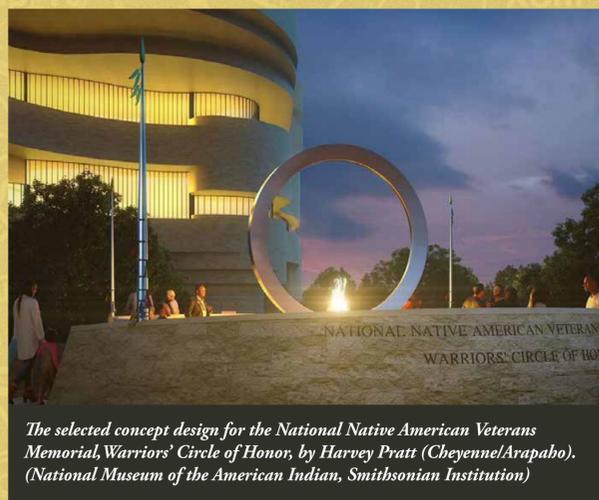
Several studies have found that Native Americans suffered from the physical and psychological traumas of combat at higher rates than other servicemembers following the Vietnam War. Poor employment prospects on reservations and in rural areas combined with inadequate access to medical and psychological care exacerbated the problems many Native veterans faced. A widespread reluctance to speak with outsiders or admit to shameful behavior or conduct encouraged some Native American veterans to forego programs designed to help them cope with the traumas of combat. Several sources indicate that alcoholism and substance abuse among Native American Vietnam veterans was widespread, especially during the first two decades following the conflict. The United States government failed to devote special attention to the plight of Native veterans until the 1980s.

Despite these difficulties, the Vietnam War inspired many Native American veterans to reconnect with their cultures and reinvigorate their communities. The war and emergence of social justice movements politicized Native veterans in new ways, and many veterans became active in tribal governments and cultural associations. During the decades following World War II, the Federal Government slowly eliminated many aspects of tribal sovereignty during a process named Termination. The goal of Termination was to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society by breaking up the reservations. Native Americans resisted these infringements on their rights by



Some Native servicepeople expressed sympathy for indigenous Montagnard peoples, who wished to maintain their independence, practice their traditional cultures, and remain outside of the Vietnam War. Army veteran Warren Gobl is here pictured with a Montagnard. Some Native servicepeople saw parallels between the Communists’ and South Vietnamese treatment of the Montagnards and the histories of their own nations’ relationships with the United States government. (Warren Gobl)

strengthening tribal governments, protesting injustice, battling these policies in courts, and restoring tribal customs, languages, and education. Historians have labeled this period of Native activism the Red Power movement. Many Native activists who took part in the 1970s Red Power movement were Vietnam veterans, including a large number of the American Indian Movement (AIM) protestors who organized the Wounded Knee standoff against federal law enforcement agencies in 1973. This violent occupation and standoff resulted in a 71-day siege and the death of two protestors. Most Native Vietnam veterans, however, affected positive change through peaceful methods. They took on prominent roles in tribal councils on the reservations or became participants in cultural or social justice organizations in towns and cities. Some of the most prominent of these voluntary associations are known as warrior societies, which were established by many nations and tribes throughout the United States and even in Canada during the 1970s and 1980s. In many nations, such as the Kiowa, Comanche, Lakota, Chippewa, and Cheyenne, certain tribal functions can only be performed by veterans. Vietnam veterans have fulfilled and continue to serve in these leadership roles in the present day.



The selected concept design for the National Native American Veterans Memorial, Warriors’ Circle of Honor, by Harvey Pratt (Cheyenne/Arapaho). (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution)