Way of the Warrior

A documentary by Patty Loew, produced with Wisconsin Public Television, looks at the culture and contradictions of Native Americans serving in the U.S. armed forces. It will be broadcast on WPT and nationally on PBS in November.

INTERVIEW BY JOAN FISCHER

Throughout the Wars of the 20th Century, Native American men and women served in the U.S. military in numbers that far exceeded their proportion in the general population.

Considering how the U.S. government has treated Native Americans, this phenomenon begs exploration. Why would Native men and women lay down their lives for a nation that consistently has served them so poorly?

“Way of the Warrior,” a new documentary by UW–Madison communication professor and veteran broadcast journalist Patty Loew, uses personal stories of heroes and soldiers to try to answer that question. These stories from World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam...
weave a rich tapestry of positive and negative themes—the warrior ethic, prejudice and stereotypes, forced assimilation, poverty, cultural pride, redemptive acts, and healing.

Loew, who is a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, uses historical footage, period photographs, Native music, personal diaries, and interviews to reveal what it means to be “ogichidaa”—one who protects and follows the way of the warrior.

What drew you to this topic?

Patty Loew: My grandfather was one of 12,000 Native Americans who volunteered for World War I. I imagined him taking the oath to defend the U.S. Constitution and found it ironic—given that he, like many Native Americans at the time, were not citizens and had no protections under the Constitution. Also, I’ve spent quite a bit of time in Native communities at powwows and ceremonies. Veterans enjoy a really exalted status. Warriors are revered. Tribes have extraordinarily high enlistment rates. To me, the high enlistment rates didn’t seem to be as much about poverty or lack of opportunity as with other minority communities. There was a deeper cultural meaning. I wanted to explore that.

How do the veterans you interviewed deal with the irony of risking their lives for a nation that often has treated them so poorly?

Yes, this wasn’t lost on them—especially the Korean War vets who came home after the war and went to bad “B” Westerns where they saw the very military they had fought and risked their lives for turning the Gatling guns on their own Native people. Can you imagine what they must have felt? But many told me that they didn’t feel they were risking their lives for the United States as much as they felt they were defending their own people, their own communities.

How important was the cause of any particular war in motivating Native men and women to sign on? Did this vary significantly depending on which war?

I didn’t get the sense that it was the “cause” in the context that most mainstream Americans view war. Many Native men—and women, because a surprising number of Native women became WACS and WAVES or worked in defense industries—enlisted because of clan obligations (clans like the Bear Clan among the Anishinaabe, for example, are “warrior” clans, and military service is culturally consistent with those clan obligations) or because of family traditions that went back to the Civil War in some cases.

One vet told me that he enlisted because in 1827 his tribe had signed a “peace and friendship” treaty with the U.S. and promised to come to the military assistance of the U.S. should it ever be needed. Even though he said the U.S. had broken every promise made to his people, his tribe was still honoring the treaty they signed. I had to pick my jaw up off the ground after hearing that one!

Given their often impoverished socioeconomic status, was the motive for many Native Americans to sign on the opportunity for advancement (in education, job skills, health and retirement benefits, etc.) rather than actually fighting?

It’s so complicated and layered. Some were motivated by economic necessity. Others, like mainstream men and women, were looking for adventure. Still others enlisted out of a sense
of patriotism. But there were other uniquely cultural reasons (clan obligations, family traditions, treaty obligations, and so on). It varied from tribe to tribe and from war to war.

In World War I, for example, many young Native men were in Indian boarding schools, which were very militaristic. Boys and girls marched to their dormitories, to the dining halls, to their classes. Little boys drilled in cadet uniforms with wooden rifles every morning. It was like “being a POW,” as one interviewee told me. These children were already being treated as little soldiers. As Tom Britten, author of *American Indians and World War I*, told me, “It was a seamless transition from military school, to training camps, to the front lines.”

I can say the majority of Native men did not enlist for the benefits. Of all racial and ethnic groups, Native Americans are the least likely to seek veterans benefits. It’s actually quite a problem for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“*Warrior*” sounds like such an inherently male term. What has the role of women been in Native American warfare, and how is it different in the context of the U.S. armed forces? Do Native women express appreciation for the opportunity to “do battle?”

Native women have a long history of being warriors. During the American Revolutionary War, an Oneida woman by the name of Dolly Cobar picked up her husband’s musket after he fell at the Battle of Oriskany and took his place. Since my documentary examined the relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. military, I did not research the role of women in Native American warfare. I can say that the women World War II veterans I spoke to talked about how they felt their service was a way to help defend their communities and support the male members of their nation who were serving.

My mother, Alice DeNomie Loew, worked for the Perfex Corporation in Milwaukee, a company that manufactured the Norden Bombsight. She left the Layton School of Art, where she was studying to become a dress designer, and turned her talents toward designing torpedo beds and working on the NBS. Here’s an excerpt of her interview:

> “Oh yeah, because my brothers were in service and I felt that I was working toward protecting them. What little I was doing I was trying to do the best I knew how. And it was imperative that I make everything match these specifications ... little alterations in the blueprints from one to another, I made sure that it came out exactly right. I hadn’t met my husband yet, but my older brother was in the Air Force. My brother-in-law was in the Air Force and people I knew that were going in to serve, so I felt that I was doing my part.”

How have the U.S. armed forces treated and valued their Native members? Are they regarded as particularly good members of the military, and for what reasons? Finally, have they tended to serve in units of their own or are they dispersed among troops of all different ethnic backgrounds?

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**Walking Point**

With his asshole puckered up tight,
The Marine was walking light, He was hunting men, Who were hunting him.

His rifle was in perfect order, He wasn’t, fear, fear of not feeling fear, The heat, mud, and mosquitoes All added his brain housing group As he walked and thought along

Thou shalt not kill, That stuff didn’t work here. God must have stayed back In the real world.

Is any of this real? Is this a green nightmare I’m going to wake up from?

He sang to himself as his sense Gathered evidence of continued existence

His eyes saw, his ears heard His heart felt a numb nothing, His mind analyzed it all As he studied the trail

He amused himself as we walked along The old story about bullets, Ha. Don’t sweat the one that’s got your name on it, Worry about the one addressed: To Whom It May Concern.

On another level his mind churned with Rifle, M-14, Caliber 7.62 mm, a gas operated, Magazine fed, air cooled, semi-automatic Shoulder weapon. Weight—12 pounds with 20 rounds Sustained Rate of Fire—30 rounds per minute Effective Range—460 meters

Or, Hand Grenade, M-26, And so on and on and on.

Movement! Something is moving up there! Drop to the mud, rifle pointing at the unknown, Looks like two of them, hunting him. They have rifles but he saw them first. The Marine Corps takes over, Breathe, Relax, Aim, Slack, Squeeze.

The shooting is over in five seconds, the shakes are over in a half hour, the memories are over, never.

*by Jim Northrup*
It’s so difficult to answer this question. Native Americans disproportionately serve in the most dangerous positions—walking point, doing long-range reconnaissance, parachuting in behind enemy lines—what Tom Holm, author of *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, has described as the “Indian scout syndrome.”

It’s based on stereotypes, sometimes imposed by white commanders, but often assumed by Native soldiers themselves, that somehow Indians are superior trackers and fighters—so-called “super warriors.” They can see in the dark, have an innate sense of direction, can tell volumes from a single bent blade of grass. It’s been around a long time—probably since European encounter and reinforced by popular fiction (for example, James Fennimore’s *Leatherstockings*).

Stereotypes have deadly consequences. If you’re a military commander and you need soldiers for an impossible mission—scaling cliffs at Omaha Beach to take out German artillery in advance of the D-Day invasion—who are you going to send? Super warriors, of course.

In World War I, Native Americans had a casualty rate five times higher than the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) as a whole. In Vietnam, Native soldiers were far more likely to see “moderate” to “heavy” combat than non-Natives, according to Holm’s research findings.

Regarding your other question, because of the U.S. government’s assimilation policies regarding Indians, Native soldiers, unlike African Americans, fought in integrated units. There were some divisions—the 32nd and the 36th—that contained infantry units mustered out of boarding school locales. My grandfather served in the 128th, 32nd Division, which had a large number of Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Oneida, Menominee, and Potawatomi soldiers. The 36th, formed in large part by National Guard troops in Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico, was disproportionately Native. Perhaps the most famous unit, the 45th—also known as the Thunderbirds—was almost all Native. It was one of the most highly decorated units of World War II, with five Native Americans receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor.

### Can you recount one or two particularly noteworthy interviews or anecdotes concerning your subjects? What moved you or inspired you about them, and why?

Journalist Jim Northrup, a former Vietnam combat marine (3rd Battalion, 9th Marines), was perhaps the most memorable interview. Northrup, an Anishinaabe from the Fond du Lac Reservation in Minnesota, talked candidly about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how writing poetry helped him deal with his PTSD. I can share one of his poems. [Note: See “Walking Point,” page 39.]

One of the most revealing aspects of the interview was Northrup’s realization of the similarities between themselves and the indigenous people of Vietnam they were fighting. Here’s an excerpt:

**Q:** Holm writes about how Native men came back with a sense of themselves in a more global context. They began making intellectual connections between their own lives and indigenous people around the world.

Northrup: “I made the connection much earlier than that. Cuz I traveled around different countries and people would look at me and touch my skin and say ‘same same’ or point to my eyes and ‘same same’ or what little bit of hair I had and say ‘same same.’ This happened in Puerto Rico, it happened in Panama, it happened in Okinawa, it happened in Japan, it happened in Hong Kong, it happened in the Philippines. It happened in Vietnam. Everywhere I went people thought I was one of them and start speaking the language like I was a native. I’d laugh at them and start speaking a few words in Ojibwe and we’d start from here.”

**Q:** How did you process that?

Northrup: “As we’re going through some of the villages, I could see that someone had spent a lot of time making the baskets that they use to process rice, much like the way we do at home, the way we winnow the rice, and I could see that someone had spent a lot of time and we’d just go through and trash it or burn it. We were there as Marines. We were there to kill people and that’s what we did … Our motto
was, if it moved, shoot it. If it doesn’t, burn it ... it’s what we did. We were the bayonet end of America’s foreign policy and we killed and got killed.”

My sense is that quite a few Native men who enlisted during the Vietnam War had expectations that things would change when they got home—that their sacrifice would somehow mean something for their communities. When they came home and nothing changed, they got angry and got political. And their communities pushed them to become spokesmen. They had experienced the outside world. They knew the way things worked, so who better to delegate those responsibilities to? It’s no coincidence that the leaders of the American Indian Movement and Red Power (Civil Rights) were veterans.

Please describe one or two important things you learned from this project.

The most important thing I learned—a concept I find myself thinking a lot about lately—is that nearly every Native community with which I am familiar has a protocol for reintegrating returning vets back into the community. In the American mainstream, the military does a good job of providing soldiers the basic training they need to become killing machines. But it doesn’t do much to help transform soldiers who experience the horrors of battle into individuals of peace. Every Native community I visited had ceremonies to purify its returning warriors: sweat lodge ceremonies, debriefing protocols with clan mothers. The Hopi ritually wash the hair of returning veterans and give them new names. There is a realization in Indian Country that the community has an obligation to its returning vets ... not just for the mental, emotional, and spiritual benefit of the individual soldier, but also to protect the community.

These men (and now women too) have witnessed unspeakable things. They bring back a kind of poison that if not purged threatens to poison the entire community. I think about that every time I read about some former Marine climbing a clock tower in Texas or hiding behind a grassy knoll waiting for a presidential motorcade to pass by. I think about this as I see tens of thousands of American GIs returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and wonder what psychological demons they’ll be facing and what personal wars they’ll continue to fight. According to Holm’s research, Native vets who return to communities with reintegration ceremonies face far fewer episodes of PTSD and have much milder symptoms. I believe that the American military can learn quite a bit from Native communities in this respect.

Military portrait of Cpl. Mitchell Red Cloud, a Ho-Chunk Medal of Honor recipient (posthumous) who sacrificed himself to give his company time to retreat from a Chinese offensive during the Korean War.

National Archives photo
Can you give us an idea of the breadth of this documentary? How many people did you talk to, and did you include Natives from states other than Wisconsin? What was your overarching goal with this project?

We traveled to four states (Oklahoma, Arizona, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) and gathered stories from half a dozen distinctly different Native communities (Bad River Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Muscogee Creek, Fond du Lac Anishinaabe, and Hopi). I interviewed several dozen veterans, an equal number of family members, dozens of scholars, and veterans advocates. My goal was to explain the contributions of Native Americans to the U.S. military, the consequences of Indian stereotypes, and, most important, the cultural meaning of being a warrior in Native communities.

Is there anything you’d like to add to this? Please feel free to tell us more.

I never intended to get genealogical in this documentary, but it was almost as if my late grandfather had a hand on my shoulder during this project. In searching for historic film of World War I at the Wisconsin Historical Society, I came across a rare 1916 National Guard training film shot at Camp Douglas. It included my grandfather’s unit, shot the very month he trained at Camp Douglas!

Then a relative found a roll of undeveloped film in my grandfather’s trunk. I developed it and discovered that it was film my grandfather shot of his unit during the Mexican Border Wars in Waco, Texas, as National Guard troops were chasing Pancho Villa.

Finally, last year at Indian Summerfest in Milwaukee, a cousin gave me an envelope she thought I might find useful. Inside—my grandfather’s diary penned from France during World War I. I learned that he had fought in all six campaigns in which the AEF was involved, including Soisson, Chateau Thiery, and Meuse-Argonne. I also had two audiotaped interviews of my grandfather conducted by my mother, brother, and cousin.

I realized that there was probably no better-documented Native doughboy in the country and I had to tell his story.

One other unusual find—my graduate assistant went to the National Archives with a list of film we needed to tell the individual stories of Native soldiers I had researched. I asked her to bring back film of the 32nd Division and the 128th Infantry in particular. She brought back a roll shot by the Signal Corps—the only roll of the 128th—that was 11 minutes long. Nine of those minutes were wide shots of the troops parading in front of “Black Jack” Pershing, who commanded the troops. But there were two minutes of the troops at rest, playing football and baseball. Of those two minutes, there were only two close-up shots where a soldier could be identified: a pitcher throwing the ball and a batter hitting it and racing to first. My grandfather was that batter.

What are the odds? It wasn’t so much spooky as it was compelling. I believe my grandfather really wanted his story told!

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PBS has scheduled “Way of the Warrior” to air November 1 at 9 p.m. central time. PBS affiliates may choose to show it at another time that month. Stay tuned to Wisconsin Public Television or visit www.wpt.org to confirm broadcast time in Wisconsin. The documentary will be available on DVD through VisionMaker Video, a service of Native American Public Telecommunications.

Patty Loew is an associate professor in the department of life sciences communication at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She also hosts and produces documentary segments for Wisconsin Public Television’s In Wisconsin, a statewide news and public affairs show. An enrolled member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, Loew has produced more than a dozen award-winning documentaries on Native American topics, including “Spring of Discontent,” which aired regionally on ABC affiliates, and “Nation Within a Nation,” which aired nationally on PBS. Her book Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2001) won an Outstanding Achievement recognition from the Wisconsin Library Association, and she later published a children’s version of that work (Native People of Wisconsin). Currently she is writing One Sky Two Views with space scientist Sanjay Limaye, a book for middle schoolers that integrates Native star stories with Western astronomy. Loew received her Ph.D. from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and holds honorary degrees from Northland College and Edgewood College.

Related story: Historian Kerry Trask reflects upon the meaning of the Black Hawk War starting on page 20.