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Heraldry of the Plains

Bonnie Lynn-Sherow

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FOLIO IV HERALDRY OF THE PLAINS

Bonnie Lynn-Sherow

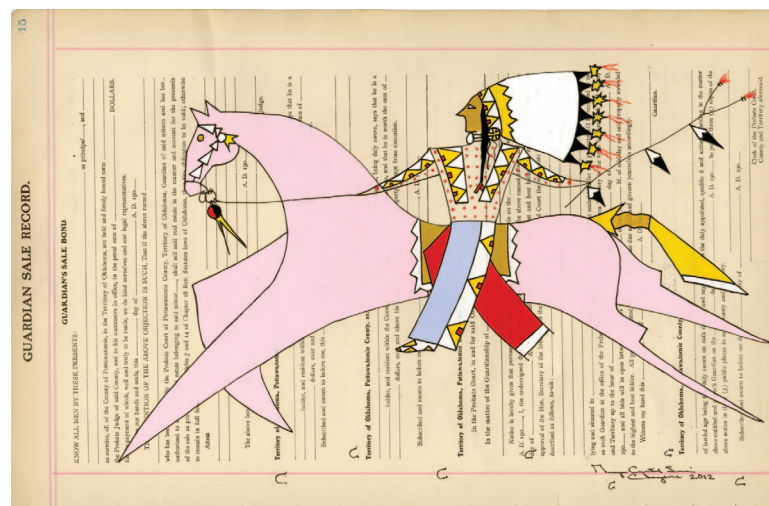
There are some striking connections between Army insignia or heraldry and the way in which Cheyenne, Lakota, and other Plains warriors decorated themselves, their horses, and their weapons before going into battle.

The originators of ledger art were imprisoned Indian warriors at Fort Marion in Florida at the end of the 19th century. According to historian Colin Calloway, ledger art “...serve[d] to prompt memories of heroic exploits in battle and horse raids.” While native warriors fought together for protection, they also fought for themselves. The Dog Soldier society, the most feared warrior society on the Plains, consisted of volunteers. Although Tall Bull was a respected and renowned leader of the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, he could not compel any other member to do his bidding but had to inspire his followers by example.

Native warriors often adopted a particular color or pattern for their war regalia related to their name—so Red Lance would wind his hair in red cloth, paint his lance red, hang red ribbon from the same lance, as well as use a red-beaded saddle blanket—even tie a red polka-dotted hanky to his horse’s bit! These elaborate preparations served an important purpose: to be easily identified so that an individual’s exploits, his coups, would be counted. A warrior needed witnesses to verify his actions in the heat of battle.



CHEYENNE DOG SOLDIER



KIT FOX

Contemporary Indian Ledger Art by George Levi

The same motive extended to warrior societies and clans. Lances were decorated to denote which society (much like a cavalry unit) a warrior belonged to.

Similarly, Army divisions have historically created insignia for themselves for the same reasons: to identify their units and to receive proper credit for what they have accomplished. The stories and songs and legends surrounding the history of a unit serve to connect past and present and provide a link with the future, even if they themselves perish.

Army insignia, whether a big red “1” or an eagle clutching a quiver of arrows, becomes suffused with both private and public meanings. They are symbols of brotherhood and loyalty, even unto death. And although Army insignia and heraldry are assigned by rank, specialization, and other official identifiers, individual acts of valor are still recognized with decorative insignia that identify the recipient as someone worthy of respect and honor.



GUIDON OF TROOP A, SEVENTH CAVALRY



STANDARD OF THE
FOURTH RECONNAISSANCE BATTALION

Courtesy United States Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas