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Indians as Soldiers, 1919-1945



In the summer of 1918, Richard Fool Bull sent greetings in his native Lakota to the agency at Rosebud, South Dakota, from Camp Funston in Kansas. “How Cola,” he began, “I am getting to be quite a soldier learning right along.... I got a dandy rifle and bayonet and I am anxious to make use of them on some German.

When the war is over I'll bring a German scalp with me back to Rosebud.” Fool Bull's enthusiasm for fight elicits common stereotypes, but his was not the typical reaction Indian soldiers had to training at Camp Funston and Fort Riley during the First and Second World Wars.

Long before the outbreak of World War I and lasting well into the late twentieth century, accepted notions of “Indianness” were central to national policy in the Office of Indian Affairs. In 1917 Commissioner of Indian

Affairs Cato Sells saw war as a golden opportunity for Indian assimilation into mainstream American society.

I am in full accord with the idea of giving to all Indians such a clear definition of patriotism as will form a lasting mental picture of their relation and duties to our common country. . . but I do not think that thought can be properly upheld by encouraging a racial recognition in defense of a common cause.

Integrated military service was consistent with national boarding school



BOYS' BATTALION, HASKELL INSTITUTE
Kansas State Historical Society

programs, allotments, and restrictions on native religious practices. Each was designed, in the famous phrase of Indian educator William Henry Pratt, to “kill the Indian and save the man.” The War Department, on the other hand, had a very different objective in mind when recruiting Indian soldiers to its ranks. War Department officials believed the average Indian soldier was like a secret weapon: he was fearless on the battlefield with uncanny talents for scouting, reconnaissance, and sharpshooting. These two rather different views led to a peculiar departure from accepted practice in regard to racial minorities: the Indian soldier was purposely and deliberately integrated into service alongside regular white recruits.

Although a few Indians from the same tribe trained together at Camp Funston and even served together in the same regiments in World War I, by 1940 War Department policies were clear in trying to place at least one “chief” in every company if possible,

or at least one in each regiment. This did not mean that the War Department believed Indian soldiers superior to white soldiers. On the contrary, it was generally accepted that Indian soldiers should be relegated to very specific tasks within the military and that their efforts should always be monitored by white officers. In his 1893 report on the Army’s experiment with an all-Indian unit, Lieutenant Z.B. Vance wrote that although the Indian soldier was “remarkably intelligent,” honest and forthright, he lacked ambition and discipline and so should “constantly be kept under the eye of a white man.”

The years 1917 to 1945 were a period of rapid change for Indian peoples. Some of these changes, such as the loss of tribal lands to whites or the revival of warrior societies, were a direct result of Indians’ military service. Indians’ sacrifice, however, rarely increased mainstream society’s appreciation or respect for native lifeways, and national Indian policy was steadfast in its goal

of eradicating tribal society. At Camp Funston at Fort Riley, nearly every aspect of policy regulating Indians’ military service reflected the prime directive of assimilation.

In 1924 the Office of Indian Affairs estimated that more than 17,000 Indian soldiers had served their country in World War I. When the United States entered the war on April 6, 1917, there were only 127,588 soldiers in the US Army and 80,446 National Guardsmen. By November 11, 1918, the US Army had expanded to become home to approximately four million men. This exponential increase was the result of a massive project in the early months of the war to train volunteers and draftees for military service in base camps across the nation. One of those bases was Camp Funston, located at the Fort Riley Military Reservation in the Flint Hills.

At Camp Funston the majority of native recruits came from Pine Ridge, Rosebud, and Cheyenne River reservations in South Dakota. Indian

boarding schools were also a direct source of recruits, and a multi-tribal group enlisted from Haskell Indian School in Lawrence. Indian Agency records suggest that while Camp Funston received a smattering of Indian recruits from Oklahoma, Iowa, and Kansas, the majority came from the main agencies in South Dakota.

The severely regimented life at Camp Funston must have come as a shock to new recruits. As they entered the training camp, recruits were directed through a series of rough-hewn buildings or tents. Inside, officers demanded to see their identification and directed them to an assembly-line examination by camp doctors. The process was so fast that some men took the mandatory oath of loyalty before the physician had completed his work, leaving the young soldier to pledge his allegiance unclothed. The rough nature of their initial encounter with camp life was noted by Indian recruits in their letters

home. As Richard Fool Bull wrote in July 1918, “I saw all the Rosebud boys going *thru the mill* the other day. All passed examination except Felix Eaglefeather and Little Crow.”

Every morning trainees arose at 5:45 a.m. to stand reveille and then marched to breakfast at 6:20. A typical breakfast consisted of cantaloupes, corn flakes with sugar and milk, fried liver and bacon, fried onions, toast, and coffee. Dinner was beef à la mode, boiled potatoes, creamed cauliflower, pickles, tapioca pudding, iced tea, and bread. This was followed by an evening meal of chili con carne, hot biscuits, stewed peaches, and more iced tea. For the most part, Indian recruits relished the vast quantity of food served at camp, even if it was not exactly what they were used to. In general Plains Indians consumed a higher proportion of meat to other foods. While army food was welcomed during their early days in camp, Indian soldiers soon began to look forward to food packages from home.

The American Red Cross, Y.M.C.A, and Knights of Columbus were the main contacts between Indian recruits and their families on the reservations. The American Red Cross chapter in South Dakota worked with their sister organization at Camp Funston to send food and gift packages to the Indian soldiers to keep up their spirits. A grateful young Indian soldier sat down on Christmas Eve 1917 to thank the Rosebud County Chapter of the Red Cross for his holiday package. “It is very kind of the people to remember the soldiers so liberally and undoubtedly represents a great amount of work and sacrifice.”

Indian families across the country responded to the war by making up packages, knitting socks and mittens, and raising money. At Rosebud the elder male members of the community showed their support for the young men at Camp Funston by forming their own “home guard” and drilling daily should they be needed to defend the reservation from German attack.



BAYONET DRILL AT CAMP FUNSTON

J.J. Pennell

courtesy of Pennell Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas

The training at Camp Funston was as predictable as the meals. Drill began at 7:30 a.m. For the next four hours men learned to march in line and in columns, dig trenches, attack with the bayonet, care for their uniform, make and pitch a tent, care for their rifle, and defend themselves from gas attacks. After dinner at noon, soldiers returned to the parade ground to drill some more until the call for retreat, presentation of arms, the lowering of the flag, and the playing of the national

anthem at 5:45 p.m. Following the evening meal, soldiers enjoyed a brief free period until lectures at 7 p.m. Ten o'clock was lights out marked by *Taps*.

Not every American Indian at Camp Funston settled down to camp life or supported the war effort. In several documented cases, the Rosebud “boys” actively worked to be discharged from Camp Funston and sent home to their families. Given that the average Indian recruit at

Funston was between 21 and 27 years old, he would have grown up hearing the story of the deaths of nearly 300 Lakota men, women, and children at Wounded Knee in the bitter winter of 1891. Most Indian soldiers, however, did not seek exemption from military service to avoid combat. Rather, they saw their draft as a violation of their status. As wards rather than full American citizens, they feared their families and property would not be adequately protected while they were in service. Some recruits also worried that the government would deny them veterans' benefits after the war. This was true for Pierre From Above, a Lakota Sioux who declared that he would not fight without the full rights of citizenship. He wrote to the Agency, "This doesn't mean that I am backing out the Army, but I rather be a citizen before I go." Other Indian recruits were concerned for the safety of their family members in their absence. In the fall of 1917, Louis Whitehorse filed a claim for exemption "on account of having a dependent

(disabled) wife." Louis's request was denied, and on October 26th he was arrested as a deserter and taken to Fort Mead and from there to Camp Funston. Whitehorse continued to ask to be allowed to return to the reservation, to no avail. In the spring of 1918, while serving his time, his wife died. George Big Owl and his wife Millie Peneaux of Rosebud also tried unsuccessfully to have George discharged from Camp Funston on account of Millie's polio. As Millie wrote to the Agency Superintendent, "I can't take care of my childrens because I can't walk and I have no relatives to help me...supposed you were in my place, suffer like this what would you think? Sure enough you will think of killing yourself and then you will be better off." Confusion over Indians' status and their eligibility for the draft continued to plague Indian soldiers even after the passage of the Curtis Act in 1924 that finally made all Indians citizens of the United States. Although the Army did not keep separate records of Indians' contributions

in World War I, acts of gallantry and bravery were regularly noted in local newspapers and by Agency superintendents in their records. Several Indians who trained at Camp Funston served with distinction overseas and were ultimately killed or wounded in the conflict.

Moses Clown, a Haskell student who was born at Cheyenne River Agency, was inducted in June of 1917 and sent to Camp Funston for training. He left for Europe with Company B of the 314th Military Police, which was attached to the 32nd Division of the Army. Ten days before the November armistice, Clown and four others in his unit were killed by an exploding shell. Antoine LeDeaux and Allen Kills Warrior, who trained at Camp Funston, suffered eye and lung damage after being gassed. Eddie Cottier, another Funston recruit, was wounded in the Battle of Meuse Argonne in October 1918. His wounds were severe enough to warrant amputation of his left leg at the thigh and part of his right foot.

Upon their return to the United States in 1919, American Indians found a society grateful for their service, but not fundamentally changed. It was expected that Indians would return to their former lives on the reservation, even though many Indian veterans were no longer physically able to work. Formerly ranchers and farmers, many Indian veterans found jobs in the Indian Service or as common laborers in agriculture and local industry. War costs had reduced federal spending for reservation programs like healthcare and schools, and veterans often returned to a diminished level of service for their families and children. Indian lands had been taken over through liberal long-term land leases to white farmers who profited from high wartime prices for agricultural products. On the other hand, in some Indian communities, wartime experience helped to revitalize old warrior traditions, societies, and rituals. Seen now as an expression of

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patriotism, American officials were more tolerant than they had been of earlier ceremonies such as the Ghost Dance. Some tribes, as at Cheyenne River Agency, formed their own American Legions to honor their veterans and oversaw the erection of memorials to their fallen comrades.

At Fort Riley the conspicuous service of Haskell Indian School students during the Great War led to some unexpected connections between the school and the post, albeit based on the

same stereotypes that had influenced the Army in 1917. As the horror of the war receded, both the school and the post looked to publicize their continued importance in American society.

This led to the establishment of two troops of all-Indian student-soldiers: a mounted cavalry unit and an artillery unit. These two functions were not chosen randomly, but were selected for their "natural" fit with Indians' affinity for horses and sharpshooting. The artillery troop was made up of sixty-five students and lasted until 1934.

Mounted Troop C of the 114th Cavalry at Fort Riley was made up entirely of Haskell students. These students were carefully selected for good conduct and represented a cross-section of tribes. As the War Department reported, "When there are distinguished visitors, the Indian Troop is always called upon to give its silent drill. For ten minutes, without command or guiding signal, the Indians go silently through a drill involving 1,192 movements in marching

and the manual of arms, never stepping outside of the limited space assigned, brushing the lines of spectators, but never touching them. Troop C is the 'banner' troop of Kansas because in athletic competitions, members of the Troop clearly display the traditional Indian prowess."

The 1930s were a difficult time in Indian peoples' history as their land base dwindled and the weak national economy strained meager resources. At the height of the depression, James McGregor, Superintendent at Pine Ridge Agency, wrote to Indian Commissioner John Collier to ask about a War Department warehouse that was rumored to contain a large amount of canned Argentine beef. McGregor pleaded with Collier to investigate the possibility of having this beef sent to Pine Ridge. "The Sioux Indians," McGregor explained, "do not have any money to purchase beef, and they will have to live on shorter rations if we do not get this beef." McGregor's request

was denied, as was a similar request for coffins, also rumored to be sitting in a federal warehouse.

On the eve of World War II, assimilation again became the main goal of Indian policy. As America watched the war escalate in Europe, the nation slowly began gearing up for another global conflict. By the time the United States entered the war, the expectation that American Indians would be an integral part of America's military effort was deeply entrenched, and again, Indians signed up in numbers far out of proportion with their population. Once again, the War Department considered American Indians to be useful both as soldiers and as mascots for regular troops and made a conscious effort to place an Indian into every company where possible.

In addition to the lonely token role many Indian soldiers filled in their companies, Indians at Fort Riley underwent a more demanding training period compared to their predecessors

in World War I. More practical preparations were being undertaken at Fort Riley, which expanded by an additional 32,000 acres. Camp Funston was rebuilt as the home of the 2nd Cavalry Division in December 1940, while a Cavalry Replacement Center was established at Camp Forsyth. Training was similarly more sophisticated than in the previous war. With the increased use of telephones and airplanes, the instruction of Army personnel was standardized through constant direction and analysis from the Army Ground Forces center. Inspectors were routinely flown to training camps to check on the progress of instructors and ensure that everything was being done in a uniform manner.

Despite these advances, the Army Ground Forces had trouble providing a sufficient number of replacements for the losses being suffered overseas. To meet this demand, Replacement Depot No.3 was activated at Fort Riley on June 1, 1945. On average,

replacements remained at Depot No.3 for four days, and training was formatted to fit a more accelerated pace. By then, the war in Europe had ended and training became more focused on combat in the Pacific. Replacements

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received training in health risks specific to the Pacific combat areas, specialized instruction on jungle villages, jungle patrolling, attack on Japanese command posts, and identification of Japanese uniforms and equipment. When Indian soldiers arrived at Fort Riley, most had already received approximately

five months training in Replacement Training Centers with an emphasis on the Pacific before being sent to a coastal base to await service.

During this time Fort Riley was host to one of the Army's most famous recruits, Johnny Nevermissashot. Johnny Nevermissashot identified only as a "Sioux Indian," or the "perfect replacement," was reported putting an apple on the head of a WAC sergeant prior to "stepping off twenty paces and effecting a simulated William Tell Act." The publicity surrounding this event is a good example of the expectations the Army had of Indian recruits and their presumed abilities for marksmanship. Although this soldier's name was almost certainly not Nevermissashot, the Army did not think it necessary to identify their token Indian marksman by his real name.

There can be no question that military experience at Camp Funston and Fort Riley shaped Indians' ideas about the world. World-wise veterans helped Indians negotiate more effectively with

mainstream society and led to numerous changes in reservation life and policy. As individuals, the brief time Indian soldiers spent at Camp Funston and Fort Riley probably did not directly affect operations there as much as the experience changed them. Certainly Indian soldiers' positive contributions to the American military helped pave the way for the integration of other minorities and women who proudly serve in the Army today.

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