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“We had become the VC in Our Own Homeland:” Indigenous Veterans of Vietnam and the 1973 Siege of Wounded Knee

Margaret Curtin

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“We had become the VC in Our Own Homeland:” Indigenous Veterans of Vietnam and the 1973
Siege of Wounded Knee

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Margaret Kathryn Curtin

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Introduction

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a decade of extreme internal social turmoil for the United States. From the student-led anti war movement to the rising Black Power movement to the Women's movement, this period was marked by political fragmentation and civil unrest. American Indians were no farther removed from this commotion than anyone else. The Red Power Movement not only incited radical political action within Indigenous communities, but brought unprecedented levels of American attention to the historical legacy of the subjugation and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. As Red Power activists occupied the village of Wounded Knee in 1973 in protest of violated treaty rights, their calls for Indigenous self-determination were seen and heard across the televisions screens of America.

Over seventy one days, the 1973 siege at Wounded Knee saw tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition fired across the fields of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Yet among the 300 men, women, and children inside the village, one particular subset of individuals played a formative role in the operation: veterans of Vietnam. Indigenous veterans came from across the nation to support the calls for sovereignty and Indigenous self-determination made by the protestors at Wounded Knee. Furious with the legacy of genocidal violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples by the United States, and frustrated by their own position as veterans of an imperial war, these men channeled their rage into radical political activism at the siege of Wounded Knee. For Indigenous veterans, their service in Vietnam was a radically politically formative experience.

Guy Dull Knife Jr. (Oglala Lakota) was an Indigenous veteran of the Vietnam war. Upon his return home, Guy became involved in community assistance, and thus his decision to join the defenders at Wounded Knee as they stood up for their sovereign treaty rights was a natural

inclination.¹ An Oglala Lakota man from Pine Ridge himself, Dull Knife was tasked with traversing the backcountry and bringing supplies into the village. Running back into the village one night, Dull Knife recalled looking out over the horizon only to see red flares burning the land. His homeland, the one he had been sent to Vietnam to defend, was now under attack by the same government he had put his life on the line for in the Pacific. In his family's biography, *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge: A Lakota Odyssey* written by Joe Starita, Guy recalled, "Pine Ridge was more dangerous for me than Chu Lai...We had become the VC in our own homeland."²

Native Americans have fought for the United States in every single twentieth-century American conflict. Successive generations of Native American veterans have brought back with them a keener understanding of western modes of thinking, thorough political opinions, a deeper understanding of their personal globality, and newfound leadership skills.³ Veterans of World War Two returned home to advocate for the sovereign status of Indigenous nations in the face of termination policy. Many found roles of leadership in their communities, or within national Indigenous rights organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians.⁴ As this phenomenon applied to the World Wars, it also can be said of the Vietnam war.

There were anywhere between 42,000 and 62,000 Indigenous veterans of the Vietnam conflict. Rates of Indigenous service in Vietnam mirrored the high rates of service in the World Wars, if not surpassing it ever so slightly. However, service in Vietnam for Indigenous men was unlike any prior war. As young men from tight knit Indigenous communities, both urban and rural, they had not experienced much of life outside their homes. The war changed that drastically, exposing them to the colossal scale of man-made violence and acts of horror in

¹ Joe Starita, *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge: A Lakota Odyssey* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 306.

² Starita, 308.

³ Alison Berstein, *American Indians and WW2: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (University Oklahoma Press, 1991), 133.

⁴ Edward Robinson, "Hey Uncle, Uncle Sam! American Indian GIs and Veterans and Red Power Activism in the Era of the Vietnam War" (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2016), 2.

Vietnam. Immersed in a global context while abroad, the war also provided these men with the opportunity to understand how they, their people, and the United States were entwined in the universal context of imperial violence. Some young men recognize the same acts of colonial violence being used against the Vietnamese and that had been historically used against the Indigenous peoples of North America. This led to a resounding personal relation to the Vietnamese on behalf of many Indigenous GIs. Not only were the histories of the people quite similar, they also looked similar, brown skin and black hair, and lived in traditionally tribal and kin-ship based communities that often reminded men of their communities back home. Both groups were victims of the same imperial power, but yet here these young American Indian men were, brandishing guns for the United States. This parallel created a sense of unease for some Indigenous GIs, and provoked many to reconsider their actions in the Pacific.

However, as Indigenous servicemen fought in Vietnam, the political climate of their communities on the homefront was becoming increasingly radical and turbulent. Red Power, a movement which championed Indigenous self-determination (the ability for Indigenous communities to govern and control themselves), was on the rise. Red Power was derived from Native American communities' reaction to the frustrating failed policies of termination. Termination became the official policy of the United States government for dealing with “Indian problem” through the House Concurrent Resolution 108, passed in 1953, and continued to be so until 1972. Termination consisted of a two-pronged policy plan “termination” sought to detribalize Indigenous communities and remove their ownership from tribal lands, while “relocation” sought to transfer tribal members into big cities and absorb them into mainstream society.⁵ In addition to termination, the origin for Red Power can be found in the global context

⁵ Matthias Voigt, “‘Fighting for Their Freedom At Home’ Native American Vietnam Veterans in the Red Power Movement, 1969-1973,” in *War Veterans and the World after 1945: Cold War Politics, Decolonization, Memory* (Routledge, 2020), 84.

of social unrest which defined the 1960s and 1970s, and the self-renewing power of protest activism that was popular at the time and provided a path for cultural revival throughout Indigenous communities.⁶ Red Power gave Indigenous men and women the opportunity to reject the continued narrative of Indigenous erasure perpetuated by the United States, and take part in a resurgence of Indigenous cultural traditions and politics. The American Indian Movement, founded in the Twin Cities in 1968, was a prominent example of these Red Power organizations. Their organization played a prominent role in the almost 70 major Indigenous demonstrations which took place during 1969 to 1978, two of which included the seizure of federal property.⁷ Activists demanded recognition of both their civil and treaty rights, as well an end to the on-going American project of assimilation and eradication of Indigenous cultural identities.

As they returned home from the Vietnam War, Indigenous veterans encountered a variety of new hardships. Poverty plagued Indigenous communities in both rural and urban environments. Facing dire levels of post traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues stemming from war-related trauma, many Indigenous veterans found themselves struggling to maintain employment while facing issues of substance abuse. Although these issues followed veterans from all sectors of society, Indigenous veterans were met with additional race-based discrimination. As Americans overlooked them and their efforts in the war, some Indigenous veterans felt a sense of betrayal and abandonment from the country for which they had just put their lives on the line. It became clear to them that the American government did not particularly care for their rights nor the rights of their peoples. In response to their troubling wartime and post-service experiences, many Indigenous Vietnam veterans took it upon themselves to find

⁶ Voigt, 84.

⁷ Voigt, 83.

healing from whatever avenues were available to them. Searching for solace, some turned to traditional Indigenous values, specifically those of warriorhood.

Warriorhood was a deeply held value of the American Indian Movement (AIM). As political activism became entwined with the warrior identity, Vietnam veterans found traditional healing through radical political participation in the rising Red Power Movement. Veterans became involved throughout AIM, and their contributions to the organization did not go unnoticed, especially at the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee. At Wounded Knee, Vietnam veterans participated in another war. It was a battle very similar to those they saw in the Pacific, but this time they were fighting on the side of the VietCong. They saw themselves as the Vietnamese now, facing off against the same armory they had been trained to use by the United States. Veterans within Red Power found a renewed sense of self as they stood up for the sovereign rights of their peoples. The rejection of assimilationist values rang true with the cognitive dissonance and rejection of the United States' policies many felt after their time in the service. Reclamation of themselves and their traditional warrior identities was central to the process of healing for many veterans.

Native veteranship in Vietnam, and their ensuing participation in the Red Power movement is a relatively under researched topic. There is a fair amount of scholarship concerning the political activities of Indigenous veterans of the World Wars, but later conflicts such as Korea and Vietnam remain less explored. There is also extensive scholarship surrounding the Red Power movement, but only a small number of historians have sought to interpret the connection between the Vietnam war and politics of Red Power. Veterans' involvement in the movement remains researched to an even lesser degree. However, there are several historians

whose work proved to be most useful in my project. Primarily, I draw substantially from the works of Tom Holm, Edward J. Robinson, and Matthew Voigt.

Historian Tom Holm (Cherokee-Muskogee Creek) is himself a veteran of Vietnam (Marine Corps), and is professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona. His research on Indigenous Vietnam veterans began in 1981 when Holm and a few colleagues began circulating a one page questionnaire among their friends to gather information on Indigenous Veterans to make a case before the Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) of the then Veteran Administration to identify and deal with the specific needs to Native American veterans. In 1983 the RCS working group on American Indian Vietnam Veterans was established, and Holm served as an advisor for the group. The group began gathering information which they believed would help clinicians and counselors within the RCS understand how traditional healing and kin relations are beneficial and unique to the readjustment process for Native veterans. 170 veterans completed this survey, the majority of which were born between 1944 and 1952, and who held tribal affiliation with 77 different communities. The majority of the research behind Holm's 1996 monograph, *Strong Hearts Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* derives from the work he and his colleagues did for the RCS.

Throughout his book, Holm uses quotations from many of these questionnaires; however he keeps individuals anonymous. Holm also points out that, try as he or other scholars might, one cannot jump into the personal lives of Native veterans, and fit all of their stories within one grand conclusion. These individuals identify themselves within local communities and their sense of personhood is linked to the specific traditions and sacred histories unique to their people. To avoid the "Theory of Everything," the Western urge to be precise and categorize everything which exists, is a central pillar of Holm's work which I have attempted to integrate into my

project as well. This project attempts to be *a* history of the Native American veterans of the Vietnam War, with its groundings in military service and political participation, not *the* history of Indigenous experience in Vietnam. Overall, Holm's work strives to bring light to the strength of Native American communities in socially absorbing veteran's wartime trauma or PTSD through participation in tribal honoring and healing ceremonies. However, my project will be drawn from sections in Holm in which he discusses alternate modes of Veteran readjustment, specifically participation in the political Red Power of the time.

A second study that I found particularly valuable for my project was the dissertation of researcher Edward J. Robinson from Canterbury Christ University. Encountering his dissertation entitled, "Hey Uncle, Uncle Sam! American Indian GIs and veterans and Red Power activism in the era of the Vietnam War," was a formative step in the project. Throughout his work Robinson outlines how Native GIs serving on the ground in Southeast Asia developed a sense of camaraderie with the plight of the Vietnamese people, and how as result many Native servicemen began to experience inner conflict and turmoil over their personal role in advancing the US imperial project. Robinson's work is well researched and provides a comprehensive, yet broad, analysis of the political radicalization of Indigenous servicemen.

In addition to Robinson, historian Matthew Voigt's chapter, "Fighting for Their Freedom At Home:" Native American Vietnam veterans in the Red Power Movements, 1969-1973" from the 2018 book *War Veterans and the World After 1945: Cold War Politics, Decolonization, Memory* was an equally formative piece to encounter. Voigt, unlike Robinson, deals with understanding the intersections between Red Power activism, Native Americans in the US military, and masculinity studies. He provides analysis for veteran involvement throughout AIM, citing veterans at the Trail of Broken Treaties and the occupation of Alcatraz island, in addition

to the siege at Wounded Knee. Voigt seeks to understand how Native soldiers utilized their veteranship status in the struggle for civil rights and treaty rights with the American settler nation state. He points out that warriorhood, defined by veterans through traditional modes of Indigenous spirituality and service in a 20th century global imperial conflict, was a pivotal part of AIM.

Yet in addition to secondary literature, the primary sources that underpin this project are the first person narratives of Indigenous Vietnam veterans. The throughline of this project is based on the interpretive lens of life history. As a reader and student, I have always been able to gain the most from localized studies that bring the reader into a very specific person or place in time to highlight the complex inner workings of historical moments, and incorporating a life-history approach into my project was very important to me. The driving questions behind this project began by looking at veteran political activism through looking at the life of one Western Shoshone man, Russell James Redner, who had served in Vietnam, became active in the American Indian Movement upon his return, and went on to defend Wounded Knee in 1973. At its midway point, this project drew on Russ' life to tell the general trend of involvement with Red Power activities upon the return home by Indigenous veterans. I encountered Russ' story for the first time in Kenneth Stern's *Loudhawk: The United States versus the American Indian Movement*.

Stern's *Loudhawk* documents the course of the legal case *The United States V. LoudHawk*. This case began in November of 1975, when local police pulled over a station wagon and mobile which just so happened to be carrying six members of the American Indian movement, eight illegal weapons, and seven cases of dynamite. The members apprehended included Kenny Loudhawk, Russ Redner, KaMook Banks, and Anna Mae Aquash, however

Dennis Banks and Leonard Peltier, who had also been inside the caravan and managed to evade arrest, were also charged with the firearm and dynamite possession charges. The Loud Hawk case stands to this day as the longest pretrial criminal case in US history. It would not be resolved until 1988. This was due to what one can only call a massive dropping of the ball on the behalf of the federal government including evidence tampering and unnecessary delay.

Ultimately the case ended thirteen years later when Dennis Banks accepted a plea deal for one count of possession, and all other charges against the other defendants were then dropped.

Loudhawk is written by Kenneth Stern, who completed his undergraduate degree at Bard College and now works as the director for Bard's Center on the Study of Hate. Stern started working on the case as a first year law student in Oregon, but before the case was over he had appeared as lead counsel before the US Supreme Court. The story is written as a first person narrative, and Stern draws on his old legal notes, memories, FBI documents, transcripts, letters, and interviews to quote those in his story. He also weaves in a history of the injustices affecting the Native American community, specifically the violence at the Pine Ridge reservation. Stern further attempts to tell the histories of the defendants through the Loudhawk years, who they were and how they ended up in AIM. One of these men is Vietnam and Wounded Knee veteran, Russell James Redner. Redner and Stern became friends over the course of the case, and Stern incorporates Redner's life history throughout the work. This work is the only scholarly source which deals with the life of Russ Redner.

Yet, as my research continued I began to find other first person narratives that filled gaps in the story that the materials on Redner did not address: places where I did not have enough information to draw together concrete conclusions about the choices in his life, and brought new additions of their own. Thus my original aim to center the entire project around Redner opened

up to stories of other individuals. Most significant of these was the memoir of Woody Kipp (Blackfoot) entitled *VietCong at Wounded Knee*. Published in 2004, this work provides a profound self-reflection on the life of Kipp from his younger years on the Blackfoot reservation, to his time as a marine in Vietnam to his role as a defender at the occupation of Wounded Knee. Kipp paints himself an entertaining, humorous, and not always flattering self portrait. This memoir is richly remembered, covering about half of his life, and Kipp thoroughly details how his experiences in the service informed his political radicalization. He tells of his years as a basketball loving, yet very angsty, teenager, to his time as an observant soldier in Vietnam and his troubled return back to the homefront, fraught with drinking and violence, but also conscious-raising moments of reckoning with his own Indigenous identity. Kipp draws on biting humor throughout his life to show not only the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding, but also how necessary overcoming them is to the endurance of traditional Native American heritage. Today he is now a professor at the Blackfeet community College on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana.

This project unfolds over three chapters. In Chapter one, I detail the Indigenous experience of serving in Vietnam. Born in the 1940s and 1950s, the generation of men that would go on to serve in Vietnam spent their childhood dealing with the burdensome effects of termination policy. Poverty and constant mobility left these men with a sense of rootlessness. Although they had varying levels of familiarity with their Indigenous heritage, the long term effects of assimilation left many men feeling alienated from traditional Indigenous culture and values. As they came of age, Vietnam loomed on the horizon. Some men were drafted, some enlisted, but either way, many saw military service as a mode to reconnect with Indigenous tradition of warriorhood and carry on a familia precedent of military service set by their fathers

and grandfathers. However, fighting in Vietnam would prove to be an experience vastly different from service in previous wars. Encountering men of all creeds and skin colors expanded the world view of many Indigenous GIs. Indigenous GIs observed racial dynamics within the US military, often reflective of the high racial tensions brewing back home in the US, and they were often subjected to racial stereotypes and assumptions themselves. Furthermore, as they encountered and sometimes participated in the racist treatment of the Vietnamese people by the United States military, many began to form connections between the historical subjugation of their own peoples and that of the Vietnamese. The imperial conquest of the United States in Vietnam reminded many of the genocidal tactics used against Native Americans. Soon enough, some Indigenous GIs could relate more to the plight of the Vietnamese people than the imperial goals of US presence in the Pacific. This was a striking realization, one the continued form as GIs returned home, and would lead many to a course of radical political activism against the United States.

In Chapter two I examine the further radicalization of Indigenous veterans as they navigated the process of readjustment. Returning was a difficult process for veterans of all types; however, for Indigenous veterans, the return was made even more difficult by particularly high levels of post traumatic stress disorders, a stifling lack of economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples, and widespread discrimination from white Americans. Many felt trapped in a war that continued even after their return to the states. Although they had left Vietnam, they were now being subjected to the continuous policies of erasure in the United State's hostile policies against Indigenous peoples of North America. These experiences often gave men a broad understanding of the violence of colonialism which had affected their peoples. In this chapter, I use the poetry of Jim Northrup and artwork of T.C Cannon to underscore how Indigenous veterans used art to

express a looming sense of betrayal by the United States government. Looking for avenues to alleviate their pain, veterans began engaging with traditional Indigenous modes of healing. Some took part in ceremonies and rituals, others began to engage with traditional values of warriorhood. Others were called to join the Red Power movement.

In Chapter three, I articulate how the sense of betrayal felt by Indigenous veterans and alienation from the imperial mission of the Vietnam war brought these men to engage with the Red Power movement, more specifically the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee. Although Red Power groups, such as the American Indian Movement, were not formed as coalitions of veterans, their message and goals drew many veterans to their ranks. As they occupied the small village of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation, AIM took a stand against the brutal disregard for the civil and treaty rights of Indigenous peoples on behalf of the United States. Frustrated with the corrupted US-backed tribal government that oversaw Pine Ridge, AIM's occupation sought to reinstate the sovereignty of the Oglala Lakota. Vietnam veterans came from across the nation to assist the activists at Wounded Knee. Veterans were an instrumental part of the security force. They built bunkers and defenses for the village just as they had in Vietnam. In fact, the parallels between Wounded Knee and Vietnam became glaringly obvious to many veterans. From the sheer amount of ammunition fired, to the incessant flares, to the rural setting, Wounded Knee was highly reminiscent of Vietnam with one key difference. Now instead of fighting under the American flag, the veterans aimed their guns at the US military. They had become the Viet Cong now. To many men, this rejection of the United States was interwoven with a reclamation of their own warriorhood. As they engaged with traditional warriorhood, ceremonies, and Indigenous spirituality, many men began to reaffirm their sense of self, a sense which had become muddled due to their service abroad. However, back in Wounded Knee, they became grounded in

themselves and their role as warriors once more. This project seeks to shed light on the under research field of Vietnam veterans participation in the protest activism conducted by AIM at the siege of Wounded Knee, and also seeks to affirm how Indigenous service in Vietnam was a politically formative experience for young men.

Chapter one: Native American Servicemen in Vietnam



Figure 1. “On Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967” by T.C. Cannon (1971) courtesy of Arts and Antiques Magazine

American Indian Vietnam Generation

The American Indian Vietnam generation was born into an extremely disruptive period in Native American history. They were raised outside of the prosperity associated with the postwar boom of the 1950s and early 1960s that many of their white counterparts experienced.⁸ As the United States became involved in the Vietnam conflict in 1965, this generation would grow into the adults fighting the Vietnam War; they were certainly not the first Native Americans to fight within the US military. Indigenous peoples have served the US military in

⁸ Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, (Austin, TX: Univ. of Texas Press, 1996), 114.

every single American war since the inception of the nation.⁹ The parents of the American Indian Vietnam generation, part of the “Greatest Generation,” were veterans of WWII. Through their service, these men were able to transplant pre-existing notions of Indigenous warriorhood into US military service, melding together a plethora of historical wartime traditions and beginning a new cultural custom of service within the US military, which would be followed by their children fighting in Vietnam.

Upon their return home from military service in the Second World War, many Indigenous veterans experienced postwar disillusionment derived from the policy of termination and relocation. Termination sought to end any remaining sovereignty of tribal communities by privatizing and absorbing any remaining tribal land; relocation sought to transfer remaining tribal members to urban environments, separate them from other Indigenous people, and absorb them into the culture of mainstream American society. Frustrated with the goals of termination, a handful of Native veterans rose to prominence in activist organizations, notably including the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).¹⁰ Campaigning for policies which they believed would improve the lives of their countrymen, Native veterans championed self-determination.¹¹ This generation was heavily influential in the disbursement of two main ideas: the growing awareness of a pan-Indian identity which extended beyond tribal affiliation, and a change in the nature of Indian leadership itself. As many Native young men returned home from war, they were given collegiate-level educational opportunities, gave them a higher status among white Americans. Some veterans received benefits from the GI bill, and others were given an education in how to operate and maintain emerging military technology. This familiarity with white

⁹ The National Museum of the American Indian, *Why We Serve: Nation Americans in the United States Armed Forces*. The Smithsonian, November 2020.

¹⁰ Voigt, 87.

¹¹ Berstein, 173.

America and an acceptance into its inner workings opened up opportunities for mainstreaming Indigenous political ideals.¹² Despite these pushes for political sovereignty, assimilation policy held on and dictated the worldview of much of this generation. Those who stayed on reservations or took part in relocation programs were subjected to political projects designed to redirect their values systems to be more closely aligned with white-america's middle class capitalism.¹³ Due to their life experience, many Native Americans were relatively committed to adapting to these changes. Their children, however, would go on to take a far less assimilative approach to American culture.

Meant to assimilate Indigenous peoples into mainstream white American culture through relocation to urban cities and movement off the reservation, termination policies resulted in widespread urban poverty. For the Vietnam generation, who had experienced federal termination policies as children, this meant growing up in an environment of unsafety and chaos. Frequent mobility did entail a broader understanding of pan-Indigeneity than their parents' generation ever did, but still many of them grew up in impoverished neighborhoods with unideal living standards (both on and off the reservation) due to these failed relocation programs.¹⁴ An anonymous Indigenous veteran, quoted in Tom Holm's (Creek/Cherokee) study for the Veterans Administration's Readjustment Counseling Services, candidly said of his urban childhood: "The system's wrong man. I lived in Milwaukee when I was a kid. My parents worked hard but the bills piled up. They started drinking ... I hit the streets. It's a bullshit system."¹⁵ Unsatisfactory experiences with the "American melting pot" led the American Indian Vietnam generation to

¹² Berstein, 173.

¹³ Tom Holm, "Intergenerational Rapprochement Among American Indians: A Study of Thirty-Five Indian Veterans of the Vietnam War," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 12, no. Spring (1984): 167.

¹⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 111.

¹⁵ Holm, "Intergenerational Rapprochement," 168.

develop a distaste for assimilative values. Therefore, unlike their parents, this generation understood the American system to be the creator, not the pacifier, of their problems.

Russ Redner (Western Shoshone), an Indigenous veteran of the Vietnam war and leader in the West Coast branch of the American Indian Movement, was born in California. His adopted father was a white police officer from Eureka, California, who along with his (also white) wife decided not raise Redner within an Indigenous community.¹⁶ Although it is unclear why Redner was sent to live with non-native parents, the practice of removing Indigenous children from their tribal communities is part of a longstanding colonial practice in the United States. Regardless of reason, it is safe to say that Redner's experience of removal from his heritage was not unique. Many years later, Redner would express how his upbringing within white America had made him feel alienated from his cultural and ethnic identity: "They tried to raise me white, tried to make me think I was white. I almost believed it, then something would happen ... Some kids would say 'Hey Cochise' or something like that."¹⁷ As he detailed how his colorblind upbringing failed to prepare him for the racism he would face throughout childhood, Redner expressed frustration at how his early life separated him from his Indigenous identity. Unlike some of his generation who grew up in urban pan-Indian networks or traditional reservation kinship networks, Redner's formative years spent in white America set him apart from his cultural heritage and traditions. As he later told his friend Kenny Loudhawk in 1975, "You were raised on the res, in the culture. For me it's harder. Shit, I won't be able to drum as well as my daughter will by the time she's five."¹⁸ The dismantling of generational transmissions of Indigenous knowledge and culture had been a long time goal of the United States government. Although the exact reasons for Redner's

¹⁶ Kenneth Stern, *Loud Hawk: The United States versus the American Indian Movement* (University Oklahoma Press, 1994), 28.

¹⁷ Stern, 28.

¹⁸ Stern, 29.

adoption are unknown, one can glean from his story an understanding of how this policy was alive and working in the mid century. Redner also expressed to Kenny Loudhawk how much the disconnect of his childhood affected his sense of self: “You know, I never really thought about how much it disturbed me. To live in the white world, I thought you had to believe Indian people didn’t exist.”¹⁹ Growing up in a nation that simultaneously wanted to erase Indigenous peoples from reservations and history textbooks, Redner was raised with an internalized understanding of the genocidal tactics meant to terminate him and his people.

Additionally, Vietnam Veteran Woody Kipp (Blackfeet) also felt the effects of termination policies in his childhood. His story slightly differs from Russ Redner’s, yet both men’s childhoods are telling of how the aims of termination policy were felt ubiquitously through Indigenous communities during the mid century; even if members did not directly take part in relocation. Being raised on the Blackfoot reservation as the youngest of five siblings (two of which were WW2 veterans), Kipp was adopted into a Blackfoot family with a long military history. Of his family, Woody notes that the Kipps “stood with one foot in the old ways and the other in the acculturated American ways.”²⁰ Growing up in the white border town of Cut Bank, Kipp spent his childhood playing with fellow Indigenous children on his parents’ property, but attended Catholic services every Sunday and was introduced to minimal Indigenous cultural practices in his childhood. He attended predominantly white schools and, just like Redner, entirely lacked an education relevant to his people’s experiences and history. One of two Indigenous students in his class, Kipp recalls entering an essay competition in seventh grade where contestants were asked to submit a work about being the ethnical grandchildren to George Washington:

¹⁹ Stern, 28.

²⁰ Woody Kipp, *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee: The Trail of a Blackfeet Activist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 7.

During those years I learned to read and write but heard nothing of the deep metaphysical teachings that were my heritage ... By seventh grade I didn't know who I really was or where I had come from; in my mind, George Washington was my ethnical grandfather... The teachers knew that I wasn't an ethnical grandson of George Washington, that I'd been hoodwinked by their version of history; they gave the prize to a more appropriate descendant, a white girl.²¹

For Kipp, this experience was crushing. At a young age he learned “to relate with white people and their values,”²² often forsaking his own heritage and value systems in the process. The internalized impact of this education took years for Kipp to unravel later in life. While he did not directly experience relocation, Kipp's childhood sheds light on how assimilationist policies were very much alive in the postwar period and clearly present in the lives of Indigenous children during the mid 20th century. As they grew into teenagers, the generation became increasingly resistant to the philosophy of termination. They remained dedicated to preserving their tribal traditions and were proud of their Indigenous identity.²³ These young men, struggling to understand their place in their own communities and in the broader world, would become those sent to serve in Vietnam.

Why Did This Generation Serve?

Historians do not know how many Indigenous veterans of Vietnam there actually are. The Bureau of Indian Affairs estimated that approximately 42,000 Native Americans served in Southeast Asia during the war, as reported on tribe by tribe bases.²⁴ However, The Veterans Administration reported in 1980 that there were 62,100 Native American Vietnam-era veterans. According to historian and Indigenous Vietnam veteran Tom Holm, about one in four eligible

²¹ Kipp, 12.

²² Kipp, 12.

²³ Holm, “Intergenerational Rapprochement,” 169.

²⁴ Tom Holm, “Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls Revisited: The Research, the Findings, and Some Observations of Recent Native Veteran Readjustment,” *Wicazo SA Review* 32 (Spring 2017): 120.

Native men served during the Vietnam War, as compared to one in twelve of the general United States population.²⁵ Although these numbers are reflective of how significant service in the US military was for Native peoples, it is also reflective of how, like many other ethnic minorities, Indigenous people bore a disproportionate share of the violence of the Vietnam war. Despite the fact that they entered the service in numbers almost higher than their parents did for WW2, the Vietnam generation of American Indians saw their military service through a different lens than previous generations did.



Figure 2. Harvey Pratt (Cheyenne and Arapaho) on his last day in Da Nang courtesy of the Smithsonian Magazine. Pratt would go on to design the National Native Americans Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.

Across every twentieth century conflict, draft dodging was highly uncommon for Native servicemen.²⁶ Historians have previously misidentified Native enlistment as an effort to legitimize oneself in dominant white society.²⁷ While this phenomenon is not universally untrue

²⁵ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 123.

²⁶ Voigt, 85.

²⁷ Voigt, 85.

across ethnic minorities in the United States, the motivations behind Native American enlistment reside in a complex mix of assimilationist, economic, and cultural factors; ones that range drastically between individuals. Many Indigenous men cited their reasoning for joining as the military giving them something to do, and offering an escape from the violence of the streets and the turbulence of poverty.²⁸ Additionally, young Native American men were subject to propaganda which entranced many other (non-native) servicemen. The glorification of war worked to pedal military service as thrilling and heroic, rather than wrought with death and trauma. In his richly remembered memoir, *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee: The Trail of a Blackfeet Activist*, Vietnam veteran Woody Kipp (Blackfoot) recalls how as young man, he thought that the idea of war was exciting and full of adventure: “I was eighteen years old and convinced that war was glamorous.”²⁹ A highschool dropout working on his big brother’s farm, enlisting in the Marine Corps provided an escape to the mundane life he believed he was living. After his time in the Pacific, Kipp did not continue this view point. In his memoir he writes: “Looking back, I must admit that nineteen-year-old men don’t know enough about life to be sent with weapons of mass destruction among women and children.”³⁰

According to the Veterans Administration’s Readjustment Counseling Services group working on American Indian Vietnam veterans, “duty” “honor” and “country” were thought to be important reasons for entering their service, according to 75% of veterans of the 170 veterans surveyed.³¹ A number of them stated that they felt honor-bound and legally obligated to defend the country, not because they were citizens of the United States, but because their individual

²⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 121.

²⁹ Kipp, 23.

³⁰ Kipp, 23.

³¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 118.

nations had signed treaties with the whites which allied them to the US.³² An anonymous

Indigenous veteran interviewed by Tom Holm affirmed this belief:

I went to Vietnam, was wounded twice and won the Silver Star, not because I have any particular loyalty to the United States, but because I have loyalty to my own people, my own tradition. We are pledged by a treaty to provide military assistance to the US in times of war. I know that the US had broken its part of the bargain with us, but we are more honorable than that. If we respond in kind, we are no better than they are.³³

To many of these men, an attack on the United States, was also an attack on their homelands.

Therefore, joining the war effort was not only to defend the US and its people, but Native American lands and, most importantly, their own people.

Many wished to honor the tradition of warriorhood and gain respect from their own peoples as their ancestors historically had, in times of conflict. This traditional act gave many a reaffirmation of their tribal identity, and a deeper connection to their personal spirituality.³⁴ For many, this continuity provided a connection to one's cultural heritage. While each Indigenous nation has its own practices, there are some similarities when describing what warriorhood meant to Indigenous peoples.³⁵ Depending on the need for warfare or a rigid distinction between war and peace times, many different tribal groups had military traditions that could include warrior societies, special wartime regalia and arms, preparation ceremonies, cleansing rituals, and homecoming ceremonies.³⁶ Warrior societies, which functioned as a group designated to be the tribal militia, were most prevalent among the thirty five (or so) tribes whose homelands were part of the Great Plains region.³⁷ Traditionally, warriors were central to community life, extending their cultural role tremendously outside of the battlefield. Communities understand the warriors

³² Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 119.

³³ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 118.

³⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 119.

³⁵ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 119.

³⁶ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 35.

³⁷ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 38.

as members who not only protect the community, but seek to serve its people and restore justice.³⁸ Warriorhood was typically (although not always) designated as male role, for it provided men with a connection to spirituality.³⁹ Female power was typically associated with reproduction and growth, as women were not only childbearers but often the sowers of crops. To amend the imbalance of sex in social hierarchy male power became associated with death, or the identities of the warrior and the hunter.⁴⁰ The warrior himself was commended for not only acts of bravery in battle, but for remembering, defending, and continuing the traditional values systems of the community. It was for this reason that they were extremely important in religious and political institutions. For the American Indian Vietnam generation, these values were very real and hugely significant in connecting to their cultural heritage. Although warfare may have looked different for them than it had for their ancestors, participating in it and becoming a warrior was instrumental to strengthening their sense of self.

Native participation in twentieth-century conflicts produced multiple generations of veterans. Many men joined hoping to carry on a familial tradition of military service, one that was established by their grandfathers serving in WW1 and carried on by their fathers in WW2. As many men before them had mixed their culture of military traditional practice with non-Native military service, this act of syncretism allowed for Vietnam era servicemen to retain a strong sense of their own tribal identity through their service.⁴¹ As did their reasons for entering the service, experiences in the military varied greatly between individuals.

Fighting Pacific Theater for Indigenous GIs

³⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 119.

³⁹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 32.

⁴⁰ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 32.

⁴¹ Voigt, 87.

Military service in the Vietnam conflict was difficult and dangerous for most GI's, with many ethnic minority GI's experiencing racism in the military that made matters worse. Racism was rampant among troops, and these race relationships within the military body were often reflective of the high racial tensions back on the homefront. Vietnam veteran, Charley Johnson (Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw), recalled encountering racist dynamics in his early years of service. An alumni of Chilocco Indian School, Johnson's oral history was recorded during a 2016 class reunion by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder as part of the Library of Congress' Veterans History project. Before his tour in Vietnam, Johnson was stationed in Germany where he roomed with a white Southern man. Johnson recalls:

He'd be standing at his window, and he'd point that rifle down at somebody. He'd click it and, 'Pow! Shot that nigger. Pow, shot that ...' That stayed with me. I said 'Here he is on Sunday morning. You'll see him carrying his Bible going to church services,' and that just ... I couldn't understand it, how he could have so much hate for another people.⁴²

It wasn't too long after that a white man and black man approached Johnson and offered him the third bunk in their room. He took it. Although Johnson's roommate never literally turned his rifle on him, this moment was telling to Johnson of how much race based hate lay in the hearts of his fellow army men.

While stationed at the brig, a confinement facility for marines who had stepped out of line, Woody Kipp recalled a moment in the mess hall line which ignited his observation of long standing racial tensions in the military. Kipp observed a group of black marines attempt to cut to the front of the chow line. White marines, already in line, began to protest and punches were thrown instantly. And although that initial dispute was settled by officers, the fighting between groups did not cease and continued late into the night. Kipp recalls: "The racial clashes

⁴² Charley Johnson, Charley Johnson, Jr., interview by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder, 2016, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.111818/>.

continued into the subsequent nights for a week, and the guards soon found it necessary to shoot over the [heads of men] to separate and subdue them.”⁴³ Although he was not personally involved, Kipp recalls these nocturnal wars yielded broken bones, deep cuts, and at least one cracked skull. However, the most shocking aspect of the nocturnal wars was not the scale of the violence, but the nightly chants Kipp recalled hearing from the African American’s tents. Although the song’s origins were a mystery to Kipp, he recalls recognizing the sound of tribal drumming and singing: “The chant the blacks sang in the brig sounded like *ooga booga*. It had a real purpose, though, even if it was an impromptu creation. The song forged an identity that reached into the heart of black Africa, letting the white marines know they weren’t dealing with slaves.”⁴⁴

Johnson, Kipp, and many Indigenous veterans in Vietnam did not solely witness white hatred as the sole replicator of racial dynamics with the military. They were beginning to realize the depth of the racial violence they lay witness to. These race-based conflicts were the offshoot of a much deeper systemic violence occurring in American cities back east. Indigenous Veteran Danny Bruner recalled a moment when he too became aware of the replication of American racial violence in the military. He writes, “But one guy, a city black, knew better. He told the lieutenant straight out he’d had enough, he wasn’t taking another step in the jungle...I remember thinking he was a troublemaker and a coward, but soon I realized he was right. He was streetwise, he understood death and war; he’d seen it back home.”⁴⁵ As observed by Bruner, the other servicemen of color (namely one African American serviceman) were not just acting out of reaction to Vietnam, but a much deeper violence they had been subjected to their whole lives.

⁴³ Kipp, 45.

⁴⁴ Kipp, 46.

⁴⁵ Danny Bruner, “Stay with That Indian,” in *Vietnam: The Heartland Remembers* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 115.

Yet, this was not always apparent to all Indigenous GIs. These men were young during their service, and many had come from reservations or tightly knit Indigenous urban communities. Therefore, while they were not blind to racism (especially from white people) they were not fully conscious of the systemic racial violence built into all aspects of life in the United States, or the racial relationships between other ethnic minorities. Reflecting on the nocturnal race wars at the brig Kipp writes, “I didn’t fully understand the depth of this hatred between blacks and whites. I was too young and dumb about racial matters to understand the fights through a meaningful perspective. I was Indian. I had grown up in a white border town where there were racial undertones, a few overtones, but nothing of this violence, overt magnitude.”⁴⁶ Upon reflection of their younger years, Bruner and Kipp both noted that the racial undertones of their fellow GI’s actions, although not fully visible to them at the time, were a reflection of broader racial tensions in the United States.

However, Indigenous GI’s were not only observers of racism in the military, they were also victims of it themselves. Racial stereotypes and assumptions not only subjected Indigenous GI’s to hostility from their fellow servicemen, but also determined the kind of roles and jobs designated to Native men. The first of these was a phenomenon entitled “Indian Scout Syndrome (ISS)” was derived from the historical trend under which white Americans have constructed a mythological understanding of Indigenous adeptness in combat.⁴⁷ Steeped in stereotypes pertaining to Indigenous warriorhood, this belief attributes an innate proclivity for warfare or scouting. ISS assigns the perceived ability to detect the presence of one’s enemy with incredible levels of stealth to a genetic predisposition of Indigenous warriors, rather than learned any skill. ISS proved to be rampant throughout the military, and although it gave Native GI’s some degree

⁴⁶ Kipp, 45.

⁴⁷ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 88.

of status (even a status born of racial stereotypes) it also endangered their lives. Historian Tom Holm notes that as a result of ISS, Indigenous GI's were assigned to long-range reconnaissance patrols and killer teams with greater frequency.⁴⁸ During his time in the service, Danny Bruner recalls encountering ISS in his infantry division: "Because I was an Indian, a lot of the guys thought I had some power.... They used to say, 'Whatever you do, stay with that Indian!' Everybody called me Chief, and they liked me to [lead the] walk because I was good at it. I could smell gooks. To me, they smelled just like pigs."⁴⁹ "Gook," a derogatory term that was part of everyday vernacular for US troops. It served to dehumanize the Vietnamese people, and somewhat justified the killing and maiming of them for US troops. "Chief" was yet another racially based denomination found rampant in Vietnam. A nickname used by non-Native GI's to refer to their Indigenous counterparts, being referred to as "Chief" was an almost universal experience for Native men in the service. As Jim Northrup (Anishinaabe) recalls: "Every squad had an Indian in it named Chief. It didn't really bother me. I guess my reaction to it was, 'I'm not in the Navy. I'm not a Chief Petty Officer. I'm me. I've got a person.' You get it nowadays at National Veterans things."⁵⁰ Although perhaps not as derogatory as "Gook," "Cheif" also held a belittling sentiment which evoked racist stereotypes of Indigenous men.

Nicknames relating to Indigenty were widely found throughout the vernacular of GI's. Many servicemen noted their non-native counterparts often referred to territory controlled by the VietCong as 'Indian Country.'⁵¹ Speaking within the vernacular of US imperialism, non-native troops could only understand the war in the terms under which it was being sold to them. They

⁴⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 138.

⁴⁹ Danny Bruner, "Stay with That Indian," 115.

⁵⁰ Robert Sanderson, "Vietnam Powwow: The Vietnam War as Remembered by Native American Veterans [a Machine-Readable Transcription]," American Native Press Archives and Sequoyah Research Center, accessed March 22, 2022,

http://ualrexhibits.org/tribalwriters/artifacts/Sanderson_More-Indian-Voices-from-Vietnam.html#JN.

⁵¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 126.

were still the cowboys of the Wild West, except now they were fighting ‘Indians’ in the jungle, not on the plains. They could dismiss the Vietnamese people as racially inferior and primitive, thus justifying the forceful and destructive military strategies which bulldozed the Vietnamese countryside. For Indigenous troops, these metaphors were not just nicknames, but inducers of a deep moment of self reflection concerning their role in the violence. Harold Barse (Kiowa/Wichita) could not help but identify the obvious parallels between the destruction he bore witness to in Vietnam and the history of his own people. He recalls:

Because here's this little village, and here's the combat assault, choppers coming in and rockets going off target, they are shooting and they are blowing up houses, huts, and people. It doesn't take too long before you realize hey, I've seen this before on the movies. It's what the Calvary did; we're the Calvary; they are the Indians.⁵²

The US deployed the use of rhetorical propaganda to justify their action in Vietnam through the modes in which they spoke about the VietCong. These modes, specifically the use of the term “savagery,” reflected the same tactics the US had historically used in their eradication of Indigenous people from the North American continent. From the inception of the United States, the idea of savagery has been deployed in defense of colonial ambitions and the expansion of Western Civilization.⁵³ The imagery of the frontier and the violent victories over Indigenous peoples in American mythology historically reinforced notions of white cultural superiority to the “savagery” of Native Americans. Tapping into these cultural trains of thought, the United States deployed the same language to refer to the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong was constructed as an aggressor, one who engaged in savage acts of brutality and terrorism such as human shields and guerilla warfare tactics. For some non-Native GI's, this language provided a justification for the grandiose scale of their actions.

⁵² Sanderson, “Vietnam Powwow.”

⁵³ Casey Kelly, “Rhetorical Counterinsurgency: The FBI and the American Indian Movement,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 10, no. 1 (November 26, 2012): 27.

However, for Indigenous servicemen, this language further cemented the parallels between the US' imperial conquest in Vietnam and the historical genocidal treatment of Native Americans. When minority GI's who served in Southeast Asia recognized their own experiences with oppression within the lives of Vietnamese people they came into contact with, "structures of recognition" came to be. This term, coined by psychologist George Mariscal, refers to the experience of many minority GIs who served in Vietnam.⁵⁴ As they fought with the Vietnamese men began to recognize themselves and their own personal oppression in the plights of their enemies. Mariscal's work applies this phenomena to Chicano veterans of Vietnam, however the experience can be applied to Native American servicemen as well. For many ethnic minority GI's, these experiences often resulted in conflicting emotions about one's place in the military, and the moral backing to what they were doing.⁵⁵

First Moment of Radicalization: Structures of Recognition and Relation to Vietnamese

As victims of racism at the hands of the US military, Indigenous servicemen began to reflect on the racist violence they saw being inflicted on others. As they themselves participated in the abuse of East Asian people and simultaneously faced racism from their own colleagues, many began to draw parallels between the histories of their own people and the current plight of the Vietnamese. Many of these relations forced Indigenous GI's to deeply reconsider their purpose in South East Asia. In spite of their own experiences of racism, many Indigenous troops felt as though they had been brainwashed in the military's efforts to create Viet Cong killing machines. Stan Holder (Witichita) noted that as a young man, his brainwashing by the US military deeply informed the actions against the Vietnamese he took part in. Holder would go on to coordinate and lead the security forces at the Wounded Knee occupation of 1973, after his

⁵⁴ Robinson, 13.

⁵⁵ Robinson, 4.

early years were spent in Vietnam. Quoted in the documentary, *Hearts and Minds* (1974), Holder says:

I wanted to go out and kill some gooks ... I guess I had been totally brainwashed, because I could remember when people used to call me 'blanket-ass' or 'cheif,' and they still did ... I think my name was Ira Hayes in bootcamp, either Ira Hayes or Squaw ... but there I was saying I wanna go kill some gooks.⁵⁶

Despite gibes at his own racial identity, Holder believed in the advertised mission of the military so deeply that it took some time for him to separate himself from it. Preying on young men who rarely had the expertise to identify their own oppression, the military could indoctrinate them on the premises of hatred for the Vietnamese. In his memoir, Woody Kipp describes a moment of recognition as being pivotal in his personal journey of awakening and radicalization. While riding the back of a truck with fellow GI's through the countryside, Kipp observes an act of violence which he connects to the historical treatment of his ancestors. As the truck drove along, an old Vietnamese man riding a bike came into view along the side of the road. Kipped watched as a burly, red headed marine grabbed a fifty-pound concrete block and wordlessly hurled it at the biking man. The old man tumbled, head first into a shallow rice paddy below. Never turning around the marine simply said, "Hate them motherfuckers."⁵⁷ Kipp realized that the actions of the redheaded marine were not acts of warfare, but examples of racial hatred. He recalls, "How awkward and frail he looked as he hit the water. Did he survive? I eventually realized what I had seen had in fact taken place over and over as the Europeans stormed into a so-called New World and into the American West. Other old men - my grandfathers - had suffered similar treatment at the hands of American soldiers."⁵⁸ Although he admits that these connections would not be fully realized for him until his time at the Wounded Knee siege,

⁵⁶ Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds* (Warner Bros., 1974), HBOMax.

⁵⁷ Kipp, 43.

⁵⁸ Kipp, 44.

observing them in Vietnam laid the ground of a primary moment to question and doubt the validity of the US mission and his individual role in it.

During his time in the service, Russell James Redner (Western Shoshone), began to draw a similar conclusion. Speaking from his own personal experiences with the Vietnamese he recalled, “After a while, I couldn’t figure out why I was shooting at those people. I started thinking I had more in common with them than with my side, who treated me like shit because I’m a skin.”⁵⁹ These structures of recognition were glaringly obvious to some Indigenous GI’s and had serious emotional ramifications as some began questioning their own actions. Many Indigenous GI’s began to experience a cognitive dissonance over their role in the US military. Their actions did not align with their internal belief system, and this caused serious emotional turmoil for many men. For some it happened in the Pacific, and for some it didn’t set in until they had to time reflect from the home front. Either way, this tumult was prominent for many Indigenous GI’s. As Russ Redner points out, this disturbance made him question how different he really was from the Viet Cong. As a result of this new understanding of reality, comradeship with the Vietnamese was not an uncommon thought for many Indigenous GI’s.

The comparison between Native Americans and the Vietnamese was not just use of rhetorical propaganda by the United States, but the forging of a true kinship with the Vietnamese people that was felt in the hearts and minds of many Indigenous GI’s. Although many could understand the historical legacies of US imperialism which both peoples were subjected to, there were also many smaller, tangible examples of the connection between them. The first of these was a physical resemblance - brown skin and black hair. Woody Kipp recalls being referred to as the “biggest Chinaman” by fellow GI’s; his towering height being the only physical

⁵⁹ Stern, 29.

characteristic separating him from the Vietnamese.⁶⁰ During Jim Northrup's (Anishinaabe) time in the Marine Corps, this physical resemblance was not lost on the Vietnamese people either. and resulted in many interactions with local residents. Jim recalls:

It was freaky enough in Vietnam to shoot at those people and then to look at them because they had almost the same color skin, same color hair, and eyes. And the spirit they had of making do with what they had; kind of like Indian people—really primitive at times, but making do. They would come up to me and speak Vietnamese to me.⁶¹

Historian Tom Holm reported a similar kind of exchange between another anonymous Indigenous veteran and a North Vietnamese Army soldier. In the words of his informant, “One day, this VC prisoner we had pointed to my skin and hair and eyes and said ‘Same, Same’ meaning he and I were alike. I hated him for saying this but one day, out on patrol, I realized he was right, that I had been a red man killing yellow men for the white man.”⁶² For many Indigenous soldiers, this resemblance promoted not only a kinship with the Vietnamese people, but also drove home the notion of total cognitive dissonance. It brought the colonial implications of their actions to a very visible reality. Seeing themselves reflected in the Vietnamese people caused many to reconsider who they were fighting for and why they were fighting at all.

The similarities between the two peoples often overthrew the differences. Woody Kipp immediately re-enlisted after his first tour in Vietnam, citing his love for the Vietnamese people as a primary motivator.⁶³ Yet it wasn't just the physical resemblance that drew Woody to the Vietnamese, but a fondness for their culture. Kipp had numerous encounters with Vietnamese people, including having a girlfriend who inspired him to go AWOL in hopes of spending time with her in her family's home. On his conversations with the Vietnamese, Woody writes, “The pidgin English conversations were not easy but somehow familiar. Many years later, after

⁶⁰ Kipp, 36.

⁶¹ Sanderson, “Vietnam Powwow.”

⁶² Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 149.

⁶³ Kipp, 39.

digesting what had happened to the Native American peoples after the coming of the Europeans, I began to understand my connections to the Vietnamese through their understanding of nature and family, animist beliefs, and Buddhism.”⁶⁴ As Kipp points out, the values shared between these groups promoted them both to recognize much deeper likeness within each other. The Indigenous Vietnamese who resided in the countryside often lived in tribal communities, which struck a familiar nerve with many Native American GIs.⁶⁵ They also found commonalities amongst spiritual practices, as the values of Buddhism were more aligned with Indigenous religion than Christianity or Protestantism. As soldiers struggled with the moral code dictating their actions, Buddhism presented a heavy contrast to the actions of violence being committed by the United States, as well as proving to Indigenous GI’s the little they had in common with the values of the United States. However, this revelatory experience was not the case for all Indigenous Veterans, nor was their radicalization immediate. As Woody Kipp points out above, it was not till years later that he understood why he felt a sense of kinship with the Vietnamese. As young men, it took many years for these men to comprehend the evil actions that had taken place in the name of justice and freedom in Vietnam, with many still not having the knowledge to fully understand how intertwined the historical fates of their own people had been with the Vietnamese. For most men, these structures of recognition and moments of clarity only took place once they had settled back into the homefront.

⁶⁴ Kipp, 41.

⁶⁵ Robinson, 15.

Chapter Two: The Return Home

A Fragmented America

For Vietnam veterans, the return to civilian life proved to be increasingly difficult than recoupment for previous wars ever was. They had encountered astonishing levels of human-made violence in the front, and were given few resources to deal with the lasting effects of PTSD. High levels of PTSD and related mental illness among Vietnam Veterans can be attributed to the post WW1 revision of warfare. Historically, combat experience for veterans become recognizable on the homefront by the personal significance of one's actions.⁶⁶ Through family stories, veteran groups, and other places of gathering, war narratives told by soldiers serve the purposes of being a space for comradeship and bravery among those with similar experiences. After the First World War combat became mechanized, and as a result, the role of the individual soldier changed. This phenomenon accelerated in Vietnam. Rather than men who independently contribute to the result of battle, Vietnam servicemen had very little connection to the outcome of war. As a result, there was a shift in typical war narratives told upon one's return, from "courageous heroism in battle" to barely managing to survive.⁶⁷ For many Vietnam veterans, a struggle to understand what they had just gone through in the Pacific was the norm, with many feeling like cogs in a machine rather than actors in their own destinies. After having endured extreme hardships in Vietnam, veterans came home tormented by post traumatic stress disorder and a newfound social shame for participating in such a controversially destructive conflict.

Vietnam was unique in many senses. There had not been a precedent for an American conflict being so widely documented and reported upon, and thus no conflict had ever been so

⁶⁶ Russel Lawrence Barsh, "War and the Reconfiguring of American Indian Society," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 3 (2001): 371–411.

⁶⁷ Barsh, 378.

controversial for the mainstream American public. The United States' involvement in the Vietnam conflict began in 1954, as the Vietnamese people liberated themselves from their previous colonial power, France.⁶⁸ Following liberation, the country broke into Civil War. Fought between the Southern Vietnamese, who advocated for continued connections with Western colonial powers and capitalism, and the Northern Vietnamese, who had a nationalist standpoint and wished for a socialist government. At this time, the United States was in the throes of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and held onto the policy of containment, through which they sought to contain the spread of communism. Deathly afraid of the spread of communism as colonial powers fell across the global south, the United States became the self-appointed “protector” of the free market. As the civil war continued in Vietnam, President Kennedy provided the Southern Vietnamese with training resources and monetary funds. However, following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson began to escalate American involvement in Vietnam. Starting with the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, a Northern Vietnamese attack on American forces, Johnson was provided with the momentum to pass the Gulf of Tonkin resolution; this transformed the balances of power in the American government, granting the executive branch the authority to repel any armed attacks against the United States.⁶⁹ Much like in Korea, Congress never formally declared war, resulting in Vietnam never “officially” being considered a war under legislative terms. In 1965, Johnson began Operation Rolling Thunder (a carpet bombing operation of Vietnam) and committed American soldiers to the battlefield. By 1966, there were 400,000 American men in Vietnam.⁷⁰ However, with each American escalation

⁶⁸ Jeannette Estruth, “Lecture on the Vietnam War,” History 136 Surveying Displacement and Migration in the United States (class lecture, Bard College, April 14th 2022).

⁶⁹ Estruth.

⁷⁰ Estruth.

came a Northern Vietnamese escalation, as China and the Soviet Union financially supported the Northern Vietnamese.

American tactics in Vietnam were ruthless. Using herbicides and pesticides, the United States destroyed the Vietnamese countryside, burning crops and people in their wake.⁷¹ Soon enough, the measure of success for the Americans became the count of Vietnamese bodies found after a battle. It was becoming clear to the American public that dumping people and bodies in Vietnam wasn't working, and no military solution favorable to the United States was possible.⁷² At this point, the American public had also heavily turned against the conflict. The Tet offensive, a crushing defeat for the Northern Vietnamese, was a turning point for most Americans, who soon realized their country's presence in Vietnam was causing catastrophic levels of death and destruction. It was not until the election of Richard Nixon 1968 that America slowly began removing itself from the conflict. The Paris Peace accords ended the war in 1973, and after the departure of Americans the Northern Vietnamese were able to resume their war aims, and conquered Southern Vietnam by 1975.

The America to which Vietnam veterans returned was a very fragmented one. Political lines were heavily divided over the legitimacy of American presence in Vietnam. Divisions between political beliefs and an emerging political activism interest in the young severed intrapersonal relationships and split apart families. Racial tensions started to explode as well.⁷³ The summers between 1967 and 1969 would be dubbed "red summers," as urban unrest facilitated race riots throughout many metropolitan American cities.⁷⁴ Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the ending of the civil rights era, the battle for racial equality

⁷¹ Estruth.

⁷² Estruth.

⁷³ Estruth.

⁷⁴ Estruth.

became a stagnant one. Frustrated, African Americans turned to the streets in protest, where many young men and women adopted more radical political viewpoints including the Black Power movement, which called for Black self-determination. Radical politics became more prevalent in America as young college students across the country started showing an emerging interest in activism. Additionally, countercultural movements were gaining heavy traction, often combining the politics of racial justice, environmental advocacy, anti-war politics, and women's movements. Therefore, as a result of these political and cultural divisions within the United States, the return home for veterans was an uneasy one.

As veterans returned from a confusing and traumatizing war, they were not met with the "welcome home" parades that had greeted veterans of WW2. Instead they faced a divided country full of frustration and shame, devoid of all the pride and praises which typically had welcomed veterans home. As Americans turned a blind eye to the social needs of recently returned veterans, men found themselves feeling meaningless in their contributions to the war, and in the grand scale of American politics.

The Return for Indigenous Veterans

This political moment in American history set an unprecedented cultural stage for servicemen to come home to one that contributed to the national detestation for veterans, a sentiment that was even harsher towards veterans of color because of the racist mainstream beliefs of the time. Unique to Vietnam veterans, in contrast to veterans of the first and second World Wars, was an anti-veteran sentiment which permeated throughout the United States. Caught up in the intention to end US involvement in Vietnam, the American public misdirected its opposition to the war towards returning veterans. This sentiment was felt by Veteran George Lamont (Lakota), when he returned from his time as a paratrooper in Vietnam, "Then we come

back and the white people spit in our face. They call us baby killers and everything.”⁷⁵ Hostile anti-war protestors who took their frustration out on Veterans left Indigenous veterans with deepend feelings of alienation, disillusionment, and deceit.⁷⁶ In addition to racism and psychological issues stemming from under-treated PTSD, veteranship meant Native Americans had three strikes against them.⁷⁷

Although this plagued almost all veterans who returned to the states, this phenomenon was often worse for veterans of color who had to face national racism upon their return to the States. They were confronted with prejudice and ignorance directed at them due to their race as they endured the discrimination of being veterans of highly unpopular war. This malevolence from white Americans was made apparent as soon as Indigenous veterans stepped off the plane. According to one anonymous Indigenous veteran interviewed by Tom Holm, “We fought a white man’s war, you know, and the first thing that happens when I get back is that some white kid, a girl, at the L.A. airport spits on me.”⁷⁸ For Indigenous veterans, encountering this hostility was confusing and anger inducing. They were being treated like demons by the forgein country for whom they had been fighting.⁷⁹ Although they had faced some level of dcrimination within the US military, it was unlike the expansive nature of the neglect and hatred white America carried and expressed for them. Now more than ever, their veteranship and racial heritage were being thrown back in their face as “negative.” These feelings contributed to a general sentiment of dissatisfaction with larger American society and alienation from it.

However, within Indigenous communities, treatment of veterans differed from mainstream America, though it varied greatly per community. For some Indigenous veterans,

⁷⁵ Voigt, 88.

⁷⁶ Voigt, 88.

⁷⁷ Robinson, 49.

⁷⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 189.

⁷⁹ Barsh, 380.

their returns were celebrated at home. For Guy Dull Knife (Lakota) who served in Vietnam, a hero's welcome awaited him upon his return at his home reservation, Pine Ridge. Quoted by historian Russel Lawrence Barsh, Dull Knife recalls, "They didn't have much to give, but wherever I went, they would stop me on the street and slap me on the back and stuff dollar bills in my pocket."⁸⁰ According to historian Tom Holm, Indigenous communities did not think of the war in the same highly politicized context that mainstream-Americans viewed it in.⁸¹ Even when dissuaded from joining the service, men were often given support by their families, as relatives saw it as their duty to love and support the individual decisions of their family members.⁸² To community members, ensuring the safety of their loved ones was a much higher priority than expressing their distaste for the war. For this reason, most Indigenous communities did not take out their frustration about the war on their veterans, as Americans did. Yet, it is important to note that this did not ubiquitously dissuade anti-Vietnam veteran sentiment across Native America. A handful of anonymous Blackfoot veterans, interviewed by author Sarah Farman between 2001 and 2010 as part of her research on Blackfoot veterans, recalled coming home to no welcome parades or ceremonies which had greeted their fathers and grandfathers who returned from the World Wars.⁸³ It took until the 1980s for the Vietnam generation of veterans to receive recognition across all Indigenous communities through the powwow circuit.⁸⁴

Surviving the Homefront through the Poetry of Jim Northrup

Some Indigenous veterans settled in urban environments after their return, near military bases, or in Indigenous urban communities. Still, many men returned to their home reservations.

⁸⁰ Barsh, 376.

⁸¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 121.

⁸² Holm, 122.

⁸³ Sarah Farman, "Warrior Bodies in Ambiguous Conflict: Remembering Vietnam with Blackfeet Memories," in *Bodies in Conflict: Corporeality, Materiality, and Transformation* (Routledge, 2014).

⁸⁴ Voigt, 88.

The socio-economic conditions which plagued reservations at the time were dire. Hurting from the continued effects of termination and relocation policies, poverty was rampant on reservations.⁸⁵ These conditions became a motivator for enlistment, yet as veterans returned, they found themselves stuck in the same cycle of poverty they had tried to escape. One anonymous Indigenous veteran recalled feeling as though the war did not stop when he returned home, “I saw things in Vietnam I can’t forget, people dying because of me. Then I came home to the reservation and I see my people die and I can’t stop it. It’s like a war zone all over again. Sometimes I feel like my whole life has been a war.”⁸⁶ As young men of all races went to fight in the Pacific, few understood how deeply the war would impact them for the rest of their lives. Due to the crushing symptoms of PTSD, the gunfire, flares, and bombings never truly went away. As Indigenous veterans returned home, not only was the trauma from war stuck in their hearts and minds, but they were suddenly confronted with the same excruciating war with the United States that had plagued the lives of their ancestors. The weight of US colonialism did not leave their lives as it did for white veterans. Instead, they were now on the other side of the conflict, looking down the barrel of the gun that was the United States’ imperialism.

Native veterans did indeed have higher levels of post traumatic stress disorder when compared to other ethnic groups.⁸⁷ This was often, but not always, a result of *Indian Scout Syndrome* and a consequence of being given more difficult jobs due to their presumed “Indian wilderness skills.”⁸⁸ Regardless, the emotional scars of their time in the Pacific were deep. Upon their return, many Indigenous men looked back on their combat experiences as being completely negative, and the root cause of their emotional suffering.⁸⁹ Many men had experienced “age

⁸⁵ Robinson, 48.

⁸⁶ Robinson, 49.

⁸⁷ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 169.

⁸⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 137.

⁸⁹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 184.

acceleration,” resulting from having seen life, death, and destruction in a very compressed time span; and they additionally suffered from survivor's guilt as a by-product.⁹⁰ Feelings of depression and extreme rage, in addition to flashbacks and nightmares, commonly accompanied the minds of Veterans.⁹¹ To cope with this “never ending war,” Indigenous veterans did what they could to ease their own pain.

To relieve the pressure of their hardships, some men turned towards drinking. In the survey of 170 Indigenous Vietnam veterans conducted by the Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) of the Veterans Administration, eighty one percent communicated having experienced mild to severe problems with alcohol consumption.⁹² Growing frustrated with the stagnation and poverty of reservations, many veterans left their communities to look for work in urban environments. However, urban life tended to be just as fraught with hardship as life back home. Unemployment, drinking, and violence plagued urban streets too. Like many other non-native Vietnam veterans, veteranship status kept Indigenous veterans from access to stable employment.⁹³ This was often the result of both the anti-veteran sentiment and racism, rather than a lack of job qualifications. According to the same RCS survey, forty five percent of veterans surveyed were unemployed by the end of 1986.⁹⁴ With doors slamming in their faces left and right, disillusionment and frustration were common feelings among Native veterans. Jim Northrup (Anishinaabe; See Fig. 3) found himself confronted with many of these hardships upon his return from war. In Vietnam, he had served as a rifleman in the Marines Corps. Upon his return to the Midwest he became a deputy sheriff, and although he found steady employment, dealing with the traumatic ramifications of his combat experience proved to be very difficult. In

⁹⁰ Holm, “Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls Revisited,” 124.

⁹¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 184.

⁹² Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 185.

⁹³ Robinson, 49.

⁹⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 182.

an interview compiled by historian Robert Sanderson around 1993 and published by the Sequoyah National Research Center, Jim recalls being drawn to law enforcement work because of the adrenaline rush it gave him.⁹⁵ At the same time he struggled with flashbacks and nightmares, often finding it hard to articulate these emotions to those around him. As he searched for modes of healing around him, Jim found storytelling to be a fruitful outlet for his pain. His poem, “Shrinking Away,” gives a profound personal insight into the struggles of native veterans readjusting to civilian life:

Shrinking Away

Survived the war, but was
 having trouble surviving
 the peace, couldn't sleep
 more than two hours
 was scared to be
 without a gun.
 Nightmares, daymares
 guilt and remorse
 wanted to stay drunk
 all the time.
 1966 and the V.A. said
 Vietnam wasn't a war.
 They couldn't help, but
 did give me a copy of
 the yellow pages.
 Picked a shrink off
 the list. 50 bucks an
 hour, I was making 125
 a week. Spent six
 sessions establishing
 rapport, heard about his
 military life,
 his homosexuality,
 his fights with his mother
 and anything else he wanted

⁹⁵ Sanderson, “Vietnam Powwow.”

to talk about.
 At this rate, we would have
 got to me in 1999.
 Gave up on that shrink
 couldn't afford him and he
 wasn't doing me any good.
 Six weeks later my shrink
 killed himself. Great.
 Not only guilt about the
 war but new guilt about
 my dead shrink.
 If only I had a better job,
 I could have kept on
 seeing him.
 I thought we were making
 real progress, maybe in another
 six sessions, I could have
 helped him.
 I realized then that surviving
 the peace was up to me.⁹⁶

This poem provides a deeply personal first-hand account on the process of readjustment.

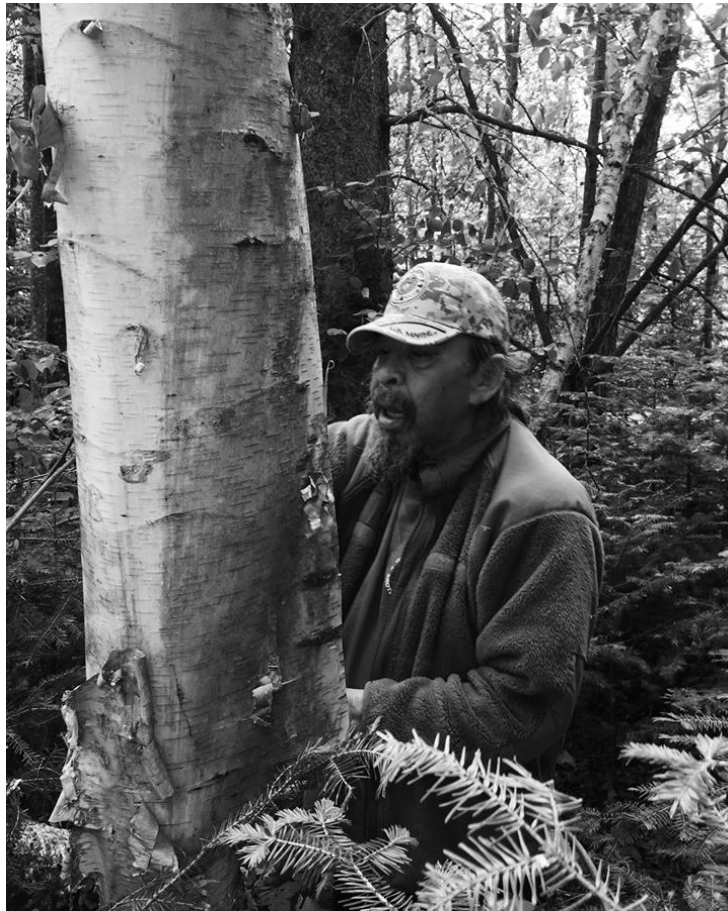
Jim's words illuminate the sentiment that surviving the Vietnam war was only half the fight.

Surviving "peace" was proving to be an even more difficult battle. The colossal symptoms of PTSD plagued his mind, and turning towards alcohol abuse brought an ease to his condition. In this poem, Jim then goes to tell of his frustrating experiences with the VA and finding mental health assistance. In his interview published by Robert Sanderson, Jim details this moment in his life, "I stay drunk all the time, or stoned, or something; I didn't want to be there anyway. So I knew there was something wrong. So I went to the VA in Chicago, Illinois, and told them I wanted to talk to somebody. And they said they couldn't help me because Vietnam wasn't a war at the time or some reason like that."⁹⁷ Northrup's disillusionment with the Veterans

⁹⁶ Sanderson, "Vietnam Powwow."

⁹⁷ Sanderson, "Vietnam Powwow."

Administration can be further explained by two historical happenings. Due to the expansion of executive power through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the American presence in Vietnam was not considered an official war. Even though American boots were on the ground in Vietnam in 1965, Congress had never officially declared war. In addition to this, health care for Native Americans was pervisously designated through the Bureau of Indian Affairs.⁹⁸ Concerning Indigenous veterans (especially veterans of a “conflict” and not an official war), the two federal branches could bounce bureaucratic responsibility for these men back and forth eternally. For Northrup, this meant that the health care services which should have been available to him through the VA were inaccessible.



⁹⁸ Estruth.

Figure. 3 Photo of Jim Northrup courtesy of the website Perfect Duluth Day. Note Jim's Vietnam Veteran ball cap, a common uniform sported by many Vietnam Veterans.

Although the VA pointed Jim towards a “shrink,” that experience proved to be disappointing and burdensome. Frustrated at his shrink's preoccupation with himself and unable to afford the treatment, Jim left the practice; only to hear of his shrink's suicide two months later. This was a resounding moment for Northrup, “I felt bad about that. I left all those guys in Vietnam to die, watched a lot of people die over there, and I came back to the real world and I felt bad about my shrink shooting himself.”⁹⁹ For Jim, the war didn't stop once he left the Pacific. It prevailed through all moments of life, making “peace” just as much of a battle as war had presented. Yet, Jim concludes his poem with the notion that healing would be a deeply personal process. Although it was not always linear or formal, healing for Indigenous veterans took many forms. Jim soon found solace in the art of storytelling. In 1989 he began a column, *Fond du Lac Follies*, which was syndicated throughout several Native American Newspapers.¹⁰⁰ Combining a warm sense of humor with witty political commentary, Jim told his readers stories about traditional Anishinaabe life and crafted jocular comments on Native American and US relations, often ones informed by his service in the military. Jim's writing gained rapid popularity during his lifetime, and his published works include *Walking the Rez Road* and *Rez Road Follies: Canoes, Casinos, Computers and Birch Bark Baskets*.¹⁰¹

A Sense of Betrayal through the Work of T.C. Cannon

In order to express conflicting emotions about their own military service, some Indigenous Vietnam veterans across 20th century conflicts focused on visual artistic

⁹⁹ Sanderson, “Vietnam Powwow.”

¹⁰⁰ Sam Roberts, “Jim Northrup, Vietnam Veteran Who Wrote About Reservation Life, Dies at 73,” *The New York Times*, August 4, 2016, sec. Books.

¹⁰¹ Roberts.

expression.¹⁰² The works of T.C. Cannon (Kiowa/Caddo) encompass the sense of betrayal felt by Native American veterans of the Vietnam war. Tommy Wayne Cannon was born on September 27th, 1949.¹⁰³ After graduating from high school in 1964, he attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he and other Indigenous students were encouraged to explore subjects beyond painted scenes of deer and buffalo that institutional Native American art depicted at the time.¹⁰⁴ Taking a pause on his education, Cannon served two years in the Vietnam War as a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division. He took part in the Tet Offensive, earning several military medals including two bronze stars, and upon his return in 1968, was inducted into the Kiow Black Legged Warrior Society.¹⁰⁵ Yet, Cannon's drawings, poetry, and music revealed many conflicting emotions about his time in Vietnam. Upon his return home, Cannon's work further played with the juxtaposition of Indigenous and white American cultures. Not only did this cement a firm message fighting the essential narrative which permeated US culture at this time, but focused on deconstructing the often presumed binary between Native and non-Native life.¹⁰⁶ He never shied away from humor and irony, often bringing those elements together with music and poetry that accompanied his paintings.

As he returned home from Vietnam, Cannon witnessed a complete disinterest from the American state in recognizing the rights and contributions of Native American veterans. His 1976 painting, *Washington Landscape with Peace Medal Indian* (See Fig. 4) demonstrates the feelings of betrayal felt by veterans. In the work, a traditionally dressed warrior sits in a vibrantly colored room. Around his neck hangs a peace medal, a historical gift from the U.S. government

¹⁰² Barsh, 372.

¹⁰³ David Gradwohl, "Cemetery Symbols and Contexts of American Indian Identity: The Grave of Painter and Poet T.C. Cannon," in *Marker XIV* (Journal of the Association of Gravestone Studies, 1997), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Anne Bolen, "An Art Revolution: T.C. Cannon Shows Native Life at The Edge Of America," NMAI Magazine, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/story/art-revolution-tc-cannon>.

¹⁰⁵ Gradwohl, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Bolen.

meant to symbolize amity and to commemorate political agreements.¹⁰⁷ Through the window over the warrior's right shoulder sits the US capitol building. Despite the peace medal and Abraham Lincoln-esque top hat in his hand, the Indigenous diplomat is removed from the source of political power. He may have been promised control over his own fate and that of his people, but here he sits, far removed from the actual means of control. This was the frustration felt by Vietnam veterans over false promises and exclusion from political control over themselves, their fates, and those of their people. Being active participants in the US military state to outside actors far removed from it permeated feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and wariness of the federal government.¹⁰⁸ It was these experiences of discrimination in the States fostered a sense of betrayal for many men.¹⁰⁹ Many felt they had been used as pawns in a white war. Facing discrimination on all sides, many veterans came to the heavy realization that the same government they had put their lives on the line for did not care about their people, nor did it care very much about them.

¹⁰⁷ Bolen.

¹⁰⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 181.

¹⁰⁹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 171.



Figure. 4 “Washington Landscape with Peace Medal Indian” by T.C. Cannon (1976) courtesy of Wiki Art.

T.C. Cannon created 80 works in lifetime including some 50 paintings as well as multiple poems and songs before a car accident took his life on May 8th, 1978 at the age of 31. Yet, his works were transformative in expressing a complex 20th Century American Indian identity and redefining Native American art within the institution of the art world. As Veterans like T.C. Cannon attempted to adjust to life on the homefront along with the hardship that came with it, many sought unorthodox avenues to alleviate their plights. Faced with these ill-fated circumstances, Indigenous veterans looked for ways to improve life for themselves and their

communities. The avenues they took to achieve this would, for some, lead to radical political activism.

Exposure to Counterculture: Ideas and Education

Service in Vietnam made veterans eligible for the GI Bill, and many took this opportunity to acquire a collegiate education. Education opportunities gave veterans the means to talk about, realize, and explain their experiences in Vietnam as well as their experiences under racism and colonialism. For Blackfoot veteran Woody Kipp, studying at the University of Montana was his first time being in a classroom with other Native students. Growing up in a reservation border town and attending almost all-white schools, this was an opportunity not previously presented to him. In 1970, Kipp joined his fellow Indigenous students in an introductory English course exclusively for Native American freshmen designed by the University to bridge the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Here, he joined his peers in contesting and questioning the material being taught to them.¹¹⁰ Kipp also became more aware of the persistent inequalities within American society, and how the difficulties experienced by his people were bound with those of other non-white races and cultures. In addition to taking classes with other Native American students, Kipp was also exposed to white counterculturalists for the first time. During the Vietnam years, universities were hot spots of radical political thinking and protest.¹¹¹ As Woody Kipp recalls, “The University of Montana campus in the fall of 1971 was full of young people with raggedy clothes and long, unkempt hair.”¹¹² Befriending many of these hippies, Kipp began to absorb new political concepts and critique the ones taught to him

¹¹⁰ Kipp, 83.

¹¹¹ Robinson, 50.

¹¹² Kipp, 84.

throughout grade school. Yet, there was a dark underbelly to encountering counterculturalism for Native Veterans.

Although they promoted peace and were outcasts from society themselves, white *hippies* were often no less demanding of Indigenous people than their conservative counterparts. It was widespread across counter-culturalists to “play Indian” in order to convey their frustration with Vietnam and American society as a whole. Playing Indian, as defined by historian Philip Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) in his monograph with the same name, is a historical phonema that has been in play since the inception of the United States. In a quest to create their own national identity, white Americans mimic stereotypical Indigenous traditions, images, clothing, ceremonies, etc while simultaneously participating in the genocidal erasure of real Native American people.¹¹³ From the Boston Tea party to the creation of the Boy Scouts, “playing Indian” creates a national American character that is paradoxical. It allows for white Americans to be both Indian and white. This playing gives them permission to engage with “savagery” and “nobility” simultaneously. By the Vietnam era, Indian play was used to articulate and soothe white anxieties about the purposelessness of modern life.¹¹⁴ In the face of an arbitrary imperial war and a politically fragmented society, counterculturalists found “Indianness” to represent an authentic American past, and for them, Playing Indian was a means to reconnect to their “authentic” self and obtain a mode of “primitive resistance” against broader American society.¹¹⁵ Protesting American action in Vietnam was central to this form of Indian play as, “To play Indian was to become vicariously a victim of United States Imperialism.”¹¹⁶ This took the form of growing out one's hair, wearing buckskin, creating posters with Peter Max designs and Aztlán

¹¹³ Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (Yale University Press, 1998), 161.

¹¹⁴ Deloria, 161.

¹¹⁵ Deloria, 163.

¹¹⁶ Deloria, 161.

eagles, smoking the peace pipe, etc.¹¹⁷ Yet, as these Americans played with symbolic Indianness, they were largely disconnected from real Indigenous people. Although some white counter-culturalists became involved with the Red Power movement, those who placed politics in a detached and symbolic Indianness found themselves with a haphazard conglomeration of symbols, “crunched together around an ill-defined notion of rebellion.”¹¹⁸

Woody Kipp encountered this phenomena among the counter-culturalists he met during his time at the University of Montana. While spending time at *Eddie's Club*, a local hippie hangout, Kipp and his friend Sherman Jenkins got into a physical altercation with one of the local white hippies. Starting from a drunken miscommunication, the altercation escalated and soon the white man was looking for his shotgun to, “blow the fucking Indians to Kingdom Come.”¹¹⁹ Kipp and friends moved outside quickly before the man returned, but they knew their days of living peacefully among the flower children were done.¹²⁰ Kipp recalls, “We had discovered that hippies might talk peace, but it was just a decoy, that they were as violent as their forebears.”¹²¹ For Kipp and his friends, this moment was yet another reminder that no white crusade would ever save them or have Indigenous peoples’ interests at heart. Although they had felt a removed sense of kinship with these long-haired white people, at the end of the day they received the same violence and misconceptions from them as they did the rest of America. The sense of betrayal and alienation would be ubiquitous in encounters with white people of all varieties. As veterans continuously found frustration while attempting to relate to white America, many turned to traditional Indigenous modes of healing to ease their hardships.

¹¹⁷ Deloria, 164.

¹¹⁸ Deloria, 165.

¹¹⁹ Kipp, 113.

¹²⁰ Kipp, 113.

¹²¹ Kipp, 112.

Searching for Healing: Traditional Ceremonies

For those who had access, traditional return ceremonies provided healing from not only veterans' PTSD symptoms, but also from the feelings of betrayal and alienation they were experiencing as a result of their return to America. In his monograph, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, historian Tom Holm strives to shed light on the strength of Native American communities in socially absorbing veteran's wartime trauma and PTSD through participation in tribal honoring and healing ceremonies. Using research he was part of gathering for the Readjustment Counseling Service of the Veterans Administration, he successfully shows a high correlation between the easement of PTSD for Indigenous veterans of Vietnam and their participation in tribal rituals and ceremonies of healing.¹²² Not all Indigenous communities have return and restoration ceremonies, and those that do take a wide variety of forms. Meant to remove the stigma of death and the disharmony caused by war, some tribal healing ceremonies focused on social absorption of the individual veteran's trauma.¹²³ Some were welcomed home with special dances, peyote ceremonies, and prayer meetings.¹²⁴ Ceremonies like the Blessing Way of the Navajo or the Stomp Dance of the Creeks, Seminoles, and Cherokees asserted the groups' unity and the individual's importance to their community.¹²⁵ Although some veterans like Woody Kipp looked towards formal non-Indigenous education opportunities as means to continue their readjustment process, many also looked towards traditional modes of Indigenous knowledge for healing. In the 1960s, a broad cultural revival

¹²² The scope of this project is contained with Veteran political participation, but for further information on participation in traditional ceremonies as a mode of healing see Tom Holm's *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, pages 183 to 197, and his article "Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls Revisited: The Research, the Findings, and Some Observations of recent Native Veteran Readjustment" published in *Wicazo Sa Review* (Spring 2017).

¹²³ Holm, "Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls Revisited," 123.

¹²⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 189.

¹²⁵ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 189.

was spreading through Indigenous communities.¹²⁶ When the Veteran Administration's services and treatments proved to be futile and inadequate for treating not only PTSD but for providing employment and other social services, some men turned towards traditional Indigenous spiritual customs for healing.

The Navajo people have a few different types of ceremonies for returning soldiers. The Enemy Way ceremony, sometimes referred to as the Squaw Dance, is a four to seven day ceremony for veterans who have seen combat (See Fig. 5).¹²⁷ It involves the retelling of the story of the Hero Twins, who made the world a safer place for human beings by ridding it of monsters, but upon their victory abused their powers and disrupted the harmony of the world. Thus, the first Enemy Way ceremony was performed upon the Twins to restore their harmony and the balance of nature.¹²⁸ The ceremony is quite complex, involving multiple medicine men, days of fasting, songs and prayers, but for veterans who take part in it, it is an incredibly healing experience. An anonymous Navajo Veteran said of his Enemy Way ceremony, "I didn't completely believe in the ceremony, but I went through it. It did purify me. It's real, it's not something that is just symbolic."¹²⁹ For veterans who participated in these types of ceremonies, a strong sense of self and purpose was often a result of their experiences. The ceremonies gave veterans a sense of pride in their service and their communal heritage, opening up significant routes for readjustment and reinstitution to society.

¹²⁶ Robinson, 50.

¹²⁷ "Coming Home | Native Words, Native Warriors," National Museum of The American Indian, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/coming-home>.

¹²⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 188.

¹²⁹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 188.



Figure 5. “The Black Pot Drum of the Enemy Way” by Carl Gorman (1971) courtesy of The National Museum of the American Indian.

John Ground III (Blackfoot) enlisted in 1966 and served two tours in Vietnam. When he came back he returned to the Blackfoot reservation in Montana.¹³⁰ John soon became involved in the local powwow circuit as a means to rediscover himself through his cultural heritage, and went on to dance in powwows across the US. John created his own unique regalia which represented his hybrid identity as a Blackfoot warrior and a US veteran.¹³¹ In a series of interviews taking place between 2001 and 2010, John showed these items to author Sarah Farman. They included a black pair of traditional buckskin leggings lined with the stars and

¹³⁰ Farman, 190.

¹³¹ Farman, 190.

stripes of the United States flag. For John, keeping the US flag on his regalia was an important means to define the tradition of Blackfoot military service as part of his cultural identity, “We also list many Blackfeet people under that flag.”¹³² Engaging with traditionalism as a mode of healing did not always take the form of cultural ceremonies like powwows or sweat lodges; some men came to feel that engaging with white capitalism and culture was the antithesis of their Indigenous heritage. Championing cries for self-determination, they found the Red Power movement and its traditional Indigenous values to be an avenue for reconciliation within themselves and greater purpose.

For those who did not have direct ties to spirituality or community access to it, returning to the traditional ideals of warriorhood proved to be a connection to their own Indigentity; joining in on political activism was to be a successful means of achieving this. The Red Power movement drew many veterans in.¹³³ It championed the recognition of Indigenous treaty rights, an end to the destructive policies of termination, and an overall care for the cultural survival of Native peoples. Although Red Power emerged during the same period as the Black power movement, the goals of each movement were a bit different. “Black Power” rebutted integration for African Americans, while “Red Power” (although drawing heavily on Black Power) called for Indigenous nationalism, sovereignty, and decolonization.¹³⁴ Red Power not only held promises of political control and sovereignty, it also gave a new definition to the role of the warrior.

¹³² Farman, 190.

¹³³ Holm, 176.

¹³⁴ Voigt, 88.

Chapter Three: The Siege at Wounded Knee, 1973

An Introduction to the American Indian Movement

The American Indian Movement was founded in 1968 by Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. It originated as a response to the substandard conditions of urban life created by the federal relocation program, though they soon began to broaden their agenda. AIM monitored police brutality in the Twin Cities, worked to improve housing conditions for Native American families, and opened two Indigenous run schools which sought to educate Indigenous children about their communities history and cultural customs schools.¹³⁵ AIM was pan-tribal and focused on political change, a path that would eventually lead to involvement in militant Red Power activism.¹³⁶ However, it is important to note that as membership grew, the American Indian Movement defined itself as a spiritual movement.¹³⁷ Revitalizing traditional Indigenous spiritual and religious practices while emphasizing the passing of that knowledge to future generations, was fundamental to everything the movement did. Though they were not the first pan-Indian group that focused on national Indigenous issues, their activism brought unparalleled non-native attention to the plight of Indigenous people. The Red Power Movement gained national traction after the nineteen month long occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969. Local Bay Area Indigenous activists observed that the abandoned Alcatraz prison in the San Francisco Bay could be claimed by the Sioux under the 1869 Treaty of

¹³⁵ Bradley Shreve, "Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities," *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education* (blog), August 20, 2015, <https://tribalcollegejournal.org/survival-schools-the-american-indian-movement-and-community-education-in-the-twin-cities/>.

¹³⁶ Robinson, 55.

¹³⁷ Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 103.

Fort Laramie which allowed the Sioux to claim any unused federal land.¹³⁸ John Trudell (Santee Dakota), a Navy Veteran who had recently returned from his last tour in Vietnam, became the spokesman for “Radio Free Alcatraz” during the occupation. He would go on to have a central role as a spokesman for AIM and was present at the 1973 siege at Wounded Knee. Although the occupation of Alcatraz was officially organized by a different group called “Indians of all Nations,” the occupation brought national attention to the injustices and treaty violations committed by the United States against Indigenous People, and got the ball rolling for a string of Red Power occupations and protests that would occur in the 1970s.

Although AIM was not a coalition of Indigenous Veterans, the veterans' presence in AIM was instrumental from the organization's birth. Founder Dennis Banks (Ojibwe) was a veteran of the Korean War. Stationed on an Air Force base in Japan, his time in service allowed him to create structures of recognition formed later by Native servicemen in Vietnam. In his memoir, Banks recalls being ordered to kill nonviolent Japanese student protesters and Buddhists monks if they set foot on the base. From his position inside, Banks witnessed the brutal beatings of monks and nuns by military police. He writes, “During my struggles in the American Indian Movement, I have seen BIA police wield their clubs at Indians like that. Each time my memory flashed back to what I saw that day in Japan.”¹³⁹ Just like the men in Vietnam, Banks' military experience gave in a global understanding of imperial violence, one that was highly reminiscent of his experiences as an Indigenous man in America. His time in the service, like theirs, informed his political actions upon his return home.

¹³⁸ The occupation of Alcatraz island was a major turning point for Red Power. For more on the occupation see Troy R. Johnson's *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination, and the Rise of Indian Activism* (1996) and Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior's *Like a Hurricane: the Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (1997).

¹³⁹ Banks and Erdoes, 54.

It is important to note that Vietnam veterans did not return home united nor did they form large political groups together. Rather, they joined the preexisting, although recently formed Red Power movements, of which the American Indian Movement happened to be an example. Although founding members of AIM had military backgrounds, Native veterans contributed mostly to the revival of traditional warrior culture within AIM, not its founding.¹⁴⁰ Although veteran issues were part of the movement's agenda during its years, the scale of Vietnam's influence on the Red Power movement would not start to take shape until the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973.

Historical Context: The Pine Ridge Reservation

Of all political demonstrations organized by the American Indian Movement, the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee was the most widely memorable. To understand the occupation of Wounded Knee, one must first understand the conditions of the Pine Ridge Reservation that painted the backdrop for the siege. The Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations are located next to each other in South Dakota, and are to this day inhabited by the Sicangu Lakota Oyate and the Oglala Lakota.¹⁴¹ For the sake of clarity, the terms Lakota and Sioux are often used interchangeably to refer to the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains region. However, Sioux was never a self-given name, rather the term was given to the Lakota and Dakota peoples by French trappers; it derives from a derogatory term: *natowessiwak* or "little snakes," and was used by their enemies, the Obijwe, to describe them.¹⁴² Sioux is typically used to refer to a confederacy of several tribes who speak three different dialects: Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota.

¹⁴⁰ Robinson, 55.

¹⁴¹ "History & Culture," Rosebud Sioux Tribe Tribal Historic Preservation, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.rosebudsiouxtribe-nsn.gov/history-culture>.

¹⁴² Kathy Weiser, "Lakota, Dakota, Nakota – The Great Sioux Nation – Legends of America," Legends of America, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-sioux/>; "Lakota or Sioux?," *Black Hills Visitor* (blog), September 6, 2017, <https://blackhillsvisitor.com/learn/lakota-or-sioux/>.

Nonetheless, these peoples generally refer to themselves as Lakota or Dakota, meaning “friends or allies.”

Beginning in 1935 under the Indian Reorganization Act, the Oglala Lakota of the Pine Ridge reservation implemented a tribal government with democratically elected chairmen who held two-year terms. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was heavily involved with creating and implementing this new western government. In 1972, an Oglala Lakota man named Dick Wilson was elected as the tribal chairman. His time in power brought rampant corruption and a regime of violence against those opposed to Wilson’s tribal authority in favor of traditional modes of leadership. Through the use of his auxiliary tribal police, known as the “GOON squad” (Guardians of Oglala Nation), Wilson attempted controlled dissent within the community. The GOON squad broke up oppositional meetings and harassed individuals who spoke out against Wilson or his government.¹⁴³ Using his control over tribal funds and assistance programming, Wilson cut off aid to groups who disfavored him.¹⁴⁴ He was accused of fraud, public fund malversation, and the restriction of constitutional rights for select opposing Oglalas to free assembly, due process, and protection from unreasonable search and seizures.¹⁴⁵

The strongest opposition to Wilson’s government came from the Lakota elders who adhered to traditional forms of governance. They believed that the real relationship between the Lakotas and the federal government was founded in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, not the 1935 government constructed under BIA supervision. Under the elders’ eyes, the 1868 treaty was a contract between two sovereign nations. Wilson's federally backed tribal government was thus an imposition, not supported by the same sovereign Lakota-Dakota group which signed the

¹⁴³ Michael Leroy Oberg, “New Deals and Old Deals,” in *Native America: A History, Second Edition* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 276.

¹⁴⁴ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee* (PBS, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgKJ6UTRMJ4>.

¹⁴⁵ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 176.

1868 treaty. For this reason, Wilson and his corrupted administration were not viewed as legitimate tribal authority by many of the Oglala people.¹⁴⁶ As Wilson's corruption grew, Oglala elders formed the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO); OSCRO began gathering boxes of evidence to enable them to impeach Wilson on the basis of civil rights violations.¹⁴⁷ However, this attempt was defeated by Wilson through voting fraud, witness intimidation, and forced control of his own impeachment hearings.¹⁴⁸ His authority being challenged, Wilson called upon the federal authorities for military support.¹⁴⁹ It was also at this time that he installed .50-caliber machine guns atop the tribal council building. Tension on the reservation was escalating quickly, as OSCRO called upon the American Indian Movement to assist them against the ubiquitous violence implemented by Wilson and the GOON squad. The Oglala elders had exhausted all possible options and knew that AIM, unlike any other Red Power organization, could bring the man-power and media attention needed to tell their story. As a response, Wilson banned all American Indian Movement members from using tribal property on the Pine Ridge reservation.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, led by Russell Means and Dennis Bank, AIM arrived in February of 1973 hoping to bring the attention of the world to the crisis on the Pine Ridge reservation.¹⁵¹

In late February of 1973, members of the American Indian Movement arrived at a community meeting between dissenting Oglalas and traditionalist elders who both opposed Wilson. There, AIM proposed a radical plan to seize and occupy the town of Wounded Knee.¹⁵² Their goals were not only to remove Dick Wilson from office, but to bring national attention to the American Indian cause. With permission from Oglala elders including Ellen Moves Camp

¹⁴⁶ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 176.

¹⁴⁷ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee*.

¹⁴⁸ Banks and Erdoes, 146.

¹⁴⁹ Oberg, 275.

¹⁵⁰ Banks and Erdoes, 130.

¹⁵¹ Oberg, 276.

¹⁵² Stern, 181.

and Frank Fools Crow, the oldest traditional chief present, AIM and their supporters drove to the small town of Wounded Knee where, eighty three years before, the famous massacre of three hundred Lakota people by the United States Government had taken place.¹⁵³ It was on this night that the occupation of Wounded Knee began. Thirteen days later on March 11th 1973, the defenders released a statement declaring their independence as the sovereign Oglala Nation under the 1868 Treaty of Laramie.



Figure 6. The Defenders of Wounded Knee courtesy of the Akwesasne Notes' 1976 book *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973, in the Words of the Participants*.

Veterans at The Occupation of Wounded Knee

As many young Indigenous men and women heard about the stand at Wounded Knee, they hopped in their cars and headed straight for South Dakota. According to historian Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), many of this generation who had been raised to understand their future

¹⁵³ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee*.

as a path of assimilation now saw a new type of Indigenous identity unfolding on their televisions.¹⁵⁴ Russ Redner was one of many AIM supporters nationwide who took to the road when he heard of the events unfolding at Wounded Knee. Joined by friends Calvin and Alan Aubrey and Willard Carlson, they loaded up a car with guns, ammunition, medicine, and camping gear, heading east to South Dakota.¹⁵⁵ Woody Kipp, a journalism student at the University of Minnesota, convinced his professor to let him leave class to attend the protest, provided he did a report on the occupation.¹⁵⁶ After saying goodbye to his newborn daughter and wife, Kipp bought a snudnosed .38 and hit the road with friends Bradley LaPlant, another veteran of Vietnam, and Joe Boy Morris.

Despite their time in the Pacific, the scene which greeted the young veterans in South Dakota was unlike anything they had ever seen. The central location of the takeover was a church, which sat on the rise of a large spherical mesa.¹⁵⁷ About a mile away, a ridge lined the horizon around the church. It was from this position that the federal government shot down into the defenders who sat at the center of the bowl. The defenders' numbers rested between 200 and 300. Armed with .22s and a few shotguns, they faced off against FBI agents, federal officers, BIA police, and the GOON squad, all armed with a cornucopia of the latest military equipment. This was not the first time in recent years that an Indigenous rights group had occupied a site in protest; it had precedents in San Francisco and Washington DC. However, this was the first rural setting which had been occupied, previous occupations had taken place in urban environments such as San Francisco and downtown Washington D.C., thus giving federal agents the opportunity to exercise less restraint in the militarization of their response.¹⁵⁸ In the very first

¹⁵⁴ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee.*

¹⁵⁵ Jessica Cejnar, "Film Chronicles Yurok Man's Activism from the Wounded Knee Uprising to Standing Rock," Lost Coast Outpost (Lost Coast Outpost, October 4, 2019).

¹⁵⁶ Kipp, 113.

¹⁵⁷ Stern, 181.

¹⁵⁸ Oberg, 277.

few days of the siege, special agent in charge, Joseph Trimabch, was told by his superiors that he could have “anything he wanted.”¹⁵⁹ To Trimbach, this was a beautiful blank check, resulting almost immediately in federal agents being sent to Rapid City to buy every single rifle they could find. Roadblocks were set up around the 15 miles perimeter of Wounded Knee, and Dick Wilson even set up his own roadblocks outside of those erected by the US military.¹⁶⁰ The defenders’ armory paled in comparison to that of their opposition, who had brought high-powered rifles, submachine guns, armored personnel carriers, night-vision Starscopes, armed personnel carriers, and fighter jets.¹⁶¹ The defenders of Wounded Knee were primarily armed with .22s, hunting rifles of 10.06 caliber, a few smaller shotguns, and the weapon the media would make the greatest deal of: one AK-47 of Czech origin, a souvenir that Kiowa veteran Bobby Onco brought back from Vietnam. They had no ammunition for the gun.¹⁶²

Although many historians have recorded the history of the Wounded Knee occupation, there has yet to be a single holistic work published on veteran participation in military aspects of the siege. Tom Holm’s expert analysis of Veteran participation in the construction of Wounded Knee’s defense structures stands as one of the most comprehensive studies of Veteran influence at the siege; yet this is still a highly under-researched phenomenon. What is known is that Indigenous Veterans were a prominent group at the occupation, and one that assisted in the defense of the village. Many had experienced the injustice of the colonial system as residents of Pine Ridge, but others traveled from across the nation to assist the defenders.¹⁶³ Indigenous veterans came to the aid of the Oglala for a variety of reasons, but many had in fact channeled their feelings of betrayal and disillusionment into radical political activism.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee.*

¹⁶⁰ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee.*

¹⁶¹ Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne, “Everybody Can Go Home,” *Akwesasne Notes*, no. 2 (April 1973), 20.

¹⁶² Banks and Erdoes, 163.

¹⁶³ Oberg, 278.

¹⁶⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 171.

The first evidence of the influence of Vietnam Veterans at Wounded Knee is the structural organization of the defenders. Outmanned and outgunned by the US military and their allies, the occupiers' most imperative issue was defending their position. In his autobiography, *Where White Men Fear to Tread*, Russell Means, leader and spokesman for AIM, recalls asking all Vietnam Vets and anyone experienced with military service, to come forward in the early days of the occupation.¹⁶⁵ Bill Means answered his brother's call, and along with Stan Holder, a veteran of three Vietnam tours, they became the heads of security for Wounded Knee. Veterans with ranks of AIM leadership at Wounded Knee included: Dennis Banks (Korea), John Trudell (Vietnam), Bill Means (Vietnam), John Arbuckle (Vietnam), and Stanley Holder (Vietnam).¹⁶⁶ However, understanding the actual percentage of Veterans in the population of the siege is difficult, and no exact number exists. In his dissertation for Canterbury Christ Church University, historian Edward J. Robinson explains that Veterans at Wounded Knee were more akin to an officer class rather than infantryman.¹⁶⁷ According to Russell Means, veterans at the scene were tasked with training other members who did not have military experience.¹⁶⁸ Civilians were organized into squads, each of which was headed by veterans with combat experience. There were originally forty-five members of the Wounded Knee security team, organized into four squads.¹⁶⁹ However, in reality, this number was subject to change as defenders came and went, and it is not a reflection of the variety of military backgrounds and levels of experience within the ranks of the defenders.

¹⁶⁵ Russell Means, *Where White Men Fear to Tread* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995), 259.

¹⁶⁶ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 179.

¹⁶⁷ Robinson, 63.

¹⁶⁸ Means, 259.

¹⁶⁹ Robinson, 65.



Figure 7. WK defenders cleaning weapons at the security headquarters, courtesy of the Akwesasne Notes' 1976 book *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973, in the Words of the Participants*.



Figure 8. Inside WK security headquarters, a map showing Wounded Knee and government bunkers hangs above the radio headquarters, courtesy of the Akwesasne Notes' 1976 book *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973, in the Words of the Participants*.

Drawing on their military training, veterans at Wounded Knee played a prominent role in building the defenses of the village. Primarily, they established a perimeter around the village, protecting it between two lines of fire.¹⁷⁰ They dug trenches and built bunkers out of plywood and implemented fighting holes: an imitation of American tactics in Vietnam. According to Historian Tom Holm's analysis of Wounded Knee, these trenches were dug in a position which allowed the defender's lines of fire to overlap, giving them the opportunity to provide cover for each other.¹⁷¹ Unlike the federal agents on the ridge who had endless access to ammunition and supplies, the defenders had to use the materials available to them within the limits of the town. Just about anything would do for creating cover, and even sandbags were made from old pillowcases and trash bags

When they arrived at the hamlet of Wounded Knee, Woody Kipp and his friend and fellow Vietnam Veteran Bradley LaPlant, were quickly assigned to a bunker. Located on a hillside, their bunker was named "Denby Bunker," and from within the men could see the armored personnel carriers about half a mile away. The bunker itself was constructed with a dirt wall in front and topped with sandbags.¹⁷² Monitoring the government was the men's main task at the bunker.¹⁷³ Anyhow, given the number of rounds fired being estimated at between 40,000 and 130,000, there is no doubt that the defenses built by the occupants, makeshift as they were, contributed to the miraculously low death toll at the siege. According to Vietnam and Wounded Knee Veteran Roger Iron Cloud: "[we] took more bullets in seventy-one days than we did in two years in Vietnam."¹⁷⁴ By the end of the siege, two Indigenous men, Frank Clearwater and Buddy

¹⁷⁰ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 177.

¹⁷¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 178.

¹⁷² Kipp, 131.

¹⁷³ Kipp, 128.

¹⁷⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 179.

Lamont, were killed by US fire. One federal agent was paralytically wounded. The Wounded Knee fortifications and their occupiers survived heavy gunfire from federal agents, and withstood several fusillades without falling.¹⁷⁵ Undoubtedly, these military style defenses implemented by Veterans, who learned from the very government at which they were shooting at, saved countless lives.

Vietnam at Wounded Knee

As Woody Kipp lay peering at the ACPS on the horizon, he was reminded that Wounded Knee felt like the war in which he had recently served: intense periods of boredom that were only shattered by moments of intense adrenaline. Wounded Knee was not just structured like Vietnam internally, rather the entire occupation felt akin to Vietnam. Veterans like Kipp picked up on this immediately, and in fact began naming parts of Wounded Knee after Vietnam. For example, a defensible perimeter was established around the town. Lying between it and the government forces was a strip of land which became known to occupiers as the DMZ or “demilitarized zone,” a term used by the military in Vietnam.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, the occupier's supply route was labeled “AIM's Ho Chi Minh road,” named after the highway which runs from the North to the South of Vietnam.¹⁷⁷ Yet it was not just the physical landscape which reminded veterans of Vietnam, the sheer amount of armory brought by the US government and number of shots exchanged mirrored the level of force they had previously seen in the Pacific.

These nicknames were not just jokes made in passing; Wounded Knee was a war zone. The levels of armory being used and persistence of gunfire mirrored, and sometimes exceeded, veteran memories of Vietnam. Russ Redner recalled that the gunfire he saw at Wounded Knee

¹⁷⁵ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans*, 178.

¹⁷⁶ Banks and Erdoes, 163.

¹⁷⁷ Robinson, 65.

was some of the worst he had ever encountered anywhere.¹⁷⁸ For veteran Woody Kipp, the amount of fire not only paralleled his time in Vietnam, but so did the machinery being used. One night as he returned to his bunker, enemy fire broke out in front of him. Directly ahead, an APC had opened fire on the compound with its 30-caliber machine gun. As Kipp lay flat on the ground, bullets streaking over the top of his bunker and into the night, he realized that these were the same machine guns he had been trained to use to kill the Vietcong.¹⁷⁹

In spite of the high level of armory, some of the most ruthless tactics used by the federal government at Wounded Knee were those meant to starve out the American Indians. The FBI shot more flares up during the seventy-one days at Wounded Knee than they did during the entirety of the Vietnam conflict.¹⁸⁰ Keeping the sky lit all throughout the night took away the Indian's advantage to leave the compound for supplies that came with darkness. Additionally, the noise was enough to keep the defenders awake into long hours of the night. Many years later, in a conversation with Kenneth Stern, Russ Redner described the tactics used by defenders to evade the lights: "The youngsters would run, fall to the ground when a flare went up, run some more, before the next flare. They got pretty good at it."¹⁸¹ Other AIM activists, who would later be arrested during the LoudHawk case along with Russ including KaMook Banks, Kenny Loudhawk and Anna Mae Aquasha, filled this role during the siege. None of them were much older than 16 at the time.¹⁸² Woody Kipp also instantly noticed the similarity in flare usage. As he concealed himself from the US military to sneak onto the Wounded Knee Compound, he and his party were inhibited by the flares being shot up by the US. He recalls:

¹⁷⁸ Stern, 29.

¹⁷⁹ Kipp, 131.

¹⁸⁰ Stern, 336.

¹⁸¹ Stern, 181.

¹⁸² Stern, 181.

Suddenly a popping sound punctuated the night. I was shocked - I knew that sound. I had heard it every night for twenty months in Vietnam as the security forces defended the air base at Da Nang, unleashing flares to light up the Vietnamese night to see if Victor Charlie was coming through the concertina wire. In that moment in the ravine, I realized that the United States Military was looking for me with those flares. I was the gook now.¹⁸³

As he evaded the US military roadblocks to enter the Wounded Knee Compound, Kipp had an epiphany. The very army he had fought for turned against him, as Kipp gained a world breaking understanding that America was *not* what he believed it to be. He entered Wounded Knee as a different type of warrior than the Woody Kipp who fought in the Pacific. This time, he was a warrior who defined himself through his Indigenous identity.

For Veterans, comparisons to Vietnam were much more than practical. Wounded Knee was not just another chance to relive their time in the Pacific. This time the men approached their role from a traditionally Indigenous and anti-US standpoint. This was a chance to redefine masculinity within their identities and into the context they so desired. Rather than fighting an imperial war thrust upon them, the siege was a healing process for many, one that worked to reclaim the sense of self that had been taken from them by the United States military.

At Wounded Knee, these men felt a novel sense of solidarity with the VietCong. The structures of recognition built in Vietnam gave veterans the ability to feel a small sense of solidarity with one's former enemies. But at Wounded Knee, this solidarity extended by physical features and cultural similarities. Combat veterans understood their position to be extremely similar to that of the Vietnamese. They were now nonwhite revolutionists unable to compete with the level of military technology being used against them, rather than cogs in the American military. Similarly, these groups were fighting to preserve their traditional way of life against the very same imperial power who threatened them. Many defenders believed that Wounded Knee

¹⁸³ Kipp, 127.

deserved to be given the same national attention which was given to Vietnam, and demanded that the then Secretary of State, William P. Rogers, come to Pine Ridge for peace negotiations.

Quoted in the 2009 PBS Documentary *We Shall Remain*, one young man emphasized this belief saying, “I don’t see why the North Vietnamese should take precedence over the American Indian people. We’ve been fighting this war for four hundred years, and if [America] can spare the time to go there, [Rogers] should be able to spare the time to come over here.”¹⁸⁴

From a tactical perspective, veterans found themselves to be in the same position as the VietCong had been. While in the Pacific many had observed a correlation between Vietnam and the Indians Wars of the late 1800s, now the parallels had never before been so obvious and contemporary to veterans. Like the VietCong, the Wounded Knee defenders took on guerilla warfare tactics as their position was exclusively defensive. They relied on stealth and a deeper understanding of the local rural landscape to remain moving and avoid being trapped in long exchanges of fire with an over armored enemy. Outmatched by the US government, the patience to outlast the adversary was central to each AIM’s strategy, just as it was to the Viet Cong’s.¹⁸⁵

To veterans inside the compound, it was clear that the tables had turned. The country whom they had carried arms for had now turned the guns on them. Some described moments of epiphany when they realized this fact. In his memoir, Woody Kipp recalled thinking of what was said to him by a Vietnamese man upon witnessing Kipp’s tattoo of an American Indian man, “*You same same VietCong.*”¹⁸⁶ When the comment was made, Kipp thought little of it, but now the statement rang true and loud within him. After shooting erupted on the fourth day after federal ultimatum deadline passes, Kipp and fellow Vietnam veteran LaPlant, take hold in their defense bunker: “We lay flat on the ground, the bullets streaking over us at a distance of about

¹⁸⁴ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee.*

¹⁸⁵ Robinson, 70.

¹⁸⁶ Kipp, 131.

four feet, the red tracers sparking the night air into a deadly brilliance. These were the same machine guns I had been trained to use to kill VietCong. *You same same VietCong.*¹⁸⁷ Russ Redner, who still had shrapnel from Vietnam inside of him as he defended the Wounded Knee compound, arrived at a similar conclusion to Kipp. Redner recalls: “But the firefighters at Knee were the worst I ever went through. Remember how they were, Kenny? Man, I couldn't believe that there I was, pointing a .22 across a ridge. You know who was on the other side, directing M-16s at me? My old commander!”¹⁸⁸ Various FBI and federal agents, just like their counterparts inside the occupation, were veterans of Vietnam as well. In fact, looking out over the army side could mean recognizing some familiar faces. For Redner this meant seeing the men who had previously had his back in combat, the same men who now pointed their guns at him. For Colonel Warner of the US Army Special Forces 82nd Airborne Division, who had been standing by in Omaha, Nebraska, this meant recognizing many of the men he trained who were now on the other side.¹⁸⁹ Although it is unknown whether or not Redner himself served under Warner, it can be deduced that he was not the only Wounded Knee defender who recognized faces behind enemy lines. For veterans who were looking down the barrel of the US military, recognizing those whom they had served alongside them cemented the notion that they were no longer fighting as pawns dragged in to defend the imperial side of a colonial war. They understood themselves as the “VietCong” now.

¹⁸⁷ Kipp, 131.

¹⁸⁸ Stern, 29

¹⁸⁹ Voigt, 96.



Figure 9. US Marshal's bunker on the Eastern perimeter of Wounded Knee, courtesy of the Akwesasne Notes' 1976 book *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973, in the Words of the Participants*.

Reclaiming Warriorhood at Wounded Knee

However, as veteranship of Vietnam meant that many defenders felt a sense of kinship with the Vietnamese people, it was not the only motivator in separating their personal military service and masculine identity from the US imperial mission. For these men there was a newfound sense of purpose behind their militancy, and that purpose was spiritual. Veterans at Wounded Knee sought to take their orders from traditional Indigenous influences. This gave them the ability to define their warriorhood through their own cultural values and self-determination, rather than participation a white-led imperial conflict.

Above all else, the American Indian Movement defined itself as a spiritual movement.¹⁹⁰ Clyde Bellecourt, who co-founded the movement with Banks in 1968, recalled that, "Everything we did was preceded by prayer."¹⁹¹ According to Bellecourt, one of the first things the occupiers did upon arrival to Wounded Knee was build an Inipi sweat lodge in which everyone was

¹⁹⁰ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee*.

¹⁹¹ *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee*.

required to purify themselves and pray to The Creator for assistance.¹⁹² Spiritual preparation and decompression for battle was a daily routine. Those who were tasked with bunker duty during the occupation were on a rotating schedule that allowed for each to purify themselves with nightly sweat baths.¹⁹³ Woody Kipp recalls his first sweat bath took place at Wounded Knee. It occurred five days into the occupation when the United States government issued an ultimatum: the occupiers must lay down their weapons and surrender. Ultimately, this would not bring an end to the siege, but as the deadline approached those inside the compound began to brace for war. Kipp and the other warriors of AIM began to spiritually prepare themselves. Leonard Crow Dog, a medicine man and spiritual leader of AIM, prepared a sweat lodge. The ceremony concluded in front of buffalo skull art where the men knelt to pray, while Crow Dog painted each man's face for war and possibly death. In this particular context, the painting signified to the Creator that these men were his children, and that if they died that day, they would be recognizable as such.¹⁹⁴ However, not all who came to aid Wounded Knee knew of traditional Indigenous spirituality. Many, like Russ Redner, had been alienated from their cultural roots as children, or others like Woody Kipp, whose parents were Christians, had simply not been exposed to it before. Many of the Oglala Lakota occupiers began introducing Lakota culture to those who came from urban environments and who had lost touch with their traditional heritage.

¹⁹² *We Shall Remain: Episode 5, Wounded Knee.*

¹⁹³ Banks and Erdoes, 185.

¹⁹⁴ Kipp, 130.



Figure 10. Occupants of Wounded Knee perform a traditional sweat lodge, courtesy of History.com.

For Kipp, and his fellow Veterans, the reclamation of his own identity and militant power proved to be a pivotal point in his radicalization. Warriorhood was a guiding philosophy for the men in the American Indian Movement. As traditionally Native American ways of thinking about warfare met modern militancy and weapons, Native veterans were given the task to claim a new identity. This was a hybrid identity, both of the traditional warriorhood and service in a modern imperial conflict, that empowered them and defined their call for Red Power. Day-in and day-out, the Warriors of Wounded Knee held on to the compound, sustaining huge amounts of firepower and attacks from the US military. But this time, unlike their experience in Vietnam, being a warrior here meant much more than fighting in combat. Leonard Peliter, quoted in the documentary *Incident at Ogala*, recalled that exchanging fire with the enemy was only a fraction of the roles undertaken by the warriors of Wounded Knee. He recalls:

We have to really start doing stuff: building community gardens, chop wood, hauling water. Whatever they needed doing because that's what your responsibility is. Not just

prancing around with a gun in hand and thinking you're showing everybody you're tough. In our society that's not a warrior role.¹⁹⁵

For the veteran's involved in AIM, the siege at Wounded Knee gave them the opportunity to redefine their warriorhood through care for their own people. Being able to take care of one's own and hold the reins of power were central to the calls of self-determination and political sovereignty supported by AIM. Derived from this power during their time in the US military, political participation in the Red Power movement gave Indigenous veterans a means to heal from the trauma they endured in the Pacific and the feelings of powerlessness that accompanied their return home. This new opportunity for warriorhood within Red Power gave veterans the confidence and power to stand up for themselves in a new light.

Ultimately, after seventy one days, the siege at Wounded Knee came to a close. The deaths of two American Indian men, Fran Clearwater and Buddy Lamont, were the primary motivators for the occupiers to de-escalate the conflict. Tribal elders called it to an end after the death of Lamont, an Oglala man shot and killed by a government sniper. His death shook the Lakota community, and on May 5th, 1973 both sides agreed to disarm. Buddy Lamont was a 31-year old ex-marine who had served in Vietnam, and his funeral epitomized the hybrid warrior identity assumed by many Vietnam veterans inside Wounded knee. He was laid to rest as a Lakota warrior and a US soldier. Lamont was buried in his army uniform from Vietnam, while also dressed in his beadwork and moccasins, and holding a pipe. Per the request of his mother Anges, his coffin was draped with an American flag and the flag of the Wounded Knee occupation, which bore four stripes of red, black, yellow, and white, representing the four races

¹⁹⁵ Micheal Apted, *Incident at Oglala* (Miramax Films, 1992).

and directions of the earth. His coffin bore the inscription: “Wounded Knee, 1890 - 1973.”¹⁹⁶ At Lamont’s funeral, his mother spoke of her son’s service in the US military and at Wounded Knee:

This is the only son I have ... And I told him he didn’t have to go [to Vietnam], I needed him at home. ‘No mom, what should I do at home when the rest of them are going?’ I prayed nothing will happen, I will see my son alive. And God must have answered my prayers - he came home alive. And again, when he joined this ... ‘I need you at home,’ I said. ‘Well, mom, maybe you need me, but,’ he said, ‘I’m here for a good cause.’ He said, ‘Watch now, we’re going to win. We’re going to come to the top. And you’re going to be happy. All the people will be happy’ ... And that’s the last time I saw him.¹⁹⁷

Given the scale of the military weapons, and an estimated number of rounds fired being somewhere between 40,000 and 130,000, it was marvelous that more individuals were not injured or killed. Although the Oglala Lakota did not achieve their fundamental goal of halting violence at Pine Ridge or removing Dick Wilson from power (who would not fall until losing the tribal election in 1976), the national attention which the occupiers brought to Indigenous Rights was unprecedented. Many Americans watched the siege unfold on their television, and became aware, for the first time, of their nation’s long history of injustices towards Native Americans.¹⁹⁸ Despite these levels of public exposure, the violence persisted, and the years following Wounded Knee saw two hundred people murdered by Dick Wilson’s federally backed GOON squad on the Pine Ridge reservation, leaving Pine Ridge with a murder rate six times that of Chicago and Detroit.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne, *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973, in the Words of the Participants* (Rooseveltown, N.Y. : Akwesasne notes, 1976), 232.

¹⁹⁷ Akwesasne Notes. 232.

¹⁹⁸ Oberg, 278.

¹⁹⁹ Stern, 24

Conclusion



Figure 11. Native American veterans of the Vietnam War stand as part of the color guard at the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial on November 11, 1990, Washington, D.C. courtesy of the Smithsonian Magazine.

The men of the American Indian Vietnam generation came of age in a world fraught with the horrific effects of termination policy. Their parents, veterans of WW2, broadly held on to assimilationist values. However, the military service of the American Indian Vietnam generation would inform their political beliefs in a very different way. Military service in Vietnam politically radicalized Indigenous veterans. As they arrived in Vietnam, many men were exposed to the global politics of imperialism for the first time. They saw dynamics of racial discrimination play out within the US military, witnessing the interactions between white and black Americans in a new way, and were the victims of racism from within the US military themselves. Indigenous veterans also participated in the U. S. military's racial violence against the Vietnamese people. Exposure to these dynamics provoked structures of recognition among

Indigenous GIs who were beginning to make connections between the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples of North America and the treatment of the Vietnamese, in which they participated. This was a resonating moment for many men who began to feel a sense of kinship with the Vietnamese, and began to question their role in the US military.

This cognitive dissonance experienced by Indigenous over their service in Vietnam would be expanded as they returned home. Men encountered closed doors almost everywhere they turned. They were suffering from PTSD and other mental illnesses, often finding VA health services unhelpful. Poverty was rampant throughout Indigenous communities on reservations and in cities, and employment opportunities were not common. Additionally, they faced discrimination from the widespread anti-Vietnam sentiment, a feeling that was misdirected at veterans, and they faced racism from Americans. Some many Indigenous veterans began to feel a sense of betrayal directed at the United States. They had put their lives on the line for a country which held little respect for their well being or that of their peoples. On the homefront, Veterans were able to form tangible connections between the imperial mission of the United States and the subjugation of their own communities. Dealing with their frustration towards the United States government, reckoning with their time in the American military, and undergoing the already arduous journey of readjustment to civilian life, Indigenous veterans of Vietnam began to seek avenues to alleviate and express their pain. For some, a turn towards traditional Indigenous spiritual healing ceremonies and cultural values proved to be successful. These men felt more in touch with themselves, their communities, and their identities through these ceremonies and rituals. Veterans also became involved in political activism. Yet, through the Red Power movement they were able to define their activism within the traditional Indigenous notion of warriorhood. Being able to express their frustration with the United States and return to

traditional values, gave these men the ability to reconnect and reclaim their sense of self while also standing up for the sovereign rights of their people.

The was epitomized at the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee. Veteranship status was commonly held by the men of the American Indian Movement, and Indigenous veterans came from across the United States to assist activists at Wounded Knee. The veterans at Wounded Knee proved valuable to the operation. They guarded the compound from bunkers, engaged with assisting the community, and built defenses. Wounded Knee was a war just like Vietnam. The connection was obvious to many veterans. Except this time they pointed their guns at the American military, rather than sitting among its ranks. The relation to the Vietnamese many had felt in Vietnam was not cemented. Here in South Dakota, as more than one testimony from Indigenous vets at Wounded Knee asserted, they were the VietCong now. As they engaged the spiritual aspects of warriorhood at Wounded Knee, many felt secure in their sense of self and personal identity as a warrior.

This study has so far concentrated on foregrounding the experiences of Indigenous men from the termination generation who became Vietnam combatants, and demonstrated how this experience radicalized their political understanding of Indigenous people and U.S. imperial power. Close reading of life histories both written down as autobiographies and testimonies gathered as oral histories has been the centerpiece of analysis. One interpretive thread that I did not pursue, but that now begs for attention as we look to next possible research steps, is that related to gender - in particular, indigenous men's masculinity. Studies of Indigenous masculinity uniquely combine racial, gender, and class oppression under colonial contexts, and understanding how veterans of the Vietnam war united their veterans status in a struggle for Indigenous self-determination is very much bound up in questions of masculinity and patriarchy.

Alternative routes of masculinity for Indigenous men often arose from frustration with white male hegemony, and attempts to undermine it were made through alternative gender practices.²⁰⁰ This however, was unfortunately beyond the scope of this senior project, but the reclamation and remaking of modern warriorhood poses very interesting questions for future researchers.

In 1973, the siege at Wounded Knee saw two parallel events: the take over of the village of Wounded Knee and declaration of the Independent Oglala Nation and the configuration of an internal warrior society. According to historian Matthew Voigt, these events are telling of how nation building is deeply intertwined with masculinity.²⁰¹ Nationalist projects, colonial or anti-colonial, require a reconfiguration of gender roles; women are often the symbolic representation of a nation while men take on the role of its defenders.²⁰² This phenomenon raises many questions about the parallel establishment of the Independent Oglala Nation and the warrior society within AIM as images of warrior-veterans were ever present within the village of Wounded Knee and its leadership

The question of gendered justice is inseparable from the issue of survival of Indigenous peoples.²⁰³ Quoted by historian Andrea Smith, a scholar and activist Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) argued that understanding the disproportionate violence enacted against Native American women is fundamental to the survival of all Indigenous peoples. She writes:

Many people believe that Indian men have suffered more damage to their traditional status than have Indian women, but I think that belief is more a reflection of colonial attitudes toward the primacy of male experience than of historical fact. While women still play the traditional role of housekeepers, child bearers, and nurturer, they no longer enjoy the unquestioned position of power, respect, and decision making on local and international levels that were not so long ago their accustomed functions.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Voigt, 84.

²⁰¹ Voigt, 95.

²⁰² Voigt, 95.

²⁰³ Andrea Smith, "Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 121.

²⁰⁴ Smith, 121.

This tendency that Allen refers to, separating the success of the nation state, colonial or anti-colonial, from the welfare of women is instrumental to understanding how the foundation of a nation-state by AIM could not be a truly sovereign project. Confined to the symbolic role of nurturer and literal role of homemaker, Native women remained subjected to settler colonial gender dynamics, robbing them of their agency and ability to hold power. Physical attacks and assaults upon Native women were rumored to be not so common happenings with AIM, with the perpetrators sometimes being high ranking officials.²⁰⁵ Despite their calls for sovereignty, not all of the men within AIM could understand that the violence being enacted upon women was an assault on Native American sovereignty. This proved to be a fundamental flaw in the organization's trajectory. It can be undoubtedly said that AIM's tactics at Wounded Knee were heavily influenced by masculinized military methodology. It is not within the scope of this project to say that veterans had a direct effect on the masculinized militarization within the political agenda of AIM, that would be a worthwhile historical question for future researchers, but it is worth noting the heavy correlation between veterans involvement throughout the movement and high levels of militancy as the organization grew. However, this project does point to how the gendered nature of Indigenous military service influenced many young men to not only fight in the Vietnam war, but to reclaim their masculinity identities upon their return. It can be said the AIM was made in the wake of enraged men. A true and thorough assessment of the relationship between anti-colonial nation building within AIM and the masculinity of

²⁰⁵ Alexander Pettit, "A Legacy of Furious Men: The American Indian Movement and Anna Mae Aquash in Plays by Tomson Highway, E. Donald Two-Rivers, Yvette Nolan, and Bruce King," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 31. Unfortunately an analysis of women leadership within AIM is outside of the scope of this project. Anna Mae Aquash's life story and contributions to AIM are substantial, and unfortunately go unrecognized by contemporary scholars. For more on Aquash see the New York Times article "Who Killed Anna Mae" by Eric Konigsber, Kenneth Stern's *Loudhawk*, and Devon A. Mihesuah's 2003 book *Indigenous American Women*.

Indigenous Vietnam veterans is outside of the current scope and page limit of this project, but raises important questions for future historians.

The men and women of the American Indian Movement found themselves participating in an Indigenous cultural renaissance, one that Vietnam veterans played a crucial role in.

Indigenous veteranship in America was not a new phenomena, nor was its impact on Native American politics or Indigenous/white relations, but nevertheless, Indigenous veterans of Vietnam transformed their relationship to themselves, their people, and to the rest of the United States through their military service and a deep understanding of their Indigenous identity.

Although they had served on the side of the United States in the Vietnam war, they were all but assimilationists, unlike their fathers' generation. Rather, as this project as shown, they were the Vietnam generation of warriors who protected the cultural continuation of their peoples against the genocidal tactics of the United States. Centering the stories of people such as Russ Redner, Woody Kipp, Guy Dull Knife and others ensures that our understanding of the Vietnam era is not impoverished by their erasure.

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