War at the Margins

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The idea of “martial races”—judging ethnic groups in terms of their “fighting qualities”—was refined in the context of the nineteenth century British Army in India and later expanded to colonial armies across Asia and Africa.¹ The “martial myth” denoting men of some groups as warriors (such as Native Americans, Māori, or Kachins) and others as peace-loving or passive (Orang Asli, Aboriginal Australians) is a residue of colonial wars. Whether Indigenous people fought the intruders, withdrew into the jungle or desert, or were unable to mount significant resistance in the face of overwhelming invasion, their response was judged in histories written by the victors.² Those judgements echoed through the decades to shape their World War II experiences, and they still shape how national militaries engage with these groups as recruits, allies, or enemies.

The colonial perception of Indigenous warriors appears in another form in military heraldry featuring tribal images. The practice predates World War II, though that war added new examples, such as Māori Battalion symbols and the “crossed head-hunting swords” on postwar Chin Rifle badges.³ A few North American units carried (and still carry) Native names and symbols because of histories of Indigenous enlistment—such as the Canadian Army’s Algonquin Regiment and the US Army’s 45th Infantry (“Thunderbird”) Division⁴—but other uses are disconnected from actual Indigenous presence, for example the two-dozen-plus “tribal-class” destroyers built for British and Commonwealth navies between 1937–45 with such names as the Athabaskan, Arunta, Maori, Bedouin, Eskimo, Zulu, Iroquois, and Haida. Tracing Native imagery in US armed forces, Al Carroll argues that the fact that Native Americans are the only ethnic group whose symbols are systematically used reflects the public’s sense of both admiration and guilt.⁵ The custom recognizes Indigenous fighting ability, while subordinating it to national control.
Native Americans on the Front Lines

The stereotype of Native Americans as courageous, even reckless fighters, based on the image of the nineteenth century Plains Indian warrior, left real Native Americans vulnerable to dangerous deployments. Canadian Indians, too, whose World War I excellence as snipers, scouts, and in raiding parties had been noted, were again used in these hazardous roles in World War II. The “warrior” image proliferated, with media and commanders lauding their “natural” fighting ability, acute senses, wayfinding, and other traits. Fantasy admiration for “innate” skills could have lethal results when men were given risky assignments, leading to heavy casualties as well as many awards for heroism. For example, one of the select teams parachuted in to attack Normandy’s cliffs on D-Day consisted of thirteen Southwestern Indians, chosen based on stereotypes of Indian rock-climbing skills, balance, and courage. Only two lived through it.

Tom Holm (a Creek/Cherokee scholar and Vietnam veteran) calls this the “Indian Scout Syndrome,” and it persisted through later wars, with Native Americans disproportionately assigned roles such as long-range patrols or “walking point” (taking the first, most exposed position). Indians often tried to live up to such heroic images, which could put them in even greater peril. In Holm’s interviews with Vietnam War veterans, “Most American Indian infantrymen stated flatly that they were ordered to walk point time and again because of white stereotypes”—for example, that they had especially good eyesight, so were sent into tunnels, or that they were at home in the forest, even if they had grown up in a city. Obviously, such abilities are not innate; the idea that putting an Indian on point as a “tactically sound maneuver. . . would be laughable,” Holm says, “had it not been so dangerous for the men who had to do it.”

Of course, sometimes rural-reared men did in fact have greater skills or self-confidence in certain situations. When US Navy aircrewman Oliver Rasmussen survived a July 1945 crash on Hokkaido, he used lessons learned growing up on the northern Wisconsin Chippewa Reservation to stay alive and free until the end of the war. Paratrooper Earl Ervin McClung (Colville Tribes) with the 82nd Airborne in Normandy, recognized the “syndrome” named by Holm: “I was a first scout. Being an Indian and from a reservation you were automatically a first scout. . . . They had been trying to kill us for two hundred years so why change it?” But he also said he volunteered for patrols to protect his comrades, because he thought he could do a better job. Certainly Native American
soldiers received praise for their service, and many were singled out for honors. But the pressure to perform according to historical stereotype was dangerous.

These ideas followed individual Native Americans into their units, where they generally felt well-integrated, though their identity was invariably marked by the nickname “chief.” Like other ethnic nicknames of the time, calling a man “chief” linked his military role with his identity. But did this reflect admiration and respect, or the opposite? “I didn’t mind the nickname ‘Chief,’” Chester Nez recalled. “We didn’t think of it as a slur. We knew we were well respected as fighting men. We laughed and joked with our fellow Marines, giving back as much as we took.” Joseph Medicine Crow recalls the time he was told to retrieve a box of ammunition atop a hill loaded with land mines and under German mortar fire: “The CO [commanding officer] said, ‘Well, Chief’—he always called me Chief—I guess if anybody can get through, you can. Get six men and go up there.” But the use of “chief” also highlights the fact that most of their comrades had never met an Indian before and knew little or nothing of tribal identities. When Hollis Stabler heard about the Normandy invasion on the radio: “They mentioned the name Omaha Beach. I said, ‘Omaha Beach?’ I was thinking, ‘Well, I’m an Omaha Indian!’ But of course, no one knew I was an Omaha Indian. The entire time I was in the army, no one ever asked me what tribe I was from, except other Indians of course, so I just kept silent. They always called me Chief . . . .” [italics in original].

If most Americans were ignorant of the facts of Native American history and identity, all were familiar with the stereotypes, the story of the Western frontier retold in schoolbooks, novels, and popular films. That story had its own implications for Americans at war.

“Frontier” Metaphors

Recall the account in the previous chapter of when American journalist Eric Sevareid met the Nagas who rescued him and other plane-crash survivors. Sevareid’s first impulse on seeing the group of men approaching was to raise his hand in a peace gesture and say “How,” as if he were in a 1930s Hollywood Western. His description of Nagas begins with mental references to Native Americans, though later (after spending time with them), he notes that they “Certainly have nothing in common with Indians of the plains.” Indeed, why should they? For no reason except a general frame of “the primitive” or “the savage” which, for American Sevareid, was rooted in images of Native Americans of the Great Plains at the height of the Indian Wars.
Perhaps the pervasiveness of this theme in popular culture explains why Native American references are applied to Indigenous fighters around the globe. The official US Army history of the China-Burma-India theater describes Kachins as “a great fighting stock” and “expert woodsmen” who “reminded some of those Americans who worked with them of the American Indian in his greatest days.” It was not only Americans who carried this metaphor into tribal encounters. A battalion commander remarked about Aboriginal Australian Army officer Reg Saunders’s excellent bush and jungle skills in New Guinea: “He was made to order for this type of fighting; he moved silently, like a Red Indian, and his inherent knowledge of the bush made him a tremendous asset.” Germans shared the stereotype—Hitler warned his eastern front that Soviet soldiers fought like Indians.15

“Indian Wars” symbolism continues in modern conflicts. Tom Holm’s work offers many examples from the Vietnam War. A Seneca veteran recounted: “When I got to the bush, my platoon sergeant tells me and the guys I came in with that we were surrounded. He said: ‘The gooks are all out there and we’re here. This is Fort Apache, boys, and out there is Indian country.’ Can you fuckin’ believe that? To me? I should have shot him right then and there. Made me wonder who the real enemy was.”16 The metaphor’s timeline extends to later military operations. The “Kit Carson” program used in Vietnam (employing former Viet Cong as scouts for US infantry) was suggested for Iraq, where, Al Carroll notes, “The Second Iraq War marks the fifth war in U.S. history where war supporters have invoked the image of the enemy as ‘Indians’ and have used Wild West imagery.”17

Indeed, the ongoing relevance of nineteenth century wars goes beyond metaphor. An argument has been made for direct historical links among patterns of frontier imperialism worldwide. Army officers fighting Native Americans in the late nineteenth century studied European expansions in Africa and Asia to find procedures for containing tribes. Recycled Indian Wars strategies then travelled with the US Army to the Philippines, where they were used to control “frontier” tribal groups in the highlands and then in the war against Philippine independence—in fact, many officers and men who fought in the Philippines were veterans of the Indian Wars. Filipino patriots called on the same model, saying they would withdraw to the mountains and fight as Indians did if necessary.18 Aspects of American policy and rhetoric in Vietnam echoed the Philippines conflict, a further link in the chain. Connections between their own history and imperialism abroad were not lost on Native American leaders, who became increasingly concerned with US foreign policy during the Cold War era.19
The Japanese Empire drew on the same conceptual model of an expanding frontier. By classifying both Ainu and Taiwan’s Aborigines as dojin or “savages,” Tomonori Sugimoto explains, the two groups “became commensurable not only with each other but also with other indigenous peoples all over the world.” Japan’s nineteenth century Ainu policy was modeled in part on Western colonialism and US Indian policy, combining dispossession and legal control with assimilationist education and social welfare. Ainu policy then became a model for policies imposed on Taiwan and Korea, as when the colonial government looked to the way Hokkaido and Karafuto had Japanized Ainu names, for a similar task in Korea.20

These historical links center on the cultural idea of the frontier, which is not only a place where nations seek to expand their borders but also a place of violence, where combat does not follow the lawful customs of war. The “wild people” of these “wild places” cast fearful shadows, images used as weapons in the field and in the propaganda war. But, in the brutality of battle, is there a difference between “primitive” and “civilized” war? The presence of Indigenous people on World War II’s front lines offered a symbolic focus to men struggling with that question.

Transgressive Practices in a Savage War

In the “wild places” new to Allied and Japanese servicemen, primitivizing stereotypes acted as shorthand to describe unfamiliar peoples, and soldiers scared themselves with stories of nearby savagery. The official US Army history of the 1943–1944 attack on Rabaul describes Islanders this way: “The native inhabitants [of these islands] are Melanesians, most of them barely beyond the Stone Age. Cannibalism and headhunting were suppressed only recently . . ..” In East New Britain, a downed American pilot so feared going into hiding with local people that he contacted the Japanese instead. An OSS Detachment 101 training was held in the Naga Hills, described as a place where, “The terrain was rough and the Nagas still practiced headhunting”; the group must have felt let down when the supposedly bloodthirsty Nagas called in the civil authorities, who surrounded the trainees as suspected spies. Japanese soldiers were influenced by the same images. Fujioka Akiyoshi’s field artillery company succumbed to a Moro surprise attack soon after landing on Jolo in the Philippines in October 1944: “Fujioka wrote that dead soldiers had their weapons, clothing, gold teeth, and raw livers plucked from them. Thus did he come to regard the Moro people as ‘a fiendish race’ of ‘natives’ (dojin).”21
Such fear could be a useful weapon. The heavily Native American US Army “Thunderbird” Division was used to intimidate unruly Nazi POWs in Italy, an assignment aided by rumors of Native American soldiers taking scalps. Journalists highlighted how Māori Battalion bayonet attacks frightened German and Italian troops. The Kachin practice of cutting off ears of the dead to record the number killed had an added advantage of terrorizing Japanese soldiers.

In Europe, the image of the “savage” particularly harmed colonial troops, like the Tirailleurs Sénégalais prisoners murdered by German soldiers who felt “hatred and fear” of them—a precursor, historian Raffael Scheck argues, to the barbarization of the Wehrmacht and SS that led to larger-scale massacres of Jews, Slavs, and others later in the war. On the Allied side, the “savage” image pervaded the contemporary press and the later historical treatment of Moroccan Goumiers. These ethnic units of the Free French Army, made up of Berbers from the Atlas Mountains, fought as Allies in North Africa and through Europe. US Army officer Edward Bimberg encountered Goumiers in Corsica in January 1944, where they “looked like something out of the Arabian Nights” with their djellabas, horses, and “vicious-looking knives.” They were “perhaps the most effective mountain infantry of World War II—and certainly the most colorful”—and they were also notorious. As with other irregulars, commanders’ praise of their skill and hardihood were balanced by complaints of poor discipline and unreliability. Stories circulated of them slicing off ears and slashing the throats of sentries, even taking heads as trophies. Crimes against civilians in Italy perpetrated by a few men badly harmed their reputation despite battlefield success. Historian Driss Maghraoui writes, “This paradoxical view of the goumiers as both ‘good’ soldiers and ‘savage’ fighters became a standard characteristic of their representation.”

The idea that Indigenous soldiers were more “savage” than Westerners or Japanese is sadly ironic, considering the scale and ferocity of two world wars. But in specific locales, the savage/civilized dichotomy shaped military decisions. Anthropologist Simon Harrison argues that it gave rise to the idea that reprisals in kind were allowable when confronting “savage” enemies, a justification for actions not acceptable in “civilized” European warfare. Balfour Oatts declined to attend Chin ceremonies for taking Japanese heads but did not discourage it: “Had we been fighting a civilized enemy it would have been another matter and I certainly should not have allowed it. The [Japanese], however, had introduced bestial practices into war as part of their stock-in-trade . . . .” As to IJA or INA men, “I did not mind how many of their heads were chopped off, so long as I
did not have to do it myself.”27 Oatts’s serene conscience has its roots in what Harrison describes as a colonial-era “division of labor” between European and tribal soldiers—essentially, outsourcing savagery to others, who did things that European soldiers were “unwilling or forbidden” to do. This let the European military “preserve a distinction between civilization and savagery, while at the same time violating it.”28

The reality of war, however, dissolved assumptions about who was savage and who was civilized. Recall General Sir William Slim’s praise of the “gallant Nagas” serving at Kohima, speaking of them as “gentlemen” who often refused payment for their loyal service (chapter 2).29 On the other hand, modern war makes the signs of savagery—torture, mutilation, genocide, rape—all too visible. In a story from Guadalcanal, after vicious hand-to-hand fighting, US Marines cut off three Japanese heads and put them on poles facing the enemy. When the Regimental Commander saw the heads, he said, “Jesus, men, what are you doing? You’re acting like animals.” One replied, “That’s right, Colonel, we are animals. We live like animals, we eat and are treated like animals—what the fuck do you expect.”30

**Headhunting and Cannibalism**

Headhunting, the archetypal symbol of savage warfare, was not limited to Indigenous fighters. The Japanese used beheading as a method of execution, some African colonial troops were rumored to decapitate enemies, and American soldiers took Japanese skulls and other trophies. Head-taking symbolism was understood by all parties and was used for deliberate effect: According to Balfour Oatts, a British official in Burma was “packed off to the United Kingdom” after he encased half a dozen Japanese heads in oil drums and sent them to the commander as a critique of military inaction.31

One can hardly exaggerate the fascination of both Westerners and Asians with headhunting, a shortcut term for everything encoded in the “primitive” stereotype. War-era writing usually presents it as an incomprehensible custom, but in the decades since scholars have developed a more sophisticated understanding.32 Taking heads in war or for sacrifice has a long history across the arc of Southeast Asia’s tribal cultures, and foreigners turned the practice to their own purposes. Allied officials paid Nagas for heads of Japanese paratroopers, and decapitated Japanese bodies were found during the battle of Kohima. The OSS even planned—but never implemented—mobilizing Naga guerrillas, capitalizing on their past as headhunters (described in a memo headed “Assam Headhunters, Immediate
Utilization of,” 14 April 1944).33 The Japanese also benefited from the custom. Tokuhei Miura, searching a village in Burma, “encountered an inhabitant dangling the freshly severed heads of two Englishmen” and Tom Harrisson described how, when Tagal people of inland Borneo handed over four downed American airmen to Japanese, they were given a reward and allowed to keep the heads.34

Timor and Borneo also saw a limited revival of the practice, which had been suppressed under British and Dutch rule. Ibans allied with Tom Harrisson in Borneo saw killing Japanese as different from prewar practice, but elders still conducted the appropriate head-taking rituals. When a landing field was built to supply Z Force, men brought Japanese “fresh heads” to Harrisson’s headquarters to boost the airstrip’s spiritual power.35

In the Philippines too, US and Filipino guerrilla officers employed Indigenous groups with headhunting traditions. Lieutenant Donald Blackburn (whose unit’s nickname was “Blackburn’s Headhunters”) was protected by Igorots in north central Luzon and enlisted them as reliable and successful guerrillas. Blackburn found decapitated Japanese corpses at the site of a battle in which Igorots played a role, and in one action, “a company of headhunters” captured a truck convoy and brought back all the trucks and a bulldozer, along with six heads, explaining that Blackburn had asked for proof of enemy killed. Where this tradition existed, it did not exist only for tribesmen. One of Lieutenant Ed Ramsey’s Filipino guerrillas displayed the heads of two Japanese on a captured jeep; he apologized to Ramsey, saying that Japanese had captured his brother and tortured him to death. Ramsey replied that he would square things with the general, “but that nothing like this must ever happen again. ‘We’re not guerillas anymore,’ I added. ‘This is the American army now, and they don’t understand these things.”36

Like headhunting, cannibalism was a fixed image in the minds of foreigners deployed to the Southwest Pacific. The “ready-made stereotype of Islanders”37 persisted through and beyond the war years, resistant to the reality of Islander lives. It is true that forms of cannibalism, like headhunting, had historically been part of some island cultures, but in World War II, factual charges of cannibalism accruing more often to starving Japanese.38 Taiwanese Aboriginal Takasago volunteers—men the Japanese public had characterized as headhunting savages—were horrified by the cannibalism by imperial troops that they saw or heard about in New Guinea. Anthropologist Chih-huei Huang argues that the inversion of power between Japanese and themselves—especially Japanese stooping to cannibalism—confirmed the Indigenous men’s sense of being truly Japanese in virtue. They served as low-ranking porters in the first part of the war, but in
the straitened times near its end even officers had to depend on the Takasagos’ survival skills. Cannibalism revealed the same upset, in a moral sense.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Trophy-Taking}

Trophy-taking is another practice not uncommon on the battlefield, but when applied to body parts (rather than, say, flags or weapons), especially by an enemy, soldiers and the public saw it as barbaric. Simon Harrison describes US servicemen collecting souvenirs of Japanese dead as part of the “race war” aspect of the Asia-Pacific War (taking body trophies was less common on European battlefields). Trophies—even skulls—were given as gifts to families, friends, and others, an act Harrison links with European and American custom of keeping or selling body parts from lynchings or criminal executions as a form of racialized justice or retribution.\textsuperscript{40}

Trophy-taking continued despite directives banning it. Immediately after—and even during—the Battle of Peleliu, US Marines stripped enemy dead of flags, sabers, and pistols, took snapshots of the dead, pulled out their gold teeth, and severed ears or other body parts. Rear-echelon servicemen risked their lives to get souvenirs and souvenir-hunters hampered the work of collecting documents and weapons from dead enemies.\textsuperscript{41} E. G. Sledge’s memoir describes how “The men gloated over, compared, and often swapped their prizes. It was a brutal, ghastly ritual the likes of which have occurred since ancient times on battlefields where the antagonists have possessed a profound mutual hatred. . . . It wasn’t simply souvenir hunting or looting the enemy dead, it was more like Indian warriors taking scalps.”\textsuperscript{42} But here again the “Indian” metaphor misleads. Scalping in its original cultural context had a particular purpose, including use in ceremonies. In World War II, some Indian combatants took a personal token such as a piece of clothing from enemy dead as a requirement for cleansing rituals—like the Enemy Way held for Chester Nez (chapter 4).\textsuperscript{43} Trophy-taking by non-Indian soldiers arose from a grimmer source.

Trophy-taking and body counts intersect in unsettling ways that confuse any savage/civilized distinction. During the postwar Malayan Emergency (see below), British forces retrieved bodies of Communist dead for identification. The military had argued for taking just heads and hands, but government nixed that idea because of the propaganda risk. British-employed Dayak trackers from Borneo sometimes decapitated enemy dead, until publicity about their activity, especially rumors that they were permitted or even rewarded for it, drew protests. The propaganda risk was realized when \textit{The Daily Worker} (a Communist
newspaper in Britain) in 1952 published shocking photographs of British servicemen posing with severed heads and with dead bodies and body parts in a parody of game-hunting photos.\textsuperscript{44}

Such trophy-taking, Harrison says, seems to recur with new generations and new wars—fading from public memory after the Pacific War, re-emerging in Malaya and later in Vietnam, and again among US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even where trophy-taking is prohibited and punished, Harrison argues, it is likely to recur in Euro-American militaries, so long as “war, hunting and masculinity” link in a repeated, though seldom explicit, cultural pattern.\textsuperscript{35}

**Post-World War II Deployment of Indigenous Combatants**

As mention of Dayaks working with British troops in the Malayan Emergency indicates, militaries continued to deploy Indigenous people for their knowledge and skills after World War II. Many anticolonial independence fights and Cold War conflicts recruited them or trespassed into their territory, which is often located along borders and offers a hard-to-access refuge for insurgents and site for guerrilla warfare (chapter 11).

There is a pattern of Indigenous experience in these postwar situations, which echoes their involvement in World War II, and can be seen during the Malayan Emergency—the British term for the 1948–1960 conflict with Communists, among the earliest of postwar Southeast Asian conflicts fueled by decolonization. Orang Asli in Malaya’s forests and highlands suffered from the destructive campaigns fought across their territory, which served as a base for insurgents. As in the Asia-Pacific War, both sides recruited Orang Asli allies and brought troops into their homelands; British and Commonwealth forces imposed disruptive policies including forced resettlement and destruction of gardens. World War II personnel continued in this new war, including British Army officers who had served with Indigenous guerrillas in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{46} And, as in the previous war, the Orang Asli goal was to survive the violence that foreigners forced on their homelands.

Other Indigenous groups were drawn into nationalist and Cold War conflicts that followed World War II in Asia and Africa. Aborigines were among the Taiwanese recruited by the Kuomintang for the fight against the Communist Party in mainland China; some were stranded there as the Nationalists retreated. The Dutch rebuilt their colonial army to fight Indonesian independence, recruiting soldiers from ethnic groups that had served in it before the war and adding new ones, such as Toraja men in the Celebes. French counterinsurgency in Algeria
and Indochina used Indigenous forces. Armed struggles for independence in southern Africa from the 1960s through the 1980s entangled politically marginal groups who had little ideological commitment to either side. Facing the southern African desert, the kind of “wild place” discussed at the start of this chapter, insurgents and counterinsurgency leaders made the practical choice to foster local expertise (San, Shangaan, Pygmy). The South African Defence Force used San Bushmen as trackers and soldiers, incorporated them into special forces, and employed them in covert operations. Their treatment resembles the way British used Indigenous trackers and soldiers in Malaya and Kenya, French in Indochina and Algeria, Americans in Vietnam and Laos, and Portuguese in Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique. The use of Indigenous forces has become a standard part of counterinsurgency strategy worldwide.

It is abundantly clear, though, that even when Indigenous people have no role in combat, they are in danger when foreigners’ conflicts spill across their territories. In the next chapter, we turn to how World War II affected civilian life as the contending powers fought across Indigenous lands.