

confused the Indians and the enemy. "We had to watch the war dogs carefully when they were around the Navajos—they couldn't tell them from Japs."

In spite of these occasional lapses of mistaken identity, most Native Americans in the armed forces experienced little overt racial discrimination. Their service in integrated units meant that they faced the same dangers and hardships as other GIs, and from these shared experiences came a mutual respect among Indians and non-Indians alike. The Native American serviceman, regardless of rank, invariably was called "Chief" by his European American buddies. The term often was used in a spirit of playful affection, but it also could signal condescension with derogatory intent. Letters from Indians in the military were filled with accounts of acceptance and friendship across racial lines. Ellison Bowman, a Navajo marine, wrote from the South Pacific, "I am OK here with these people over at South Sea Island. I am swell friend of white soldiers. I am the only one red skin with this outfit. I and them just like a brother now." An Indian tail gunner and radio operator on a B-17 Flying Fortress reported that "members of the crew are swell to me, they are the best fellows after a guy gets to know them." From an army camp in California, Private Amaldo Pino (Tesuque Pueblo) wrote in 1942, "The people here are very friendly to me and treat me mighty fine," and from Fort Bliss, Texas, another Native private wrote simply that "the boys here seems friendly."

Indians who suffered the worst hardships expressed intense feelings of bonding with their white comrades-in-arms. "I would say that all of us who were in Japanese prison camps and survived . . . were closer to each other than even our own brothers could be," recalled one Native American prisoner of war. "The long days of suffering, starving and seeing our buddies die binds us together with bonds of steel." A young Chippewa veteran, reflecting on his wartime experiences, expressed his sentiments in poetry:

*We bind each other's wounds and eat the same ration.  
We dream of our loved ones in the same nation.*

Without question, these shared experiences contributed to the assimilation of Indians into the mainstream of American society. As Allison R. Bernstein, author of *American Indians and World War II* (1991), concluded, "Increased contacts with whites and the outside world in the military stimulated changes in habits and outlooks on the part of Indian soldiers." Indians in the military became enmeshed in

the intricacies of a modern bureaucracy, arranging for dependency allotments and applying for veteran's benefits. And the increased pay and benefits of military life meant a substantial rise in the standard of living for Indian soldiers and their families. Consumer goods from European American society that had been beyond the reach of many Native Americans were now readily available. Increased exposure to non-Indian religious traditions also led some non-Christian Native Americans to convert to Christianity. Although the number of conversions is unknown, the traumatic conditions of the battlefield apparently caused Native people to be more open to non-Indian religious practice. "I attend a Catholic mass from the back of a jeep every morning," reported one war-weary Indian private.

Contemporary observers concluded that the wartime experiences of Native Americans would lead inevitably to their complete assimilation. Historian Gerald D. Nash, author of *The American West Transformed* (1985), offered a more balanced appraisal: "If the war had an impact of strengthening acculturation of some Indians, it also had the effect of strengthening various aspects of Indian traditionalism." In spite of the increased exposure to non-Indian religious traditions, many Native Americans continued to practice their traditional religions. Shamans or tribal medicine men conducted sacred rites for the safety of those who were leaving the reservation to enlist in the armed forces. Once overseas, Indians continued to draw strength from traditional beliefs and practices. One Navajo code talker confessed that he always invoked the Great Spirit before transmitting a message. Another said that he had been exposed to the Catholic religion, but had not taken it very seriously. "I *did* pray many times when I was exposed to danger on the main battlefield, as a code talker and as a signalman," he recalled. "I prayed as my mother and father had taught me—to the Heavenly Being as well as to Mother Earth." He also learned that while he was away his mother had gone to a sacred hill and prayed for his safety almost every morning using sacred corn pollen. "Maybe that is the reason," mused this grateful marine, "I came back all in one piece."

The continued practice of traditional culture often evoked expressions of great interest from European American observers. War correspondent Richard Tregaskis described the scene among the Indian marines on board ship prior to the landing on Guadalcanal. The senior medical officer found the Indians "doing a war dance. One of them had a towel for a loincloth and a blackened face, and he was doing a



can can while another beat a tom-tom." Likewise, Ernie Pyle described a solemn dance held by Indian marines prior to their landing on Okinawa. The Indians prayed that the strength of the Japanese would be sapped as the marines stormed the beaches. The landing proved to be relatively easy, but the marines later met heavy opposition on the southern part of the island. "O.K., what about your little ceremony? What do you call this?" asked one white marine. An Indian Leatherneck smiled and replied, "This is different. We prayed only for an easy landing." Following the Allied victory, one group of Native Americans celebrated in traditional fashion. "As tom-toms were not items of issue," commented a white officer, "they headed *au naturel* for the bandmen's tents. Grabbing drums, and later any instruments available, they Indian-danced their way toward the officers' tent."

As these passages suggest, the rhetoric used by European Americans to describe their Indian companions in the armed forces was often filled with clichés drawn from popular culture. Terms such as "war dance," "tom-toms," and "chief" were commonplace. This is hardly surprising since for many whites the war provided them with their first encounters with Indians as real people, living in the here and now, not as flickering images of feathered savages on the silver screen. When whites were called upon to recognize the accomplishments of Native American soldiers, they invariably invoked the popular image that had predominated for generations, the image of the warrior. "The real secret that makes the Indian such an outstanding soldier," concluded Major L. A. Gilstrap, "is his enthusiasm for fight." The same conclusion was reached by journalist Donald C. Peattie in "Lo Takes the Warpath," an article that appeared in *Reader's Digest* in 1943. "The red soldier is tough," commented Peattie. "He takes to commando fighting with gusto. Why not? His ancestors invented it. . . . At ambushing, scouting, signaling, sniping, they're peerless." Even Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes credited the "warrior traits" of the American Indians for their valor on the battlefields of World War II. It was "the inherited talents of the Indian," he believed, that made him such a good soldier, and those talents included "endurance, rhythm, coordination, sense perception, and enthusiasm for fighting."

Visual representations of Indian soldiers also reflected the warrior image drawn from popular culture. On the cover of the dictionary used for training Navajo code talkers were two cartoon-version Indian warriors, neither of which bore the slightest resemblance to anything Navajo. Military photographers of Native American soldiers some-

times added feathered headdresses—inevitably identified as "war bonnets"—and arranged their subjects in poses reminiscent of stock warrior images from the nineteenth century. At the war's end, the federal government issued a pamphlet, "Indians in the War," which summarized the contributions of Native Americans in the armed forces. On its cover was a painting of a traditional burial of a Plains Indian warrior.

Although these wartime images of Indian warriors clearly revealed their popular culture origins, it is also important to recognize that the images had undergone a fundamental transformation. The warriors of World War II were portrayed as courageous heroes, a far cry from their earlier role as fendish enemies of the advance of white civilization. These modern warriors were lionized for their abilities as skilled fighters and their willingness to die for their country. "A red man will risk his life for a white as dauntlessly as his ancestor lifted a paleface's scalp," wrote one inspired journalist. Historian Alison R. Bernstein aptly summarized this remarkable shift in attitudes: "It seems as though the Indians' negative image in the nineteenth century as bloodthirsty savages suddenly became a positive image, since they were fighting on the right side. Those supposedly inherent characteristics, which had been formerly despised, now were celebrated."

## ON THE HOME FRONT

World War II also had a tremendous impact on the Native Americans who remained on the home front. Forty thousand Indians worked in defense-related jobs during the war, including about half of all the able-bodied Native men who had not joined the armed forces and one-fifth of the women.

The war presented American Indians with an unprecedented array of new job opportunities, some of which were right on the doorstep of their reservations. Manpower shortages at the Phelps-Dodge copper mine in southern Arizona led to the employment of 300 workers from the nearby Tohono O'odham (formerly Papago) reservation. An aluminum plant near the St. Regis Mohawk reservation hired Indian workers as did two large defense construction projects near the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation in South Dakota. More than 3,000 Navajos were employed at the army's Fort Wingate Munitions Depot adjacent to their reservation in western New Mexico. Hundreds of Indians worked on the vast Naval Supply Depot at Clearfield, Utah. This