

**Hidden Discrimination: Edwin Wilber and Stereotypes  
of the Native American Soldier**

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### **Abstract**

Native Americans have been involved with warfare for thousands of years. When the colonization of the New World began, Native Americans fought to retain their land. These fights lasted for more than one hundred years, spanning multiple conflicts with the colonists, British, and French. The Native American warriors would side with the belligerent that posed a lesser threat to their lives, doing everything they could to keep what they deserved. Eventually, Native Americans would be recruited by American militias, typically being used as scouts based on their understanding of the land on which the war was being waged. As time progressed the United States military continued employing Native American soldiers for duty, and even though the terrain in these wars has changed, the Native American was still being used as a scout based on the assumption of an innate ability to understand terrain. This assumption by the military has led to many Native American casualties in war, due to being placed on the front lines. One particular Native American soldier who has lived this stereotype is Edwin J. Wilber, a Menominee Indian from Keshena, Wisconsin. Edwin served in the Korean War as a scout and received two Purple Hearts during his tour of duty. Edwin had not been formally trained in scouting prior to his deployment, but based on his race, Edwin was made a scout and was placed in harms way multiple times.

In most Native American tribes, those that went into battle would be looked at as warriors and were held with the highest regard. Warriors would be sent into battle with a celebration of their sacrifice and would be greeted back to the tribe in a similar fashion. Native Americans have been involved in warfare against Americans, but have also allied with Americans to fight a common enemy. The Native American soldier has proved to be essential throughout American military history, but the roles that traditional Native American soldiers had in early American history have crossed generational lines. This crossing of generations has put Native American soldiers in harms way based on assumptions of the innate abilities of a warrior. One soldier in particular is Edwin J. Wilber, a Menominee Indian from Shawano, Wisconsin. Edwin grew up on a small farm in rural Wisconsin and one day decided to join the United States Army in order to serve his country during the Korean War. Edwin's training did not prepare him for what he was going to be put through and due to assumptions of his abilities by his superior officers, Edwin was sent to hell and back during his time in the Korean War. In order to better understand where these assumptions were initiated one must look at the history of Native American warfare and the interaction of Native Americans with the French, British, colonists, and Americans in the past 400 years.

From the outset of European colonization of the Americas in the early 1600s, clashes existed between the Native people and the colonizers. The Europeans were taking over land that had belonged to the Native Americans for hundreds of years prior, which did not settle well with the Native Americans. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Native American tribes would often raid colonial settlements in attempts to rid the area of colonists and seize supplies. Raids on settlements would gradually cease due to increased military influence of the colonists. At this time the Native American's were primarily a military threat for the Europeans, due

largely to the unconventional tactics that the Native Americans would use during battle. The Native American tactics were to raid and ambush their enemy, which is something they had been practicing during intertribal warfare. Fighting of this nature consisted of, "...no formal tactics and little quarter was given."<sup>1</sup> The Native Americans would move swiftly into battle, attack at close proximity, and as soon as their objective was complete 'vanish' into the surrounding area. After years of being ambushed by the Native Americans, the colonists took a new military stance and began to ally with some tribes, as well as employing Native American tactics during battles. In the early and mid-1600s, fighting between the Native Americans and the colonists was considered small scale—typically individual skirmishes between single colonial settlements and a faction of a Native American tribe. In 1675, the first large scale military action was started in colonial America; this was King Philip's War. King Philip's War pitted various Native American tribes against the New England Confederation and their Indian allies.<sup>2</sup> The Native American tribes involved were the Wampanoag—the tribe of Metacom, or King Philip—Nipmuck, Pocumtucks, Abenikis, and other smaller tribes.<sup>3</sup> The New England colonists had their military force, the New England Confederation, as well as their Native American allies, the Mohegan and the Pequot.<sup>4</sup> King Philip's War began due to Native American grievances towards the imposing colonists—the Native Americans were losing land and aimed to end the spread of the colonists. There were few victories for the colonists at the beginning of the war. Colonial armies were poorly trained and were not prepared for stealth and ambush tactics that were used by the Native Americans, even though they had seen these techniques used in small battles previously.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 159.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," *The New England Quarterly* (March, 1988): 79-100.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Companion*, 159.

<sup>4</sup> James Drake, "Restraining Atrocity: The Conduct of King Philip's War," *The New England Quarterly* (March, 1997): 33-56.

Towards the end of the war, officers of the colonial militias, most famously Benjamin Church, began to employ Native Americans as scouts and informants, making Church the “...father of American ranging.”<sup>5</sup> These men would go on reconnaissance missions in order to locate the enemy and report back to the officers. After the enemy had been located the colonists, along with their Native American allies, would move in using raid and ambush tactics. This proved much more successful, and colonial victories were becoming more frequent. In August of 1676, a Native American scout spotted King Philip and using his skill as a warrior shot him with a flintlock rifle, killing him. King Philip’s War was the first time that Native Americans fought alongside the colonists, however almost all Native American tribes chose not to side with colonists.

During the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century, there were two major opinions in regards to the Native Americans. Most colonists on the east coast felt the Native American was a ‘noble savage’, or an overall good, simple being that was being corrupted by civilization. The opinion on Native Americans differed however in the frontier districts. In the frontier districts, Native Americans were viewed as being simply ‘savages’, out to kill, which caused raised tensions between those in the frontier and the Native Americans. Even with some Native American tribes lending aid in fighting there were mixed opinions on whether or not they could be trusted. General Philip H. Sheridan felt that, “...the only good Indian [is] a dead Indian;” however, he did admit that he would act the same way as the Native Americans towards oppressors of the colonies.<sup>6</sup> During this time, many military officers were also attempting to

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<sup>5</sup> John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607-1814* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, “‘The Only Good Indian is a Dead Indian’: History and Meaning of a Proverbial Stereotype,” *The Journal of American Folklore* (Winter, 1993): 38-60.

assimilate and educate Native Americans, so they would be more respected and trusted by others; this was also a tactic to gain the trust of the Native American.

After King Philip's War there were more small scale fights between some colonists and Native American tribes. Then in 1754, the outbreak of the French and Indian War came; a territory war in which the British fought against the French and their Native American allies. Native Americans sided either with the French or the British based on their own personal interests. Those that sided with the French did so because they felt the French posed less of a threat to take over more land belonging to the Native Americans. Native Americans that sided with the British did so for two reasons: (1) the British threatened to cut off all supplies to tribes that sided with the French, and (2) Native Americans were under the assumption that siding with the British would be means for an end to European dominance of Native American lands. In 1756, Major Robert Rogers of Connecticut created one of the first guerilla units, which he aptly named Rogers' Royal American Rangers.<sup>7</sup> This was a group of men that were trained to fight deep in enemy territory, much like the Native Americans. Members of Rogers' Rangers were both colonists and Native Americans. Native Americans were seen as being the best for this type of warfare, since the Rangers were using tactics learned from Native American fighting in the past. The war ended in a decisive victory for the British, and the tribes that sided with the French were cut off from supply lines just as the British had warned. Though instead of ending European dominance of land, more colonists moved in and more land was lost. This sparked more conflict between the Native Americans and the British, but that would all come to an end during the Revolutionary War.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Oxford Companion*, 306.

During the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the Native Americans once again needed to choose whom they were going to side with, because it was inevitable that they would be involved in the fighting. At the beginning of the war, the Native Americans aimed to remain neutral between the two sides; however, many tribes would eventually side with the British, who seemed less expansionistic than the Americans who had already been taking their land. Native Americans in south and central New England sided with the Americans, mainly due to rival tribes siding with the British. The Native American support in New England was made up of mostly alliances, but those Native Americans that were religiously converted, and some others, would fight as individuals alongside the American troops.

Native Americans would also have a large role in the War of 1812, where many major Eastern tribes would side with the British forces, while the Choctaw and Cherokee allied with the Americans. At the Battle of New Orleans, the final battle of the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson led some 4,000 troops, including many Choctaw Indians, to a decisive victory over the much larger British force of nearly 11,000.<sup>8</sup> Native Americans fighting with the American resistance were once again used for scouting, and occasionally would fight side by side with soldiers. Overall, the victory of the war was indecisive, with scholars arguing that both sides won for various reasons. However, most scholars can agree that the true losers were the Native American tribes—Native Americans once again lost land due to fighting.

The American Civil War would also utilize Native Americans for fighting; again the Native Americans would take up arms with both sides of the fight. Much like the Union and Confederacy, Native Americans took sides to fight against their tribal enemies. Native Americans were first recruited by the Confederacy, and in 1861 four regiments were formed that

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<sup>8</sup> *The American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812: People, Politics, and Power*, ed. Jeff Wallenfeldt (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2010), 209.

used Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Indians.<sup>9</sup> These Native Americans were all recruited from the recently established “Indian Territory,” which is modern day Eastern Oklahoma. Indian Territory was created out of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, in which Native American tribes east of the Mississippi River were forcibly moved to the west and eventually into Oklahoma. During the Civil War, some of these tribes changed allegiances to the Union, upon which the Union created an all-Indian brigade, which was used again for scouting and reconnaissance. One of the most famous Native Americans to serve in the Civil War was Ely S. Parker, a Seneca Indian who would eventually become a General and secretary to Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>10</sup> Grant would eventually promote Parker to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, which is the equivalent to the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>11</sup> The Civil War was the last time that Native Americans would fight with one side or the other, as well as the last time they would fight in segregated units.

Throughout the Civil War, there were other wars being fought between Native Americans and volunteer militias that were created due to the Civil War. Volunteer militias have been found to be at fault for initiating the Apache Wars and the Sioux Uprising, as well as multiple massacres of Native Americans at Canyon de Chelly, Sand Creek, and Camp Grant. Although Native Americans were fighting with the Union army, tensions between the two were still strong. Even after the Civil War many veterans waged ruthless war against the Native Americans, including General William Sherman. Sherman and his supporters would burn down huts, kill cattle, and overall create total war against the Native Americans until the 1890s.

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<sup>9</sup> David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Caswell, *The Life of General Ely S. Parker* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society Press, 1919), 150.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

There were some Americans that respected the Native Americans, including some in the military. In 1866, the United States Army created the Indian Scouting Service. Military officers felt that the Native Americans were naturally adept at waging war and scouting, which was one reason for creating the Indian Scouting Service. Prior to 1866, Native Americans were being used as scouts, but with the inception of the service, the Native American soldiers were now able to make full military wages. As scouts, these Native American men would accompany other soldiers to the site of a future battle to plan troop placement; they would also attempt to discern where the enemy would be located in order to place their troops in the safest manor. The Native Americans were typically scouting against tribal enemies, so there was an added incentive to complete the job correctly. There was some doubt amongst those in the army to whether the Native Americans would remain faithful to the American troops. The Native Americans proved themselves in battle many times over, and throughout the longevity of the Indian Scouting Service these Native Americans would be honored an army record of medals for bravery in action.<sup>12</sup> The Indian Scouting Service was disbanded in 1943 after the final members of the team had retired from military service.

After the turn of the twentieth century Native Americans began to serve more in integrated units within the military. Army divisions needed scouts that were reliable and they turned to the Native Americans. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Native Americans wanted to serve in the military; however, most Native Americans were not considered to be citizens of the United States and were therefore ineligible for the draft. Although there were a large number of Native Americans that could not serve, over 10,000 did. The majority of these Native Americans came from Indian Boarding Schools—transitionally moving from the

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<sup>12</sup> *The Oxford Companion*, 476.

boarding school to war was easy due to the way these schools were run. Native Americans chose to serve for multiple reasons, such as economic stability and nationality; however, many served to uphold their tribes “warrior tradition”—tribes often honored warriors. World War I created a respect for the Native American soldier that had not been seen in previous wars, and according to many army officers, what made the Native American soldier so “outstanding” was the “enthusiasm for the fight” that was seen at all times.<sup>13</sup> With 10,000 soldiers volunteering, the United States Congress decided to rethink citizenship and created the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, or the Snyder Act. President Coolidge signed this act into law, which stated that, “...*all non citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States be, and they are hereby, declared to be citizens of the United States...*”<sup>14</sup> With the enactment of this law the number of Native American soldiers in the army and reserves would greatly increase.

When World War II began there were over 7,500 Native Americans enlisted in the army; when the United States army began to mobilize for war more than 22,000 Native Americans would be a part of the army, with an estimation of around 24,521 during the war.<sup>15</sup> At this time, the Native American population of the United States was around 400,000, with “able-bodied men”—ages 21 to 44—numbering near 60,000. This means around forty-percent of eligible Native American men decided to serve in World War II, a staggering number that was the highest of any other race or ethnicity in the war.<sup>16</sup> This large number of soldiers is accredited to various reasons, such as monetary incentives, but the main reason for joining was the honor that

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<sup>13</sup> “Native Americans and the U.S. Military,” United States Navy, accessed via: <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq61-1.htm>

<sup>14</sup> *Indian Citizenship Act of 1924*, Pub. L. No. 68-175, 43 Stat. 253 (1924).

<sup>15</sup> Jere’ Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II*, (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1999) 62.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1993), 388.

was bestowed upon a Native American for serving in war from his tribe. Native Americans also feared what would become of the United States if the Nazi's would win the war. The Nazi Party's Aryan race ideology was enough to gain Native American support for the war—since their skin was colored, unlike the Aryan skin, they felt they would be targeted by the Nazi's.

The Native American soldiers played a large role in World War II, fighting side-by-side with other soldiers in integrated units. One of the main roles of the Native American was that of the “Code Talker.” Many army units would use a Native American soldier as their radioman, and when messages were transmitted they were done so in the Navajo language. By speaking in Navajo, the Americans would be assured the enemy was not intercepting their messages, allowing the allies to mobilize troops with relative ease. The Navajo code talkers would also scout out an area to find enemy positions, which they would then radio to officers for troop mobilization. The enemy never interpreted the Navajo language, and there is no statistic on how many soldiers may have been saved by the use of these Native Americans during the war. Arguably, the most famous Native American to serve during World War II was Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian, who was a member of the United States Marine Corps and one of five men who raised the flag over Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima.

After World War II many Native Americans stayed in the service; therefore, when the United States entered the Korean War those who were a part of the military were sent into duty. There are no exact numbers on how many Native Americans served during the Korean War. Numbers have been estimated anywhere between 10,000 and 15,000, many of whom volunteered after the start of the war.<sup>17</sup> After the Korean War came the controversial Vietnam War, which was highly debated amongst young Native Americans and their elders. Yet the strong sense of

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<sup>17</sup> *The Oxford Companion*, 478.

respect that these young men had for the Native American warrior tradition led more than 42,000 to serve during the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup> The failure of the Vietnam War made many Native American soldiers rethink their allegiance to the United States military, with many veterans defecting from the military and creating militant groups like the American Indian Movement (AIM). The number of Native Americans that have served either with or against the United States at one time or another are astounding. In the 1990s, there were more than 160,000 living Native American veterans, which constituted nearly ten-percent of *all* living Native Americans—this number is triple that of any non-Native Americans.<sup>19</sup>

The Menominee Nation is not necessarily a violent one, but there have been many times throughout history where the Menominee would take up arms and fight their tribal enemies. The Menominee Indians fought in many of the same wars mentioned previously, including the French and Indian War, the American Civil War, and World War II. Basing their alliances on whichever belligerent posed the lesser threat to their tribe, the Menominee fought alongside the French, until the eventual independence of the United States.

In 1755, shortly after the start of the French and Indian War, Charles de Langlade, a French soldier who had married a Menominee woman, called upon the Menominee to aid the French in the fight.<sup>20</sup> On July 9, 1755, the Menominee accompanied French troops under the leadership of M. Beaujou in an attack against Colonel George Washington and General Edward Braddock's army at the Monongahela River.<sup>21</sup> The French and Menominee surprised the British

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<sup>18</sup> "Native Americans and the U.S. Military," United States Navy, accessed via: <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq61-1.htm>

<sup>19</sup> *The Oxford Companion*, 478.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia K. Ourada, *The Menominee Indians: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Report from Fort Duquesne, 1756, M. Dumas, Commandant, *Wisconsin Historical Collection*, XVIII, 163.

troops, ending the fight in a bloody victory for the French—of the original 1,300 British men sent into battle, nearly 900 were killed or wounded.<sup>22</sup> The Menominee Indians were seen as the strongest Native ally for the French, proving their willingness to kill British and Americans in many instances.<sup>23</sup> The French typically used the Menominee for two purposes; escorting French military officers and scouting British supply lines for interception.<sup>24</sup> The Menominee fought alongside the French until 1760, yet remaining loyal until the end of the war in 1763.

The first Menominee Indian to enlist in the American Civil War was Louis Kak-ush-ka, enlisting on September 5, 1861 and immediately being placed into the Ninth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment.<sup>25</sup> After the enlistment of Kak-ush-ka, many Menominee followed his path, with the largest enrollment being in Company K, First Battalion, Thirty-seventh Regiment, Wisconsin Infantry Volunteers—this regiment boasted some forty-four Menominee Indians.<sup>26</sup> The Menominee served the Union Army until the end of the American Civil War, with many serving as infantrymen.

The Menominee remained idle on their reservation until the outbreak of World War II, which created a patriotic response from the Menominee to serve their country. Nearly sixty men had enlisted in the United States Army during 1939, the first year of the war—that number jumps to over 200 by 1943.<sup>27</sup> Due to the large amount of Menominee men that left the reservation to serve in the military, the reservations lumber industry was threatened; however, the Menominee

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<sup>22</sup> *The Menominee Indians*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 186. Ourada sites: Minutes of the Menominee General Council, Dec. 1942, Pt. 13, Accession No. 9646-E-1936-054, *ibid.*; “Narrative Supplement to Annual Forestry Report,” Menominee Indian Reservation (1943), Accession No. 69A672, FRC Kansas City.

women stepped in to “work for victory.”<sup>28</sup> Some fifty women worked the mill during the war, keeping the industry alive for the Menominee reservation. Many Menominee men received medals for their service during World War II, including fourteen Purple Hearts, a Distinguished Flying Cross, and a Bronze Star.<sup>29</sup> The Menominee Indians proved their patriotism towards the United States during World War II, something that would continue in the subsequent wars fought by the United States military.

The roles that Native Americans were given in wars by the United States have continued to be given to Native American soldiers since their inception. It is believed that Native American soldiers have the same skill set that those before them did. Native Americans were made scouts in the 1860s for various reasons, but the most important reason was the Native Americans understanding of the terrain the war was being waged on—this was mostly true. Yet, when the United States became involved in wars abroad they still used Native Americans for scouting, believing the Native American soldier had an innate skill of navigation in unknown terrain. Native American soldiers had just as little of a grasp on what to expect in Europe as the rest of the United States military had; however, they would still be placed on the front lines to conduct scouting missions. By being placed on the front lines, these men were subjected to the brunt of the fighting, which is one reason for the high number of medals these men earned. The assumptions made by the United States military placed these Native American men in extreme danger—assumptions based on the past, which had very little relevance on the soldiers of the modern era. One Menominee Indian veteran who was subjected to this stereotype is Edwin J. Wilber, of Keshena, Wisconsin.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Ourada sites: “Indian Women Work for Victory,” *Indians in the War*, 49; “Blister Rust Control Report of the Menominee Indian Reservation” (1960), Annual Reports 1933-1960, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 186-187. Ourada sites: *Indians in the War* (Chicago: United States Department of the Interior, 1945), 8-41.

Edwin was born on February 20, 1931 to Earl and Margaret Wilber, rural farmers who were living in Keshena, Wisconsin. Earl had just earned enough money to start his own farm and was beginning to make a life for his family, which at this time consisted of five people—Earl, Margaret, Edwin, and Edwin’s older sisters Rita and Theresa. By 1936, the family had grown considerably, adding three new family members—Eileen, Bruce, and Louis—which was typical of a Wisconsin farming family of the time. Edwin and his siblings all grew up living on a farm, working day in and day out for their family’s wellbeing.

The Wilber’s would eventually prove to do well as farmers, making enough money to own two farms during the 1940s. The larger, forty acre farm was located in the West Branch area just north of Keshena, Wisconsin. The smaller, twenty-six acre farm was located within Keshena city limits. The Wilber farms consisted mostly of corn and other crops, all of which was tilled by the family’s mule team. Edwin eventually pooled the money he had earned while farming to buy the family a tractor, which would prove to make the work move along much more efficiently. While working on the farms, Edwin learned at a young age how to read maps based on landmarks around him, such as trees and rocks, which would help him to find the crops he needed to till. Edwin learned what he would consider to be, “common sense,” while working on his family’s farm, such as reading maps and understanding how to lead a group of workers to complete the daily tasks. This “common sense” would eventually be utilized by Edwin while serving in the Korean War, proving to save his life multiple times.<sup>30</sup>

The fourth of July is a day the United States celebrates its independence; it is a proud day for all Americans. July 4, 1950 was especially patriotic for many Americans, because seven days prior, President Truman ordered the use of American troops to aid the South Korean plight

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<sup>30</sup> Edwin J. Wilber, Interview by Author, Personal Interview, Keshena, Wisconsin, December 11, 2011.

against their North Korean and Chinese enemies. On July 4, 1950, many Americans volunteered to fight with the United States military. One of these men was eighteen-year-old Bruce Wilber, Edwin's younger brother by two years. After watching his brother leave to fight for their country, Edwin decided it was time to take action himself. Edwin grew tired of living and working on a farm and wanted to do something to change his world, so on July 26, 1950, twenty-year-old Edwin J. Wilber joined the United States Army. Edwin wanted to avoid the impending draft and decided he would join the army before he received a draft notice from the United States government—his draft notice would come, however it was after six months of being enlisted.

Shortly after entering the military, Edwin was sent to basic training. According to Edwin, basic training was just that, basic, "...there was nothing to my training. Basically you would run here and there, do field problems, fire your rifle a few times, and then you were headed overseas to fight in a war...nobody really prepared physically...or mentally."<sup>31</sup> Soldiers were not taught the basics of reading maps and only fired their rifles few times before deployment. This poor training was creating problems for the military; ill trained soldiers were creating defeats for the United States and their South Korean allies.

After his training was complete, Edwin was sent to Korea as a Private with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments as a part of King Company. Upon entering Korea, Edwin was viewed highly by all of the men, as well as the superior officers within the Division. Soldiers were often asking Edwin for help when it came to navigation, particularly reading maps. Just as Native Americans were used in previous wars, Edwin was being used for navigation purposes, something he had never been formally trained in. Being able to navigate terrain was one of the innate skills that Native Americans were thought to possess, which may have been

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<sup>31</sup> Edwin J. Wilber, Interview by Author, Personal Interview, Keshena, Wisconsin, October 11, 2011.

true of their native lands in the United States, but the jungles and hills of Korea were a different matter. The type of unconventional warfare used in the Korean War had never been seen by the United States who was fresh out of a conventional war victory in World War II—sans Atomic Bomb. Edwin was almost immediately appointed to be the regiment's point scout, a position that had been held by hundreds of Native Americans before him. By holding the position of point scout, Edwin was the first into the fight, putting himself on the line for his fellow soldiers. Edwin was also made an assistant squad leader, a position that was typically given to higher-ranking soldiers. This position made Edwin the leader of a small group of men and made him responsible for their actions.

January 25, 1951 marked the first day of an American offensive; this offensive charge was Operation Thunderbolt, the first offensive that was led by General Matthew Ridgway the newest commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment accompanied the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions into a battle filled with artillery and gunfire from both belligerents of the war. On the first day of the offensive, there was heavy artillery fire coming from the North Koreans. Edwin and his regiment found themselves in a valley, taking close range fire. A small squad of men moved to take the hill they were positioned under, and being the point scout Edwin was the first to crest the hill. The fire continued, as did explosions from enemy grenades. One of these explosions led to fragmentation of a grenade, which hit Edwin. This would be the first casualty Edwin would experience while serving in the Korean War. Edwin was taken from the hill and sent to a hospital in Hwaesong, Korea, where he spent twelve days recovering from the grenade blast. The 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment took many casualties, many which were not as fortunate as Edwin, during Operation Thunderbolt, which lasted six days. From what Edwin can remember, the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment had some 260 men go into battle that day, which was 60 men over

strength. Of these 260 soldiers, only 30 were not wounded or killed during the mortar bombardment.<sup>32</sup> Upon returning to the Regiment, Edwin was ready for combat and eager to return to the battlefield. Edwin was promoted to Private First Class as soon as he returned to the front lines.

After Operation Thunderbolt and upon the return of Edwin to duty, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division was involved in many firefights, though none proved to be as deadly as Operation Thunderbolt. Since Edwin was the point scout and assistant squad leader, he was often put into harms way but was willing to lay his life on the line to save his fellow squad members. One such instance of this was when Edwin and his squad were on patrol deep in enemy territory. While the squad was approaching a marked location for further investigation, Edwin heard someone in his squad holler, “GRENADE!” Edwin and the squadron’s medic hit the dirt, while the rest of the squad ran in the opposite direction. Out of the jungle came a, “Chinese or North Korean [soldier],” firing a ‘burp gun’ directly at Edwin and the medic.<sup>33</sup> The burp gun, or the PPSH-41, was a Russian made full automatic submachine gun that was made for short range combat. It was not an accurate weapon by any means, but with close range combat, the burp gun proved to be much more successful than the United States issued M1 Garand and carbine, which were more accurate at long distances. The rounds, although numerous, were not being fired with accuracy. The Korean or Chinese soldier was firing at a very high rate and one bullet hit the medic in the helmet bouncing into the ground. A second bullet hit the medic in the helmet as well, this time penetrating the helmet. All the while, the fire had missed Edwin by only a few feet, and after the medic had been hit Edwin sprang into action to save his fellow soldier. Edwin returned fire and threw a grenade in the direction of the enemy.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The firing ceased for a moment so Edwin took off the medic's pistol belt, which was significantly heavy, and then put the medic over his back and began to run towards a ravine that would give the men some shelter. Edwin was a fairly small man while he was serving in the military, weighing around 175 pounds, and the medic he was carrying was significantly larger, according to Edwin nearly 250 pounds.<sup>34</sup> Edwin ran in the direction of Love Company, a subset of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, and told other soldiers he saw to run ahead to Love Company's outpost for backup.

Edwin was not only running in order to save the life of the medic over his shoulder, he was also running because he was being followed and shot at by enemy soldiers. Many American Divisions were outfitted with South Korean natives who were used for translation and navigation purposes, and while running from the enemy the South Korean who was aiding Edwin's squad was pinned down by North Korean and Chinese soldiers. It still pains Edwin to this day that he could not turn around and save this man from the fate he would inevitably face in the hands of the enemy, but he needed to make a decision between the man on his back or risking all three of their lives—an unfortunate consequence of war.

Once Edwin finally reached the outpost where the rest of the division was stationed, he was able to take the medic off of his shoulder and place him on a stretcher. Another group of men came and took the medic to the medical tent, and Edwin is unaware of what happened to the medic after being taken away. Edwin was able to collect his thoughts and focus on the battle ahead.

Shortly after getting back to the company, Edwin was approached by one of his superior officers, Sergeant Clark. Clark asked Edwin where the enemy was located since he was the one

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

who was taking fire from them. Clark wanted to call in an artillery strike on the enemies' position in an attempt to stop the advance of the North Koreans. Edwin raised his rifle and pointed directly to where he and the medic had been fired upon by the enemy soldiers. Just after he had shown Clark where the enemy was located, Lieutenant Williams of King Company approached the men asking where to call the artillery strike. Before Edwin could speak, Clark pointed to the location Edwin had just given and Williams called in the strike over the radio. After the strike was called, and it was done so successfully, Lieutenant Williams looked at Clark and said, "Good job, Clark." Edwin knew that he was the man who should be getting credit for the strike call, but was not going to speak out against a superior officer. Edwin still has flashbacks to that moment, stating, "...whenever I hear those words today, 'good job', it brings me right back to that time over there."<sup>35</sup>

Sergeant Clark was a leader in Edwin's Regiment, but most encounters the two had with each other were typically unpleasant. Another instance of bad blood between Edwin and Sergeant Clark came on a rest day. Edwin decided he would wander around the area to get a better grasp on the terrain and what he may need to expect for the future—walking alone into uncharted territory was something that was strongly forbidden by the military, but Edwin felt that it was making him a better soldier. While he was walking around the area he came across a group of American soldiers that were tied together with their hands tied behind their backs. Edwin ran back to camp in order to tell his superior officers what he had just found, and the only person around to notify was Sergeant Clark. Sergeant Clark then took off to find the nearest Lieutenant and said that *he*, not Edwin, had found a group of men tied together in the field.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Edwin, once again, was given no credit where credit was due, and expresses that Clark “never” gave him any kind of acknowledgement when it came to anything during his time in Korea.<sup>36</sup>

Not only was Edwin a hero in his own regard, he was also a terrific leader and example for all that served with him. As was stated earlier, Edwin took over a familiar role to Native Americans in previous wars as a scout. Edwin was appointed the role of point scout during his squads’ first patrol after arriving in Korea. Edwin was coming straight from basic training and had not been formally trained in scouting, but this idea of an innate ability of Native Americans to scout seems to have found Edwin, like it did many before him. There were many times that Edwin was asked by his Lieutenant to make night patrols with a squad, something that was typically led by someone higher than the rank of private. The first time he was asked to complete a night patrol, Edwin and his squad were instructed to sit atop a hill and listen for enemy troops. When the night was over Edwin assumed he would be relieved of night patrol duties; however, the next night the Lieutenant again asked Edwin to take his team on a night patrol. Edwin knew this was not a job that he should be responsible for, but when he asked the Lieutenants why the Sergeants were not conducting these night patrols he was met with the response, “...well...you know where to go.”<sup>37</sup> This response goes to show the assumption that Edwin knew the terrain, even though he had never set foot in Korea or experienced something like Korea prior to his deployment.

It was also assumed that Edwin knew how to read maps, and on a few occasions he was asked by superior officers, who he felt were unable to read maps, where the squad was in relation to the map they had in front of them. Edwin was also not formally trained in reading maps, it was something that was left out of basic training, but being raised on a farm helped him to understand

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

where he was on a map due to landmarks and other waypoints. Using skills Edwin learned in childhood would prove to be useful throughout his time in the Korean War and understanding maps was one of those skills he perfected over time.

For nearly eight months after his first casualty, Edwin found himself in combat many times, and more than once he was close to being a casualty once again. Then on October 9, 1951, Edwin and his men once again began to take heavy fire from the North Koreans and their Chinese allies. Similar to the Regiment's position in January, the 8<sup>th</sup> found themselves between two hills in a valley. The enemy began with heavy mortar fire, which was dangerously close to the Regiment's position. The rounds then started to fall over the Regiment's position; one round came in killing one of Edwin's fellow soldiers, Private Charles Castorena.<sup>38</sup> Another round then came down, hitting a foxhole near Edwin. The round exploded, which ended up burying two soldiers, trapping them in their foxhole. Edwin could hear them screaming for help so he risked his life by digging the men out of the foxhole, all while still receiving heavy mortar fire. After Edwin unearthed the two men, they took off running to their camp, they were shell-shocked and had no desire to continue fighting. Two new soldiers were brought in to fight in the place of the other men, both of whom had just been sent to Korea and were experiencing real war for the first time. Within two hours of being placed in the foxhole another mortar round was fired in the same location, killing the two men instantly—nobody in the Regiment knew who these men were, they only knew their government issued serial numbers. Edwin reminisced that when he goes to events or parades honoring Korean War veterans he often wonders how those two men's parents

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<sup>38</sup> "Charles Castorena: Korean War Casualties, 1950-1957," Ancestry Library Edition, [http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi/bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=nara5&rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=ang-s-d&gsfn=Charles&gsln=Castarina&uidh=xf6&pcat=MIL\\_CASUALTIES&fh=1&h=41763&recoff=5+6](http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi/bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=nara5&rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=ang-s-d&gsfn=Charles&gsln=Castarina&uidh=xf6&pcat=MIL_CASUALTIES&fh=1&h=41763&recoff=5+6)

took the heartbreak of losing their children. Little did Edwin know that this night would mark the last of his time in the field.

On October 10, 1951, Edwin and his Regiment were at their camp when they were called into action due to a firefight that was going on just ahead of their position. The North Koreans and Chinese were killing American soldiers at will, and most of the men that were going in ahead of the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment were killed quickly. When Edwin finally made his way to the front line he was met by a radioman that immediately gave Edwin the radio and told him to radio an artillery strike location. Edwin was still a Private First Class at this time and asked the radioman where all of the Lieutenants and Sergeants were—the men that were supposed to be giving these orders—and he was told they were all gone, most of them killed. Edwin used waypoints around them, such as hilltops and valleys, to pinpoint where to call in the artillery strike. The strike was radioed in and Edwin and Private Clifford Roling, a man Edwin went to basic training with, charged the hill where the fire was coming from.

When the two men reached the top of the hill they were taking fire from the enemy and one of the North Koreans threw a grenade the way of Edwin and Private Roling. The grenade exploded and hit Edwin in the leg, with the shrapnel hitting Private Roling. The explosion was enough to cause Edwin to fall backwards. Edwin fell on top of another live grenade, which exploded underneath his shoulder—two grenades had hit him within seconds of each other. The other soldiers who were on the hill attempted to make a stretcher for Edwin from the men's jackets so they could carry him to safety, all the while a firefight was still raging. While he was being carried back to the rest of the Division, a bullet was fired that passed directly over Edwin's body, hitting one of the soldiers that was carrying him in the hip. The man continued to carry Edwin to safety even though a bullet had struck him. Four men had to carry Edwin on the

makeshift stretcher, until they made it to the camp. Here they were able to obtain a stretcher, which they took after a Lieutenant from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon had died and the stretcher was no longer necessary.

Edwin was then taken to an evacuation zone because his injuries were too severe to be taken care of on the battlefield. The evacuation zone was separated into three areas: the dead were placed on one side, those to be evacuated who were not injured were in the middle, and those soldiers who were injured, but would live were placed on the other side—this is where Edwin was placed. Those who were severely injured were the first to be taken by the evacuation helicopters. Edwin was transported from the evacuation site to the MASH unit at the 121<sup>st</sup> Evacuation Hospital. Edwin received multiple surgeries on his leg and shoulder and was then sent to Osaka, Japan to recover. After this, Edwin was sent stateside and his days in combat were over.

The role of a Native American scout in the military was something conceived in the late 1800s due to the Native Americans understanding of the land that no other soldier had. Native Americans had lived on that land for hundreds of years and the knowledge of that land had been passed down generational lines. When the United States entered World Wars I and II, as well as Korea and Vietnam, the Native American soldier was still used as a scout—even though the terrain in these wars was unlike anything the Native American or any other soldier had encountered before.

Edwin J. Wilber was immediately made a point scout upon his arrival to Korea and he was also made an assistant squad leader for the simple reason that he, "...[knew] where to go."<sup>39</sup> Edwin did not necessarily know where to go, but he used common knowledge he learned from

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<sup>39</sup> Edwin J. Wilber, Interview, December 11, 2011.

his upbringing to lead other soldiers in the heat of battle. Edwin believes he was made a scout for one reason, according to him, “[Your superiors] look on your records and see what you are...if you have a big number [six] on there you’re and Indian...maybe that’s why they picked me.”<sup>40</sup> By being placed on the front lines based on this assumption of abilities as a Native American, Edwin was subjected to extreme situations, which led to him becoming a casualty twice during his tour and countless other close encounters with death.

Edwin once said, “The word ‘hero’ is strange...you can’t call yourself a hero, someone else has to. No matter how much you do [during a war], you may never be called a hero.”<sup>41</sup> He received two Purple Hearts during his tour of duty, as well as a Bronze Star with Valor, for heroism in the midst of battle.<sup>42</sup> Based on a letter and certificate Edwin received from the Army after being awarded the Bronze Star, he knows his is a hero, but he has yet to have been told in person of his heroism.<sup>43</sup> Edwin J. Wilber, through his actions during the Korean War, is indeed an American hero.

## Appendix A

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Appendix A – Certificate Denoting Award of Bronze Star, this certificate is signed by William Edward Bergin, who was the Adjutant General of the Army (1951-1954), as well as Robert T. Stevens, the Secretary of the Army (1953-1955)—This certificate was awarded on 1 June 1953.

<sup>43</sup> Appendix B – Letter from Military explaining that a Bronze Star is being awarded to Edwin J. Wilber. This letter also explains the circumstances of the battle in which Wilber was given the Bronze Star for. This letter was written by Colonel Norman Moore from the Headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division on 7 February 1952.



HEADQUARTERS 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION  
APO 201

GENERAL ORDERS)  
NO.....49)

7 February 1952

AWARDS OF THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL

By direction of the President; under the provisions of Executive Order 9419, 4 February 1944 (Sec II, WD Bul 3, 1944), and pursuant to authority contained in AR 600-45, the Bronze Star Medal with "V" device for heroic achievement in connection with military operations against an enemy of the United States is awarded to the following named enlisted man:

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Private First Class EDWIN J. WILBER, RA16332430, Infantry, United States Army, Company K, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, is cited for heroism in action against an armed enemy on 10 October 1951, near Mago-ri, Korea. During the attack on an enemy-held hill, the friendly troops were subjected to intense small arms, automatic weapons, machine gun, grenade, mortar and artillery fire. Private WILBER, assistant squad leader, was advancing up the rugged slopes of the objective. When the rest of his squad was immobilized by the heavy concentration of fire, Private WILBER, exhibiting exceptional courage, moved out to silence the hostile emplacement that was obstructing the advance. Crawling to within grenade range of the enemy bunker, he silenced it with two accurately thrown grenades. Then working his way through a connecting trench, Private WILBER entered a second hostile position and killed its occupants with a Chinese automatic weapon. Private WILBER's courageous action enabled his squad to advance and successfully complete this mission. His heroism reflects great credit on himself and the military service. Entered federal service from Wisconsin.

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BY COMMAND OF MAJOR GENERAL HARGROLD:

OFFICIAL:

NORMAN MOORE  
Colonel, General Staff with Troops  
Chief of Staff

L. A. HERRON  
Lt Col, AGC  
Adjutant General

**HISTORY 489—Hidden Discrimination  
INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM**

Date: 12.11.2011

I hereby grant Nicholas M. Pelant permission to document through audio and/or video recording and transcription oral history interview(s) for the purpose of protection, preservation, and encouragement of history, culture, tradition, and heritage. The information I agree to share with the interviewer is to be used solely used at the discretion of the interviewer. The knowledge contained in the oral histories will not be given to any non-project staff except in cases where it is useful for protection and preservation purposes. When this material becomes available, it may be read, quoted, or cited from and disseminated for educational and scholarly purposes only.

This consent does not preclude any use, which I may want to make of the information contained in the recordings or transcription.

It is desired that the following restrictions be placed on this material:

I would like a copy of any interview recording and transcript to be given to:

           Myself                                 Other Individual or Tribal Government Agency  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Edwin J. Wilber  
Signature of Interviewee

Nicholas Pelant  
Signature of Interviewer

EDWIN J. WILBER  
Name

NICHOLAS PELANT  
Name

NONE  
Signature of Interpreter

12.11.2011  
Date

            
Name

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