

Indian Scouts honored as ‘best-of-the-best’

Most folks know about the Medal of Honor...our nation’s highest military award for valor. It’s rare for it to be presented... even more rare for someone to have survived the kind of bravery, gallantry, and intrepidity associated with any deed considered for this distinction.

For those who have viewed the special Medal of Honor exhibit at Sharlot Hall Museum, many have been surprised at the number associated directly with Arizona -- 156 for men in uniform during the Territorial Indian Wars of the late 1800s, plus another 12 either born or raised in Arizona and recognized for actions in foreign wars. Of note, 11 were Indians!

At a time when Anglos in the Territory were the minority, the U.S. government sent soldiers and cavalrymen to the western frontier to protect settlers. When they arrived, soldiers were unprepared for the vast desert terrain, the heat and arid vastness, or the raiding bands of indigenous people who would suddenly appear, strike quickly, steal horses or cattle or food, and seemingly vanish into nearby mountains... disappearing into the dust.

We “moved like the wind,” said Geronimo, an Apache leader. In 1866, Congress authorized the Army to enlist Indians as scouts. Before long, the military began recruiting and enlisting native American Indians as Army scouts. These Arizona natives were warriors, familiar with the terrain and harsh landscape, and family men -- much like the traditional ‘blue coats’ -- who banded in a common cause to protect their lands and people.

They had unusual names and spoke languages totally unfamiliar to the Anglo ear, and certainly different from Bostonian English. At enlistment, names were difficult to pen with familiar vowels and consonants, so liberties were often the norm. Recordskeeping was lax, and the names of Scouts were often a single word. There were multiple names of “Jim” and “Chiquito” (Spanish for ‘little guy’), plus a few descriptive names like “Rowdy” or “Alotse,” which meant “skinny.” Rarely was a complete name penned, nor words necessarily akin to what the family would call him.

Anglo soldiers, fresh from Civil War battles, could describe from where they hailed: Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania or Illinois. The Indians, however, would say something like “A’bahja” (which means, “from the people”), which may have been misinterpreted



Scouts in action in the Southwest c.1882 COURTESY SHARLOT HALL MUSEUM

or simply mixed together under the simple soundalike: “Apache.”

Regardless their name or tribe or area of family, these Indians were enlisted into the Army with all the same rights, pay and privileges of an Anglo soldier -- but with some very special skillsets. They knew the country... and how to survive on meager rations or off-the-land. They knew where and how to find water -- the most precious commodity. They knew how to hunt and track... to recognize the most subtle signs of native activity.

They knew how to shoot and kill, and had the ability to lead troops stealthily into position for attack. It was “no holiday,” wrote Lt. John Bourke, for the regular soldiers to keep up with Scouts when they were on the move. Quite simply, they were elite warriors by birth, heritage and culture!

As warriors with exceptional skill, the Indian Scouts were highly effective. General George Crook credited the surrender of the Chiricahua Apaches in 1883 and the ultimate surrender of Geronimo and his last band of holdouts in 1886 to the work of his scouts.

Eleven of those enlisted Scouts were recognized with the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest recognition for valor in combat.

While the records for their accomplishments have often been summarized with simple phrases of “bravery in action,” there deeds chronicle a critical time in the history of the Arizona Territory.

To learn more about these heroic men, visit the Sharlot Hall Museum and review the special exhibit that honors 168 men with a direct connection to Arizona who were recipients of the Medal of Honor. This exhibit continues through November 2016. The Museum is located two blocks west of the Courthouse Plaza in Prescott, 415 West Gurley Street.

