

Medal of Honor Presented to Yavapai Indian

Rowdy loved the chase, awarded MOH in final years of Indian Wars

It was early 1890. After a Mormon freight hauler was murdered by men presumed to be followers of the “Apache Kid” – an Indian Scout who had gone rogue – the 10th U.S. Cavalry was sent in hot pursuit of the perpetrators.

An Indian Scout was chosen to serve as the eyes and ears of that detachment. His name was Rowdy, a sergeant with Company A Indian Scouts. He would be recognized for “bravery in Action against [fellow] Apache Indians” on March 7, 1890, and would be presented the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest military honor for valor in action. But he wasn’t an Apache... he was Yavapai.

Known only by a single, descriptive name, Y.B. Rowdy was like many other native Arizonans trying to protect his family, his people and their lands. He was familiar with the terrain and harsh landscape of the Arizona Territory. He spoke a language totally unfamiliar to the ears of traditional “blue coats,” but was able to “move like the wind” through the vast desert terrain and guide his fellow soldiers.

At enlistment years prior, the military company clerks found it difficult to pen with familiar vowels and consonants the unusual names and spoken languages of the native Scouts. As such, liberties were often the norm, recordskeeping was lax (to where the names of Scouts were often a single word), and rarely was a complete name penned nor words akin to what the family would call him. Rowdy was probably ‘assigned’ the moniker because of his tenacious nature in-the-field.

When asked from where he hailed, Rowdy probably responded in the tongue of his people with “A’Bahja” (which means, “from the people”) and the Anglo clerk misinterpreted it because – to the uninitiated ear – it sounded similar to “Apache.” That may explain why, for more than 100 years, Rowdy was assumed to be one of 11 “Apache” Indians presented the Medal of Honor. During the Cherry Creek Campaign, Rowdy led troops through the dangerous and narrow Salt River Canyon in what became one of the last engagements of the three-decade clash of cultures referred to as the Arizona Territorial Indian Wars.

Regardless their name or tribe or area of family, the Indians who enlisted into the Army had all the same rights, pay and privileges of an Anglo soldier – but had 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. While the records for their accomplishments have often been summarized with simple phrases of “bravery in action,” their deeds chronicle a critical time in the history of Arizona.



Rowdy was only 28 in this 1886 portrait from the National Anthropological Archives. According to Army records, he was listed as Apache, but was from the Yavapai nation. Photo courtesy: Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe

The original Medal of Honor was first issued during the Civil War. A star-shaped planchet was found in the desert near Globe, and inspired creation of the Museum exhibit honoring those Arizonans who have been duly honored.

Rowdy (at far left) was described as an “excellent shot... old in war (and) loved campaigning and fighting...” The “Apache Kid” (on right) was photographed with Rowdy during ‘better’ times while both served with the 10th U.S. Cavalry.

Photo Courtesy: Burke Library Archives (Columbia University) and Yavapai-Prescott Indian tribe