

## Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War

During the Second World War, indigenous people in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada mobilised en masse to support the war effort, despite withstanding centuries of colonialism. Their roles ranged from ordinary soldiers fighting on distant shores, to civilians capturing Japanese prisoners on their own territory, to women working in munitions plants on the home front. R. Scott Sheffield and Noah Riseman examine indigenous experiences of the Second World War across these four settler societies. Informed by theories of settler colonialism, martial race theory and military sociology, they show how indigenous people and their communities both shaped and were shaped by the Second World War. Particular attention is paid to the policies in place before, during and after the war, highlighting the ways that indigenous people negotiated their own roles within the war effort at home and abroad.

**R. Scott Sheffield** is Associate Professor of History at the University of the Fraser Valley. He is the author of *The Red Man's on the Warpath: The Image of the 'Indian' and the Second World War*.

**Noah Riseman** is Associate Professor of History at the Australian Catholic University. His first book, *Defending Whose Country? Indigenous Soldiers in the Pacific War*, was shortlisted for the 2013 Chief Minister's Northern Territory History Award. He is also the co-author of *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945* and *Serving in Silence? Australian LGBT Servicemen and Women*.

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R. Scott Sheffield , Noah Riseman  
Frontmatter  
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*The Politics, Experiences and Legacies of War in  
the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand*

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## Foreword

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In 1942 journalist Richard L. Neuberger published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* stating that a Nazi propaganda radio broadcast predicted an ‘Indian uprising’ should Native Americans be asked to fight against the Axis. The broadcast, according to Neuberger, also asked the rhetorical question: ‘How could the American Indians think of bearing arms for their exploiters?’<sup>1</sup> I asked a good friend, Leipzig University instructor Frank Usbeck, to look into Neuberger’s assertion. Professor Usbeck could not find a reference to this particular broadcast in German archives, so it might very well be that Neuberger was engaging in a bit of propaganda of his own. The question, however, lingered on.

*Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War* does much to answer this question and many more. R. Scott Sheffield and Noah Riseman, both talented historians, have crafted a detailed comparative study of Native peoples – Native Americans of the United States, First Nations peoples of Canada, the Māori people of New Zealand and the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands – and their service in the militaries of four settler colonial states during World War II. Although the different Indigenous servicemen and women, of course, served in different capacities and in different theatres of the war, their experiences before, during and following their return home were remarkably similar. Quite often they served in very specific combat roles. Each of the four groups was stereotyped as possessing military skills or propensities useful to the combat missions of the various states. Indigenous service personnel entered the military during World War II often in greater numbers than their proportional populations and performed their duties with devotion and courage. It appeared to ‘prove’ the notion that if oppressed people can fight against the Axis, the entire war effort was a just cause.

All was not as this idea seemed. In all four settler colonial states, Native peoples questioned the fact that as second-class or even non-citizens

<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Neuberger, ‘On the Warpath’, *Saturday Evening Post* 215 (24 October 1942): 79.

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with little in terms of civil rights, why indeed should their people risk their lives in service of those that took their lands, suppressed their cultures and left them as the poorest of each nation's poor. Additionally, some Indigenous nations questioned conscription as illegal because of the fact that many of their people were simply not full citizens of their particular settler colonial states. Other Native nations asked that their young men be exempted from military service as conscientious objectors based on religious beliefs or because of historic treaty provisions. These protests were either ignored or explained away as the complaints of a vocal minority.

Indigenous peoples largely volunteered or accepted the draft on an individual basis and except for an all-Māori battalion (primarily under the command of non-Māori officers), special units in northern Australia and Alaska, and the Comanche and Navajo Code Talkers, they were integrated into regular military units. On the other hand, Indigenous servicemen were often put into dangerous combat situations because of non-Native stereotyping. They were placed generally in 'non-technical' military occupations meaning infantry, reconnaissance and commando duties based on the idea that they were warriors, trackers, hunters and scouts by birth. They thus saw more than their share of combat.

The authors make excellent use of oral histories found in the archives of the four settler-colonial states. The readjustment of the Indigenous servicemen and women was not altogether satisfactory, according to those who returned home following the war. Many were dissatisfied with their homecomings because settler state policies regarding their peoples remained unchanged or were in fact markedly worse. For example, Native Americans returned to the United States to face a policy shift from relative political and cultural autonomy to forced assimilation. Policymakers in the United States argued that because Native Americans fought valiantly in the war or aided the war effort at home, they wanted to become fully assimilated into the larger American society. With that as an excuse, the government began the policy of relocating Native Americans from their reservations to major metropolitan centres and terminating Native American tribal governments.

Across all four countries, many servicemen returned from combat with severe emotional and physical trauma. Combat situations promote a kind of solidification of group ethos of mutual aid. They often returned to a disjointed, individualised society that was exactly the opposite of the group cohesion that combat produces. In some cases, they were aided by the settler state in readjusting to civilian life. On the other hand, readjustment came as a result of tribal healing and honouring ceremonies and simple kinship compassion in what has been called the social absorption

of wartime trauma. Often the veterans saw themselves as warriors fighting for their own land and peoples rather than as soldiers in service of the larger nation-state. Sheffield and Riseman do a remarkable job of integrating the narratives of the different groups' experiences into this study.

What follows, all in all, is a rigorously researched and highly readable study. The authors have taken into account the different backgrounds of these peoples with perception and detail. As the reader will discover, Sheffield and Riseman have put together a very fine and much-needed study in answer to the question of why and how Indigenous peoples served in the militaries of culturally repressive settler colonial states.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR TOM HOLM  
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about gender, in particular, really challenged us to interrogate some of the gendered structures affecting women and their roles during the war. Tom Holm's work has, of course, been ground-breaking in this field, and we are honoured that he agreed to write the book's foreword.

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R. Scott Sheffield, 'Veterans' Benefits and Indigenous Veterans of the Second World War in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States', *Wicazo Sa Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 63–79.

Indigenous readers are advised that this book contains the names and images of persons who are deceased.



## Abbreviations

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AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANZ	Archives New Zealand
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AWAS	Australian Women's Army Service
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs (and its predecessor agencies; USA)
CMF	Citizen Military Forces (Australia)
DAB	Dependants' Allowance Board (Canada)
IAB	Indian Affairs Branch (Canada)
ICC	Indian Claims Commission (USA)
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
LOC	Library of Congress
MWEO	Maori War Effort Organisation
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NAIB	North American Indian Brotherhood (Canada)
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration (USA)
NCAI	National Congress of American Indians (USA)
NCO	Noncommissioned officer
NORFORCE	North West Mobile Force
NRMA	National Resources Mobilisation Act (Canada)
NTSRU	Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
PCMR	Pacific Coast Militia Rangers
POW	Prisoner of war
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force (UK)
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
RCN	Royal Canadian Navy

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RN	Royal Navy (UK)
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
RNZN	Royal New Zealand Navy
RSL	Returned Services League (as named at the time of the Second World War)
SJC	Special Joint Parliamentary Committee (Canada)
SRO	State Records Office of Western Australia
TSLI	Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion
VLA	Veterans' Lands Act (Canada)
WAAAF	Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force
WAAC and WAC	Women's Army Corps (and its predecessor names; USA)
WASP	Women Airforce Service Pilots (USA)
WAVES	United States Naval Reserve (Women's Reserve)