

Hidden Discrimination: Edwin J. Wilber and Stereotypes of Native American Soldiers

Nicholas Pelant *✧* History *✧* University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



Introduction to Native American Soldiers and Edwin J. Wilber

In most Native American tribes, those that went into battle would be looked at as warriors and were held in 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 historically been involved in warfare against the United States Government, but they have also allied with it 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.

Statement of Research

Racial assumptions have been made regarding Native American soldiers for hundreds of years. This project delves into the military career of one man, Edwin J. Wilber, a Native American soldier during the Korean War. It argues that the United States military made race-based assumptions about Wilber's military abilities, including assumptions that he had an innate, biological ability to understand foreign terrain. Wilber survived the conflict, but many Native Americans did not, as they were often placed on the front lines because of their assumed ability to read terrain. This project uses a variety of archival sources, including United States census data and military casualty records, but also relies heavily on oral interviews with Edwin J. Wilber.

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"[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 [to be a scout]."

- Edwin J. Wilber

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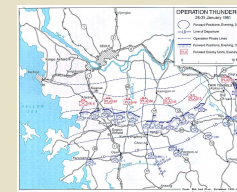
Special Thanks To: The Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Edwin J. Wilber, Dr. Patricia Turner, Dr. Selika Duckworth-Lawton, Dr. Johnny Trutor, the History Department, and Phi Alpha Theta

A Distinguished Military Record based on False Assumptions

Because he is a Native American, Edwin was seen as having an innate ability to navigate terrain and always have an understanding of where he and his Company are. Edwin had never been formally trained in scouting; however, like Native Americans before him, he was placed in this position. 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." Edwin did not necessarily know where to go, but he used common knowledge he learned from his upbringing to lead other soldiers in the heat of battle. By being placed on the front lines based on this assumption of abilities, Edwin was subjected to extreme situations, which led to him becoming a casualty twice during his tour and countless other close encounters with death.

January 25, 1951 – Operation Thunderbolt

- ✧ Edwin, as point scout, crests a hill that is taking heavy fire from North Korean and Chinese Soldiers.
- ✧ Fragmentation of a grenade hits Edwin and he is evacuated from the battlefield.
- ✧ Edwin spends twelve days recovering from the grenade blast.
- ✧ Edwin's 8th Cavalry Regiment takes 230 casualties, most are killed in action, while others like Edwin are sent back to battle.



Operation Thunderbolt—Allied and enemy troop formations on January 25, 1951

October 10, 1951

- ✧ Most of the Sergeants and Lieutenants of the Company were killed in the midst of battle. Edwin is given the task of calling artillery strikes on enemy locations.
- ✧ After radioing in artillery strikes Edwin and another soldiers charge the enemy who are perched atop a hill. An enemy threw a grenade, which exploded and hit Edwin in the leg, causing him to fall backwards. Edwin then falls onto another live grenade, which explodes under his shoulder.
- ✧ Edwin is evacuated with the help of four other soldiers and is quickly helicoptered out of the warzone. He is then brought to Osaka, Japan for multiple surgeries and to recover from his injuries.
- ✧ This would mark the end of being a soldier for Edwin.

Post-War Honors

Edwin was awarded the Bronze Star with Valor after he had returned to the United States for his actions and heroism during the Korean War.

"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."

- Edwin J. Wilber

