

Native American heritage heals wounded warriors

Contributed by By Lance Cpl. Daniel Boothe , Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton
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Native

Americans from across the nation taught West-coast wounded warriors how to overcome the lasting torments of war, with time-honored rituals and sacred traditions.

Nearly 30 combat veterans participated in "Operation One Drum," a 4-day workshop designed to alleviate combat stress. The Native American program is the first of its kind to be held on a military installation.

"When a man is faced with a life or death situation, his spirit detaches from him and remains on the battlefield," said Staff Sgt. James L. Eagleman, former 1st Marine Division tanker and current resident at Wounded Warrior Battalion West, Camp Pendleton. "This experience has helped me and a lot of the guys here reconnect spiritually."

A central part of the event was the making of tribal drums. Marines and sailors made the symbolic hand drums from buffalo hide and cottonwood. The ceremonial drums carry sacred meaning to many Native American tribes and were a keystone to several indigenous North American cultures.

The honor and spirit given to the drum was explained to the combat veterans at Camp Pendleton and proved to be a vital core to the diverse workshop.

"We don't play the drum or beat the drum, we drum a steady beat that brings our heart in tune with the creator," said Larry "Grizz" Brown, lead ceremonial drummer and descendant of the Cherokee and Creek Native American tribes. "It's not just something you hear, it is something you feel deep within your soul."

Wounded warriors also connected with Native American veterans through traditional Talking Circles. These discussion groups require participants to pass an eagle feather amongst one another to designate the current speaker and allow veterans from every era to share their combat experiences.

“Just talking can sometimes relieve some of that mental anguish,” said Sgt. Maj. Michael J. Templeton, sergeant major, WWBN-West and two-time Iraqi combat veteran. “This ceremony is a welcome back and reintegration of the warrior in us.”

When Native American warriors first returned from battle, they were called to sit before the elders, said Eagleman, who is also a descendant from the Lakota and Sioux tribes. The elders would apologize to the warriors for having to do the things they had to do and see the things they saw. And then they gave them honor for putting the needs of the tribe above their own survival, added Eagleman. Finally, the elders told them how happy they were for their safe return.

“Just as the American buffalo seemed on the verge of extinction and has made a comeback in such numbers that there is enough hide to make drums; so is the promise that these Marines and sailors will survive the ordeal they have been through,” said Marshall Tall Eagle, sacred spiritual pipe carrier for the Northwest Eagle Clan of the Apache and Vietnam veteran. “Without honoring our veterans now, future generations will not understand the cost of freedom, nor will they know what their fathers and grandfathers suffered so that they can have their present day liberty.”

The wounded warriors were immersed in the Native American culture and heritage throughout the week-long workshop that concluded with a three-hour song and dance ceremony, Feb 25.

“We have millions of dollars and several staff, all meant to help take care of these guys,” said Lt. Col. Greg Martin, commanding officer, WWBN-West. “What we can’t do with these resources is necessarily touch their hearts and minds the way a program like this might.”

During the final ceremony, the wounded warriors received the Native American Warrior’s Medal of Valor, a medal awarded on behalf of the 565 first nation tribes, said Tall Eagle.

“It seemed right to give American veterans the unique insights about war that is inherent to the Native American culture,” said Deborah Bear Barbour, originator of the Hawaii-based, Operation One Drum and descendant of the Native American Oglala and Lakota tribes. “It was time for Native Americans and soldiers to embrace one another in an act of healing.”

