

Tribal Warfare

The Society of Modern Airmen

Col Mark K. Wells, PhD, USAF

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Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Native American intertribal warfare across North America was common and intense. Apart from fighting over land and resources in conflict that could be marked by generally small-scale but nevertheless intense destructiveness over time, these tribes often attached immense importance to prestige and status. How one tribe stood in relationship to another was considered of great significance. In some instances, raids consisted solely of dancing and taunting opponents and included the famous practice of “counting coup,” in which a living enemy was touched by hand or by a special wooden stick. In short, individual warriors and tribes sought rank and position in the larger Amerindian community.¹

Even if modern air forces are part of a nation’s larger national defense establishment, it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that all of us as airmen are members of individual tribes. For all sorts of historical reasons, this core tribe identity, in turn, has been based on what we mostly do each day. In the simplest terms, pilots fly airplanes, navigators and weapons system operators operate equipment, maintenance officers and airmen fix aircraft, personnel officers work human resources, missile folks train to launch missiles, intelligence officers do analysis and make predictions, and so on. The United States Air Force currently lists more than 120 job specialty codes—for officers alone. In the Air Force, as in Native American society—and I daresay in any hierarchical organization—rank and prestige are important to membership and success. Quite apart from the normal and easily identifiable insignia of rank that we all carry come the no less visible and equally important badges of our qualifications. In addition to these are the all-important ribbons or medals we wear to signify our achievement, earned either in peacetime or during actual combat service.

These accouterments combine to establish our formal and informal authority and, unlike the situation in civilian life, make it relatively easy for observers to discern where any military member ranks in the hierarchy. Moreover, knowledge, skills, and language further set tribes or subgroups apart and build a sense of group identity.² Almost from the dawn of organized conflict, military organizations have reflected a structure that resembles a pyramid with various tiers of contributors occupying a unique, identifiable status. In vernacular terms, we sometimes refer to this phenomenon as the “pecking order” or “food chain.” Although some movement

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE JUN 2015		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2015 to 00-00-2015	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Tribal Warfare: The Society of Modern Airmen				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air Force Research Institute, Air & Space Power Journal, 155 N. Twining St., Bldg. 693, Maxwell AFB, AL, 36112				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

up and down can take place inside these tribes or subgroups, significant upward mobility across tribal lines is generally considered far more difficult.

For all sorts of historical reasons stretching back to Homer's ancient Greece, and much earlier in other worldwide locations, actual "combatants" have long—some might say rightly—dominated the highest ranks of the world's militaries. For example, consider the classical and well-understood definition of combat: to fight, contend, or struggle during armed fighting or battle. A combatant is a person who fights and is at risk. From the earliest days of aviation, airmen who engaged in aerial action with enemies have been regarded as members of this elite group. Aircraft and flying were considered novelties, and pilots were often seen as daredevils. Many people believed that it took a special type of man to brave the obvious perils—particularly those of combat aviation.³ This image became even more exaggerated during the First World War, especially in the popular perception. Circumstances combined to generate the favored notion that pilots were somehow "supermen" who not only had nerves of steel but also possessed physical and mental superiority. In short, for obvious reasons, pilots—or, more broadly, "flying" airmen—did the fighting and dying. Perhaps as a result of deliberate efforts made by belligerent governments during both world wars to establish and uphold their "hero" status, pilots enjoyed the highest rank in the pyramid.

To many outsiders, it currently appears that pilots lead a pampered life and that they enjoy rank, pay, and privileges far out of proportion to those of their comrades in other services.⁴ Of course nonflyers in any air force have always been recognized as fundamentally essential to its operation. Aviation at its core is technologically dependent and derives its essence from a huge infrastructure at the apex of science, technology, and application. Especially today, nobody gets airborne or conducts any form of aerial operation without the investment of tens of thousands of man-hours and billions of dollars of scientific and industrial commitment. Moreover, figures gathered in 2010 indicate that for every pilot, the US Air Force has more than 23 nonflying Airmen and officers in support.⁵ Consequently, one might argue that air forces necessarily require the largest tail-to-tooth ratio of any of the services.

None of this mattered very much, either in the popular imagination or inside air forces for a long time. Up until the first Gulf War in 1991, military events of the preceding 90 years had done little to disturb the tidy orderliness of the Air Force hierarchy. Pilots remained at the top, and almost everyone in the service knew it. That said, complexities inside the pilot and larger aviator tier were well known to any of its occupants. Returning for a moment to our recognition that a combatant—even a potential one—in the armed forces will generally garner more recognition than a noncombatant, we acknowledge that fighter pilots held the highest position in most air forces. Other types of flyers (e.g., bomber pilots, transport pilots, or instructors in training command) therefore occupied slightly lower subgroups yet remained in the overall highest fraternity of the tier. Among the simplest measures of this position were promotion statistics and access to higher levels of responsibility.⁶

Just after the Second World War and during the Cold War, US Air Force bomber pilots were most certainly ascendant, at least with regard to the overall direction of the service's strategy, policy, and acquisition. These officers—aviators who had largely shaped their careers through Strategic Air Command—were part of what

Morris Janowitz would identify as the “elite nucleus” that eventually gave way to a different group as the changing demands of the international security environment shaped aircraft development and deployment.⁷ Over a short span of time, large, nuclear-capable bombers became less useful in wars such as Vietnam, which demanded quick and responsive support of ground operations. Even if bomber pilots ceded formal position to fighter pilots in the hierarchy of the US Air Force, however, they lost little if any of the informal authority they wielded as members of the overall pilot elite. The fact that they might “potentially” put themselves in harm’s way, along with the panache and mythology associated with flying in previous wars, was sufficient to keep them there.

These reflections raise the question of whether the current nature of combat, the size and scale of the battlefield, or the very essence of the military and air forces has so changed that we absolutely need to redefine what it means to be a combatant. Will it upset the formal and informal hierarchy of airmen? As air forces around the world shrink, become more androgynous and civilianized, and—even more importantly—see their missions become far less traditional, new understandings become necessary.⁸ It is difficult to imagine that traditional military measures—kinetic “fire and steel” as they are called—will ever go away. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that peace-keeping operations, nation building, and humanitarian concerns have grown in importance. These facts are already blurring distinctions among the practitioners of organized violence, citizens, airmen, combatants, and military contractors. Indeed, they have contributed also to changes inside the US Air Force regarding combat and combat-support roles. One must, of course, add the multiple, complex requirements of fighting insurgencies and conducting operations against terrorists or other non-state actors. In short, there is upheaval in the food chain!

Take, for example, the increasing use of the technology that the US Air Force is now calling unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Despite this official nomenclature, international print and television media refer to them pretty much universally as “drones.” It is noteworthy that the Air Force made an early, albeit futile, attempt to call them remotely piloted aircraft. A cynic—or member of the pilot fraternity—would note the importance of using the term *pilot* in the title of any machine exploiting the third dimension. Whatever the name, it seems abundantly clear that drones will play an increasingly important, if not dominant, role in the future of air operations. At least in terms of numbers, they currently represent the bulk of systems acquired each year.

A similar expansion has occurred in the use of space-operated systems to enhance communication and to link intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. The active exploitation of space requires the identification, selection, education, and training of an entirely new generation of Airmen. This group has slowly but steadily become an integral part of the multitiered Air Force hierarchy, but, arguably, their status within that hierarchy is yet to be fully determined.

In a similar way, the hierarchy is dealing with “cyber warriors,” those individuals designated to work in the ever-expanding field of cyberspace. Although one can argue that exploitation of the electromagnetic environment has long been a part of air operations and airpower, the potential impact of computer cyberspace and artificial intelligence on contemporary warfare is profound. Rather than relying exclusively

on the physical destruction of targets—annihilation or attrition—this new way of conducting operations focuses on generating desired effects. Traditional kinetic weapons and means may be supplemented or even made obsolete by nonlethal means that could compel the enemy to change his behavior. We are already seeing the impact of nonkinetic weapons, including microwaves, cyber assault, computer hacking, directed-energy beams, radio-frequency strikes, and acoustic weapons, among others.⁹

One can hardly overstate the impact of cyber, drones, and even newer technologies on contemporary operations. One result has been expansion of the battlespace to virtually unlimited proportions. Airpower has increasingly broadened beyond land, sea, and air to include space and cyberspace. Moreover, air, space, and cyberspace function inseparably and are vital if the US Air Force is to “fly, fight, and win” and provide national security.¹⁰ As a result, the service can no longer simply rely on a relatively small group of direct, heroic combatants for institutional leadership. Technical specialists, UAS operators, intelligence analysts, and satellite operators—many of them thousands of miles away from any physical risk—are nevertheless increasingly central to success in air operations and are having an ever-greater effect on the social culture of air forces. It follows that as air forces worldwide no longer rely on manned aircraft exclusively to carry out combat missions, their senior leadership must react to that fact and look to change the makeup of their services. Not too many years ago, it was popular to say that being a “warrior” was a state of mind rather than an actual experience. Today, to be warriors, our Airmen no longer need to kill or place themselves at risk of death. This blending of roles has led to noteworthy and noticeable changes in the hierarchy of Airmen. Friction is inevitable.

Those of us who continue to serve see this discord daily. For decades there was a feeling in the US Air Force that pilots won the majority of promotions and received special privilege regarding jobs. Organizational theory suggests that individuals will not give up this privileged position easily. As distinctions among various Air Force subgroups decline, so might one expect a fight for retention of social superiority, whether formal or informal. Under such circumstances, a typical response has been to blur the most visible distinctions among groups even further. By allowing a broader cross section of personnel to wear the visual reminders of aviation service, all members of the Air Force might feel more a part of the team. Further, senior leadership tries to increase morale by deliberately and substantially increasing the number of ratings and occupational badges. Finally, equity improves when particular career fields receive direct attention for extra promotion consideration.¹¹

These efforts do not always succeed, nor are they met with universal acclaim. Whatever official and regulatory efforts take place in the realm of changes in organizational culture can be slow and generally have to overcome a host of complex attitudes based on history, tradition, and the uncertainties of human behavior. Regardless of the intent of an air force leadership’s reordering of its conventional hierarchy or matching that human dynamic to the realities of modern air warfare, resistance and strife will remain. “Tribes” and subcultures likely will continue to exist for years, if not decades. It is even more interesting to consider that the very tension occasioned by emerging technologies is actually “good” for the hierarchy of the pyramid. One doesn’t have to believe in social Darwinism to accept the notion that

a certain amount of organizational strife keeps everybody on his or her toes and more willing to fight for or adapt to change. Despite conflict, the best ideas generally win. Think back to Army cavalymen in the early decades of the twentieth century and their resistance to mechanization.¹²

In this regard, an examination of drone pilots should make for an interesting case study. Media reports indicate rather too optimistically that drones are rapidly changing the “Top Gun” culture of the Air Force and that the service pins more wings on new drone pilots than on fighter and bomber pilots.¹³ The latter is true, but among at least some of those who dream to fly in a conventional cockpit, there remains measurable reluctance to give up that opportunity to fly a computer joystick and operate out of a small trailer some distance from a real flight line and the roar of jet aircraft.¹⁴ Nonflyers perhaps too often overlook the kinesthetic pleasure and emotional satisfaction of airplane flying. Flying can even be considered romantic, and the connections to mythology are clear—witness the story of Daedalus.

One finds other manifestations of the current unsettled atmosphere of Air Force culture and hierarchy. The recent incident at Malmstrom AFB in Montana, where more than 90 missile-launch officers cheated on a monthly proficiency examination led to the relief of 10 commanding officers. Cited among the complex reasons for the scandal was the perception among these officers that their work was professionally unrewarding and undervalued. For too long, this absolutely vital mission had been dismissed, marginalized, ignored, or, in the vernacular, “pushed too far down the food chain” to matter.¹⁵ One need only recall that the number of brand-new Air Force second lieutenants who volunteer for missile crew duty is comparatively low.

Where does all of this leave us? Given centuries of Western military development and the obvious human admiration for courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and victory, it hardly seems possible that our Homeric notions of the warrior ethos will undergo any fundamental change. In short, at an intellectual level, Air Force leadership should—and, I hasten to add, with good reason—strive to reorder its traditional tribal hierarchy of occupations, but I fear that the effort will never entirely succeed. Regulations cannot do what emotion and the power of human responses can. Cyber warriors, drone operators, computer specialists, and satellite drivers, may—and, perhaps most certainly, will—determine the outcome of any future major conflict. But like the American Indian tribes of two centuries ago, human emotion as much as logic will dictate the hierarchy among Air Force personnel. If we search for common themes, it seems difficult to overlook the impact of mythology and a certain romantic view of how each group or subgroup can contribute to the welfare of the whole. However expanded the contemporary definition of *warrior*, we collectively seem to default to our earliest human origins engaged in conflict. In the United States, like our Native American predecessors, from our earliest years we Airmen have sorted ourselves out as tribes. This process continues, albeit at an accelerated rate, and, whatever the outcome, it is only as transitory as technology and may result in overall improvement. ★

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Col Mark K. Wells

Colonel Wells (USAF; MA, Texas Tech University; PhD, King's College, University of London) is Permanent Professor and head of the Department of History, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado. At the academy, he leads a 31-person academic department teaching 40 different history courses to over 3,000 cadets annually. He has served as an aircraft commander in the KC-135 with the 92nd Air Refueling Squadron, a T-37 instructor pilot, a flight commander in Pilot Instructor Training, and a military assistant to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. He is currently active as an instructor pilot with the 557th Flying Training Squadron. Colonel Wells has published articles in a number of periodicals, and his first book, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* (Frank Cass, 1995), won the Society for Military History's 1997 Distinguished Book Award and was listed twice on the Air Force chief of staff's reading list of recommended books. A command pilot with more than 3,200 flying hours in the KC-135, T-37, T-3, T-41, T-52, and T-53, Colonel Wells is a distinguished graduate of both Squadron Officer School and Air Command and Staff College. He also graduated from the US Army War College.

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