

After painting his face, Eddie “Two Clouds” Zermeno prepares to dance at the Tinker Inter-Tribal Council’s first powwow held near Tinker Air Force Base, Okla. Everything he wears, including the color of his face paint, is symbolic. Red paint signifies blood shed in all wars, and black represents American prisoners of war. During the summer, Zermeno dances at several powwows each month.



WARRIOR SPIRIT

Military warriors at work, Indian warriors on weekends

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr., photos by Tech. Sgt. Efrían Gonzalez

Feathers flashed in the sunlight like the wings of hummingbirds as American Indians spun, dipped and pounded their moccasins to the beat of a drum.

Dancers sported fringed buckskin pants, ermine, buffalo and wolf pelts, and neck chokers made of buffalo horn, quills and elk teeth. They wore beaded moccasins and shirts with multicolored stripes of cloth that gave the dancers smooth, wind-like movements. Their heads were adorned with the feathers of predatory birds or the hides of animals.

But one dancer’s outfit stood out from the rest. While other dancers jingle-jangled past him, Thunder-Cloud Hirajeta’s regalia remained as silent as the moon. His clothes were the color of the sky. His moccasins were made of hide as black as soot. Atop his head he wore a pointy, ocean-colored hat with slits on the sides. On his shirt, he wore short ribbons dyed the color of rainbows.

Military warriors — Indian warriors



Staff Sgt. Thunder-Cloud Hirajeta wears two uniforms, one Air Force, the other American Indian. For demonstration purposes only, he displays items outside his flack vest that he took with him during his recent Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment — a medicine bag and an eagle bone whistle. Before leaving for the war, Hirajeta, a Comanche,

was presented with the medicine bag, called a “puha,” which contains items special to him and provides protection from evil. The bone whistle was used by Indian leaders of the past to call for help because they believed eagles carry thoughts and prayers to God. Indian leaders also used the whistle as a tactical tool to signal attacks or to regroup.



As a staff sergeant, Hirajeta was wearing his Air Force blues to the first Tinker Inter-Tribal Council powwow held last summer in Midwest City, Okla.

Hirajeta, 24, is also a Comanche Indian.

Since Hirajeta was taking part in a dance that honored veterans, it was not at all strange to see him there. What makes him feel a little peculiar is living two different and distinct lives.

“During the week, I work as a warrior for the Air Force. On Saturdays and Sundays, I’m a weekend warrior,” joked Hirajeta, a heating, ventilation and

Retired Tech. Sgt. Gordon Roy (left) adorned his dance regalia with Air Force patches before the Grand Entrance dance at the Tinker Inter-Tribal Council powwow. The patches serve as symbols of achievement and are a source of pride for having served in the military. Roy is a Ponca Indian and a member of the council. A local dancer (below) participated in the powwow’s Grand Entrance dance. Between 1,500 and 2,000 people attended the powwow, which event coordinators plan to make an annual event. Council members held a special dance honoring members who deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom.



air conditioning specialist stationed at Tinker.

However, he's quick to add they are one in the same — both are warrior societies.

N. Scott Momaday, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and Kiowa Indian born in Oklahoma, put it best when he said, "You'll never find a greater patriot than an American Indian. It's not an accident that the greatest honor that can come to an American Indian is to serve in the armed forces."

An even greater achievement is to have been in

a war, like Hirajeta, a native of Fayetteville, N.C. He returned last spring from Operation Iraqi Freedom where he was deployed to Baghdad International Airport, Iraq. For two-and-a-half months, he worked in airfield operations and combat communications.

"Indian roots are in the warriors," said Bob Harwell, a Creek Indian and the Tinker Inter-Tribal Council's senior advisor and one of the organization's founders. "It permeates through them. We

honor veterans, and we feel strongly about defending this country. Many of our council members are proud of their jobs, and we talk a lot about our war fighters, who to us are warriors."

In between dances that recognized all veterans, the festivities stopped so everyone at the powwow could honor Hirajeta's safe return home from war. Once the drums started again, people placed money and gifts at his feet as a sign of respect. Gordon Roy, a retired Air Force veteran who served two

tours in Vietnam, stood at Hirajeta's side as his adopted father — not his adopted father in the classical sense, but more of a mentor. Roy, a Ponca Nation Indian, taught Hirajeta everything he needed to know about the ways of his people.

"It felt good to get honored," Hirajeta said. "Being an Indian, I feel the beat of the drums in my heart and soul. It grabs a hold of me and becomes part of me."

Later in the day, Hirajeta got out of his blues and



Dancers at the Tinker Inter-Tribal Council powwow (top) honor Hirajeta for his Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment. Hirajeta, wearing his blues, is the council's vice chairman. Glancing around, looking for her friends, Daisy Mae Swift (right), of Kiowa and Wichita descent, wears her South West Oklahoma Vietnam Veterans Junior Princess sash. Sitting beside her is Kiowa DuPoint, a Kiowa Indian and also a Junior Princess.



Even astronauts need mentors

He was born in Wetumka, Okla., in 1958, and his family moved around so much he didn't have time to grow roots in any one place. Later, after moving to Colorado, he majored in forestry because he loved the outdoors — especially rock climbing. In fact, he loved the outdoors so much and the inside of a classroom so little that he earned two D's in biology and was suspended after the sixth semester.

While assisting surveyors across the rugged Colorado landscape, he regained interest and entered college again after being persuaded by his supervisor. He graduated with majors in mathematics and engineering. More than 20 years later he is now known as the first American Indian to fly into space. That man is mission specialist John Herrington — NASA astronaut and Chickasaw Indian.

"You can have difficulty in life and lack direction, but there are people in your life who will make a difference. There are people out there who can help you realize your dream," Herrington said.

The Tinker Inter-Tribal Council provides such support. Organized in 1977, the council was created as a forum for American Indians having difficulties in their careers — personnel problems, promotion stagnation and lack of education.

"We provided career advice to the more than 600 Native Americans who worked at Tinker at that time," said Bob Harwell, a Creek Indian and the council's senior advisor. During those early days, Harwell said misconceptions about

Indians permeated American society.

"There were stereotypes about Indians always being drunk, lazy and slow. Our job is to turn those misconceptions into more positive ideals. The first powwow we ever had as a council showed non-Indians what Indians are all about," Harwell said.

Even the council's namesake needed help at one time.

Tinker Air Force Base was named after Maj. Gen. Clarence Leonard Tinker, an Osage Indian born and raised on tribal lands in Oklahoma. Early in his career, the cadet from Wentworth Military Academy in Lexington, Mo., knew he couldn't get into the regular Army as a military officer, which in 1908 was largely reserved for West Point graduates.

Fortunately, the school commandant helped Tinker earn a commission as a third lieutenant in the Philippine Constabulary. More importantly, it eventually got Tinker into the Army Air Service officer corps in 1920 where he eventually rose to the rank of major general and commander of the Hawaiian Department of the Army until his death, south of Midway Island, in 1942.

Membership into the council, which meets monthly, is open to active and retired federal employees. Of the more than 700 American Indians at Tinker, more than 70 are in the council, making it the largest in the Air Force, according to council members.

— Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

into his Indian regalia, which he has an almost religious connection to. Everything has a meaning, such as the bandoliers that crisscross his chest. Bandoliers signify everything that is Thunder-Cloud Hirajeta.

Bandoliers are an offshoot of the single Cheyenne Dog Soldier sash that could only be worn by warriors who vowed never to retreat. In the late 1800s, some warriors would stand and fight during times of conflict to allow women and children to escape. Dog Soldiers, however, went one step further. They used their sashes with pins attached to

stake themselves to the ground — restricted from moving from that spot — to allow companions to retreat to safety, even if this resulted in death. Only after they reached safety, or another authorized Dog Soldier released him from his duty, was he allowed to pull the pin from the ground.

“The Dog Soldiers were the elite military organizations of the tribe,” said Momaday, in an interview with the West Film Project and WETA as part of a Public Broadcasting Service special. “They were the last line of defense for the people. And so they were greatly esteemed. They also had a song

which only the members could sing, and only in the face of death. So you can imagine what children must have said when they saw a Dog Soldier go by: ‘Ahhh, wow! Look at that guy. He’s a Dog Soldier.’ ”

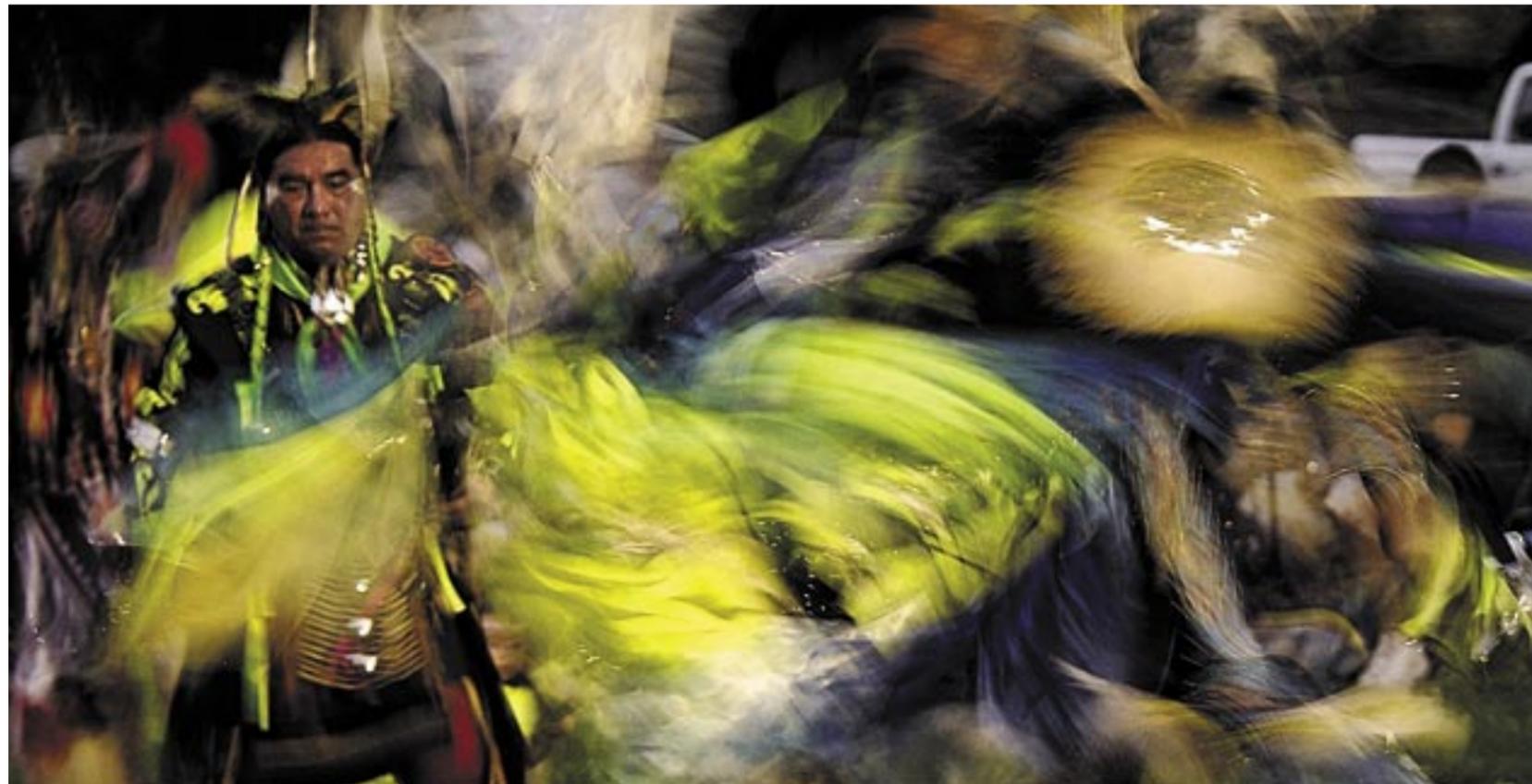
This is what Hirajeta wanted children to feel when he had danced earlier in his blues.

“I wear my uniform as much as possible so I can be an Air Force ambassador to children who may see me at the powwow,” Hirajeta said. “And they can see how much respect I receive and how others treat me. This may inspire them to join the Air

Force and to do an honorable thing for our community.”

Just as he hopes to earn a military ribbon or two for his deployment to Iraq, he anticipated and was pleased when presented an eagle feather for his time spent in the war.

Historically, American Indians have the highest record of military service per capita compared to other ethnic groups, according to Department of Defense officials. Their cultural values drive them to serve their country, and their warrior spirit becomes one with the Air Force. ✪



Larry McCurtain, a Kiowa and Comanche (top), dances slower than the fancy dancer on his left, who is a blur of motion. McCurtain participated in the council's powwow to help keep American Indian traditions alive.

They're also a time for feasting and visiting. Dancing in his Absentee Shawnee regalia, Kelly Switch (right) is often called upon to serve on the head staff at powwows throughout the United States. At the council powwow, he was the head male dancer. Hirajeta dances in his Comanche regalia (far right). He said dancing is more difficult than it seems because of the symbolism involved. Hirajeta's father served in Vietnam, his step-father was in Desert Storm and his brother was also in Iraq.



Regalia and respect

“I get into my costume every morning when I go to work, and I wear my regular clothes on weekends when I go to powwows,” explained Eddie “Two Clouds” Zermeno as he looked in the rearview mirror of his Plymouth Voyager van.

He then smeared red face paint over his forehead, eyes and upper part of his nose. Red represents blood shed in all American wars. The Tinker Air Force Base civilian employee and member of the Tinker Inter-Tribal Council was participating in the council's first powwow.

As he donned his vest adorned with the colors of the American flag, he said his regalia is priceless. He's been dancing most of his life, and every item on his regalia he has either made, earned or had handed down to him. He's constantly adding to it.

When he walked, bullet shells on his ceremonial outfit clinked together like chirping crickets. The shells represent fallen comrades. Although a dancer's outfit may be based on a particular tribe's style, dancers may incorporate their own stories and personalities into the regalia, like unit patches, Veterans of Foreign Wars badges and mini-American flags.

Like nearly all others, the council's powwow helps keep alive American Indian culture and traditions. It's a time to celebrate, socialize, dance and feast. For the general public, powwows act as windows into Indian culture, but there is some etiquette to follow:

- Don't call their regalia costumes.
- Don't use flash photography during contests. It's distracting.
- Ask permission before taking pictures of someone outside of dancing.
- Don't touch regalia without permission. The regalia have special significance for the dancers and their families.

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