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Peer reviewed

# The Eagles I Fed Who Did Not Love Me

WOODY KIPP

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The two F4-B Phantom jets came in low, very low, at about two hundred feet, probably traveling at somewhere around five hundred miles per hour. Five hundred was just cruising speed for these birds. I had seen them go faster in Vietnam. I had seen them twist and turn and hurl fiery death toward the ground in the form of 250-, 500-, and 1,000-pound bombs. They were, as we say in the Blackfeet, *stoonatopsi*, dangerous. For the twenty months I had spent as a support combat engineer with the First Marine Air Wing on the outskirts of the Vietnamese city of DaNang, the sleek killing machines had been on my side. Now they were not on my side; now they were hunting me.

In 1969, native militants took over the abandoned prison island of Alcatraz to call attention to the destitute conditions of the natives of America. After a year-and-a-half on the island, living in primitive conditions, the natives were forced to leave their watery fortress. A fire had been lighted, however; the protests were just beginning. On 27 February 1973, the American Indian Movement (AIM), in concert with a grassroots political activist group called the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, took armed control of the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Alcatraz was the call to arms. There were other marches, protests, walks across the country to keep the native movement visible, but Wounded Knee was the crucible that formed many of

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today's native leaders, whether or not they were at the siege. At Wounded Knee, those who chose to come told white America, "We might not be able to live like our ancestors, but, when push comes to shove, we can still die like our ancestors, die in the Indian way, defending our homeland and our people."

In 1973, in the village of Wounded Knee, there was a white Catholic church next to the mass grave that contained the bodies of the nearly four hundred Sioux men, women, and children who were massacred in 1890 by the Seventh Cavalry, Custer's old unit. The church is no longer there. Sometime in the 1970s, after the occupation, it burned to the ground. I have never heard why or how it burned. I can only guess.

The 1973 takeover of Wounded Knee village was the first armed resistance by natives since the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. The takeover was a response to a century of maniacal oppression by white society, an oppression that goes on today—subtler, smilingly, but it continues. Young whites today have a favorite refrain about this historical oppression: "Why should I have to pay for something my grandfather did?" I tell them that, although the overt acts of military warfare may have ended, the policies and principles espoused by their grandfathers are still in place in Indian Country. I ask them, "Why else would it be that I, on paper, own 648 acres of trust land on the Blackfeet Reservation but cannot use any of it because of Bureau of Indian Affairs rules and regulations?" Surely, I tell them, if a white man owned 648 acres of land, he would be able to pressure his legislators into enacting a law that allowed him the use of the land he owned. It is in the interest of white colonialism that the Indian cannot use the land he supposedly owns on his own reservation. Instead, white farmers and ranchers depend on Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) bureaucrats to block the land up for them and offer it to the highest bidder; moreover, the bidders drink cocktails with the bankers in the towns surrounding the reservations—bankers whose institutions do not loan money to Indians, especially Indians like me with waist-length braids.

That, in part, was what Wounded Knee was about, at least for me. Others who were there had their own reasons. But one issue was clear: It was a rebellion by those who had been on this land for millennia, eighteen to sixty thousand years, according to the latest archaeological estimates. And we say this: You may be in physical control of the land, white man, but spiritually we are still the landlords; until you come into union with the land, you are always going to be an outsider, someone who has disregarded all

the tenets of the holy Christ you claim as a guide. Remember, white brothers and sisters, we read today—scientific tracts, literature, philosophy, books on business management. And sometimes we read the Christian Bible and it makes us wonder if you are truly aware that this earth plane is but a lesson to prepare us to come into conjunction with the song of the universe, with all those exalted ideas you promote but cannot seem to practice: truth, beauty, and justice.

Alcatraz, Fort Lawton, Wounded Knee will be viewed by future generations as a birthing time, a painful agony that had to be endured in the search for survival. My daughter Dameon, now twenty-one, was born the evening AIM and OSCRO took over the village of Wounded Knee, at approximately the same time that the Indians were entering Clive Guildersleeve's corrupt trading post. She signaled a beginning. My other daughter, Avalon, was born in the redneck town of Conrad, Montana, on New Year's Eve, the first baby born in Pondera County that year. Normally, like many other towns, Conrad provides gifts to the first baby born in a new year, and to the mother. The town officials were going to give the gifts to Avalon, but when they found out she was from the Blackfeet Reservation, they decided to wait until the next white baby was born. Small thing, that. But the people in Indian Country can recite a litany of small things over the past century. And, in time, small things, like New Year's babies, grow. I picture, in my mind, my daughter Dameon being born while Indians were overrunning the village of Wounded Knee.

In Vietnam, *overrun* was a scary word. It was a term I became familiar with while reading the U.S. military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, during my stint there. To hear that a village or an outpost had been overrun by the Viet Cong was bad news. Ultimately, though, that is what Wounded Knee was about—native people being overrun by white people, smothered by the technological superiority of gunpowder diplomacy, backed up by papal bulls that, in effect, gave the go-ahead to the ethnic cleansing of the North American continent.

We—a Blackfeet named Bradley LaPlant; Rudy Thunder Hawk, an Oglala from Pine Ridge; and I—were manning a bunker when the Phantoms came over the first time. The afternoon was gray and cloudy and chilly. LaPlant and I had walked into Wounded Knee under cover of darkness some ten days before, along with thirty-seven other people, guided from Douglas Horse's place in Porcupine by young Oglala boys who knew the terrain.

When I worked at the DaNang airfield, I became accustomed to the illumination flares that lit up the surrounding countryside as U.S. marines searched the night for Viet Cong. After I left Vietnam, I was sure I had seen my last illumination flare.

On the way to Wounded Knee, with snow covering the ground, my companions and I were confronted with the roar of an engine; a large vehicle was nearby. Then came a spotlight sweeping across the mostly flat landscape. Luckily, we happened to be walking along a ravine; as the spotlight moved in our direction, we slid into the ravine and held our breaths, the light going over us and moving eerily across the white ground. The clank and rumble of the machine, an armored personnel carrier, brought the reality of the situation home to me. This was a bona fide military operation, not like a street battle with cops wielding batons and mace. Armored personnel carriers packed .30-caliber machine guns whose rapid fire made the Gatling guns that cut down the Wounded Knee victims of 1890 look like pistols. A few minutes later, the armored personnel carrier, not more than a half-mile away, launched an illumination flare. It was not close enough to illuminate us, but it was certainly close enough to make me realize that here, in my own country, I was the "gook" they were looking for.

And now the Phantoms were looking for me. I guess I felt like the dog owner who feeds and coddles his Doberman Pinscher only to wake one day to find the dog at his throat. I had fed these machines so they could do their killing work in both North and South Vietnam. Now I could appreciate the terror felt by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese who were on the receiving end of these sleek, dangerous planes whose nose cone radar costs several million dollars.

I was nineteen when I sailed for Vietnam on the U.S.S. General John Mitchell. I was told I was going to fight communist aggression. Nineteen-year-olds can be fed a lot of hype and they believe it. I attended school through high school in Cut Bank, Montana. In Cut Bank, we were taught that the communists were trying to take over the world and enslave us all. "Dangerous bastards, them communists," it was parroted in the oil-cowtown backwater eddies of Cut Bank. It did not occur to me as an Indian youth that my people had already undergone enslavement. Actually, for us, the communists might have been a welcome relief; at least they believed in doing things communally the way we did in the old days.

The communists had replaced the local Blackfeet as the bogeyman. Cut Bank Creek, flowing by on the western edge of Cut

Bank, separates the Indians from the whites. Robbie Quist, a well-known folk and country singer in Montana with whom I played basketball in high school, talks about Cut Bank Creek as the “river of fear”; at least, that’s the way it is perceived by the whites.

I am enrolled as Blackfeet. My great great-grandfather, Three Suns, was the last of the Blackfeet headmen to give in to the missionaries; his Grease Melters Clan ultimately was starved into submission by the Indian agent.

I am not a Kipp by blood. The full-blood who is my adopted father, Joe Kipp (Eagle Moccasin), also was not a Kipp by blood; his father, the first to live permanently on Cut Bank Creek after the allotment of aboriginal landholdings, was known as Cut Bank John Kipp. He, too, was not a Kipp by blood. He was a survivor of Baker’s massacre on the Marias, which was very similar to the Wounded Knee massacre in that 173 Blackfeet men, women, and children of Heavy Runner’s camp, afflicted with deadly smallpox, were shot to death while sleeping. The army troops were guided to the camp by half-Mandan, half-English Indian trader Joe Kipp. Actually, they were looking for the camp of Mountain Chief. Kipp apparently felt some guilt over having guided the army to the wrong camp, because he adopted some of the children who survived the massacre. Eagle Moccasin’s wife was my great aunt, and that is how I came to be a Kipp. My maternal grandmother was the daughter of Wolverine. The allotted land I own on the Blackfeet Reservation is Wolverine land.

Like all border towns, Cut Bank had some ideas about Indian people that influenced what I would come to think about American society. Cut Bank’s wealth was derived from land that had been wrested from the Blackfoot Confederacy, land that contained wealth the Blackfeet knew nothing about: Under it were oil and gas; on the surface, left flat by receding glaciers, it was rich and arable. For the whites, it grew bumper crops of wheat and barley. This land that once had felt the great thundering weight of the buffalo herds now supported the domesticated breeds of European cattle. Cut Bank is not cordial toward its Blackfeet neighbors; the feeling is mutual.

My nephew, Clayton Hirst, was electrocuted in a cell in the county jail in Cut Bank in March 1975; then he was hung up to simulate a suicide. We exhumed the body under court order and sent it to California for a new autopsy. The California pathologist, not tied to the politics of Cut Bank’s Glacier County, affirmed what a spirit-calling medicine man had already told us, that

Clayton had died at the hands of three men with, as the spirits called it, “shiny pins on their chests”: badges, law and order badges. Since then, even though I grew up in Cut Bank, I no longer list it as my hometown. We employed a young, energetic lawyer, Kent Russel, from the firm of renowned criminal lawyer Melvin Belli. When the all-white jury exonerated the accused lawmen of murder, our lawyer said it would be some time before Indians could expect justice in the state of Montana. These kinds of killings are what Wounded Knee was about.

The Vietnamese, like the buffalo-culture Blackfeet, lived a life devoid of high technology, farming their plots of ground with water buffalo. Bucolic, they were; and, because they lived simply, close to the land, close to their Buddhist beliefs and their heritage, the white invaders in Vietnam hated them. It took me a while to realize that the arrogant attitude of the American soldiers and marines and airmen toward the Vietnamese people—the drunken arrogance that knocked over a Buddhist shrine in a Vietnamese home without the least bit of remorse—was the same arrogance that had come riding and shooting across the Plains of America into Blackfeet country. At some point during my stint in Vietnam, I began to realize that the hatred and contempt the Americans felt toward the nontechnological Vietnamese peasants was the same hatred and contempt that had moved without conscience throughout the American West in the last century.

A specific instance of this hatred occurred during the sixty days I spent in the Third Marine Amphibious Force brig a short distance outside the DaNang air base. I was thrown into the brig for what the Uniform Code of Military Justice called “fraternizing with Vietnamese nationals.” We did fraternize. She was about twenty-five, with more-than-waist-length, shiny black hair and the extraordinary dark and pale beauty of the half-breed French-Vietnamese who were the results of France’s invasion of Vietnam. We fraternized regularly. I had come to know how to get off the base and into her village of Hoa Phat—marines called the village “Dog Patch” after the cartoon town of Li’l Abner fame. One night, fraternizing heavily, anticipating sex and drunk on Johnny Walker Red that had come from U.S. airmen who would trade us nearly anything to get a U.S. Marine Corps k-bar combat knife, we stumbled on some particularly well-hidden military police as we zigzagged down the lone street of Hoa Phat village. Thus, the brig.

While in the Third MAF brig, we prisoners were sent to load cement chunks from an old French bunker that the Americans had



demolished for no other reason than to give us something to do under the rubric of *hard labor*, which sentence had been pronounced upon us. We loaded the cement chunks slowly, in the searing red-dirt sun, onto the bed of a military truck. The pieces were irregular in shape and weight, with some weighing well over one hundred pounds. With the truck loaded, we climbed aboard, and somebody rolled a joint of Vietnamese pot. Pot was sold by the ubiquitous Vietnamese children or, in this instance, traded for somebody's military field jacket.

The guards varied, some not giving a damn whether we smoked a joint while we were away from the brig area proper. The guards were marines, too, usually of low rank, their liberal or conservative attitudes depending on how much they loved authority. There were some who would let us drink from our canteens of water only when they told us to drink. They had authority in the form of .45-caliber pistols and shotguns. Our guards this day were liberal; they told us that we had better smoke all of the pot by the time we were done working. The guards in the brig area were hard core: They would check inside your mouth, your armpits, between your ass cheeks, in your ears, to make sure you hadn't put some pot in a gum wrapper and hidden it on your body for later.

En route to the unloading place, we found places to sit on the concrete chunks and passed the joints around. The day was brilliant sunshine, so hot the body sweated in repose. Where the road crossed a rice paddy, it had been built up and reinforced to handle the heavy military traffic that swarmed daily, hauling military goods that made the war go. From the roadway to the rice paddy was a drop of some fifteen feet. A burly, redheaded marine was sitting in the front of the load with his arms resting on the cab of the truck. Suddenly, he reached down and grabbed a chunk of concrete that must have weighed at least fifty pounds. He lifted the concrete chunk to arm's length overhead and then threw it over the side of the truck. I was sitting on that side, and, as we passed, I looked back to see where he had thrown the concrete. An old Vietnamese man and his bicycle were tumbling down the bank toward the rice paddy; the heavy weight would have hit him from above, in the head or shoulders, and he probably was badly hurt or dead. Some of the marines guffawed. Some, like me, when they realized what had happened, sat silent, knowing that this had nothing to do with saving the free world from communism; this was an act of infamy, of racial hatred. To this day, I feel ashamed for not having at least said something to the redheaded



marine about his act of gratuitous violence—violence that he could get away with simply because he was an American, a superior technological being.

The attitude of the redhead was not new to me. That attitude was in Cut Bank—maybe in a bit more subdued form in the years I lived there, but it was there. Which is not to say that there aren't Indians consumed with that same kind of racial hatred. It is not, however, a hatred that jibes with our traditional teachings of the four sacred colors—red, white, black, and yellow—the skin colors of the four colors of human beings who walk the earth. Those colors are used in all native ceremonies and are to be respected. Hatred based on color and race was what had made me ashamed of my parents because they were materially poor, living in a white town; that attitude did not take into account the fact that my white boyhood friend was brutally beaten with a belt by his mother, while I received no corporal punishment from my parents. With welts on his legs and back, he would take refuge in our home; he called my adopted father Pop, the same as I did.

I was employed by the U.S. government to fight what it called “communist aggression,” but the aggressive racial hatred of the Americans toward the pastoral Vietnamese would have much to do with why I went to Wounded Knee a few years later. In Vietnam, we loaded bombs twenty-four hours a day, three eight-hour shifts, fulfilling our role as a combat engineer support unit to the Marine Air Wing who, in addition to supporting the ground troops in South Vietnam, were daily bombing the infrastructure of North Vietnam. At least, that was the official policy, that American planes were bombing bridges, weapons plants, and other crucial targets. How many innocent civilians got caught in that saturation bombing may never be known. We plied our deadly trade with rough terrain, six-thousand-pound forklifts, M-60 hydraulic cranes, and bent backs, the handling of bombs as ceaseless as the monsoon rains. I was lucky. I did not have to take part in the search-and-destroy missions that would later come back to haunt those who did as war-induced delayed stress syndrome.

In the Native American cosmology, hate can certainly cause suffering for those who feel its brunt and those who practice it. For those who practice it, the only way it can be dealt with is psychically, morally, spiritually. Many American veterans who tried to deal with the delayed stress in the physical plane in which American society operates self-destructed after bringing pain and suffering to their own families.

Although we did not participate in the ground war of the grunts, the place where we worked—the bomb revetments—was not safe. Bombs were off-loaded from the semi-trucks bringing them from the ships in DaNang harbor and were piled high in the revetments; next door was another revetment, surrounded by dirt pushed twenty feet high by bulldozers. This revetment held tens of thousands of gallons of JP5 jet fuel, more volatile than gasoline. We knew, from our intelligence sources who had interrogated Viet Cong prisoners of war, that the Viet Cong considered the fuel dump a prime target for mortars and rockets. Once, Lance Corporal Seeley made the wry observation that, if the Viet Cong were ever to zero in on the fuel dump with mortars or rockets, it would be *sayonara* fuel dump, *sayonara* bomb dump, *sayonara* jarheads. Nobody on shift that night refuted his observation, but the looks he received were enough for him not to mention it again.

Later, when my friend John Pinkerton arrived in Camp Pendleton, California, from DaNang, he told me that, during the Tet offensive, our collective bomb dump-fuel dump fears had been realized with a stupendous explosion, fire, and concussion that knocked down the building in which we had worked on our engineer equipment. Our building was about a mile-and-a-half away from the explosion, but it shattered like a frigid pane of glass. I was happy to be in California and not DaNang when that happened.

And now, here, on the Plains of the great Sioux Nation, in the current state of South Dakota, the fighter bombers, the F4-B Phantoms that I, for twenty long months, had identified with, were looking for me. I knew these birds of prey: They never make social calls; they're always business, always serious as a heart attack. They belong to my uncle. Sam. Hey, Uncle! Uncle Sam, look, it's me, your nephew, Woody; it's me who fed your birds while you were negotiating or doing whatever it is you big shots do during a war. Remember, I didn't spend all of my time over there with Vietnamese women, drinking air force whiskey, standing in line for clap shots. Hell, no! I prosecuted the war to its full extent even if I didn't know what we were fighting for. Actually, Uncle, I thought we were fighting for all those good things I learned about in high school civics and government classes—you know, freedom, democracy, justice, one-man-one-vote, death to the oppressors, freedom from hunger, equality, love of fellow man no matter what he looks like or how bad his breath is. You remember. You should; you taught me these things, made me

eager to join the battalions primed to knock on heaven's gate in your defense.

Actually, Uncle, I feel much closer to those ideals when I am fighting for my own people here in my home country, where I'm more sure about what the war is trying to accomplish. We Indians lack freedom. We know freedom because, before you came here, we lived freedom. It was a way of life, not just a buzzword to be used to decimate peoples because of their color or their beliefs. Granted, even before you sallied onto the scene we had wars. But, in those wars, there was still an element of honor, of the sanctity of life created by the Great Mystery. In Vietnam, in your war zone, there was no honor.

My Blackfeet companion, LaPlant, had been in Vietnam, so the warplanes were not a new sight to him. My friend Thunder Hawk, however, had spent most of his life on the Pine Ridge Reservation; for him, the sight of fighter bombers being sent against us took the war to a new and unimagined level. His incredulous stare followed the planes across the sky until they were nearly out of sight. "Looks like they're going to bomb us," he said. I explained to him that Phantoms carried their weaponry under their wings, and these planes had been empty. "Yeah," said LaPlant, "they're just trying to psyche us out."

In Vietnam, we used psychological warfare. After finding out that the Vietnamese have a superstitious dread of playing cards bearing the ace of spades, we dropped thousands of ace of spades cards from airplanes in suspected Viet Cong strongholds; grunts tacked the cards to trees in the jungle. The Phantoms did not drop ace of spades cards on us in Wounded Knee. Nor, as in the movie *Apocalypse Now*, did they play classical music for us. We would have appreciated both.

The psychological warfare of sending the Phantoms over Wounded Knee did not have much of an effect. With the U.S. Air Force involved in this caper, it was we who felt we had achieved a psychological/symbolic victory. We wanted attention on a massive scale focused on the federal government's failure to honor our treaty rights. The Phantoms signaled that the upper echelon of the American government was involved—Congress, the Pentagon, the presidency. Whoever had sent the Phantoms was playing by the rules that had been in effect since Columbus landed. America has always believed in using force to solve problems, especially in relation to nontechnological cultures. The great majority of native people who involved themselves in the

Wounded Knee struggle expected the U.S. government to use force against them. Force does not work very well, however, with people who have made the commitment to die, if necessary, to bring attention to their cause. We knew that, militarily, we didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. We knew the government could wipe us out before Bob Dylan could finish singing "The Times They Are A-Changin'." When a people are ready to die for their beliefs, it is futile to threaten them with loss of life. We craved attention. The Phantoms were attention, big time.

The Phantoms made another pass, higher this time. Apparently, the pilots had calculated that the militants below would not be frozen in shock the second time around and might turn their ancient deer-hunting rifles to the sky. The word had been out since the previous evening that, by five o'clock this day—the day the Phantoms came—if we had not surrendered, laid down our weapons, and given up our outmoded beliefs in decency and freedom, the federal troops would come in. At about two o'clock in the afternoon, a messenger from the leaders of the protest came to our bunker and told us to go one at a time to Crow Dog's tipi. Crow Dog's tipi, with a sweatlodge directly in front of it, stood just forty yards below the mass grave site of 1890, out in the open below the church that is no longer there. The spirits who communicate with Crow Dog had told him during the occupation that a white man's bullet had been turned around by the spirit forces and sent back to him because he was shooting at this sweatlodge. Indians believe these things can happen. Most white men scoff at the idea. During the Wounded Knee trials following the occupation, the government would not release the ballistics information on the kind of bullet that had struck the federal marshal, paralyzing him.

Crow Dog was raised in the traditional way, without benefit of—or, possibly, without the curse of—the English language. He was central to all that the American Indian Movement accomplished in its heyday. Crow Dog used to remind me of a story that was written by Norman Mailer à la Ernest Hemingway concerning the Spanish bullfight. Mailer's story dealt with a bullfighter who, when he was at peak performance, could handle the bulls with magnificence, entralling the aficionados of the bullfight with his ease and grace. Then, on other days, he was bad, and the crowd would not forgive him, throwing cups of piss at him and snarling his name in contempt. It was *Lame Deer* who probably summed up the credo of many contemporary spiritual leaders in

Indian Country. He said people respected him not because he was good, meaning morally upright, but because he had the power. Power in the Indian way means you can make contact with the beings of the spiritual world and receive guidance from them on the proper way to live, even if, like *Lame Deer* and later *Crow Dog*, you do not always follow their advice. *Crow Dog* gave direction to the movement, but sometimes he weakened and went on a wild Indian drinking spree.

I started from the bunker to *Crow Dog's* tipi and sweatlodge. At that time, I had not been exposed to the intricacies of native spiritual belief, because my adopted parents had been Catholicized. My father used to go into the sweatlodge on the ranch at *Cut Bank Creek*, but he went alone, his children going instead to catechism school. He did not speak the *Blackfeet* language to us; his generation had received severe, sometimes corporal, punishment for speaking Indian languages. Like many contemporary natives, I sensed the power of the Indian spiritual belief. One of my older adopted sisters, *Katherine*, the murdered *Clayton Hirst's* mother, was psychic, always seeing and hearing beings and noises and sights that none of the rest of us could fathom. Her husband, a half-breed who leaned heavily toward white beliefs, would tell her she was imagining things. I knew better. I knew there was something, disembodied and frightening, out there.

We had hung around *Douglas Horse's* place in *Porcupine* for several days before walking into *Wounded Knee*. During that time, a *Lakota* woman, *Cordelia Attack Him*, came and asked if we wanted to go to a spiritual ceremony. *LaPlant* declined, even though he is a bona fide spiritual teacher and practitioner today. He was afraid of it then. I went, and it turned out to be a seminal event in my life. *Cordelia's* husband, *Johnny Attack Him*, led us to the ceremony, which was performed by *Cordelia's* brother, *Alphonse Good Shield*. *Cordelia* and *Johnny* are both dead today, but I thank them for inviting me to that ceremony. For me, it was as startling as any revelation in the Bible. Before *Wounded Knee*, I was attending the *School of Journalism* at the *University of Montana* on the *G.I. Bill*. Afterwards, I no longer had any interest in white academia; the ceremony had opened another world to me.

During the course of the ceremony, *Alphonse*, who died not long after the *Wounded Knee* occupation, said he was going into *Wounded Knee* to see what was happening there. It was my introduction to the concept and practice of spirit travel—a person

being able to leave his physical body, go somewhere in the spirit, and return. Soon, with Cordelia translating from the Lakota into English—quite often medicine men are not allowed to speak English in their ceremonies—Alphonse said Crow Dog, at that moment, was holding a yuwipi ceremony in Wounded Knee. He also said that he had passed three men who were walking out of Wounded Knee toward Porcupine, and that shortly they would be in Porcupine. I was highly skeptical of what Alphonse had said, and I let it go as a flight of the imagination.

The ceremony ended after midnight, and we retired to Johnny Attack Him's home in Porcupine. Alphonse came to his sister's home after the ceremony. We were visiting over coffee when Cordelia called from the kitchen that someone was yelling outside. Immediately Johnny had the lights in the house turned off. FBI agents were known to be in the neighborhood attempting to apprehend people getting ready to walk into Wounded Knee. Supporters of the occupation, such as the Attack Him family, were under surveillance. We all stepped outside the darkened house and listened. Soon there was a shout from a willow-covered hill a short distance away. The shout was in the Lakota language, but many Lakota had been recruited by the Dickie Wilson regime and had turned against the occupation supporters. Alphonse quieted our fears; he said it was the three men whom he had seen walking out of Wounded Knee while he was traveling in the spirit world. Soon, three figures emerged from the darkness at the base of the hill. Again they said something in Lakota, and Johnny answered them. In a minute, they were at the house. It was Ron Poteet, Ted Means, and Herb Powless. Later, I would remember something another Blackfeet had said about how, as a young man, he had become intrigued by what he called the "mysteries of the medicines." There, standing outside Cordelia and Johnny Attack Him's house, I felt that intrigue. I began going into sweatlodges in the spring of 1974 with Blackfeet holy man Sam Spotted Eagle (Big Road). Twenty years later, I am not so naïve, but I am still intrigued.

As I walked to Crow Dog's tipi, I knew that the federal marshals, who were scrunched into their armored personnel carriers only half a mile away, were watching me. Day and night—with the military starlight scopes that make nighttime vision possible—they watched us. Every now and then, shots were exchanged between the Indians and the marshals. The night before, an Indian had been shot in the hand and treated for the wound by



Crow Dog. Indian women of the movement became battlefield nurses, with their own improvised operating room.

Crow Dog was in the sweatlodge with several leaders of the occupation force: Dennis Banks, Russell Means, Clyde and Vernon Belcourt, Carter Camp, Stan Holder. Traditionally, men sweat together. Holy women ran sweats for women. Standing outside the sweatlodge, I could hear them praying and singing the sweatlodge songs, purifying themselves against the contamination of the modern world, calling on the spirit world to help deliver us from the white devils with their machine guns and arrogance, beseeching the Great Mystery to intervene on our behalf because it was apparent that the white brother had forgotten his original instructions. That is one thing that is hard about the road of prayer. Even though, in the physical world, we perceive whites as embodiments of material evil and greed, still must we pray for them, for their understanding that there is a spiritual world toward which they, like us, are inexorably moving; and that, truly, there is payment and reward for how one conducts oneself on this earth.

I grew up around white people in Cut Bank, and nearly all my childhood friends were white. In a high school with a population of some four hundred students, only half a dozen were natives. Nevertheless, for a certain period of my involvement with the movement, I truly believed the white race was the devil incarnate. White people have a hard time fathoming the chagrin and utter disappointment experienced by natives when they become aware of the true history of red-white relations since the arrival of Europeans in this hemisphere. In school, the history teachers did not tell us that Columbus cut off the hands of Indians who failed to bring him gold; they did not mention the deceit and chicanery used by the Europeans to gain control of Indian homelands; they omitted the fact that, during the Reformation in Europe—the period when science took over the minds of the whites, making them more physical than spiritual beings—the natives clung to their spiritual teachings even though whites regarded them as primitive and savage, with no reasoning power. A Western writer of the nineteenth century characterized natives as not having the power to think in the abstract, when, in fact, native belief systems are based on symbolism and abstractions.

The Wounded Knee occupation was more than a week old by the time I stood outside Crow Dog's sweatlodge, waiting for him to emerge. Another AIM soldier had informed me that, when



Crow Dog came out, he was going to paint our faces with the sacred red paint. It was symbolic: Plains warriors never went to their deaths without the sacred paint on their faces, if they could help it. It was a sign to the Creator that, even in death, they were holding to the original instructions.

In the time since the insurrection had started, the federal government had barred media teams from further entry into the Wounded Knee area. From the scanty journalism training I had received at the University of Montana in the year I had been there prior to the occupation, I knew that this was a news blackout. The government was trying to keep the occupation out of the evening news, trying to create the impression that we were just a bunch of loudmouthed radicals whose aberrant behavior did not reflect the attitudes of the true natives of America toward the good white folks who had brought them death, destruction, disease, and the joy of riding with the Lone Ranger.

In spite of the news blackout, some of the more daring journalists had managed, with help, to sneak into Wounded Knee village under cover of darkness. They wrote their stories and either carried them out themselves or trusted those who were ferrying goods in and out of the village to get the stories delivered and into print. After the occupation was over, media analysts would intone that the radicals had manipulated the media for their own ends. So it appears that those Indians were capable of reasoning, after all! Yes, the media comprised the primary weapon, much more effective than the deer-hunting rifles or even the lone AK-47 that was photographed and shown on national television to prove that these really were communists. The AK-47 had been captured in Vietnam by a native veteran. In Wounded Knee, it was strictly a psychological weapon. There were no bullets for it.

Many of the foreign journalists knew nothing about natives at all. I overheard a British journalist, pointing to the sacred sweat-lodge, asking an American journalist, "What the hell is all this hocus-pocus about?" Many of the foreign journalists had been flown halfway around the world to capture the essence of this strange and highly incongruous uprising, red Indians challenging Uncle Sam to a duel on the high Plains.

A communiqué had been received from the government forces directing the journalists to evacuate the area by five o'clock that evening; the government would assume no responsibility for the safety of those who were in Wounded Knee after that hour. Some journalists made plans to leave, while others sought places to

hide where they might possibly capture the action and win a Pulitzer prize for reporting. We scorned those who wanted out, gave thumbs up to those with the tenacity to stay. Stay with us, journalist friend. If you die, maybe we can get you into heaven, even if your face isn't painted with the sacred red. Stay with us and get the story of a lifetime, or die trying. In Missoula, Montana, just before we left for the occupation, we had held a rally in support of those at Wounded Knee. A young Lakota girl, Anita Iron Cloud, carried a sign with an old warrior motto: "Better to die on your feet than live on your knees." In Missoula, it had been merely a militant, revolutionary slogan; here it had meaning.

A crush of journalists swarmed around the sweatlodge as we waited for Crow Dog to emerge. A young, French, female photo-journalist was near the door of the lodge when it was opened after the fourth and final round. Inside, we could hear Crow Dog's voice giving instructions to the men seated inside. The journalists pushed closer, their pens at the ready, trying to get a good quote from the medicine man inside, something to titillate the readers in Bonn, London, Paris, Tokyo. The young Frenchwoman, dressed in a fashionable skirt of nearly immodest length, was squatting in the doorway of the lodge, peering into the darkness, probably unaware that the men were naked or maybe not caring, in the interest of a possible front-page story. The push became a shove, and the woman lost her balance, falling headfirst into the lodge, her professionalism exerting itself as she tried to protect the lens of the expensive camera dangling from her neck. However, there was sacrifice: Although she saved her camera, she certainly lost her composure. She managed to squirm back out the doorway of the lodge through the gaggle of journalists; more than one gave her a knowing smile of camaraderie, signaling their knowledge of how hard it was to be a war correspondent. She stood off a distance by herself, looking stern and a bit perplexed by her initiation into the native sweatlodge.

Inside Crow Dog's tipi, a buffalo skull altar had been set up. As he painted my face, he prayed in the Lakota tongue. When he finished, he looked me in the eye and gave a nod of his head, and I went out. On the way back to the bunker, I wondered if the federal marshals, with their telescopic sights, could see the paint on my face. In keeping the traditions of my own people, I have had my face painted many times since Wounded Knee, in the Black-foot Medicine Pipe Dance. It is not a dance of warfare; men,

women, and children are all painted as a sign that they are following the ways of the Creator.

The weapons carried by the Indians during the occupation were the kind found in most American homes where hunters live: .22s, .30.30s, .30.06s, .270s, and at least one .300 H & H Magnum that had somehow come into the control of LaPlant, who had entered Wounded Knee weaponless. My weapon, bought for forty dollars at Paul's Second Hand Store in Missoula just before we left for the occupation, was a snub-nosed .38. A gun like that is accurate only for a few yards. It would be close-up fighting before I could effectively retaliate against the barbarians. I longed for a good piece of military equipment such as we had in Vietnam—armor-piercing bullets that could penetrate the armored personnel carriers if aimed at the right place, grenades, bazookas, something big and dangerous and powerful. I longed for something potent enough to answer the Blackfeet Crazy Dog prayer: "Give me the power to make the enemy cry."

With my face painted for war, I accepted the possibility that we would die that afternoon when the federal forces moved in at five o'clock. I thought of the refrain voiced by the natives, the refrain supposedly uttered by the mystic and warrior Crazy Horse: "It's a good day to die." I tried to work my mind into a state that made that phrase as glamorous and glorious as it sounded when we were drunk or stoned, but it didn't come. Instead, I kept thinking of my tiny daughter just a few days old.

Thoughts of the wild killing frenzy that took place on this very ground where we now waited came back to me hauntingly that long afternoon: the Lakota fleeing the hot belch of the Hotchkiss guns fired by Custer's Seventh Cavalry—running, screaming, falling, dying, wondering why the Great Mystery was allowing this to happen. What had they done wrong? In later years, when I read the teachings of the white psychic Edgar Cayce—one of the few white religious leaders that Indians understand—only then did it seem possible to me that these massacres were part of a larger plan. Cayce maintains that, long ago, the Christian faith, under the rule of the Roman emperors, at the councils of Trent, Constantinople, and Nicaea, threw out the concept of karma from Christian teachings, the belief that human beings return many times to the earth for lessons until they come into compliance with universal law.

Thinking about Bigfoot's slaughtered band was both frightening and reassuring that afternoon. The attitude of white people

toward the killing of Indians, Vietnamese, Japanese, Koreans, Blacks, anyone who was not white, was the reason we waited on that proven plain of death that afternoon. I had not yet considered the power of nonviolence, which would later become a dominant theme in my life; I was willing to make war that afternoon, if only with a snub-nosed .38.

The power of white, European technology boggles my mind even today. It is as Sitting Bull said: "The white man can make anything. He just doesn't know how to share it." The white technological power is so great that our only defense against it is to declare ourselves ready to die and hope this declaration will fall upon the ears of the white leadership in such a way as to make them consider their own mortality.

There was no way out of it now as the clock ticked relentlessly toward the five o'clock deadline. Crow Dog the medicine man had painted us to die. Crow Dog, who had grown up differently from us, vision questing when we were chasing girls and drinking beer, said this is how it must be. There had been no talk of surrender, no talk of wiping the paint from our faces and lying compliantly upon the ground, weaponless as the marshals handcuffed us. No, truly, better to die on our feet, with honor. As my brother Curly Bear was wont to say, "If we can't get along, then we'll just have to get it on."

Again, a Blackfeet refrain came back to me from the days when we controlled most of what is now Montana plus parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan in Canada: "Better to die when the hair is long and black in defense of your people than to wither away into old age." We held no illusions of winning militarily; the only possible victory we could imagine as five o'clock approached was that, if we were killed, the world would know about it. Maybe world opinion about the atrocities committed against Indians would bring change into Indian Country. *Hoka hey!*

The scenarios we imagined that afternoon in our bunker were bleak. If the armored personnel carriers moved in, they would touch off the Indian rifles, and the carriers would respond with their .30-caliber machine guns, spewing death at a terrible rate. If there is anything the American soldier loves it is his rapid firepower. He does not understand that there is more to a war than firepower. That's what defeated him in Vietnam.

Perhaps the Pentagon generals had decided to arm the Phantom jets with twenty-millimeter cannons instead of risking a ground assault that could kill some of their ground troops; such

casualties would work against them in the next elections. Although I was afraid for my life that day, in retrospect it gives me satisfaction to know that I had analysts in the Nixon administration fearing for their political lives. Although Richard Nixon would fall from grace later due to Watergate, at this time he was the only president who had given land back to the Indians: He had returned the sacred Blue Lake to Taos Pueblo. This was an indication that at least he, unlike many other Americans, was aware that there were still living, breathing natives in the United States; John Wayne had not killed the last of the wagon-burning hostiles. We knew that, with worldwide media attention focused on the occupation, the decision would come from high up in the administration as to how to handle the deadline.

In the final hour, the fear turned to adrenalin: "Fuck you, white guys! We may not know how to live in your screwed-up technological society, but we still remember how to die as Indians. Come on in. The gates are open." Five o'clock came, and the armored personnel carriers remained squat and silent. Our eyes and ears were peeled for the slightest movement, the tiniest sound that would signal the beginning of the assault. We expected the roar of the Phantoms. They would be high this time, coming at us at an angle so they could fire. Silence. Then it was six o'clock. The messenger came to the bunker and said the deadline had been extended for twenty-four hours. We would live for at least one more day.

That day turned into a lot of days; the occupation eventually lasted for seventy-one days, during which a baby was born in Wounded Knee village and some men were killed, others wounded. The roadblocks around Wounded Knee were removed shortly after the deadline day. We went to Rushville, Nebraska, to do some business and were arrested upon returning to Wounded Knee. The roadblocks had been put up again during the few hours of our absence. We were taken to the tribal jail in Pine Ridge and later transferred to the jail in Rapid City, where we were detained for a couple of weeks. When we were released, we were monitored out of South Dakota and told not to come back until it was time to go to trial for obstructing justice and taking part in a civil disorder. We went home and continued working to raise money and awareness about the occupation. I was happy to see my baby girl.

After Wounded Knee, I went home to the Blackfeet Reservation. I had realized during Good Shield's ceremony how little I

knew about my own people, their language, their mythology, their history. My people had watched Wounded Knee on the evening news. They were divided about its effectiveness, its purpose. Some who had been friends before Wounded Knee stopped talking to me and looked the other way when I passed them on the street. There is nothing so lonely as a pariah among his own people. Jobs were scarce. We were not in the good graces of the tribe's political leaders, who depend on the federal dollar to continue their colonial existence. Still, that is all they know today; they cannot be blamed for their method of survival. I was naïve to think I could go home and study my people's traditional ways for a year or two—learn all about them—and then return to the University of Montana for my journalism degree. I ended up staying home for fourteen years before I returned to the university. You need more than a year or two to learn about a people who have been on this land for somewhere between eighteen and sixty thousand years.

In 1991, I received a journalism degree from the university. Now I run a sweatlodge in the Bitterroot Valley, traditional home of the Flathead people until they were forced at gunpoint to move further north to make way for the white settlers. My sweatlodge is built at the country home of Joseph Epes Brown, who lived with Oglala holy man Black Elk in the 1940s. Joseph is old and suffers from Alzheimer's disease.

The young students I counsel today are hardly aware of the Wounded Knee siege. They have never heard of the Alcatraz occupation. To them, it is history. To us who were there, it is also history—a history, we hope, that created a consciousness that will reach into the lives of young Indians and perhaps white Americans. Many native people said they supported the goals of the movement but could not condone the violent approach. I agree. However, after a surgeon analyzes and interprets, he sometimes must pick up the knife and cut. Alcatraz. Fort Lawton. The Trail of Broken Treaties. Wounded Knee. Better to die on your feet . . .