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THE WEAPONS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

By D. E. WORCESTER*

The weapons used by the American Indians were much the same among all the tribes and regions. Most common were the bow and arrow, the war club, and the spear. These arms differed in type and quality among various tribes, partly because of the materials used, and partly because of the lack of uniformity in native workmanship. Bows were made of various woods as well as strips of ram and buffalo horn, and ranged in length from about five to three feet. Arrows also were varied, some being of reed, and others of highly polished wood. Points were of bone, flint, or fire-hardened wood.

The coming of Europeans to North America eventually caused a modification of native arms. In some regions European weapons were adopted and used almost exclusively. Elsewhere they were used to a varying degree, depending on their availability and effectiveness under local conditions. European innovations popular among the Indians were firearms, iron hatchets, knives, and iron or steel arrow points. And in the Southwest where the country was open and horses plentiful, the lance became a deadly weapon in the hands of a mounted warrior.

Although this paper is not meant to be comprehensive, a few words on the observations of Columbus are included. The natives of the Caribbean seen first by Columbus had no weapons other than a crude dart or spear tipped with a fish's tooth. The Tainos of Española described the warlike Caribs and their bows and arrows to Columbus. On one part of the island, the Arawaks were found to be armed with bows and arrows, the first of these weapons seen by the Spaniards in the Indies.

The Caribs generally were well-supplied with bows,

* The opinions contained herein are those of the writer, and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Navy Department or of the naval service at large.

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arrows, clubs, and spears. They used the shinbones of their Arawak victims for making arrows, and poisoned them with hydrocyanic acid taken from the cassava plant.

The earliest descriptions of American Indian arms are to be found in the journals of the Spanish explorers. The soldiers of the Narváez expedition to Florida found that Spanish armor was unavailing against Indian arrows. Some men declared that they saw red oaks the thickness of a man's leg pierced through by arrows. The bows used by the Indians of Florida were said to be as thick as a man's arm, and of eleven or twelve palms in length. The Indians reputedly were so accurate that they rarely missed at two hundred paces. Cabeza de Vaca observed that when two tribes were at war and exhausted their supply of arrows in battle, it was customary for both parties to return to their villages, even though one side might be much stronger than the other. He told of Indians of the coastal region of Texas who bought wives from their enemies at the price of a bow or some arrows for a woman.

De Soto found the Southern Indians ready for war at any time, and extremely skilful in combat.

Before a Christian can make a single shot with either [crossbow or arquebus], an Indian will discharge three or four arrows; and he seldom misses . . . Where the arrow meets with no armor, it pierces as deeply as the shaft from a crossbow. Their bows are very perfect; the arrows are made of certain canes, like reeds, very heavy, and so stiff that one of them, when sharpened, will pass through a target. Some are pointed with the bone of a fish, sharp and like a chisel; others with some stone like a point of diamond; of such the greater number, when they strike upon armor, break at the place the parts are put together; those of cane split, and will enter a shirt of mail, doing more injury than when armed.¹

When the Coronado expedition penetrated the South-

1. *Spanish explorers in the southern United States, 1528-1543* . . . ed. by T. H. Lewis and F. W. Hodge. (New York, 1907), 148-149.

west and Plains, a soldier was killed in the Sonora valley by a poisoned arrow which made only a slight scratch on his hand. Probably it was an Opata arrow, as that tribe was known to use poison in later days. The Pueblo Indians seen by Coronado had the usual weapons: bows, arrows, and war clubs. During the journey on to the Plains in search of the Gran Quivira, Coronado's soldiers saw a Teya Indian (Hasinai) shoot an arrow clear through both shoulders of a buffalo bull. From the Teyas the Spaniards learned a novel way to keep on the right course when crossing the trackless plains. At sunrise, the Indians selected the route they intended to travel to the next waterhole, and then shot an arrow in that direction. Before reaching this arrow, they shot another over it, and in this way continued all day long without getting off their course because of the absence of landmarks.

Espejo described the weapons of the Pueblo Indians in 1583:

Their arms consist of bows and arrow, *macanas* and *chimales*; the arrows have fire-hardened shafts, the heads being of pointed flint, with which they easily pass through a coat of mail. The *chimales* are made of cowhide, like leather shields; and the *macanas* consist of rods half a vara long, with very thick heads. With them they defend themselves within their houses.²

In 1598, Oñate visited the buffalo-hunting tribes on the edge of the Plains, and described their weapons as very large bows after the manner of the Turks. Their arrows were tipped with flint, and they used some spears. These Indians killed buffalo with one shot while hiding in brush blinds at the watering places.³

A description of the weapons of the Indians of Virginia about this same period, was left by William Strachey.

Their weapons for offence are bowes and arrowes and wodden swords; for defence,

2. H. E. Bolton, ed. *Spanish exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706*. (New York, 1916), 178-179.

3. *Ibid.*, 230.

targetts. The bowes are of some young plant, eyther of the locust-tree or of weech (witch hazel), which they bring to the form of ours by the scraping of a shell, and give them strings of a stagg's gutt, or thong of a deare's hide twisted. Their arrowes are made some of streight young spriggs, which they head with bone, two or three inches long, and these they use to shoote at squirrells and all kind of fowle. Another sort of arrowes they use made of reedes: these are pieced with wood, headed with splinters of cristall or some sharp stone, with the spurs of a turkey cock, or the bill of some bird feathered with a turkey feather . . . To make the notch of his arrowe, he hath the tooth of a beaver sett in a stick, wherewith he grateth yt by degrees, his arrowe hedd he quickly maketh with a little bone . . . of any splint of a stone . . . of an oyster shell . . . and these they glue to the end of their arrowes with the synewes of deare and the topps of deare's horne boyled into a jelly, of which they make a glue that will not dissolve in cold water. Forty yards they will shoot levell, or very neare the marke, and one hundred and twenty is their best at random.

Their swordes be made of a kind of heavy wood which they have . . . but oftentimes they use for swordes the horne of a deare put through a piece of wood in forme of a pick-axe. Some use a long stone sharpened at both ends, thrust through a handle of wood in the same manner . . . but now, by trucking with us, they have thousands of our iron harchetts, such as they be.⁴

As soon as the Indians learned to use iron for arrow points and other purposes, they preferred it, and employed it whenever it was obtainable. The bows of the Creek Indians were described as a kind of Yew, almost as strong as English bows. Their arrows were long and of reeds. Arrow points were of bone, flint, or pieces of knife blade.

4. W. Strachey. *The historie of travaile into Virginia Britannia . . .* (London, 1849, for the Hakluyt Society), vi, 105-106.

When none of these were available, they used a piece of notched hardwood which pierced as deeply as any of the others. In warfare in the woods, the Indian warrior stood behind a tree, and, with his arms around it, discharged arrows with great accuracy.

When fur traders began going among the tribes, the Indians soon added to their stock of weapons, as warfare generally was the most important element of tribal life. The hatchet, or tomahawk, replaced the war club of the Southern tribes. Tomahawks were deadly weapons; they could be thrown with great effectiveness, and were extremely destructive in hand to hand fighting. Scalping knives were much prized trade items, as were iron arrow points.

In the forest areas of the South, the natives found that European weapons, especially the gun and tomahawk, were eminently more practical for warfare than their own bows, arrows, and clubs. In 1728, William Byrd of Virginia wrote that in hunting as well as in warfare, the Indians used nothing but firearms purchased from the English. The bow and arrow was out of use. Byrd maintained that this was a condition favorable to the English, as he believed that the Indians had been able to do more damage with bows and arrows.⁵ Other accounts verify the fact that the Indians of the Virginia region very soon forsook their bows for guns.⁶

In the 1770s, Adair found the Cherokees adept in the use of guns and bows. He declared that they could make most necessary repairs to their guns, and that they made the finest bows and the smoothest barbed arrows he had seen.⁷ When war parties were in enemy territory, they always hunted with bow and arrow, to escape detection.

In the Southwest, the Indian trade of the Spanish soon had an effect on the weapons used by the natives. The

5. W. Byrd. *The writings of Colonel William Byrd . . .* ed. by J. S. Bassett. (New York, 1901), 97-98.

6. S. Kercheval. *A history of the valley of Virginia*. (4 ed. Strasburg, Va., 1925), 276.

7. J. Adair. *The history of the American Indians . . .* (London, 1775), ed. by S. C. Williams, (Johnson City, Tenn., 1930), 456-457.

situation there differed from that of the Southeast, in that the country was open, and there soon were many horses. Further, the Spaniards, unlike the French and English, prohibited the sale of firearms to the natives, though they did supply them with knives and axes. However, the tribes near French Louisiana soon acquired firearms. By 1722, the Hasinai had so many guns that they no longer used bows, arrows, and shields except in mounted warfare. Mounted warriors usually carried a bow, a quiver of arrows, a lance, and a small round buffalo-hide shield.

Most of the mounted tribes protected their horses in battle by use of leather armor, after the Spanish fashion. The Apaches, Comanches, Pawnees, and others were very skilful with the bow and arrow, and also used a lance which was like the end of a sword inserted into a wooden handle.⁸ They carried leather shields, and wore leather jackets and caps.⁹ Their arrows were pointed with iron whenever it was obtainable.

In 1759, when Parilla's force was routed by the Taovayas and their allies in a pitched battle, the Indians were found to be well armed with French guns, pistols, sabres, and lances, all of which they employed more skilfully than the Spanish soldiers. They were entrenched in their village, and apparently had ceased using the bow and arrow in warfare.¹⁰

The Lipan Apaches used in addition to the usual weapons, French guns obtained from the Bidais. The other Apache tribes were more remote from Indians that traded with the French, and were without firearms.¹¹ From 1750 on, the Comanches were supplied with firearms, but as they fought mainly on horseback, they continued to use bows and arrows, and were very formidable with the lance.

8. P. Margry, ed. *Découvertes et établissements des Français . . .* (6v. Paris, 1876-1886), vi, 312.

9. J. A. Morfi. *History of Texas, 1673-1779*. (2v. Quivira Society, Albuquerque, 1935), i, 89-90.

10. *Ibid.*, ii, 391-392.

11. H. E. Bolton, ed. *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas frontier, 1763-1780*. (2v. Cleveland, 1914), ii, 153.

The explorer Pike described the weapons of the western Apaches:

Their arms are the bow and arrow, and the lance. Their bow forms two demi-circles, with a shoulder in the middle; the back of it is entirely covered with sinews, which are laid on in so nice a manner, by the use of some glutinous substance, as to be almost imperceptible; this gives great elasticity to the weapon.¹²

The Apache arrows were about three and one-half feet long, the upper part consisting of a light rush or cane, into which was inserted a shaft of hardwood about one foot in length. The point was of iron, bone, or flint. When one of these arrows entered a man's body, and an attempt was made to remove it, the shaft would come loose and leave the point in the wound. The Apaches shot their arrows with such force that one would go through a man's body at 100 yards. Their other offensive weapon was a lance about fifteen feet long, which they held in both hands above their heads when charging, meanwhile guiding their horses by their knees. With this weapon an Apache was considered more than a match for any Spanish dragoon in single combat, but because of a lack of knowledge of tactics they never could stand the charge of a body in concert. All carried shields, and a few had firearms.¹³ Only the lancers were mounted. Although spears were used by the Indians before the coming of the Spaniards, the use of the lance in the Southwest apparently was adopted from the Spanish at the same time that the Indians acquired horses and learned horsemanship.

Warfare on the Plains before the coming of white men generally was not very destructive. A Piegan chief told of battles his tribe had with the Snake Indians early in the eighteenth century. When the two war parties met, both made a great show of their weapons and numbers, as was the customary procedure. Their arms were bows,

12. Z. M. Pike. *The expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike . . .* (new ed. 3v., New York, 1895), ii, 749.

13. *Ibid.*, ii, 749.

arrows, spears, and stone-headed clubs. After some singing and dancing, the two parties sat down on the ground at a respectable distance from each other, and placed their shields before them. These shields were very large, and provided ample protection for a man. The Snakes were well guarded by their shields, but in some cases the Piegans had to use one shield for two men. The bows of the Snakes were smaller than those of the Piegans, but of better wood, and reinforced on the backs with sinews, which gave them great strength. The Piegans had iron headed arrows which did not pierce completely the Snake shields. After a lengthy discharging of arrows, both sides retired, without either leaving any casualties on the field.

A few years later, another combat took place in which the same chief participated. This time the Piegans had more iron headed arrows, and a few guns. The Snakes had no guns, and apparently did not know of their use. They outnumbered the Piegans, and had many short stone-headed clubs for close combat. The Piegans feared an onrushing attack, as it would have been disastrous for them. After the usual singing and dancing, the two lines formed. Most of the Piegans waited for night to fall so that they could escape, but at the war chief's order they closed the lines to about sixty yards so the guns could be tried. So effectively did the Piegans use their firearms, that in a few hours the Snakes began to steal away from behind their shields, and a general rout ensued in which fifty scalps were lifted.¹⁴ Soon after this battle the Snakes began to fight on horseback in the Northwest.

A trader among the Northwest Indians in the 1780s said that the Mandans and Gros Ventres had guns, pistols, and swords, and plenty of ammunition. These Indians had not given up the use of the bow and arrow, however, but still used them exclusively for hunting, and kept the guns for warfare.¹⁵

14. J. B. Tyrrell, ed. *David Thompson's narrative of his explorations in western America*. (Toronto, 1916), 329-331.

15. A. P. Nasatir, ed. "Spanish explorations of the Upper Missouri," in *Mississippi Valley historical review*, xiv, 65.

In 1797, David Thompson described the Mandans' weapons:

The native Arms were much the same as those that do not know the use of Iron, Spears and Arrows headed with flint; which they gladly lay aside for iron; they appear to have adopted the Spear [lance?] as a favorite weapon. It is a handle of about eight feet in length, headed with a flat iron bayonet of nine to ten inches in length, sharp pointed, from the point regularly enlarging to four inches in width, both sides sharp edged; the broad end has a handle of iron of about four inches in length, which is inserted in the handle, and bound with small cords; it is a formidable weapon in the hands of a resolute man.¹⁶

The Mandans had few guns at this time, as their only source was the small trading parties which reached their villages. They had shields of bull hide which would turn an arrow or a spear, but not a bullet.¹⁷

The Snake Indians were late in acquiring firearms, and they consequently suffered in their wars with more fortunate tribes. They made excellent short bows of buffalo horn strips, and they used war clubs and lances. The Snakes west of the Rocky mountains had no knives or hatchets, and few guns.¹⁸ The possession of firearms by the tribes in contact with fur traders gave them a great advantage over their enemies. A widespread dislocation among the Northwestern tribes took place in the eighteenth century. The Chipewayans, supplied guns by the French, forced the Blackfeet and Sioux out of the forest regions onto the Plains. The Blackfeet, and Sioux, armed later by the English traders, crowded the Snakes, Salishans, and Kootenais out of their hunting grounds.¹⁹

16. Thompson, *op. cit.*, 228.

17. *Ibid.*, 228.

18. M. M. Quaife, ed. *The journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway* . . . (Madison, 1916), 268.

19. H. A. Innis. *Peter Pond, fur trader and adventurer* . . . (Toronto, 1980),

120. The acquisition of horses by the Blackfeet and Sioux was also an influence on their movement.

In 1774, Sioux horsemen were seen wearing a garment described as being like an outside vest with short sleeves, made of several thicknesses of soft skins. These garments were similar to those worn in battle by the Southwestern Indians, and would turn an arrow at a distance. The Sioux warrior rode with a shield slung over his shoulder to guard his back. The weapons used by the Sioux were bows, arrows, spears, and a few firearms. A band of Teton Sioux met by the Lewis and Clark expedition had also some cutlasses and steel or iron pointed arrows.²⁰

A weapon which horsemen of the Plains used with deadly effect in close combat was the *pukamoggan*, a war club made of a round stone enclosed in leather, and slung to a shank in the form of a whip. It was developed from the war club formerly used, and adapted to mounted combat. The tomahawk did not replace the *pukamoggan* of the Plains warrior as it had the *macana* of his Southeastern counterpart, as the tomahawk was less effective for mounted warfare.

Some Plains tribes preferred the use of bows and arrows for warfare, and made no effort to acquire guns. Among these tribes were the Crees and Assiniboines. In mounted combat, the short but powerful horn bow was more useful than a gun, as the latter was difficult to reload. While a man was reloading his gun, he could easily be killed by a thrust of a lance, or by a flurry of arrows.

West of the Rocky mountains the Indians were to obtain but few firearms until the nineteenth century. The Flat Heads fought on horseback, and always carried two bows and two quivers of arrows, with which they defended themselves very expertly even in flight.²¹ Alexander Henry described the bows used by the Indians west of the mountains as of three kinds, all neatly made. The first was a short bow made of a slip of ram's horn. The outside was left undressed, but overlaid with several layers of sinew glued to the thickness of one-third of an inch, and then

20. Ordway, *op. cit.*, 142.

21. L. J. Burpee, ed. *Journal of Larocque from the Assiniboine to the Yellowstone, 1805*. (Ottawa, 1910), 72.

covered with rattlesnake skin. These fine bows were about three feet long, and could throw an arrow an amazing distance. They were best suited for use on horseback. Another bow was of red cedar, about a foot longer than the horn one. The third type was the plain wooden bow. Said Henry:

These people make the handsomest bows I have ever seen—always preferred by other Indians. I have known a Piegan to give a gun or a horse for one of those made of sinew.²²

The Klatsup Indians of the Columbia river region wore leather armor of well dressed moose hide, which was hung loosely over their shoulders. It would deaden the force of an arrow or spear, weapons with which that tribe was very dextrous.²³

Iron arrow heads were in great demand even among the tribes that could obtain guns, as they were more effective than flint points against buffalo hide shields. Guns were preferred for warfare, but iron headed arrows were widely used, as the supply of firearms and ammunition was limited.

The Indians of the Northwest used a spear six to eight feet in length, with an iron or steel head. The spear is a footman's weapon, but was used by mounted warriors. In the Southwest, where Spanish influence was strong, the horsemen used a lance of about fourteen feet in length.

There were but few tribes that used poisoned arrows. Thompson told of Indians living near the Columbia river who used rattlesnake venom to poison their arrow points. To avoid risking the loss of warriors from snake bite, this tribe employed aged widows in collecting the poison. The poisoning of arrows was not generally popular among the natives of North America.

The changes which European arms caused in the use of native weapons are easy to trace. Less obvious are the modifications which European arms and armor underwent

22. E. Coes, ed. *New light on the early history of the greater Northwest. The manuscript journals of Alexander Henry . . .* (3v. New York, 1897), ii, 713-714.

23. Thompson, *op. cit.*, 507-508.

as the result of lengthy conflicts with tribes such as the Apaches, Comanches, Iroquois, and Creeks. The Spanish very soon gave up the use of metal armor in their New World campaigns. Leather armor was found more suitable in the Southwest; elsewhere the quilted cotton jackets of the Mexican natives were adopted by the Spaniards as the best protection against arrows. Spanish officials of St. Augustine and Pensacola frequently petitioned the King for additional suits of "Mexican armor."

From the fact that warfare between colonies and Indians was sanguinary and destructive, it has been assumed that inter-tribal warfare had always been equally devastating. Undoubtedly a warrior took equal delight in lifting the scalp of an enemy tribesman as that of a paleface. But inter-tribal warfare of pre-Columbian days generally was more of a dangerous contest for the amusement of the men than an attempt at annihilation. If more facts were available, it might become apparent that the systematic destruction of entire villages came about largely as the result of colonists of one nation inciting Indians against the settlements of another nation and those of their Indian allies. The fact that the Europeans drove tribes from their hunting grounds was, of course, an important factor in inspiring the Indians to make a desperate stand. Indian warfare was cruel and pitiless; but it was not usual that any one tribe was sufficiently overwhelming in strength to destroy another tribe unaided. The sway which the Iroquois held for a time over many tribes was made possible by their control of the gun trade out of Albany. Even with this distinct advantage, they were eventually overcome by tribes which the French urged against them.