

**Soldiers Unknown**  
**Author: Chag Lowry and Artist: Rahsan Ekedal**  
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*Soldiers Unknown* is a graphic novel based on real events that tells the story of three young, Yurok men who were drafted to World War I. The graphic novel tells the story that mainstream history intentionally leaves out— the role that Native peoples had in the military while Native people weren't formally recognized as citizens of America. Another main point is how their connection to culture acted as a form of protection and source of healing for each character involved. Perhaps most importantly, this novel eloquently captures the power of storytelling.

The novel starts off from a current point in time where the great-grandson of the main character, Charley, is told from a ceremonial leader that the *plegokw*, ceremonial blinder, was made by his great-grandfather, Charley, whom he was named after. This struck conversation between the ceremonial leader and the young man, thereby signifying the significance of transferring knowledge as a form of healing and understanding through storytelling. This story, told by the ceremonial leader, then transitions into a brilliant graphic novel talking about life before the draft featuring cultural activities, such as catching salmon with traditional dip-nets, engaging in stick games and the grinding of acorns. Realistically setting the stage for show-

ing how harmonic and joyful life was before the World War I draft. All which offer cultural teachings of ways to understand the spiritual connection of people to the natural world.

Upon the three boys' departure, this graphic novel captures the pain, agony and sacrifice endured by all from the dialogue and the incredible art by Rahsan Ekedal. Between the dialogue and art, the historical accuracy and treatment of Native peoples in this novel are painful reminders of how settler colonialism has historically treated Native peoples. However, both did a great job capturing the strength, honor and courage maintained by the three Yurok men in intense combat. A particular instance captured how instrumental the characters heritage was to them to push through and persevere through a life and death situation. As a Native person, I felt this moment to be especially powerful because it shows the audience how vital their culture and community were to them even in those deathly moments.

The artistic transition of life in combat to life returning to home was symbolic. Although the image of Charley laying on a bench in an aid station, where a Christian angel overlooked him, the following page displayed an image of a Yurok medicine woman overlooking him serving as a symbol that he found

strength in culture, not in Christianity. Which is a forceful segue into the final component of this graphic novel; adjusting to life after war.

The last segment of this novel returns to the scene of the ceremonial leader telling the story to Charley. Where there is an intense moment of frustration for Charley, when learning that the men couldn't participate in their ceremonies like they had before. Despite knowing that it was likely the thing that would heal them. The reality of tribal law, that you cannot participate in ceremonies when you have blood on your hands, is often overlooked when we talk about life after war for Yurok people. As if PTSD isn't damaging alone, the expectation to obey this law can be critical to the health and wellness of our veterans. The results of each character shed light to how hard it is to adjust and make purpose of life. However, the resilience of each character is also captured by how they did make a life for themselves by fighting for Native American Citizenship, Logging, and being a maker of regalia. These acts of resilience is what makes these stories so impactful for generations to come.

This work supports the truth about the explicit impacts of colonialism to Native people throughout the nation. This novel picks up 48 years after the Boarding School Era (1848-1870) where the grandparents of these young men personally were recovering from. These waves of social and cultural disruption sheds light on how intentional and persistent the settler society were to eradicate Indigenous ideologies. This graphic novel supports literature such as *American Indians in World War 1: At War and At home* by Thomas Britton. A

piece of literature that was instrumental to Chag Lowry's historical research processes.

This novel supports local, Indigenous knowledge that have been historically passed on through oral histories. These teachings have been passed on through the act of storytelling as a teaching tool to understand the significance of culture and respect for the people who we are named after and who sacrificed their own lives for the future of our people and culture. Therefore, resulting as a form of healing simply because of the sense of validation and representation Native peoples rarely see. Most significantly, instead of it being an oral transfer of knowledge, which fundamentally limits who will be able to hear these histories, this graphic novel acts as a creative way to ensure this story is told in the medium of a published, graphic novel.

This graphic novel is based on the topic and research collected by Chag Lowry based on Native American people volunteering to fight for the United States in the "greatest military conflict ever known." From my understanding of this graphic novel, the majority of the content was collected based on personal experiences in his own life. For example, in his afterword, he stated that his two great-uncles served in World War I. These engagements inspired him to dedicate his research to the cause. The data collected by Chag Lowry in previous pieces of research titled, "*The Original Patriots: California Indian Veterans of World War Two*," and "*The Original Patriots: California Indian Veterans of the Korean War*." The information collected by Chag Lowry from stories and photographs told by Veteran's family members inspired him

and contributed a great deal of content for this graphic novel.

The intent of this graphic novel is to tell the readers the untold story of Native American soldiers in 1917. As a Native person, this graphic novel surpasses my already existing idea of what this experience could have looked like for my people. One of the many strengths to this book is that it gave context in the *Introduction* segment that allows for the reader to be at the same level of understanding of World War 1. The way the essence of storytelling is represented in this novel resonates with the Native audience that are likely to engage with this novel the most. The implementation of the Yurok language and cultural activities is a great sign of strength and respect for the Yurok culture. Not to mention, one of the biggest strengths is the art by Rahsan Ekedal. The art is the glue to the whole story. It really brings the story to life. The facial expressions, physical body movement and actions makes this novel feel like a movie. Effectively capturing the raw intensity that words alone, couldn't adequately capture.

This conceptual framework (life before, during and after combat) made for a simple and effective framework that laid the foundation of this graphic novel. First, it began in the present time, then segue into life before the draft of 1917. The author could have easily started off when they first started training in combat, enduring the experiences of combat and life after. Which would have captured the story of the *Unknown Soldiers* regardless. However, the frame of reference to living a harmonic, spiritual lifestyle would have been overlooked. Instead, they brilliantly used the power of storytelling to set the stage. Revisiting

this story was a creative way to involve the reader into the book. The use of German and Yurok during the combat part of the book use the dialogue as a way to make this story seem real. In addition to the action packed graphics that added some excitement to the reading experience. Finally, the last segment of the narrative was the life after war. I found this part of the book most meaningful. Often overlooked, life adjusting back to normal impacts each veteran differently. Their relationships to their family, their community and their culture will never be the same. The author and illustrator did a great job capturing different ways they cope with their shared trauma; advocating for their rights, managing their resources, or making regalia. This is an important part of the healing process in all facets of healing from collective trauma. Hence being a powerful way to end the narrative.

Perhaps the biggest strength to this book is the range of accessibility and reader satisfactions that this graphic novel captures. Although the malicious content from the war scenes, the fact that this is a graphic novel alone makes it accessible to children purely based on the amount of illustrations. Next, the author did a good job making sure that there is historical and local context for readers who may have no idea what the details of World War I were. In summary, this one page excerpt layed down the concept of the novel and how it was interrelated with the series of events that led up to the World War. Additionally, the eyeline of the graphic novel was clear throughout. It was clear because the dialogue was matched well with the graphic to follow. A unique part about this graphic novel is the local, state and federal his-

tories that are sprinkled throughout the entire book that captivates higher level readers' attention.

I would personally recommend this to anyone who finds art, graphic novels, Indigenous peoples history, state, federal and local history interesting. Whether you are someone who identifies as an Indigenous person, a Veteran, a peer of a Veteran, Historian, or a simply comic book fanatic, this book is a must read. For Native peoples, it gives you a greater understanding of why our elders think the way they do because they were raised by traumatized people. It can be emotional but it is a creative way to start the healing process for a lot of people. This can be true for anyone who has elders who have served. This shared experience can impact people for generations after the

traumatic event such as a war. Historians would love this novel because it has a fair amount of historic details that are informative and based on real life experiences.

My overall assessment of the book is that it met the objective it intended to meet. It was exactly what the targeted audience, Native people's need to hear and to celebrate. Also the broader audience shows how impactful these stories are to so many people. I believe that is a result of a well thought out and executed project that captured the interconnectedness of culture, art, and history I believe that this graphic novel will set a precedent for other underrepresented communities that find the power of storytelling through expressions of art, history and real life experiences.

## About the Author

**Charley Reed** is is Karuk, Hoopa and Yurok of the lower Klamath and Trinity rivers. He is an alumni of Humboldt State University with a Bachelors of Arts in Native American Studies. Currently a graduate student of the Environment and Community Masters Program, he also serves as a college peer mentor for at-promise tribal youth at Two Feathers Native American Family Services.