ultimately employed sieges (notably at Tenochtitlan), a style of warfare for which the native city-states and armies were not prepared (and during which epidemic diseases took their toll). As the Spaniards sought to conquer Mesoamerica’s greatest empire, the Aztecs’ enemies, subjects, and even allies who shifted their allegiances to the new arrivals, provided the small Spanish forces with an abundance of well-trained manpower.

Further Reading

Frances F. Bardon

Pacific Islander Culture of War, Including Maori

Significance and Context: The Pacific Islands are sometimes referred to collectively as Oceania. They are generally divided into three geographical areas: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Polynesia consists of all the islands east of a line running along the west coast of New Zealand to Fiji and up to the western end of the Hawaiian chain. Micronesia consists of all the islands from Palau, Yap, and the Mariana Islands in the west across to Kiribati in the east. Melanesia stretches from Fiji to New Guinea.

Approaches and Application: Throughout Oceania, all adult males could potentially be called upon to fight for their communities. However, in more hierarchical societies such as Hawaii and Tonga in Polynesia, the brunt of any fighting fell upon a relatively small cadre, occasionally supplemented by levied forces. In these societies, any chief of standing maintained a retinue, including many who constantly trained in the use of weaponry. These chiefly retinues formed the nearest equivalent that the Pacific Islanders had to standing armies. Relatives were an important part of any chiefly retinue. They were also bolstered from further afield. In Hawaii, for example, training exercises were used in part to reveal potential fighters who were then taken into the retinues and trained and brought up as warriors.

Military prowess was important for social and political status. Chiefs figure prominently in traditional accounts of battles, with the death of an important chief often cited as the turning point in a battle. Although Pacific Islanders occasionally fought for control of land and resources, the overwhelming motivation for war recorded in their traditions was to seek revenge for physical harm or insults received. Status mattered. Much of that status centered on the ability to demonstrate that gods and ancestors favored one. Success in a range of human endeavors was an indication of this favor. Misfortunes such as defeat in battle and natural disasters on the land were seen as indications of the gods’ withdrawal of support. The fear of being seen to back away from the challenges of battle in front of one’s comrades, many of whom were kin, acted as another powerful incentive to warriors’ bravery and group coherence.

Most traditional fighting consisted of hand-to-hand combat with clubs, spears, and daggers, occasionally preceded by an initial exchange of projectiles. The main defensive asset of combatants was their skill at dodging and parrying blows and projectiles. Although the bow and arrow was used in Melanesian warfare, its use was restricted in more hierarchical societies elsewhere in Oceania because its higher velocity compromised the fighting skills upon which so much status rested. Single combat between champions was not an uncommon way for battles to begin. In much of Melanesia, fighting was largely limited to stealthy raids to avenge deaths by slaying the first member of the offenders’ group encountered. Open confrontations also occurred. Across Oceania, battle varied from prearranged clashes with set rules and few casualties to all-out confrontations that only ended with the rout and possible destruction of one side. In all circumstances, much importance was placed upon drawing first blood. Such an achievement was seen as an indication of the gods’ support, and could have a decisive effect on the morale of both sides. However, sometimes the issue was only decided by the clash of massed battle lines. Even then, unless one side dissolved rapidly, combat usually broke up into a series of personal duels.

Tactical sophistication varied considerably within the Pacific Islands. Ambushes and surprise attacks were the most common tactic across the Pacific Islands. The siege of fortified settlements was really only prominent in warfare in New Zealand and Fiji, although fortifications and inaccessible refuges did exist elsewhere. The most detailed indigenous accounts of pre-European tactics concern New Zealand Maori, Tahitians, and Hawaiians. Common tactics in Maori traditions include ambushes on narrow paths through forests, mock retreats to draw pursuers into prepared ambushes, and open battles along the lines described below. Tahitians made little use of fortifications beyond a number of fortified refuges in the mountainous interiors of their islands. Land warfare was usually decided by set battles in which both forces fought in lines or serried ranks, with the judicious use of reserve lines sometimes deciding the issue. Hawaiian warfare occasionally featured ambushes, but more usually involved open battles. These centered on clashes between elite groups drilled to fight in unison using long pikes, supported by lighter armed levies armed with projectiles. Where rugged terrain ruled out such controlled maneuvering, the armies might fight in detached groups seeking out opponents of equal social status.

Although most of the population lived in the interior of the large islands of Melanesia, naval power played a significant role elsewhere in this most oceanic of human habitats. Poor overland communications and no beasts of burden meant that sea power conferred mobility. Canoes were the only bulk carriers of men and
supplies. With a fleet, the center became less remote in perception and reality to those contemplating rebellion. Those with naval forces could harass enemy coasts at will if not met by naval forces of comparable strength. Although an army could contest landings, canoe-horse opponents could soon outdistance them, and move on to attack unguarded coasts. The fragmentation of power meant that quite small polities with naval capacity could exercise significant influence. They were often based on small islands off large islands, and included groups distinguished as “sea people.” Bau in Fiji and Borabora in the Society Islands were good examples. Sea people were renowned for ferocity and skill as assassins.

Naval activities varied between localities. Sea battles were more decisive than those on land, as the vanquished party lacked the option of fleeing to safe havens like the mountain refuges used on land. Naval warfare was most developed in Fiji. Huge double-hulled, and outrigger canoes carrying hundreds of men each, served as troop transports. Other canoes were designed specifically for fighting at sea. Known as tablai, they combined hulls tipped with several feet of solid wood at either end to enable ramming, with wind-driven speed and maneuverability.

Fijian naval battles were on the whole bloodier than land operations, which generally consisted of indecisive sieges. Fleet movements were coordinated by commanders in canoes distinguished by battle flags flown from the mast. Naval tactics usually consisted of attempts to run down or run opponents to sink or disable them. Once this was achieved, the victors would board and finish off the occupants of the disabled canoe, or kill the survivors in the water. Approaching an enemy vessel from the windward side was crucial, as it exposed their outriggers. The enemy crew could not venture on to the outrigger to defend it without the risk of capsizing their vessel.

Naval warfare in the eastern Pacific aimed to kill enemy personnel rather than disable their canoes. Naval operations in Hawaii mostly involved transporting troops and supplies, although there are also references to major naval battles, and coordinated attacks from the sea and the mountains against coastal enemies. Fighting at sea consisted of exchanges of projectiles followed by attempts to board. Tahitian battle fleets in the 1770s consisted of specialist war canoes supported by sailing canoes in transport roles. The main fighting vessel was a double canoe with high hulls and bulky fronts for ramming. It was propelled by paddlers, and had a raised fighting stage in the front for warriors. Paddlers were armed with slings and sling-stones. Tahitian traditions refer to fleets fighting in coordinated battle lines, with canoes sometimes linked together to provide a more stable platform, and to prevent retreat.

Geography, economic, and social organization curtailed political consolidation of military victory. Kin-based loyalties present problems to rulers seeking to consolidate or expand power. Unless frequent visits were made to areas away from the paramount chief’s power base, local rulers might be tempted to assert their independence or even challenge the paramount. These dangers were enhanced by communication problems. Most land routes consisted of narrow trails, vulnerable to disruption by bad weather. Sea travel was also determined by the weather, especially in the absence of fringing reefs. These problems were exacerbated in larger polities. Political expansion increased the resource base, but ran the risk of overextending the realm. More resources might be needed to maintain cohesion than were gained through expansion. The structure held together, in part, because the ruler’s demands did not intrude too deeply into parochial worlds. Chieflords’ rights of expropriation were based on their sacred status, and could not be pushed too far without putting that status at risk. To increase their military capacity, rulers needed to get enough food to their army for sustained periods in an essentially dispersed economy without placing too high a burden on any locality.

See also: Southeast Asia Naval Warfare

Further Reading


Paul D'Arcy

**Southeast Asian Naval Warfare**

**Significance and Context:** Southeast Asia is a vast and diverse region sitting between the Indian subcontinent and China. The region’s naval history has been influenced by both Indian and Chinese ways of war and doctrine; it also developed distinct characteristics based on its unique geography and political institutions.

Mainland Southeast Asia, stretching from Burma to Vietnam, was characterized by large centralized fleets conducting essentially conventional naval warfare on the region’s large rivers and near-shore coastal waters. Island Southeast Asia, stretching from Aceh in Western Sumatra to the Philippines, combined both conventional naval warfare and more irregular naval tactics in the form of raids and piracy at sea. Even today, much global piracy is centered on this region that is ideally suited to this form of naval warfare because of the numerous lagoons within its mangrove and forest-lined islands and shorelines, and significant bottlenecks which funnel and concentrate maritime commerce.

**Approaches and Application:** Forested, rugged terrain combined with a number of navigable rivers meant that waterborne transport was usually plentiful. While