

RED SHIRT WARRIORS

The Lakota are known as some of the greatest and fiercest warriors in history. They were feared in battle because of their skill and courage. The leaders always wore something red in battle to let the other warriors know where they were and to follow their lead. Red is the color representing HONOR. It is said that when there were times when battles appeared extremely difficult the Red Shirt Warriors were known to dismount their horses and stake themselves to the ground (saying to their fellow warriors and their opponents) we will die if necessary but we are here to fight and we will not run. Every young man was raised to be a warrior for the tribe.

The Red Shirt Warriors were the best of the best, a prestigious group that every young warrior wanted to strive to be a member. Every four years, the Red Shirt Warriors extended an invitation to a select few of the young warriors to test themselves in order to be admitted to the group. The physical tests were difficult and not all those invited were able to pass. The first tests were ones that allowed the young warriors to demonstrate the skills of battle – marksmanship, horsemanship, etc. But the last test to earn membership to the elite group was a difficult test of endurance.

The test had a time limit of four days and was conducted during the hottest part of the year. Each young warrior was sent out by themselves, without food or water and only a knife for protection and told to follow a well-known path to a high shale cliff. They were instructed to climb the cliff and recover a red sash that had been tied to a stone at the top of the mountain. Their goal was to recover the sash from the top of the cliff and return to camp with it within the four day period.

Because of the difficulty and distance, the young warriors would usually get back by sunset on the fourth day, exhausted, thirsty, and hungry. Upon arriving back to the tribe and before they were given any food or water, they were escorted into the lodge of the Red Shirt Warriors and asked to present the sash they had recovered. According to their stories, no one being tested ever returned without a red sash.

The sash was to be held tightly in their hands. The young man was asked to hold one end of the sash at head height and let it unfurl toward the ground. If the sash extended all the way to the ground, the man had gained membership and was considered a Red Shirt Warrior. If the sash did not reach the ground, he was denied membership and never allowed another opportunity to join the elite group. No explanation was given to the ones denied and no explanation was ever needed, because it wasn't just a test of endurance, but more importantly, a test of honor.

The young man had been tested physically, but also morally, because there were two sashes to choose from and more than anything else, this was a test of honor. One sash was tied to a stone on the top of the shale cliff and when it was unfurled from the man's head, it easily reached the ground. The other sash was tied to a tree located just over half the way up the cliff, at a place where the young man could stop and rest in the shade. That sash was placed in a spot where it would be visible to every man who passed. That sash was the shorter of the two and when it was unfurled in front of the elders of the Red Shirt Warriors, it was clearly evident that the young man being tested had taken a short cut. He had not gone the full distance or completed the test as described. He was not a man of his word. His honor was in question. In Lakota culture, the color red stood for honor and the Red Shirt Warriors only wanted men on unquestionable honor. Honor cannot be required, but it can and will be tested.