
Weapons and Warfare of the Tlingit

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Anthropology A200



*Replica Tlingit house and carport at the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Anchorage, Alaska.
(Carport may not be exact replica as not much is known about pre-contact Tlingit cars.)¹*

¹ In order to maintain scholarly writing, I'm required to note the comment about the "carport" is an attempt at humor. Tlingit researchers will no doubt recognize the structure as a dirigible hangar. *

Introduction

In mid-September, 2015, my wife and I took a trip into Anchorage to visit the Alaska Native Heritage Center. A selection of their exhibits, replicas of housing used by some of the indigenous people of Alaska, surround a small lake on the property. The one that appealed to me the most was the Tlingit house — possibly because of my own roots in the Pacific Northwest. The guide in the house talked about Tlingit life and mentioned slaves that would live in the lowermost part of the house and that started me researching slavery among the Tlingit, who inhabited the southeast Alaska coast. I discovered they would sometimes travel as far south to what is now Washington state (and some unverified accounts put them down into Oregon and California) on raids to gather slaves — and thinking about those raiding parties led me to research weapons and warfare among the Tlingit Indians.

While all indigenous people in Alaska engaged in fighting and sometimes all-out war, the Tlingit had a reputation for not only frequent combat, but a knowledge of tactics that allowed them to fight off Russian invaders. In this report we'll look at general weaponry as well as two of the major Tlingit-Russian battles.

Tlingit Weaponry and Armor

Based on accounts from early explorers, the primitive weapons of the Tlingit included the bow and arrow, spears, clubs, and daggers. The most common consisted of melee weapons where the wielder had to wade into the fray and get up close and personal with the enemy. That wasn't a problem for the Tlingit, as they trained from childhood for the rigors of warfare and hunting by bathing in cold water and being beaten with switches (Veniaminov as cited in Emmons & de Laguna, 1991, p335).

Melee Weapons

The Tlingit generally stopped using war clubs after they were able to acquire guns, and even before that time they seemed to be rarely used as no mention of them are found in writings from early explorers. The specimens found generally consist of wood handles with stone heads and it's said that this type of weapon was often used by a chief, carried hidden and used in private attacks rather than warfare. Other clubs made from animal antlers have been found, as well as some larger two-handed battle clubs made from wood or whale bone.

The most common weapon by far was the dagger, carried by all Tlingit men. This wasn't just a simple knife, but double-sided and larger than most knives seen today. Once made of stone, the Tlingit switched to metal as it became available. The daggers were often pointed on both ends, with a grip area between that was wrapped with twisted root, bark, animal hide, or human hair. The following description is from the travels of Captain Etienne Marchand, who traveled Sitka Sound in 1791:

The Tchinkitanayans [*Tlingit*] are all armed with a metal dagger, fifteen or sixteen inches long, from two and a half to three broad, terminated in a point, and sharp on both sides: this is the weapon which they are the most careful to preserve, and which they take a pleasure in keeping polished and bright: a grenadier is not more proud of his sabre, than a Tchinkitanayan is of his dagger; he wears it in a shoulder belt in a leather scabbard and is never without it, either day or night. It is with this weapon, which never ought to have been turned against our fellow creatures, that sometimes he engages the bear in close combat, and rips open its belly when the furious animal is ready to stifle him in his paws. (Mavor, 1810, p172)

From that passage we can see that the Tlingit not only fought war up close, but also hunted bear using their daggers (or, at least they told Marchand they did).

While the Tlingit did throw spears, that was for hunting sea mammals and salmon, not during warfare where the spear was used by stabbing. The spears used in battle were 6 to 8 feet long with sharpened points, hardened over fires. Once they were able to get access to metal, iron spear heads were used, with some spear heads being 24 inches in length.

Distance Weapons

The bow and arrow is another weapon that went out of favor after the introduction of guns to the Tlingit, and was probably used more for hunting than for warfare since most surprise attacks happened just before dawn when the darkness would make a bow and arrow almost useless.

Arrows were crudely-finished shafts of hemlock, spruce, or cedar with feathers at the nock (back) end and leaf-shaped blades at the head. The heads were usually made from copper, mussel shell, or iron with either a long tang inserted into a hole in the shaft, or bound to the shaft with sinew.

While bow and arrow could have been used in daylight attacks, Emmons and de Laguna (1991) suggest it usually wasn't because "...it is possible the Tlingit felt that the valor

of the warrior ought to be displayed in hand-to-hand conflict.” (p337) That seems a reasonable assumption based on what’s known about the Tlingit (tough SOB²).

Armor

According to the writings of early explorers, two aspects of the Tlingit really impressed them — the daggers as previously mentioned, and the suits of armor they wore into battle. The armor protected them from daggers, spears, and arrows, and an account of a battle with the Russians stated “... neither our buckshot nor our bullets could pierce their armor.” (Baranov as cited in Dauenhauer, Dauenhauer, & Black, 2008, p55) While the armor was effective, it was unwieldy and interfered with their movement.

Father John Riobó traveled to Alaska in 1779 and described the armor he saw:

These Indians have a kind of armor something like that of the ancients with buckler and spear; they have even protection for their thighs and legs, very skilfully [*sic*] made from pieces of hard wood joined and fastened together with a kind of very strong cord. On their heads they carry the figure of a ferocious beast rather skilfully [*sic*] and artfully carved from wood.
(Riobó, 1919, p224)

The wooden helmet was carved in the shape of a human or animal head, painted, and decorated with shells, copper, or human hair. A fur cap was worn underneath for comfort and the helmet was fastened on the head with hide straps tied under the chin.

Worn below the helmet was a wooden collar that covered the neck and reached as high as the eyes where it met the helmet. Slits were carved between the two in order to allow the warrior to see; this meant the entire face and neck was completely protected. The collar was also decorated and held in place with a loop of twisted bark or hide — some collars were held in place with a toggle clenched between the teeth.

The body armor consisted of two parts: the first was a layer or more of animal hide such as caribou, moose, or sea lion. On top of that (although sometimes worn underneath or even by itself) was wooden armor, made from vertical rods and slats of hard wood bound tightly together using strips of sinew. The front and back sections were separate and fastened together with hide ties at the sides and straps over the shoulders to hold them in place.

² Tough SOB^s in general, but based on actions at the end of a siege in 1804 at least several hundred Tlingit could also be described as cowardly a-holes.

Tlingit Warfare

There are numerous stories of disagreements, feuds, and outright war between the Tlingit and their neighbors to the south — and even among Tlingit clans themselves. However, there are no known situation where the Tlingit “nation” as a whole banded together to wage war.

Early European and American traders who visited southeast Alaska in the late 1700s found the Tlingit generally friendly, although somewhat suspicious. The Russians, however, came not to trade but to take over the hunting areas of the Tlingit; harvesting so much that it exhausted the favorite sea-otter hunting grounds. This disregard for the indians forced the Tlingit into open hostility with the Russians.

In a letter written in 1793, Aleksandr Baranov, chief manager of the Russian-American Company, wrote about an attack on his encampment by the Tlingit:

“During the darkest hours of the night, before daybreak, we were surrounded by a great number of armed men. ...the natives came up so stealthily in the darkness that we saw them only when they began to stab at our tents. ... In the dark, they seemed to us worse than devils. The majority of them kept perfect order, advancing toward us and listening to the commands given by one voice and only a part of them ran back and forth doing damage to us and to the Natives in our party.” (Baranov as cited in Emmons & de Laguna, 1991, p346)

Based on that account there appeared to be someone in charge, giving orders to the rest of the indians; showing the Tlingit were familiar with battle tactics. Nine years later the Tlingit showed what they were capable of when they destroyed a Russian settlement at Sitka and drove the Russians from their land (at least temporarily).

That attack in 1802 was long planned and included clans from many different tribes. It was designed to drive out the Russians and their Aleut sea-otter hunters and consisted of more than 1,000 men and a fleet of 60 large canoes so they could attack by land and sea at the same time. The Tlingit also used intelligence gathering from some of their women who lived with the Russians to learn about the defenses of the garrison and the daily routine. When it was time for the attack, it was directed from the top of a small hill by the leading chief of the Kiks.adi clan — he also signaled the hidden canoes full of warriors when to join in.

Because the Tlingit attacked only after many of the men left on hunting trips that day, there were few people left to fight and the settlement quickly fell. The buildings were looted of sea otter pelts, provisions and personal belongings, and then burned.

Assuming the Russians would return in force, the Tlingit left their nearby villages and built a fort at the mouth of a small stream. The coastal water at that location was very shallow and they hoped it would keep the Russian ships far enough from shore so their cannon wouldn't be able to do much damage.

The Russians returned with five ships in 1804 to find strongly fortified walls being defended by some of the cannon they lost two years before. They offered peace to the Tlingit, who refused, and then started attacking the fort. The battle lasted six days and the captain of one of the Russian ships, Urey Lisiansky (2003), wrote about one of the skirmishes during that time:

Lieutenant Arboosoff, finding he could do but little execution from the boats, landed, and taking with him the four-pounder, advanced towards the fort. Mr. Baranoff, who was then on board the Neva, seeing this, ordered some field-pieces to be landed, and, with about a hundred and fifty men, went himself on shore to the aid of the lieutenant. The savages kept perfectly quiet till dark, except that now and then a musket was fired off. The stillness was mistaken by Mr. Baranoff; and, encouraged by it, he ordered the fort to be stormed: a proceeding, however, that had nearly proved fatal to the expedition; for as soon as the enemy perceived our people close to their walls, they collected in a body, and fired upon them with an order and execution that surprised us. (p157-158)

Lisiansky went on to say that from his own ship alone 14 men were wounded and 2 were killed — and if he hadn't been able to cover their retreat with his cannon, "...not a man could probably have been saved." (p158)

While the walls of the fort were a significant deterrent to the Russians, the Tlingit lacked enough ammunition and expected reinforcements never showed. They agreed to quit the fort, and, fearing the Russians would go back on their word and attack if the Tlingit left by boat, crept away under cover of darkness after killing many of their small children who might have cried and given away their plan.³ (Lisiansky, 2003, p162)

The Russians destroyed the fort and constructed their own and the Tlingit stayed away until 1821 when they were invited back to Sitka. They traded with the Russians for mutual convenience, but attacks and murders happened constantly — the Russians knew they were never safe outside the walls of their post.

³ Creeping away under cover of darkness — that's just smart. Killing your children because their noise might give you away? That's where you could make an argument for the "cowardly a-hole" label for those Tlingit.

Conclusion

While the Tlingit weren't overly aggressive in general, and could get along fine with European and American traders, if you moved in on their land without permission they weren't afraid to kick your ass (as the Russians discovered). But while they had strategic battle tactics that gave them an advantage over many other indigenous people, the more advanced technology of the Russians would finally prove to be more than a match for the Tlingit and their primitive weapons and armor.

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* The Tlingit did not have dirigible hangars. (As far as we know.)