



Artist and Marine Corps veteran Harvey Pratt at his home near Guthrie, Okla.

Photo by Ben Mikesell

Harvey Pratt's Long Red Path

National Native American Veterans Memorial designer and forensic artist describes a journey he did not map out.

BY JEFF STOFFER

Harvey Pratt will humbly tell you he did not draw up any plan that became his life of art, war, law enforcement, forensic science, tribal leadership, veteran advocacy, national memorial design or the search for truth about bigfoot. He describes himself as “a little different. Things just happen to me. People ask, ‘How did this happen?’ I don’t know.”

One could say that whatever happened to the Cheyenne peace chief and American Legion post commander’s trajectory on Earth began long before he was born. His soul is shaped by ancient ways that have been passed down, generation to generation, for centuries. Running in his blood is also a Revolutionary War figure who was in on the Boston Tea Party, whose children included a frontier trader, fort builder and Indian mediator who married a princess named Owl Woman, daughter of early-19th-century Cheyenne medicine man White Thunder, the tribe’s respected “keeper of the arrows.”

Pratt’s ancestors helped carve out the Santa Fe Trail, one served as a New Mexico territorial governor, and another lost part of his foot to a shrapnel wound on Iwo Jima during World War II; one distant cousin was the legendary western artist Charles M. Russell. Pratt’s mother was a master storyteller, his older brother an internationally acclaimed painter and sculptor.

Beyond genetics, Pratt’s unique journey may have been plotted the day he was born, April 13, 1941, the sixth of seven children, in his mother’s small house in El Reno, Okla. He was a rare “veil baby.”

“It’s a membrane over your face,” Pratt explains. “When they saw that, they said, ‘Oh look at him ... he wants to be a chief.’ Historically, veil babies – there’s one born about every 500,000 – they’re supposed to be gifted. They must have seen that somewhere in our culture, other people born that way. So before I was Harvey Pratt, I was Vehunkis. Vehunkis means, ‘He’s Going to Be a Chief.’”

That distinction came with expectations. "Growing up, they used to tell me, if someone was not feeling well or hurting, as a little boy I would go over there and touch them – their face, their arm or wherever it was – and that scared me. Until I got a little older, I didn't understand."

At least a portion of his artistic future was inspired by scarcity. "I had three brothers and we were raised by a single mother, so we didn't have a lot. Our grandfather gave us clay so we could make our own toys. We learned how to make animals – horses, people – and I always remember learning how to make a saddle from a little block of clay and put somebody on it. I wasn't very old. I played with clay my whole life."

No art program was offered at St. Patrick's Indian Mission School in Anadarko, Okla., where Pratt and his siblings were students. "We boarded there. One day the priest was coming by, and he caught me drawing. He said, 'Harvey, that's pretty good.' He bought me some art supplies: paints, brushes and some paper. I painted the Crucifixion, and I made everybody Indians. He called some people around, and he sold it for me. I got \$90. Ninety dollars in 1960 was a lot of money."

He enrolled at Central State College in Edmond, Okla., with hopes of becoming a commercial illustrator, but the faculty there was not as impressed as his childhood teachers were. "The professor would critique different drawings or paintings, and he would always pick mine. He would say, 'See what this man did here? Don't do that. This isn't right.' He did that so many times, I thought, 'Hell, I guess I'll never be an artist.' So, I changed. I dropped out of art classes and concentrated on psychology, and after a certain point, I got frustrated with college and joined the Marine Corps."

Like most of his life's twists, Pratt had no idea then what military service would mean in the long run. His mother was not a fan of the idea. "I call it the silent scream," Pratt remembers. "I was still in college. 'I said, Mom, I just joined the Marine Corps and I am leaving in three days.' I was shocked that she was so devastated. It was because of her brother.

She remembers her brother being wounded and missing in action. I always remembered that – the silent scream."

He also remembers that he had no idea at the time, in 1962, "what Vietnam was."

Boot camp was predictably miserable. In his last week there, a drill instructor who thought the sling on his M1 was too slack drove his foot into Pratt's arm and pinched a nerve. He lost feeling. "I couldn't do nothing with it," he remembers. "It terrified the crap out of me. I went to the senior drill instructor

and told him. They sent me back to the base. When they did, from the rifle range back to San Diego, they put me in the back of a dog catcher's truck, with a wire cage. It's raining. I'm sitting in there. Cars are driving past me and looking at me. I was so depressed. I looked down, and I had my orders. I took them out, looked at them. They said, 'Pvt. Pratt will be a good Marine.' When I saw that, I thought, I can make this. I can do this. I always had that attitude that there were a lot of people before me who made it, and I'm as good as they are. So they never really beat me down." On his return to the rifle range, Pratt was issued an M14 to go along with his M1, and he made private first class.

He was assigned to the 3rd Marine Division, Military Police. "I thought, military police – that would be pretty cool." In time, the assignment proved to be much more than cool.

He befriended another young Marine, R.D. Pratt, a Louisiana Cajun of no relation. "A lieutenant came by, and he was looking for volunteers for a special project. We both volunteered to go. In those days, they called it guerrilla warfare training. We trained for two months in Okinawa. I had no idea where Vietnam was. They assigned us to 3rd Recon Battalion, Charlie Company, and our platoon commander's name was Hughes. They called us Hughes' Hellions."

Their primary objectives – in an operation that predated official U.S. combat deployment in Vietnam – were to guard a Da Nang airfield and go wherever necessary to rescue helicopter pilots shot down trying to transport South Vietnamese ground forces. "The Marine Corps was supporting



Pratt joined the Marine Corps in 1962 and headed to Vietnam with the 3rd Marine Division. Photo courtesy Harvey Pratt



Nearly every wall inside Pratt's home is adorned with Native American art, beadwork, military insignia and memorabilia from his career in forensic law enforcement.

Photo by Ben Mikesell

the Vietnamese military, and every time they went out on a strike, the helicopters would take them someplace. Then we would go out with them and land. They would dump us off, and if something happened, they would come back and pick us up and take us wherever someone was down ... We weren't supposed to be there. We had to sign a paper saying you can't talk about this for 10 years." He spent seven months in-country, where he and R.D. Pratt were regularly assigned missions requiring survival skills and stealth.

"It kind of shocked me. When we got to Vietnam, they would say, 'Let the Indian do that. He's good at that.' I thought, I've really got to step up and do a good job because these guys expect that of me. I always tell the story, they called us together (and said), 'We've got a couple of helicopters down, and it's out a ways. We need to get there right now, so we are looking for volunteers. And the volunteers are Pratt and Pratt.' They just called us out – and Carter and Woods. That was my fire team."

Pratt and Pratt built a reputation at Da Nang. "When we were guarding the airfield, R.D. and I captured a Vietnamese who wasn't supposed to be there. We caught him messing around at a helicopter. They took him back later and found some sapper stuff – he was going to try to blow some stuff up. I think they always remembered that we were the only guys whoever captured anybody, me and R.D. That kind of distinguished us a little bit."

The young Cheyenne Marine from Oklahoma knew how to handle himself in the field. "We made a point of that, growing up. When we were little, we would run around barefoot. We would go to the river that was maybe five miles away. My grandfather would say, 'You need to learn to do without water.' So he gave us a little pebble about the size of my thumbnail, and we put it in our mouth. He said, 'Make your own water.'"

At 10, Pratt bought his first rifle. "I got \$5 for my birthday, and I had saved \$5. Every year, as a child we chopped cotton and picked cotton for our school clothes and shoes." Or, in this case, half the price of a rifle.

After the tropical heat of Vietnam, Pratt was assigned to "cold-weather training with the military police in Korea for a month – in pup tents on top of a foot of ice; it was terrible. It was deadly cold. They finally moved us into a big tent. What they used for heaters were smudge pots. Just soot. By the time you got out of there, you were covered in soot."

He came stateside, served for a time in supply and was honorably discharged as a lance corporal in 1965, once again looking for college to clarify his future, perhaps as a Marine officer. "I loved the Marine Corps, but I didn't want to stay in as an enlisted person," Pratt says. "I went right back into psychology. I wanted to get a degree so I could go back. So I went back to school and was working at a clothing store in the evenings and weekends. A friend of mine I grew up with at St. Patrick's Indian Mission came in – he was a Comanche boy; we always stayed really close – and he was wearing a police uniform. He's talking to me, and I said, 'Look at you' He said, 'I talked to the chief about you, and he said for you to come visit with him and make an application.'"

A week after he interviewed, Pratt was hired by the Midwest City (Okla.) Police Department. Soon he was making \$100 per week as a patrol officer – "that was some bucks in '66" – and he continued to paint during off-duty hours. Some of his artwork was published in a local newspaper, and colleagues took notice.

"The captain of detectives came by and said, 'Harvey, we've got a lady in the hospital, and she's been shot in the face. Someone tried to rob her, killed her husband in her house, and when she came

down the hallway he raised up and shot her in the face. She's awake, but we don't know if she is going to make it. Do you think you could go over and draw the guy who shot her?" I said, 'Yeah, I think I could do that.' I had no idea what I was doing. I went over there, and we talked, and I made a drawing."

That first attempt at forensic art led to an arrest and conviction. "We caught that guy off of my drawing. He killed about seven people. I always said, if I hadn't succeeded with that, I probably would have never done another drawing."

Word got around. Neighboring law-enforcement agencies summoned Pratt to do drawings based on witness or victim accounts. He developed a fingerprint and records system, got promoted to detective and was sent to Oklahoma State University to earn his long-awaited degree, in police science. Soon, he was hired by the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation, and his career in forensic art took off.

"I was the first guy to do color on composites," he explains. "When they saw me doing color drawings, with colored pencils, I started getting inundated from places all over the United States. And I developed an interview technique for witnesses and victims – a questionnaire – on how to discover deception."

Later, he became a pioneer in soft-tissue reconstruction – the sculpting of human faces based on their skulls alone. He worked on some of the nation's most high-profile cases, including the Green River serial killer, Ted Bundy, the I-5 killer and the Oklahoma City bombing; he also helped with terrorist identifications from Iraq and Syria, as well as faces from the Weather Underground Organization. His work helped identify kidnapers in South America and assisted in the pursuit of Oklahoma prison fugitive Randolph Dial.

"I probably did over 5,000 drawings and 2,000 soft-tissue reconstructions, where we find some bones that still have wounds on them or somebody gets shot in the face, or burned ... I'd paint out all the wounds, bullet holes, and open up the eyes and make them look alive, fix their hair, and publish it, and boom, you get an identification."

Human skulls began to arrive at Pratt's home. This was not what he ever imagined. "When I was a kid, we were playing on the river, and we found a human skull. Scared the crap out of us. I was just a little boy. My brother picked it up, dusted it off and

took it into town. I wouldn't touch it – human bones."

By the second decade of his adult career, human bones were part of nearly every workday. Evenings and weekends, meanwhile, were devoted to his love of Native American and western art – painting, sculpting, metal work – and collecting ancient art, artifacts, pottery and jewelry. "It takes me to another place," he says. "I've seen a lot of violence in my career – people who are just not very nice. I kind of step away from that ... got me away from dead bodies and suspects and all that kind of stuff. I like to paint historical things, rather than just made-up things. I like to look at old photographs and paint ... I did the same thing with sculpting, to tell stories about people and what they wore." He sticks primarily to Plains Indians because he says he learned early that it's nearly impossible to accurately depict the unique features of other tribal

cultures, a problem he would later need to solve as designer of the National Native American Veterans Memorial.

Pratt's worlds converged in the mid-2000s when he was recruited by retired San Jose, Calif., police investigator David Paulides on "The Hoopa Project" to collect statements and forensic drawings based on bigfoot sightings from the remote Hoopa Indian reservation in northern

California. The area known as "Bigfoot Alley," made famous by the Oct. 20, 1967, Roger Patterson-Robert Gimlin film of a sasquatch ambling along the rocky banks of Bluff Creek, is largely off limits to non-native visitors. Paulides, following up on a mysterious childhood encounter in northern California and a later story of a sighting from a guide in Canada, wanted to put his interviewing skills to work after retirement to collect as many bigfoot accounts as possible. And he wanted a forensic artist to illustrate the testimonies. "When I received the résumé, I couldn't believe my eyes," Paulides wrote in the first of two books with Pratt as illustrator. "Harvey appeared to be born, raised, trained, educated and professionally molded specifically for working on the Hoopa Bigfoot Research Project. Nobody else I interviewed came close to his credentials."

Harvey and wife Gina Pratt – a Creek Indian and former law enforcement officer – joined Paulides on the Hoopa reservation for interviews and more than 40 sketches based on often-hesitant witness



Pratt is commander of American Legion Post 401 in Clinton, Okla. Photo by Ben Mikesell



Pratt's paintings and prints have been sold worldwide since his first one went for \$90 in 1960 after a mission school priest took interest in his talent. Photo by Ben Mikeseil

descriptions, each requiring a signed affidavit that the statement and drawing were accurate. “We had always heard of it my whole life, growing up,” Pratt says of the elusive creature whose likeness has been found in Native American pictograms dating back centuries. “I had heard the stories (including some in Oklahoma), but I had never really gotten into it.” Now, as he is commonly called upon to share his expertise in forensic art for others in law enforcement, Pratt is just as likely to be summoned to bigfoot conferences for similar reasons.

Pratt retired from the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation in 2017, having served not only as a forensic artist and agent but also as a narcotics investigator and assistant and interim director. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Law Enforcement Hall of Fame in 2012 and the Oklahoma Military Hall of Fame in 2019.

The National Native American Veterans Memorial design came to him in a dream. “A lot of things come to me in dreams. I wake up early in the morning, think about it, work it through my mind ... so I already have an idea of what to do, without having to start working through it. It was my experience of a lifetime – the brain just put it all together for me – what I was taught, what I learned on my own, what I learned from other people.”

That dream will take physical shape on Veterans Day at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., when a virtual dedication ceremony will unveil the multidimensional “Warriors’ Circle of Honor” memorial. “It took a while for this to really soak in – what this memorial actually means to all the Native American veterans,” Pratt says.

“This memorial is for Native American veterans, but we invite all other veterans to come and be there with us.”

The primary challenge of the design, he says, was trying to find common threads among more than 573 known tribes, each of which is unique. “I’ve been with a lot of tribes in ceremonies, and I thought, you know, the way you touch everybody is through tradition and ceremonies. Most ceremonies involve the elements – water, fire, the earth and the air. And they are all sacred. And we know the directions are sacred. They say power comes from these different directions. Some tribes only recognize four. A lot of tribes recognize six directions. Some tribes recognize seven.” Each has a different meaning and color, from the red of the Southwest “where the creator comes from” to the yellow of the Northwest, for “Mother Earth ... she gives us the plants, the animals, the water, the vegetation,” Pratt explains. “That’s where we learn a lot of our traditions.”

The design employs water, fire, an eagle feather, a drum, cardinal points, a dedicated pathway and a lesson from Pratt’s grandfather. “I remember my grandfather saying, ‘Wear a circle, people. We go in a circle, and come back to ourselves, then go back around it.’ Path of life – the Plains people called it the ‘red road.’ In order to stay in harmony, you have to walk the red road. Sometimes you will get out, and the red road pulls you back to the middle. You might drift out a little bit and then come back in. So, I thought, I need a pathway. We will call it the path of life ... until you get into the area where the directions are, and you come inside where the drum is ... you come into harmony with all of those things.”

The construction process, Pratt says, has been more complicated than he expected after his design was chosen from a blind competition that involved pages of explanation, drawings, photographs and a studio-animated depiction of the finished site.

“There are just a lot of people involved. You have to jump through hundreds and hundreds of hoops. They asked about the fire in my design in Washington. What kind of fire? What’s it being fed with? Is it propane? Is it gas? Is it natural gas? How do you put chemicals in it? What kind of color do you want in the fire? These are things you don’t really think about ... There must have been 20 architects on this project.”

That part in the journey will soon be over, and the designer’s dream will be deployed. “I want it to be a place where you are comforted, you are healed and you’re empowered. That’s what I think it’s going to be. It’s going to be a powerful place.”

And he hopes it will be powerful for generations to come. “Everybody will recognize this. My great-grandpa could come here and recognize these



The Warriors' Circle of Honor, the National Native American Veterans Memorial, is dedicated at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian this month. Photo by Ben Mikese

▶ See a video to learn the inspirations behind the memorial's design, which employs sacred elements and an essential circle.

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elements. Indians today will go in there and recognize these elements, the things that are in there, that make it theirs. My grandchildren's grandchildren will come and recognize these things. A lot of memorials have a statue or a sculpture, and it's World War I or World II, you know. But this is timeless. The circle is timeless."

In a sense, such has been the path for Harvey Pratt, who in recent years joined The American Legion and became commander of Cheyenne & Arapaho Post 401 in Clinton, Okla., where he and veterans from multiple tribes (along with one Cajun, R.D. Pratt) serve their community, honor military sacrifice and work to ensure that native veterans understand the benefits due to them.

"They are all dedicated," Pratt says of his fellow Post 401 Legionnaires. "They were all proud warriors."

And while none among them took the same route, they all share pride in service and a bond winding back to distant times that are not forgotten among them. "One of the questions I get asked the most is, 'Why do you Indians fight for this country, when this country treated native people so badly?' I say there's a couple of reasons. No. 1, it's a warrior society, a warrior culture. I was raised that way. You have to prepare yourself, be brave and not cry. You don't cry because you got hurt. You cry because your heart is broken, because you lost somebody. You learn to suck it up. I talked to some Navajo boys, and they told me, 'You suffer in silence.'

"The other thing is the Americas were like the Garden of Eden – nothing here but animals. And all of a sudden, man and woman showed up, and the creator gave the Americas to the Indians. So this land is Indian country. It is always Indian country, regardless of who owns it. That's what we fight for. Our blood is spilt all over this North American continent. Now our blood is spilt all over

the world, defending this country. That's why we fight for this land, and we fight for that flag. Indian people say things happened to us in the past. But this is still our land, and we fight for it. We fight for this country."

The journey of Harvey Pratt – who when he was chosen as a member of the Council of 44 Cheyenne peace chiefs in 1996 assumed the name White Thunder, in honor of his great-great grandfather, the arrow keeper – has included almost continuous unexpected turns. Many of them he never fully understood until they were behind him, often circling back to the day his grandfather gave him that first lump of clay, and even further, back to those born before him whose approval of his journey and memorial design matters more than anything to him. His grandfather told him long ago that eventually life's little mysteries would come together, back around and make sense, in due time.

"My grandfather could do anything. He was an electrician, a carpenter and a plumber ... he was born in the 1870s. He would take us to the river to fish, and he would point and say, 'Dig right there.' You could dig right there, and there would be a soft-shell turtle. We'd take the turtle and put it into a gunnysack. We'd go somewhere else, and he'd say, 'Right there.' He'd take his staff and jam it in the sand, and he would hold it and say, 'Dig down there. There's a turtle right there.'

"I said, 'Grandpa, how did you know that?'"

"He said, 'Well, pay attention. One day, you will know. Just learn.' As I got older, I thought about that comment. It dawned on me that if you learn something yourself, it's yours. I finally figured it out. One day, I'll know. I tell my kids the same thing. They say, 'Dad, how did you do that?' I say, 'Pay attention and one day, you'll know.'" 🍀

Jeff Stoffer is editor of The American Legion Magazine.