

THE TAINO WARRIOR

by: Bobby Gonzalez

The last great battle of the Indian War of Independence against the Spaniards in Borikén occurred in 1515. It was a two pronged assault. Carib Indians attacked a Spanish contingent on Luquillo Beach. From the nearby mountain of El Yunque streamed down an army of Taino and African warriors who joined the fray. The bloody encounter raged on for several hours. At first the indigenous army held the upper hand. However, the arrival of Spanish reinforcements and the superior European technology of guns and swords, along with the added advantage of horses and killer dogs, turned the tide. The Native People suffered defeat, and the military conquest of the Indians of Borikén was now an inevitable reality.

Historians have categorized the Taino as a non-aggressive people who were ignorant of military tactics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our indigenous ancestors were campaign veterans who conducted tactical operations under the leadership of war chiefs who were experienced in amphibious and land maneuvers, and they utilized chemical warfare.

The Taino had an array of weapons at their disposal. They employed the spear thrower, the bow and arrow (some arrows being three-pointed), spears, the war club (macana), stone axes and ropes. Chemical warfare was also availed of. By throwing certain peppers over live coals, noxious fumes were produced which would stun their foes.

When encountering an enemy force, a Taino war chief might signal his warriors to deploy into a circle around the body of enemy soldiers and then they would attack at his or her command. Withdrawal would also be orderly. The retreat formation was often in the shape of a wedge.

Pitched battles were not commonplace. Ambuscades and quick raids were the rule. The defensive abilities of the Taino were appreciated by the Caribe who, it is said, dubbed Borikén as the Island of Blood.



Taino chiefs (caciques) would sometimes raid other Taino villages (yucayeques). Such attacks might have been occasioned by any of a number of reasons: intrusion upon one's hunting or fishing territory, the failure to deliver a bride who had been paid for, or perhaps, to avenge a murder.

There was one idiosyncrasy of Taino battle protocol which proved disastrous. It was customary to unilaterally cease hostilities when the cacique was mortally wounded. The warriors would carry the body back to the yucayeque for traditional internment. Mourning ceremonies could be of two weeks duration. The Spaniards quickly became aware of this practice. Sharpshooters henceforth aimed their arquebuses at the cacique who was easily recognizable by the chief's emblem, the guanin, a heavy gold pendant hung on the chest.

Contemporary Tainos are spiritual warriors. The descendants of the original Boricuas are engaged in a struggle to retrieve their culture and to reassert their rightful place in Native American society.

Guakia Taino Cuan Yahabo (We the Taino are still here).

