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2016 - 1

**Lest we forget**

Johnson E, Cuffe H, Morris FE,

### **President's Report:**

In early 1992 the then President Alex Bell along with the committee had the foresight to envisage that they had to make an important decision in regards to the future need of the battalion. This decision involved the formation of a National Support Group that would uphold the traditions of the battalion and maintain the battalion present in years to come. The NSW RSL was informed of this decision and gave overwhelming support to the venture.

Once the National Support Group was formed it would need to have its own President and committee and liaise with the battalion committee. The challenge was now to approach the descendants of the battalion members to assist in this endeavour.

One of those descendants while chatting with (a friend) Rod White he happened to mention his own father's service in the 55/ 53 Battalion. Rod who was aware of a battalion endeavours in forming the support group refer him to Alex Bell. This descendant Clyde Parsons became the First President of the battalion and has held this position for over 20 years until he submitted his resignation in 2015.

### **Secretary' Report:**

As a child I was always in front of the television on ANZAC Day awe struck until end to see all those fighting men marching with such pride and alongside mates. Not really understanding this feeling until I myself began marching firstly in the local marches and late when my father passed on I went to take his place with his battalion that was 31 years ago and the awe struck feeling of a child was heart felt with pride and I good also feel the mateship as these brave men accepted me as one of them.

I became secretary 9 years ago and have encouraged as many descendants as possible to join the group and honour these men for their sacrifice in serving their country and protecting their families from harm. I therefore with great regret tender my resignation in 2015 for we the present committee believe it is time for the next lot of descendants to hold high the banner and ensure that the 55 / 53 Australian Infantry Battalion is never forgotten.

An Extraordinary AGM was held at Granville RSL Club on 27<sup>th</sup> February to fill the vacant positions and the results are:-

President: Arthur Perry  
Secretary: Peter Dowling

### **Treasurer's Report:**

**We greatly appreciate your donations as that is how we can manage to survive and not have to charge yearly fees. If we have missed recognising your donation please accept our apologies.**

**Donations:** J Pringle, J Newbold, Rob Lawrence, Nola Riotta, E Bilson, Ina & Ray Gentles, Fred Denny, R Denny, N Peoples, C Twomey,



## Indigenous Service in Australia's Armed Forces in Peace and War – overview

### Indigenous Defence Service

Research conducted into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service in Australia's armed forces has established that Indigenous people have served in military uniform from at least the time of Federation. In fact, the identities are known of three men who served even before 1901, in the colonial naval and military forces of Victoria and New South Wales, and pictorial evidence suggests that there may have been others.

This is remarkable chiefly because at the point of Federation Australia was still expanding white settlement in many remote parts of the continent, and the brutal (often violent) process by which Indigenous people were dispossessed of their traditional lands – often referred to as the “Frontier War” – was a recent memory. The remaining Indigenous population, believed to have been reduced by three quarters during the colonial period, existed as a marginalised, neglected, and severely disadvantaged group on the fringes of white society.

What prompted Indigenous Australians to contemplate voluntary military service is unknown, and since official records are totally silent on this matter can only be guessed at or derived using surviving personal narratives. Official records, such as personnel dossiers compiled by the nation's armed forces, also rarely shed light on whether individuals were from an Indigenous background, except in some instances upon enlistment. Because of the level of discrimination experienced by the Indigenous population at the time, men whose racial origin was not so marked that they could pass as non-Indigenous appear in the most part not to have acknowledged their heritage.

### Boer War

Despite discriminatory provisions in early federal legislation which excluded “full-blooded” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from census calculations and exempted them (and other races “not substantially of European origin or descent”) from military service in time of war, a small number of Indigenous men – perhaps as many as a dozen – are now known to have served in both colonial and federal contingents during the Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902).

Although those who served in the ranks were most likely men whose heritage was not so marked as to cause them to be debarred from enlistment, at least two men who accompanied the 1st Australian Commonwealth Horse contingent in 1902 were described as “black trackers”. The total number of Indigenous men sent in this capacity is still unresolved.



### First World War

When the First World War (1914–18) began, Australia used general enlistment to raise the Australian Imperial Force, separate to its home defence forces, and sent this overseas. Although the “substantially of European origin” rule still applied in recruiting for the AIF, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were still accepted for enlistment, apparently because their racial background was overlooked if they had not lived in a tribal environment.

Even a few “full-blooded” Indigenous Australians (like Douglas Grant and Frederick Prentice) were accepted because they had been raised in white households. In 1917 the rule was modified to accept men who could satisfy a medical officer that they had “one parent of European origin”

According to the most recent research, the number of men with proven Indigenous heritage who enlisted in the AIF stands at 823 (excluding 11 second enlistments); 152 of these were discharged before embarking for overseas. Other estimates have put the total figure between 1,000 and 1,200, and work is continuing to verify these additional names. Figures compiled by the Returned and Services League in 1931–32 provide a basis for asserting that earlier estimates of the number of recognisably “black diggers” were in the vicinity of 400 to 500, so it seems likely that the more recent figures include, in the main, those men of part–Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background who have been only subsequently identified as Indigenous by their descendants.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people served in practically all branches and units of the AIF: infantry, light horse, artillery, engineers, and even the flying corps (though not as airmen). They saw action in the Middle East as well as on the Western Front. The casualty rate (those killed, wounded, gassed, sick, or taken prisoner) among “black diggers” was proportionally as heavy as the whole of the AIF’s.

Indigenous men won a number of decorations for gallantry in the field, including four Distinguished Conduct Medals and 17 Military Medals. Some reached non-commissioned rank, and Alfred John Hearps from Tasmania briefly served as a second lieutenant until he was killed in 1916, making him probably the first commissioned officer of Aboriginal heritage.

No names are presently known of Indigenous men who sought to enlist in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) during the First World War, perhaps because the navy did not require the mass expansion of its existing personnel. Two Indigenous women served as army nurses, but one of these (Marion Leane Smith) served in a British unit in England after enlisting in Canada, and the heritage of the other has yet to be confirmed.



## **Second World War**

A similar problem of defining “Indigenesness” exists for the Second World War (1939–45), where estimates of the number of Indigenous men and women who served have ranged between 3,000 and 6,000. Again, it seems certain that recent figures have become inflated with the names of persons who, although unquestionably of Indigenous heritage, either did not present themselves as Indigenous or did not know of, identify with, or wish to acknowledge their background. The lists of names maintained by several federal and state agencies and organisations are also known to contain many errors and doubtful entries, but as yet insufficient work has been undertaken to resolve these.

Australia in 1939 followed the practice of the First World War and raised a Second AIF, in which many Indigenous men duly enlisted despite continuance of the requirement that they be “substantially of European origin”. As a consequence, “black diggers” were to be found serving in the overseas campaigns of 1940–41, including the Western Desert, Greece and Crete, and Syria. After Japan’s entry into the war, Indigenous service continued in the south-east Asian and south-west Pacific theatres. Black soldiers fought and died in Malaya and Singapore, in Papua and New Guinea, in Bougainville and Borneo.

It was in 1944, after service in North Africa, Greece, and Crete, followed by service in New Guinea, that Sergeant Reg Saunders was commissioned lieutenant, having attended the Officer’s Cadet Training Unit at Seymour in Victoria. Widely reported at the time as the first commissioned Aboriginal officer in the army, it now seems truer to say that he was the first recognisably black officer. Hearps served briefly as second lieutenant in 1916, but it is still unclear to what extent his heritage was known or recognised during his service, whereas Saunders’ origins were proudly made apparent.

In the Second World War services other than the army also began accepting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruits into their ranks alongside white personnel. Although only anecdotal evidence exists in the case of the RAN, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had several airmen of Indigenous heritage. First among these (but unknown at the time) was Pilot Officer David Paul, a bomber pilot who was shot down over the Aegean Sea in 1943; while still a prisoner of the Germans, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1944. That same year Sergeant Len Waters became the RAAF’s first Aboriginal fighter pilot and served in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI, now Indonesia). In August 1945 Flight Sergeant Arnold Lockyer was shot down over Celebes, NEI, and was killed by his captors six days after Japan’s surrender.



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A major difference to Indigenous service during the Second World War was the emergence of dedicated but usually auxiliary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander units raised for service within Australia. First noted of these was a special platoon raised in 1940 at the army's training camp in Wangaratta, Victoria, but soon afterwards followed the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU) in Arnhem Land. The NTSRU was disbanded in 1943, its role taken over by the white North Australia Observer Unit, which remained heavily reliant on Indigenous employees as guides and to help its members live off the land.

In 1942 the army had begun establishing an Indigenous garrison unit in the Torres Strait. From a single company this grew into the 830-strong Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, and although it was intended to have a static defensive role, in late 1943 it was involved in offensive patrolling into Dutch New Guinea. The RAN also took the initiative of establishing an Indigenous unit at Melville Island, off the Northern Territory's coast. Dubbed the "Snake Bay Patrol" it was an auxiliary outfit intended to secure the island against any Japanese infiltration and to assist with the recovery of downed airmen.

In addition to these units, the services in the Northern Territory (principally the army) began the employment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as labourers and support staff. Because these men were issued clothing, accommodated, paid, and rationed by the army many were inclined to think they had joined up; in reality they were civilian auxiliaries and not formally enlisted members of the service. Another significant development during the Second World War was the acceptance into the armed forces of Indigenous women as part of the wider introduction of auxiliary women's branches for each of army, navy, and air force. At least nine Indigenous women joined the Australian Women's Army Service (including Lance Corporal Kath Walker, later famous as the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal) and the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force. Another three women joined the Australian Women's Land Army, which aimed to maintain the nation's agricultural production.

## **BCOF**

Following Japan's surrender in 1945, in 1946 Australia sent a mix of army, navy, and air units to join a British army of occupation of Japan. The three Australian battalions dedicated to the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) ultimately became the basis of Australia's first regular or standing army. Although not engaged in war operations while in Japan, units from all three services formed the basis of the Australian force committed to Korea when war broke out there in June 1950. Claims have been made that as many as eight Aboriginal soldiers, including a sergeant and two corporals, were serving with BCOF in 1946, and it is known that several subsequently transferred from Japan to the fighting in Korea.

## **Korean War**

During the three years of the Korean War (1950–53), between 30 and 35 Indigenous men are believed to have served there. Most did so with the army contingent, although one seaman (P.D. Syron) served in Korean waters with HMAS Condomine in 1952–53. At least two Indigenous army men were killed in action (S.K.J. Lenoy and T. Hazel), and one (Torres Strait Islander Corporal Charles Mene) received the Military Medal for operations during 1952. The most prominent Indigenous figure of the Korean War, however, was Reg Saunders, who returned to uniform from civilian life and served as captain at the battle of Kapyong, commanding a company of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR).



## Malaya

During this time Australia was also involved in a conflict in south-east Asia known as the Malayan Emergency (1950–60). Although claims have been made of as many as 25 Indigenous men having served in that theatre of operations, at present only nine definite names are known. Most of these would likely have been members of the regular army battalions sent on rotational tours from 1955, although there was also an air presence based in Singapore for most of the period of the Emergency. The defence presence maintained in the Malayan region as part of the British-led Far East Strategic Reserve saw Australia become involved in a low-level military conflict when Indonesia launched a campaign to “confront” the newly formed Federation of Malaysia. The period of Confrontation (1963–66), mostly fought out on the island of Borneo (where Indonesia had land borders with Malaysia), undoubtedly involved a number of Indigenous Australian soldiers. These were almost certainly members of the regular army, although claims that this presence numbered as many of 19 have not been verified.



## Vietnam War

Overlapping the commitment with Confrontation, Australia became a participant in the Vietnam War (1962–73). Until the more recent commitment in Afghanistan (beginning 2001), Vietnam was Australia’s longest war and would eventually involve around 60,000 personnel. A large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also served in the conflict, but again precise figures are not known. The names of more than 160 appear certain, but claims of as many as 300 cannot presently be verified. More than 140 are from the army; 18 of these served in Vietnam as national servicemen, even though the National Service Act 1964 exempted Indigenous Australians from the requirement to register for this obligation. Although the numbers available for the RAN and RAAF are far from definitive (12 and five respectively), they at least confirm a presence. As the largest service, the army also offered the most involved pattern of Indigenous participation in the Vietnam War. In addition to soldiers for each of the nine infantry battalions rotated through Vietnam before withdrawal began in 1971, Indigenous personnel served in most of the elements that made up the 1st Australian Task Force and its supporting branches and units, including armour, artillery, and engineers. Members have been identified in both the Army Training Team and the Special Air Service detachments sent to the theatre. At least seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were killed (although not all were combat casualties) and three were known to have been wounded.

## Peacekeeping and other overseas deployments

While the Department of Defence website proclaims that Indigenous personnel served in the full range of overseas deployments undertaken by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) since 1975 (including Somalia, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, and various peacekeeping operations), no numbers regarding the size of Indigenous participation have yet become available. Only a few individuals have emerged who served in Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda, East Timor, the Solomon Islands, and Afghanistan, but these at least provide a basis for the claim that since the 1990s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have become a welcome and integral part of the modern ADF.

## Army Reserve units

Supporting Department of Defence claims of significant progress in eliminating all forms of discrimination against Indigenous enlistment is the formation during the 1980s of three regional force surveillance units as part of the Army Reserve. These units – NORFORCE (formed in 1981), the Pilbara Regiment (1982), and the 51st Battalion, Far North Queensland Regiment (1985) – are all largely, even dominantly, made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personnel. Although lacking the numbers of the army, the RAN and RAAF are equally committed to maintaining a proportion of their workforce representative of Indigenous numbers in Australian society.





## KOOKA'S KORNER

### FOR FREEDOM

Hark! The call to arms is sounding-  
Hark! The tramp of marching feet--  
What then is the use of staying  
Through the breath of life be sweet-  
Dare we fail to guard our country!

See the flag of freedom waving-  
Would you keep it waving so-  
There's a cause. For justice crying-  
Come then... linger not, but go-  
Let us fight like sons of free men-  
For the brave but once can die-  
If the enemy should triumph-  
Slavery waits for you and I

Hark! The drums of war are beating,  
See! The ranks are filling fast  
Join now, with the band of heroes-  
Till our land is safe at last-  
Do you fear to leave your loved ones-  
Think then, what their fate would be-  
Should the hosts of evil conquer-  
And we lose our liberty.

*Cummins & Campbell*

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

A GROUP OF TOADS IS CALLED A "KNOT"  
CAMELS CHEW IN A FIGURE 8 PATTERN-  
IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO LICK YOUR ELBOW  
FLAMINGOS EAT WITH THEIR HEADS UPSIDE DOWN

### FUZZY WUZZY

The black boys come a swinging  
Down the old Kokoda track  
with savage voices chanting  
Bearing wounded soldiers back

These grinning "Fuzzy Wuzzies,"  
Unpretentious, simple, slow,  
Have been right to the battle front,  
Where only brave men go!

With their simple childlike manner,  
They have worked in sun and rain,  
to rescue wounded "Aussies"

The Gallant: Fuzzy Wuzzies",  
Though their skins are surely black,  
Have proved the whiteness of their hearts,  
On that Kokoda Track.

*Musings of a Moresby Mouse*

### Army vehicle disappears

AN Australian Army vehicle worth \$74,000 has gone missing after being painted with camouflage. Police are seeking public help to find the four-