

Aboriginal service in the First World War: Identity, recognition and the problem of mateship

Philippa Scarlett

A few of them will come in pretty useful for some of the work at the front.

—New South Wales recruiting officer, 22 January 1916.¹

Think of all the half caste soldiers that were killed at war. What thanks have the half caste soldiers got for going to war. We were good men at war but looked down on now the war is over.

—Tom Blackman, ex 41st Battalion AIF, 1934.²

The popular construction of unconditional mateship, said to make the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) the band of brothers it never was, today overshadows the existence of racism in the AIF, and the fact that the negative treatment Aboriginal servicemen received post-war was often at the hands of those now said to have been their mates. This mateship myth also obscures the failure of white Australia to recognise the service of Aboriginal men. Before examining these intersecting phenomena, I first consider the diversity of the men who comprised the Aboriginal soldiers of the First World War to counter the oversimplification of this group. This masks individual stories and denies identities, including cultural identity, and in doing so reinforces generalisations about Aboriginal mateship. I then examine the contradictions in the observance of the *Defence Act 1903* (amended 1909) and draw attention to the pragmatism and racism that underpinned the enlistment of Aboriginal men and their relationships

1 *The Border Morning Mail and Riverina Times*, 22 January 1916: 5.

2 Blackman to Tennant Kelly, 22 February 1935 in Trigger et al. 2011.

within the AIF. Following this, an examination of the post-war treatment and recognition of Aboriginal servicemen exposes the transient reality of the wartime 'mateship' now prominent in discussion of Aboriginal war service.

Background

Aboriginal men who volunteered to serve in the First World War came from a disadvantaged group in a deeply racist Australia. The implications of this for war service were apparent in two early acts of the new Commonwealth. The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* enshrined the policy of a White Australia, and the closely related *Defence Act 1903* (amended 1909) was interpreted as prohibiting men not substantially of European heritage from serving their country.³ Despite this, Aboriginal men served in all major theatres of the First World War and were associated with the places which are touchstones for summoning up the experience of this conflict, including Gallipoli, where records show the service of 56 men.

The complete marginalisation of Aboriginal people in Australian society meant that notwithstanding this comprehensive presence in a war said to lay the foundation of Australia's national legend, the war service of Aboriginal men was ignored, then forgotten for decades by white Australians. Recognition did eventually come, but it needs careful assessment to avoid the danger of Aboriginal war service being assimilated into the prevailing popular views surrounding Australian military engagement.

The Anzac legend has been an evolving and constantly malleable one, in which the dominant elements of imperialism and the racial superiority which attends it have been superseded by a narrative of tragedy and mateship.⁴ The susceptibility of this legend to manipulation was pointed out by Graham Seal when he located its origins in a merging of the seemingly opposed formal Anzac tradition – associated with official commemoration, authoritarianism and returned servicemen's organisations – and the grassroots, larrikin digger tradition.⁵ It has been this plasticity which has facilitated the incorporation of Aboriginal war service into the current incarnation of the Anzac myth. But this late inclusion has in large part been achieved by a misrepresentation of the context and circumstances relating to mateship in the wartime and post-war experience of Aboriginal servicemen. In 1921, in the *Story of Anzac*, official war historian Charles Bean wrote that, 'The strongest bond in the Australian Imperial

3 For discussion of this, see Winegard 2012: 62; Riseman 2014b: 178–179.

4 Holbrook 2014: 215; Lake and Reynolds 2010: 210.

5 Seal 2004: 1–8, 77.

Force was that between a man and his mate'.⁶ The concept of mateship implicit here and expressed later by ex-servicemen has been prominent in twenty-first-century discussion of Aboriginal experience in the AIF, where it has been used to imply acceptance and equality. However, the current dominant narrative of 'mateship' and the assumption that it reverses racism in the AIF environment occludes the presence of discrimination and compresses the diversity of Aboriginality and wartime experience. It also runs the risk of overshadowing the story of post-war injustice and diverting attention from the fact that most soldiers of the First World War were fighting for a 'White Australia'.

Diversity

The generic concept of 'Aboriginal soldiers' and a latter day simplistic construction of Aboriginal mateship have together homogenised these men at the expense of an appreciation of their differences and identities.

The following discussion is based on information extracted from the service records of the range of volunteers whose Aboriginal heritage is identified in Scarlett (2015a).⁷ While numbers are not definitive, to date known Aboriginal volunteers in the First World War number around 946, of whom 770 served overseas. Although these numbers have been dramatically boosted by research during the last 10 years, they are still dwarfed by overall AIF enlistment.⁸ The fact that numbers were unconcentrated has meant that there was no Aboriginal group identity within the AIF. Even when a number of Aboriginal men were members of the same unit, they did not always serve concurrently, or their numbers were minimal in comparison with total unit membership of around 1,000 men.⁹ Comments that an Aboriginal man would become the pet or mascot of his unit reinforce the reality of Aboriginality as a novel phenomenon.¹⁰

First World War volunteers and serving soldiers, described as 'Aboriginal', were a far from homogenous group. They ranged from a very few described as 'full blood' (in photographs, information in their attestations and elsewhere) to a small proportion of men, impossible to determine, whose Aboriginal descent is not overtly apparent. However, the nineteenth-century thinking and use of the term 'half caste' persisted indiscriminately as a general description of Aboriginal soldiers both during the war and afterwards, suggesting a homogeneity not reflected in the evidence in service records and external sources.

6 Bean 1921: 6; see also Bean 1946: 181.

7 These records are held by National Archives of Australia (NAA): B2455.

8 Total enlistment c. 417,000: Robson 1982: 202.

9 Dennis 1996: 314.

10 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 1916: 7.

Nonetheless, physical appearance had relevance in the context of the AIF as a factor in the official selection process, particularly after May 1917 when, in the face of declining enlistment, a military order was introduced to allow the enlistment of men with one white parent.¹¹ It was also relevant in its potential to influence racism during and after the war. Service records show that throughout the war, recruiters adopted a variable approach to volunteers, both accepting and at other times rejecting men who were clearly Aboriginal. The Aboriginality of others successfully enlisted would not have been recognised by recruiting sergeants. Of these, not all identified as Aboriginal, while others were able to suggest southern European ancestry.

Aboriginal soldiers also lacked uniformity in their place of origin. While service records show most Aboriginal volunteers came from outback and rural locations, this was not exclusively so. Of these some lived controlled lives on missions, reserves and camps, or in and outside country towns. Others lived on remote stations or were itinerant, often travelling long distances for employment and in the main evading supervision of their everyday lives. The 35 per cent of men from this range of non-urban backgrounds, volunteering in major cities, probably felt their chances of success were enhanced away from the control of Protection Boards and the prejudice of country areas. The fact attestations show only 12 per cent of all volunteers came from families closely associated with missions or reserves challenges perceptions about where Aboriginal people lived. However, this percentage is almost certainly an underestimate because of the difficulty of differentiating a town from the mission/reserve of the same name and the fact that some men may not have revealed a mission connection. Despite this, just over half of these mission-connected men successfully enlisted in the AIF.¹²

Contrary to popular thinking, a small, largely unrecognised proportion of volunteers lived in urban areas. Goodall and Cadzow, writing about Sydney, note that 'Aboriginal people are not "supposed" to have a history in city landscapes',¹³ yet they do either because that is where they have always lived or they have migrated from outside locations. Leonard Smith (described as black in his attestation) lived in inner Sydney far from his Tasmanian grandmother's people, while volunteers from the Darug Lock family lived often close to or on the land they had always inhabited in the Sydney area.¹⁴

11 Military Order 200 (2) May 1917 in Huggonson 1989: 219.

12 Missions and reserves named in attestations are Victoria: Lake Tyers, Framlingham, Lake Condah, Coranderrk, Ramahyuck, Ebenezer; New South Wales: Wallaga Lake, Roseby Park, Warangesda, Nanima, Purfleet, Cummeragunja, Plumpton, Sackville Reach, St Clair, Brewarrina, Pilliga, Mungindi, Caroon; South Australia: Point McLeay, Point Pearce, Koonibba; Queensland: Barambah, Taroom, Woorabinda, Bloomfield; Tasmania: Cape Barren; Western Australia: Carrolup.

13 Goodall and Cadzow 2009: 3.

14 Scarlett 2008.

The widespread willingness of Aboriginal men to enlist is evident from the fact that volunteers came from all Australian states and the Northern Territory. However, they could also have a more complex, place-related identity. This was as members of groups and nations such as Wiradjuri, Noongar or Gundijtmara, rather than say as Victorians or 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal'. The degree of identification volunteers had with their culture was almost certainly not understood by the white men they associated with, including recruiters, oblivious to the fact that culture could exist as a continuing substratum in the face of suppression by authority.

External evidence linking volunteers with culture could take different forms. Little is known about unsuccessful volunteer Sandy Jackson of Marble Bar, Western Australia, but the distinctive marks recorded in his attestation, horizontal scarring on his breast, suggest initiation. Norman and Charlie Baird, who grew up at China Camp in far North Queensland, are known to have received both an English and Kuku Yalanji education.¹⁵ In central New South Wales, the patriarch of the Cowra droving family, Tom Coe, was described as an initiated man and an informant on Wiradjuri Lachlan 'mythological and traditional information'.¹⁶ His brother and five sons volunteered and all but one served overseas. In the Blue Mountains near Sydney, a small group of seemingly 'assimilated' men were visiting locations of spiritual significance to the Gundungurra up to the early twentieth century.¹⁷ They included William Riley, a farmer and member of the local Catholic church, and his son Alfred, an AIF volunteer. Another member of this group of farmers, William Albert Shepherd, also volunteered as did his nephew Albert John Shepherd. This highlights the fact that the men described as Aboriginal who volunteered or served from a mix of urbanised, semi-urbanised, outback and rural backgrounds had cultural connections which cannot be judged by outward appearances and unfolds another layer of identity in the AIF. Perhaps the closest a recruiter came to confronting this was when he recorded the religion of Harry Hawkins as 'Aboriginal'.

15 Denigan 2006: 3.

16 *Science of Man and Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia* 1902: 81; Submission by Mr. L Shropshire to Royal Anthropological Society of Australia, 1899, containing information provided by Charles Kable and Thomas Coe, p. 121 Roll 2 in Geographical Names Board of New South Wales, 2003 [CD].

17 Brookman and Smith 2010: 64.

The nature of Aboriginal acceptance in the AIF: Prohibitive legislation, pragmatism and mateship versus racism

The enlistment of Aboriginal men began in 1914, when at least 29 volunteers were accepted into the AIF, and continued throughout the war. The contradictions within the inconsistent application of the provisions of the *Defence Act* were apparent in South Australia, where men from Point Pearce and Point McLeay missions had a good acceptance rate, the Protector even endorsing the enlistment of underage men.¹⁸ In contrast, volunteers from Koonibba mission were rejected for 'physique not good enough for military service', an indirect way of referring to Aboriginality.

Although the military order of May 1917 allowed enlistment of men with one white parent, this did not change enlistment significantly, as men of this general description had been routinely accepted in the preceding years. However, some men who had been rejected or discouraged again sought to enlist and there was a temporary spike in Aboriginal enlistment noticeable in Queensland. Despite this, Aboriginal enlistment, like general enlistment had begun to decline.¹⁹ Where the order may have had most effect was in the acceptance of men whose European ancestry was minimal or non-existent. The seven Aboriginal men in a May 1918 photograph of the 1st Reinforcements Egypt probably fell into this category, while others were described as 'the blackest half castes'.²⁰

While apparently a weakening of restrictions, the military order was an even more explicit expression of racism than the *Defence Act*. Its intent was to promote the enlistment of Aboriginal men who associated with white people, already obvious in the successful enlistment of educated men, those identifying in their attestations as police trackers or with other connections to white families or communities. This was recognised by Darug man Henry Anolock, who attached letters from local townspeople to his attestation demonstrating his awareness of the importance of navigating white bureaucracies.²¹ The acceptance of these men was linked to the thinking behind the statutory declarations made by applicants after May 1917, stating they had 'associated with white people all my life'.²² On the other hand, possession of an Exemption Certificate (releasing the holder from the provisions of state Aborigines Protection Acts) is not an

18 NAA B2455, RIGNEY Rufus.

19 For the Queensland response, see Pratt 1990: 18. This decline is evident from a preliminary analysis of Aboriginal enlistment dates after 1916.

20 Scarlett 2011: 16; Bleakley 1961: 170.

21 See also Goodall 1996: 305; Goodall and Cadzow 2009: 72, 78.

22 NAA B2455, CUMMINGS Willie.

identifiable factor in successful enlistment. None of the 12 exempted Queensland men accepted into the AIF between 1915 and 1918 were named as such in their attestations.²³

Press reports from 1915 enthusiastically noted the enlistment of 'half castes' and documented their casualties. But the approval this implied was still firmly located in racism and had an agenda. The objective was to shame white men into enlisting, based on the accepted inferiority of Aboriginal people. This was clearly spelled out in articles like 'Loyal half-castes', which began, 'A striking example to eligible white men has been furnished by a half-caste family at Heywood, named Lovett, five sons having enlisted for active service'.²⁴ More of the same with a slight change of tactics was evident in late 1918. A report headed 'Patriotic natives' about Point McLeay men serving in France directly followed a regular feature giving enlistments by district. This was an attempt to encourage enlistment by moving from inter-district rivalry to inter-racial rivalry.²⁵ To a South Australian correspondent, 'it was a crying shame that any [white men] should be taught their duty by dependants of an aboriginal mission'.²⁶ Yet this was exactly what was hoped for. Its apogee came on Empire Day, 24 May 1917, in Brisbane when 16 men recruited from Barambah mission were participants in a stage-managed recruiting event. The theatre was provided by an emotive display involving a procession of light horsemen leading horses with empty saddles. It culminated in the administration of the oath to the Barambah men who, after mounting the riderless horses, rode up Queen Street with 'the ease so characteristic of the Australian aboriginal'.²⁷ The men were subsequently inducted into the Light Horse and issued with uniforms. A week later they were discharged and sent back to Barambah under police escort.

The incident was a revealing one. The reason for the fiasco was that the military order was not intended to apply to men 'from the camp', only to men who associated with white people.²⁸ It pinned down the exact nature of the changed regulations, but even more it exploited the willingness of Aboriginal men to serve in the most public way yet. The fact that they did not end up in the AIF was irrelevant to the impact of the scene on the large crowd which witnessed the

23 Mackett 1991.

24 Scarlett 2011: 53; see also Riseman 2014b: 184–185.

25 *The Advertiser*, 29 October 1918: 9.

26 *The Advertiser*, 29 April 1916: 13.

27 Scarlett 2015b: 54; *The Brisbane Courier*, 25 May 1917: 7.

28 *The Brisbane Courier*, 28 June 1917: 6.

event. The recruiters then proceeded north, their rhetoric depicting a situation so grave that a depleted and exhausted AIF was forced to 'fall back on the half-caste for the help [white men] were too cowardly to give themselves'.²⁹

After enlistment, the persistence of racism went in tandem with the simple fact that the AIF was dominated by the overarching philosophy of White Australia and believed it was fighting to keep Australia white. This was an extension of the community consensus underlying the passage of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, one promoted by recruiters from leading politicians down.³⁰ During the war, respect had to be won and soldiering ability proved in a way not expected of non-Indigenous soldiers. The racist basis for this defined the qualified nature of any wartime equality and the mateship which flowed from it. After the war, Walter (Chris) Saunders, a Gundijtmara man from Lake Condah, recalled an incident in which a white soldier refused to eat with him because of his race. Saunders' action in challenging him to a fight diffused the situation and they ended up friends.³¹ But while Saunders and others may have succeeded in proving themselves as individuals, they were then faced with more obstacles to overcome. Negative preconceptions about Aboriginal people led some to doubt their ability to perform in battle. As one officer said:

In the early days of the war they were looked upon by many officers and diggers as being undependable under heavy fire, but this opinion was soon brushed aside after the hard fighting in Palestine, and the aboriginals received the respect of all their fellow diggers.³²

As the war progressed, bravery citations show Aboriginal men came to the forefront as leaders and continued to earn respect. Harry Thorpe was 'conspicuous for his courage and leadership' and inspired those under him. Charlie Runga inspired a party of men to follow him and capture two enemy machine guns. Both received Military Medals and showed qualities that transcended racism for the moment at least.³³

Even when Aboriginal men passed these testing processes, they could not evade the fact that Australian society judged a man by his colour, and Aboriginal soldiers by the fact of their Aboriginality. During the war, an incident in 1916 involving Aboriginal and white soldiers on Salisbury Plain was revealing in what it showed about both groups. The issue was alcohol and the drunkenness for which the AIF was renowned. Aboriginal men were a part of this too,

29 *Morning Bulletin*, 29 May 1917: 5. Significantly for the exclusion of Aboriginal soldiers from the Anzac legend, the recruiter expressing this opinion, Colonel Garland, was closely associated with the seminal commemoration of Anzac in 1916.

30 Scarlett 2011: 4; Stanley 2011: 226; Lake and Reynolds 2010: 162.

31 Gordon 1965: 36–37. This story was related by Saunders' father Reg, an officer in the Second World War.

32 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 3 February 1933: 9.

33 *The London Gazette*, 17 December 1917: 13200, Harry Thorpe; NAA B2455, RUNGA Raymond Charles.

the difference for them being that in Australia they were not legally permitted to drink. The basis of this incident was the behaviour of three Aboriginal men leaving a pub, which prompted an Australian captain to pursue a ban on the consumption of alcohol by Aboriginal men, as in Australia. His report was dismissed by AIF Headquarters, reinforcing the official equality of conditions in the AIF. This stemmed from the fact that, according to the AIF's interpretation of the *Defence Act*, Aboriginality theoretically did not exist in the Australian army. In this the AIF was unique, differing from other forces where non-white status was officially recognised and attracted discrimination.³⁴ However, the suggestion that AIF regulations be altered to discriminate against Aboriginal soldiers revealed that despite their undifferentiated position in the AIF, Aboriginal men could not always escape the prevalent mentality of the Australia they had left behind.

Other instances involving alcohol and Aboriginal men, such as the court martial of George Aitken for a serious offence committed while drunk, did not elicit the same response as the one received by the men on Salisbury Plain.³⁵ What may have made the first situation different was the captain's complaint that the men's 'abusive and threatening behaviour' encompassed 'shouting about the white man stealing their country'.³⁶ In doing this the Aboriginal soldiers were challenging the prevailing white narrative of peaceful colonisation. Although Aboriginal people had asserted opposition to colonisation in various forms since invasion,³⁷ the incident was a confronting demonstration of its presence within the AIF – and the captain's demand for the institution of the status quo applying in Australia undermines the later construct of AIF inter-racial unity. In another alcohol-related incident in Paris, a military policeman told a barman not to serve Willie Karpany as he was 'under the Aboriginal Act and not allowed to be served alcohol'.³⁸ Karpany's supposedly equal AIF status and the fact that he was in a foreign jurisdiction did not prevent this attempt to exercise white power based on race. Explaining such encounters in terms of the antagonism between Aboriginal people and state police, who were active in the administration of repressive government policies, simply emphasises the existence of outside prejudice within the AIF.³⁹ It is obvious from these incidents that relationships within the AIF were more complex than often portrayed and the prejudices which infected Australian society did not automatically disappear

34 This official equality, integral to the narrative of AIF inter-racial mateship, contrasted with the status of non-white men in other forces, for example, Black Americans, Indians and South Africans whose ethnicity attracted restrictions particularly when on leave. Levine 1998: 104,105,115; Winegard 2012: 16.

35 NAA A471, AITKEN George Robert.

36 AWM15: 7611.

37 Goodall 1996: xix.

38 Kartinyeri 1996: 43–44.

39 Cunneen 2001: 12, 13.

in the microcosm of the army and the intensity of wartime experience. Similarly, like white prejudice, Aboriginal sense of identity and injustice was not put aside when Aboriginal men put on the King's uniform.

Friendships – mateships – also reflect this complexity, one which contradicts the suggestion of a unified 'Australian' identity in war in which pre-war racial boundaries no longer existed. Two South Australian Ngarrindjeri soldiers, George Karpany and Proctor Wilson, were given the ultimate accolade when they were called 'jolly fine fellows and white, clear white inside',⁴⁰ the latter phrase an expression derived from Rudyard Kipling's late nineteenth-century ballad *Gunga Din*.⁴¹ This popular poem unambiguously references colour and is an example of a variant use of the Christian concept of 'white inside' which became prevalent in the colonial and (in Australia) early post-colonial period in relation to non-whites. This clearly indicated the superiority of white men by showing a black man behaving in a way that transcended his perceived inferior status and the behavioural expectations which flowed from it.⁴² In the case of Karpany and Wilson, Kipling's quotation appeared beside a photograph of the two Aboriginal men. In a variation of this usage, William 'Mick' King, an Aboriginal man from New South Wales, was praised with the words 'Although he was black he was a White man and a dinkum Aussie'.⁴³ In the attention it drew to his colour, this statement was racially loaded, falling outside the use of the term 'white man' as one of general approbation for other white men. In yet another indicative example of attitude to race, a fellow soldier reporting on the death of John Firebrace wrote: 'I knew him well. He was in my company. Was a half aboriginal but a very fine fellow'.⁴⁴

It was the mindset of fellow soldiers revealed in statements like these – particularly when it is considered that these were made by men who admired their Aboriginal comrades – which shows the inbuilt racism of the AIF. This did not prevent respect, admiration and friendship, but racism was a constant subtext. William Punch, a Wiradjuri massacre survivor, was to one white soldier 'the best pal I ever had',⁴⁵ while a Queensland Aboriginal soldier was described as one of his best wartime friends by Victorian white man Edward

40 *Western Mail*, 13 December 1932: 2.

41 Kipling 1892: 153.

An' for all 'is dirty 'ide

'E was white, clear white, inside

When 'e went to tend the wounded under fire!

42 For example, the obituary of Indian Nobby Bux, which appeared under the heading of the same quotation, states 'although of dark skin he was white right through'. *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 29 September 1923: 10. Similarly, a comment on a Barambah soldier reads 'although Archibald James Marshall was a coloured man, he was white at heart'. *The Queenslander*, 29 November 1924: 18.

43 Stanley 2011: 225–256.

44 Private H. Day in AWM: DRL/0428.

45 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 1916: 14.

Mylrea.⁴⁶ The existence of friendships like these in wartime is clear, but in both cases neither had the chance to be proved afterwards: Punch died in 1917 and distance ensured that Mylrea's friendship was not practically tested. Mylrea's comment was made in the context of the fragility of the war experience, which led him to lament, after praising the wartime tolerance of the AIF, 'Why was it that after the cessation of hostilities the people reverted to narrow-minded vision?'⁴⁷ His address was at an Anzac ceremony in 1932 at Healesville near Coranderrk mission. The location suggests that this could have been a pointed comment directed to his audience.

Post-war recognition

Community sentiment, and within it the actions of the main ex-service organisation, the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA), as well as the work of the chroniclers, provide sometimes overlapping ways of gauging the nature of post-war recognition of Aboriginal war service.

During the war, Aboriginal membership of the AIF was kept in the public eye by newspaper articles. After the war this was no longer relevant to recruitment and the subject received less attention, only reviving slightly when the question of Aboriginal service in the Second World War became an issue. Important exceptions were the letters to the press from Aboriginal men, drawing attention to the continuation of discriminatory practices which they felt should have ended after the war service of members of their families and communities.⁴⁸ Protests were also made by the monthly paper of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (formed in 1921 to combat injustice).⁴⁹ But when queried by state Protectors, the Commonwealth made it clear that war service did not change the status of these men under the Protection Acts, and the states acted accordingly.⁵⁰

The post-war treatment of ex-soldiers and their families, particularly those living on missions, was lamentable and dominated by petty issues relating to receipt or control of war entitlements, some of it based on fear of Aboriginal empowerment through war service.⁵¹ Whether they were being forced onto missions (Willie Cummings in Queensland),⁵² barred from living on mission land

46 *Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian*, 30 April 1932: 2.

47 *Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian*, 30 April 1932: 2.

48 Scarlett 2015a: 41–43.

49 *The Australian Abo Call*, May 1938: 2; Scarlett 2015a: 45. On the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association see Maynard 2007.

50 NAA A2487, 1919/3202 [Position of Australian Aboriginal soldiers]; Riseman 2014b: 190.

51 Horton 2012; Huggonson 1993a, 1993b; Pearson 2013; Pratt 1990: 36–38; Maynard 2007: 39.

52 Mackett n.d.

once called home in Victoria (Percy Pepper),⁵³ witness to the break-up of mission land for white soldier settlement or faced with the removal of their children, many Aboriginal ex-soldiers and their families lived at the mercy of Protectors and their boards. As Tom Blackman wrote:

I always thought fighting for my king and country would make me a naturalise british subject and a man with freedom in the country but I have hardly had freedom since I returned from the war ... It seems as if a Chief Protector thinks the half caste return soldier dont want justice ... We help to fight same as the white soldiers did. Think of all the half caste soldiers who were killed at war. What thanks have the half caste soldiers got for going to war. We were good men at war but looked down on now the war is over.⁵⁴

The attitude of what became the main ex-servicemen's organisation was often no better. Service records show Aboriginal membership of the RSSILA and its advocacy for Aboriginal men seeking medals and replacement discharges. Moreover, some individuals like Tom Williams and Douglas Grant were popular League members in New South Wales branches.⁵⁵ Yet the oral history of families talks of rejection and exclusion and RSSILA membership alone is not evidence of inclusion in the social activities of the League. The potential for exclusion would have been even more pronounced after the Second World War when the Returned and Services League (RSL previously RSSILA) clubs were licensed. The widespread discrimination against Aboriginal children in public education, often children of ex-servicemen, went unchallenged by non-Indigenous League members. One known exception, an ex-member of the 15th Battalion, appears to have been a sole voice.⁵⁶ The League did display a passing interest in the service of Aboriginal soldiers when, in the early 1930s, its journal *Reveille* published the names of men from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.⁵⁷ League branches also lobbied the government for voting rights for Aboriginal ex-servicemen, legislated in 1949, but this was because they had shown they 'were advanced enough to share the danger of active service' and demonstrated they were 'sufficiently advanced to cope with the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship'.⁵⁸ This showed an attitude to their comrades that was very different from the spirit of the Aboriginal men whose letters in the inter-war period linked war service with ending discrimination.

53 Flagg and Giurciullo 2008: 93.

54 Blackman to Tennant Kelly, 22 February 1935 in Trigger et al. 2011.

55 Williams in Goodall and Cadzow 2009: 126; Grant in *Western Mail*, 22 May 1930: 2; Riseman 2014a.

56 James Bennett, letter to *Cairns Post*, 2 January 1933.

57 'Many served: AIF Aborigines', 30 November 1931: 22; 'A.I.F. Aborigines: N.S.W.', 31 January 1932: 20.

58 National Secretary RSL to Prime Minister 1961, quoted in Curthoys 2000: 136.

This post-war distancing and exclusion, which sits oddly with wartime mateships, was also present in remembrance and commemoration. There is evidence that some Aboriginal men were present at these events. Men from Point McLeay regularly marched in Adelaide until at least 1945, and returned soldier Gordon Rigney placed a wreath of swan feathers on the Adelaide memorial. An unknown Aboriginal man marched in Brisbane in 1930 and 1931.⁵⁹ But the decision by Tommy Lyons and David Mullett to travel to Sydney to march in 1930 may have been because of the potential for exclusion in country towns known for racism and bigotry.⁶⁰ In one such town in Queensland, bereaved mother Rose Martyn was ignored at the unveiling of the Goombungee soldiers' memorial in 1920.⁶¹ In Collarenebri, New South Wales, Mick Flick felt unwelcome in the town's Anzac Day march after the death of his white friend, while the great uncles of May Mead attended functions for returned soldiers in Coonabarabran but 'felt like outsiders' although supposedly among wartime 'mates'.⁶² This underlines the transience of the wartime experience and the bonds it created.

Against this background it is not surprising that the early acknowledgement of Aboriginal war service came from within Aboriginal communities themselves. In Victoria, honour boards were set up in the mission churches at Lake Tyers and at Lake Condah. A memorial at Point McLeay mission church unveiled in 1925 was the result of collections and contributions by mission members.⁶³ At Walhallow reserve in New South Wales, home to activist Bert Groves, a memorial gateway at the school was erected in 1935, and a memorial to men from Cape Barren Island was unveiled in 1937.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Aboriginal men could be omitted from official memorials. While such omissions are not consistent, their existence was most pointed in country town communities where people were known to each other.⁶⁵ The memorial at Darlington Point, New South Wales, displayed no Aboriginal names, although 10 men from the district had served overseas. These included Walter Bright, whose family were founding members of the local mission and who returned to his pre-war employment at nearby Kooba station.

After the war, Aboriginal service received virtually no attention from white Australians until *Reveille* in the early 1930s sought to 'place on record the effort of the Aborigines during the Great War' based on a search for names via an

59 *News* (Adelaide), 25 April 1945: 8; 'Many served: AIF Aborigines', *Reveille* 1931: 22.

60 Their intentions are stated in correspondence in their service records; Austin and Dodson 1974 demonstrate the depth of prejudice prevailing in country towns.

61 Huggonson 1993b: 2.

62 Goodall 1987: 3–6; Mead in Sommerville 1994: 138.

63 Kartinyeri 1996: 11.

64 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1935: 11; Mallett 2001: 36–37.

65 Edmonds 2012: 172.

appeal to readers and reports from police and Protection boards.⁶⁶ This was less evidence of a particular focus on Aboriginal war service for its own sake than part of a more general move by ex-soldiers to reflect on the war, just over a decade on from the armistice.⁶⁷

The *Reveille* articles, which were directed to a limited audience, sank without trace. Despite this they had a pivotal role in the recognition of Aboriginal war service. Their accidental discovery by Chris Clark and his 1973 and 1977 articles were the beginning of a gradually increasing interest in the role of Aboriginal men in the First World War, one which coincided with white historians' belated acknowledgement that Australia had an Aboriginal history. In addition to white writers Robert Hall, David Huggonson, Rod Pratt, Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell and Heather Goodall, Aboriginal people like Doreen Kartinyeri, Mollie Mallett, Ida West and Patricia Davis-Hurst began to write specifically about their families' and communities' war service. But although non-Aboriginal writing prior to the twenty-first century contains references to mateship and the Anzac legend,⁶⁸ these do not feature in the early writings of Aboriginal people. In the twenty-first century, Aboriginal war service has continued to receive attention, mostly in the context of writing about broader Aboriginal issues, but has remained outside mainstream accounts of the First World War, which even fail to give passing reference to the racist provisions of the *Defence Act*. However, a chapter on Aboriginal war service by Peter Stanley in a forthcoming volume of the *Oxford Centenary History of Australia in the Great War* could signal change.

Current perceptions

Historians acknowledge the problematic centrality of the Anzac legend to Australia's national mythology and argue that much of that mythology is founded on the concept of mateship.⁶⁹ In 2000, Ann Curthoys warned of the danger the presence of Aboriginal soldiers posed to this myth, based as it was on a white exclusiveness which located the Anzac narrative and its symbolic power firmly within the service of white Australians.⁷⁰ But as the century has progressed, this threat has been addressed and defused by mateship, as the internet, press and television have become major forces in projecting the story of Aboriginal war service told by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, all emphasising the importance of mateship.

66 AWM: 27, 533.

67 Holbrook 2014: 63–70.

68 For example, Hall 1990.

69 Holbrook 2014: 215; Lake and Reynolds 2010: 119.

70 Curthoys 2000: 133.

However, a hard look at the facts surrounding Aboriginal experience during and after the First World War challenges the new narrative of wartime equality and mateship now being used to give recognition to Aboriginal war service and to incorporate it into the Anzac legend. Rather than binding black and white together into a band of AIF brothers, mateship was more likely to have been an individual thing: Mick Flick's friendship with one white digger but rejection by others in his country town emphasises the need to look at mateship more closely and in a more nuanced way. This is not to devalue friendships where they existed, but to see them in all their complexities and in the light of available evidence instead of the construct of recent years, which can generalise and sentimentalise.

First World War Aboriginal servicemen displayed the same fortitude and resilience and experienced the same suffering as non-Indigenous soldiers. They deserve recognition and a place in our history of this conflict and its defining legend, but the reality of Aboriginal experience in the AIF should not be sacrificed in order to achieve it. The centenary of the First World War is a good starting point for a re-examination of Aboriginal war service – one which moves from general interpretation to an enriched appreciation of the identities of Indigenous servicemen, and which, while recognising the service of Aboriginal men, extricates it from the potentially distorting myth of mateship.

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