Introduction: A Long History of Service

On 10 November 2013, a ceremony in Adelaide dedicated a war memorial to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have served in the Australian armed forces. The memorial was the culmination of years of hard work from Indigenous and non-Indigenous supporters alike. One of the themes permeating the dedication speeches was about how during both the First and Second World Wars, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service personnel fought bravely for Australia yet returned home to continuing discrimination. Indigenous contributions to Australia’s military history for the most part went unrecognised and became forgotten in the national story. At the ceremony, Frank Lampard, the Deputy Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander War Memorial Committee, delivered an impassioned speech in which he declared to resounding applause: ‘I’m proud to say that lack of recognition ends today!’

The memorial in Adelaide represents one of several initiatives in the new millennium to commemorate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service. For instance, members of the Perth-based organisation Honouring Indigenous War Graves regularly travel to gravesites of Indigenous diggers to perform ceremonies and place commemorative headstones. In Redfern, a Coloured Diggers March has honoured Indigenous servicemen and women every Anzac Day since 2007. In the major capital cities the Department of Veterans’ Affairs now organises commemorative services during Reconciliation Week. In January 2014, the Sydney Festival showcased the new play Black Diggers, depicting the experiences of Aboriginal servicemen in the
First World War. The play has since toured to the other capital cities. The theme of NAIDOC Week in 2014 was ‘Serving Country – Centenary and Beyond’. In 2015 the artwork *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall* was dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service in Hyde Park in Sydney. These high-profile examples complement commemorative activities in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the country. Indigenous Australians have always known about their kin’s contributions to Australia’s defence. These events are all contributing to an awakening among the non-Indigenous community about the histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been protecting this country since time immemorial. They defended it valiantly when Europeans arrived; they resisted invasion, dispossession and massacres. Frontier wars waged from the time of the First Fleet in 1788 through to the 1930s in central Australia. These wars were still being fought when the Australian colonies federated in 1901 and the Commonwealth excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from participating in the new nation as equals.\(^1\)

While many Aboriginal people were still fighting on the frontiers of northern and central Australia, others were fighting for the British Empire in the Boer War from 1899 to 1902. At least 10 Aboriginal men signed up and served as regular soldiers. Approximately 10 other Aboriginal men were employed as trackers. Little is known about these men, though there are indications that some may have been left in South Africa at the end of the Boer War because of immigration restriction constitutive of the White Australia Policy.\(^2\)

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Aboriginal men were among the thousands quick to sign up for military service. However, regulations barred the enlistment of persons ‘not substantially of European origin or descent’. Some men managed to skirt these rules due to recruiters looking the other way or by pretending to be Italian, Indian or Māori (who were permitted despite not being European). In March 1917, the need for manpower drove the Commonwealth to loosen the regulations and to permit men of mixed descent to enlist. It is difficult to determine the precise number of Aboriginal men who served because the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) did not record the race of enlistees. The Australian War Memorial (AWM) has been working since the 1990s to compile lists of Aboriginal service personnel from each conflict, relying primarily on family names and Indigenous community input but also through records such as state

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 Aboriginal Protection Boards, correspondence in Department of Repatriation files and newspapers referencing Aboriginal service personnel. Currently the AWM estimates that by the end of the First World War, over 1,300 Aboriginal men had served in the AIF. Most reported being treated as equals while in the AIF, but upon their return to Australia most were denied veterans’ benefits, continued to live under restrictive protection acts and confronted prejudice. Notwithstanding the protest of Aboriginal activists – many of whom served, were related to veterans or had lost family in the war – the status of Aboriginal Australians had not improved substantially by the 1930s.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, much of the First World War experience repeated itself. Once again some men enlisted and once again regulations officially excluded persons ‘not substantially of European origin or descent’. The larger scale of the conflict and direct threat to Australia from late 1941 changed the status quo. Regulations were ignored because Australia needed any able-bodied person who could serve. This time Indigenous women also served in the new women’s auxiliary services, providing an opportunity for many of them to escape the limitations of domestic service imposed during the assimilation era. Again, those men and women who served in regular enlisted units reported that they were treated as equals, whether they served in places as diverse as Greece, Libya or New Guinea. In 1989, historian Robert Hall estimated that 3,000 Aboriginal people and 850 Torres Strait Islanders enlisted in the Second World War; now the AWM has identified approximately 5,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women.

Northern Australia became a frontline in the Second World War after Japan swept across the South Pacific, dragging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of the Top End into the conflict. Even before Japan entered the war, authorities recognised the possibility of an attack and enlisted Indigenous people to defend the country. The first formal Indigenous unit was the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion (TSLI), formed after May 1941. The TSLI was a group of approximately 440 regularly enlisted Torres Strait Islander men whose job was to patrol the Torres Strait and to provide mechanical and logistical support for ships passing through. Commanding officers and visitors praised
the unit for its professionalism and effectiveness, yet its members received less pay than non-Indigenous men serving alongside them. The Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines quarantined part of their wages, and that pay became part of what is now referred to as ‘the stolen wages’. It was only in 1982 that surviving members of the TSLI received back pay – valued by then at over $7 million.6

Another all-Indigenous force was the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU), formed in February 1942 at the same time that the Japanese began bombing Darwin and northern Australia. From February 1942 to April 1943, anthropologist-turned-serviceman Dr Donald Thomson organised and commanded a group of 51 Yolngu men in Arnhem Land. He trained the NTSRU to use bush warfare to ward off potential Japanese invaders, relying on their own knowledge of the land and weaponry such as spears instead of guns. The NTSRU patrolled Arnhem Land and constructed outposts but received no payment except for basic trade goods such as fish hooks, wire and tobacco. The force disbanded in April 1943 when the immediate Japanese threat had passed, and other white units arose to patrol the Top End. It was not until 1992 that surviving members of the NTSRU and families of deceased veterans were awarded back pay for their service.7

While the TSLI and NTSRU were the only formal Indigenous units in the Top End, there were other Aboriginal men and women employed by the Army or Air Force. Some worked in labour camps, moving ordnance, constructing shelters, preparing food and cleaning. Others worked with local Army or RAAF servicemen clearing and constructing runways, moving supplies or serving as coastwatchers. There were some instances when Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men rescued crashed Australian or American pilots. A Tiwi Islander captured the first Japanese prisoner of war on Australian soil whose plane crashed after the first bombing raid on Darwin. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents at missions were also the victims of Japanese bombings. The North Australia Observer Unit (NAOU), a scouting unit operating from Queensland to Western Australia, employed local Aboriginal men as trackers. Women had to protect their families when men left to join forces such as the

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Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion. For all the duties that local Indigenous men and women performed, they received little recognition or pay, primarily because they were not formally enlisted in the Australian armed forces.\(^8\)

After the Second World War, once again veterans returned to the discriminatory policies and legislation operating across Australia. Yet the period from the end of the war through to the 1970s would see gradual reform to Indigenous affairs, with Second World War veterans some of the key activists for change. The military, too, reformed its policies gradually. Immediately after the war, commanders reinstated the rule about members being substantially of European origin or descent, meaning only a few Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men served in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan. In 1949, partly under pressure from Indigenous veterans and the Returned Sailors’, Soldiers’ and Airmen’s Imperial League of Australia (currently Returned and Services League or RSL), the Army finally lifted its colour bar. The Air Force and Navy followed suit when the Defence Act was amended in 1951. Through the 1950s, while the services did not promote Indigenous enlistment, they did at least permit it on a case-by-case basis. Indigenous men served in the Korean War and Vietnam War; Indigenous women enlisted in the women’s services. During the periods of National Service (1951–59 and 1964–72), Aboriginal people’s status was ambiguous. Aboriginal people could always volunteer, but the National Service Act specifically exempted Aboriginal people from compulsory National Service. Yet the regulations accompanying the Act excluded many Aboriginal people of mixed descent from the definition of ‘Aboriginal’, making them indeed liable for National Service. There were inconsistent applications of the law across and within states. Notwithstanding internal and external pressure to remove discriminatory provisions from the National Service Act, the clauses remained on the books until the repeal of the Act in 1973.\(^9\) The final discriminatory provisions of the Defence Act, exempting Aboriginal men from compulsory call-up in a time of war, were finally removed in 1992. Even while these latent discriminatory clauses were still in legislation, throughout the post-war era Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women served in all services, all conflicts and peacekeeping missions.

The Australian armed forces, functioning collectively as the Australian Defence Force (ADF) since 1976, have evolved in their policies and practices towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service since lifting the colour bar. Reports

\(^{8}\) See No Bugles, No Drums, produced by Debra Beattie-Burnett, directed by John Burnett, 49 min. Seven Emus Productions in association with Australian Television Network, 1990, videocassette; Osborne, Torres Strait Islander Women and the Pacific War.

on the extent to which Indigenous service members reported racism vary across individuals, services and eras. One worrying pattern, though, is that reports from ex-service personnel suggest an increase in racism in the forces since the end of the Second World War. Those more likely to experience racism were those who served in the 1980s and 1990s, those with darker skin and those in non-combat units. Those men and women who experienced racial vilification recall that the ADF did not have adequate racial vilification rules until the 1990s. Since then, the ADF has actively implemented rules against racial vilification. In the new millennium, the ADF has also set up programs to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and has been an active proponent of Reconciliation.¹⁰

The 2011 ADF census reported that 1.7 per cent of Army, 1.6 per cent of Navy and 0.8 per cent of Air Force members identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, constituting 1.4 per cent of the total ADF. This equates to over 700 serving members of the permanent ADF.¹¹ A more comprehensive history of Indigenous service since the Second World War is available in the monograph *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945*, co-authored with Richard Trembath.

The story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service is about more than just wars, rules and regulations, ranks, homecomings and statistics. It is about people. It is about lives and experiences: motivations to serve, employment opportunities, mateship, prejudice, readjustment, post-traumatic stress disorder, family, interactions with civilian Australia and community. This book presents a snapshot of life stories of the thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who served in the armed forces during the post–Second World War era. The histories are presented in the storytellers’ own words, expressing their own reflections about their lives and the role military service played. Some of these stories are confronting, such as the trauma witnessed in war zones or abusive childhoods as members of the Stolen Generations. Other stories are inspiring, revealing Indigenous ex-servicepersons contributing to community development at the grassroots or national level. Many of these stories of military service are not about conflict, as there were many men and women who served in the Australian armed forces in non-combat roles or during eras when Australia was not engaged in overseas conflicts. These eight life stories cannot be said to represent all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-service experiences.

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They were chosen, though, because they present multiple perspectives on military service and draw from diverse backgrounds: men, women, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Army, Navy, Air Force, veterans of Vietnam, Gulf War, Somalia, East Timor, peacetime.

Sharing stories and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories is at the heart of the Reconciliation process. Service in the armed forces has been a shared history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, yet it was not necessarily an experience universally the same. Through learning about Indigenous service people’s life stories, we can understand both the common bonds between Indigenous and non-Indigenous diggers and the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women experienced military life differently. The stories in this book are only one contribution to a much wider process of sharing histories. Hopefully they will generate more discussions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military history and add to the ongoing awakening of non-Indigenous Australians to that past.
This text is taken from *In Defence of Country: Life Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Servicemen & Women*, by Noah Riseman, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.