Mabel Quakawoot is a Baialai (Byele) and South Sea Islander woman. Like so many other black women raised during the assimilation era, she had few employment options and worked as a domestic servant after she left school. It was the retired RAAF pilot whom Mabel worked for that inspired her to sign up for the Women’s Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) in 1957. She left the WRAAF when she married and raised a family in Mackay, Queensland. After her children were old enough, Mabel became involved in many community initiatives, particularly around education for disadvantaged youth. In 2014, after this interview, she was elected to the Working Party for the National Australian South Sea Islander People. Her story provides insights not only into how Indigenous women experienced life in the armed forces but also how the armed forces often represented an escape from domestic service and the limitations imposed on Aboriginal women in assimilation-era Australia. It is also the life story of a humble person, happy to give back to all members of her community – South Sea Islander, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and non-Indigenous.

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1 This interview was recorded in Mackay, Queensland, on 5 June 2011.
I was born in 1937; I’m now [2011] 74 years of age and still going. Growing up, we lived on a farm outside of Rockhampton that was given to my grandfather on my mother’s side after he came over here as an indentured labourer. The people gave the farm to him when they left to go back to England. He could not own the farm because he was an indentured labourer, so he had to then put it in the names of his children; the farm is still in our name to this day. He was called an alien. If he had died without family he would have been just an alien. A lot of the people who came from the Pacific Islands were aliens and died as aliens, and were buried in the alien part of the cemeteries. He managed not to be sent back when a lot of the other Pacific Islanders were because his family was here and his last boss didn’t want him sent back. He put in an affidavit to say that this man was very good and he wanted him to stay in Australia.2

My grandparents were from Vanuatu. My mother’s father came from Pentecost Island and my father’s father came from Tanna Island in the Pentecost group in Vanuatu. My [maternal] grandfather, he went to his grave with great big whip marks all across him, but they didn’t speak of it. The last person that owned him didn’t whip him. My father’s father was also like that, but he was a good horseman. Therefore, instead of working in the cane fields like my mother’s father did, he was with the cattle. He drove with the cattle and things like that. He married an Aboriginal lady; therefore we have the two bloods running through our veins. He mixed with a lot of Aboriginal people because his wife was Aboriginal, but we grew up mainly with my mother’s family; therefore we were brought up mainly South Sea Islanders. We went to visit our grandparents, my father’s mother and father. We went, but they were a lot older because my father was 20 years older than my mother. But you wouldn’t have noticed that they were 20 years apart. We were mainly with my mother’s family.

My father was born in Gladstone, on Boyne Island. They lived on Boyne Island and went to school from there. At the present moment that’s the island that is our grandmother’s ancestral place – Curtis Island, where they’re putting all the great big gas things now, which is very sad because they’ve ruined the island. We brought some bones back from Scotland to bury on that island. That is our burial grounds, but we don’t get buried there.

My family life as a child was loving, strict, and we knew that we couldn’t be disobedient. I was the eldest of nine; there were seven girls and two boys. It gives you extra responsibilities and they still make sure that the responsibilities are there. I still have to make decisions for all of us now. Whether they take my

decision or not is another thing, but they run it past me and that’s as it’s always been. I had a lovely, lovely childhood. A lot of people looked at us like we were snobbish, but we weren’t snobbish. It was just our father was very strict and we had to do things properly. I knew that when I went into the Air Force, I couldn’t shame my family. I respected my family right to the hilt because Dad taught us that no matter where you are, you still have family and you still have people who care for you. That’s how he brought us up, every one of us, and we still care for each other – each and every one of us, together.

I went to school on a horse. If we didn’t put the horse in – and there used to be three or four on a horse going to school – we had to walk and it would be about four miles. We went to school with no shoes on. It was a one teacher school and there were mainly all South Sea Island kids. There would be about two or three white children in the school and we were taught by a white teacher. I only went as far as what would now be grade 10, but it was scholarship. I did my scholarship and I passed that. I loved school; out of the nine of us, not one of us did not like school. Dad made sure that we were all educated, even if he had ‘seven bloody girls’, as he used to say.

We learnt all the needlework and everything like that because when my mother was growing up that was all that was taught to her mother, so she taught it to all her children. But we didn’t do any weaving like they did because my mother’s father didn’t learn anything from any Aboriginals because there was a distinction between the two races, which I found very hard. It still exists today in certain parts of the areas even though they have now intermarried a lot, with white as well as with the other cultures. But we’re accepted in, if we wish to be accepted. I’m not saying that everyone accepts you. They accept you if you wish to be accepted, and we accept them if they wish to be accepted. That’s a distinction I’d like to make between the coloured races because in Mackay there are the three different races. There’s South Sea Islander, Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal, and the three races live quite harmoniously together, but we don’t tread over each other’s lines.

Tradition from the South Sea Islands was important to us. My grandfather took a piece from my ear and he put it in my hand. He did that because he was the eldest, my mother was the eldest, and I was the eldest. So that came down to the eldest one in each family. I didn’t do it to my daughter even though she was the eldest too. Being South Sea Islanders there were certain parts of Joskeleigh that we were not allowed to walk, because they had devil men. We were very respectful of where we went.

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3 Mabel is describing a South Sea Island cultural practice where her grandfather removed a small piece of flesh from her ear.
Community life was fantastic. Everyone looked out for each other. They weren’t backward in rousing on you and telling you, ‘You’re a naughty girl and you better not do that because I’ll tell your mother’. We had a lovely life. Christmases were all spent all together; families came. At night-time, before the Christmas dinner, we went to different friends, or friends came to us. Lunchtime on Christmas was always just family only. We used to go fishing and swimming and those things because we lived just outside of Rockhampton at a little place called Joskeleigh. It’s quite well known in the South Sea Islander circles and in any history books.

Yes, there was racism, but we were always told that it was their bother not ours because we couldn’t help how we were born, what colour we were. There was no use losing our tempers over it. I was very fast and I went to run in races, but this fellow took exception to me being dark. He said that he didn’t want his daughter to travel with the nigger on the train, so I was left out of that and I never went back to run again. I was 14. I didn’t run, but his daughter didn’t make the team either. I remember another incident when my sister was walking home from school and this little girl said, ‘Oh! You’re a blackfella’. My sister said, ‘Oh well! At least I’m black all over not speckled and spotted like you’. It was a little red-headed girl that had freckles all over her face. The girl ran home and told her father and he came tearing down and wanted to give my sister a hard smack. That was one thing that stood out in my mind, but otherwise there was nothing that I can remember. Even in the Air Force, I seemed to have been accepted by all – except when some American airmen came over and they didn’t want to sit in the mess with a nigger. The Commanding Officer told them that they could go down to the hangar and their meals would be sent down there – and they did.

My father used to work at the meatworks and my mother, before she got married, used to do housework for different areas, like station owners. When she got married, that just ceased altogether because you were not allowed to work when you were married. The same applied when I got married. I could have gone and had a job at Qantas, but my husband said, ‘No. No one else’s wife is working’. That was years later, 20 years after my mother stayed at home. We owned our own home, which was very prestigious for black people to own their own home in that day and age. Mum had a beautiful carpet on the floor and beautiful lounge chairs. My father was very proud of that home. We helped, my brother and I, to pay for that house because we went to work early.

My father worked in the meatworks nearly all his life. I can remember when the Depression was on, he’d go away from home and he’d stay away. When the Second World War was on – I was about five – Mum was home with whatever kids there were; I think there were four of us then. The Americans came around to have their way with her, I suppose. But she had a double-barrelled shotgun; she just would stand there and tell them to go. One night, these white Americans
came to rattle the door and it was an old wooden door that had a bolt thing that you just bolted in. She just let one barrel of the shotgun go at the door, and they never came back anymore.

There were a lot of young dark girls that had babies to the white Americans, but they wouldn’t allow the black Americans to go anywhere near anyone. Well, this is what I surmised later on when I joined the Air Force because that was still the same attitude that the white Americans had. I don’t think that most of the relationships between the Americans and South Sea Islanders were consensual because they were not seen out together. They weren’t out walking together anywhere. As a child you don’t know that this is being implanted in your brain, but it gets implanted in your brain to do that. The children of white American men and South Sea Islander women were accepted by the community, yes. But if they did something wrong they’d say, ‘Oh, that half is American’. You wouldn’t let the mother hear you saying that. So, I suppose there was a little bit of racism within there, but if the girl was in trouble they would help the girl, or the boy.

After I left school I did housekeeping for about four years in Rockhampton because they didn’t believe that dark people could understand reading and writing and be in an office. I wished I had gone and challenged them, but that would be cheeky of me in those days. They gave me very menial tasks, like scrubbing the floors and washing the walls and making beds and things like that, which I did quite happily. There were two lots then: there were the rich and the poor. There was no in-between. The white people that were there, they were like us. They’d go out and have to work, and they had the same menial tasks if they were classed as poor people by the ones who had money. That’s all they allowed them to do. Well that’s how I saw it anyway.

Until I joined the Air Force at about 19 years old in January 1957, I went to work for these really nice people. One was a fighter pilot in the Second World War and he was the one who gave me the incentive. He said, ‘You have enough brains to join the Air Force’, and I heard that; I thought it was quite funny, but it was really great because they believed in me, even though I didn’t believe in what I was doing. I put in an application to join and I had to have an aptitude test. I passed my aptitude test and so I was in the Air Force. My father reacted with, ‘You can’t be true!’ He said, ‘They don’t take blackfellas in the Air Force. Army, yes, but not in the Air Force’. I said, ‘Well I have been accepted to go and do an aptitude test’. Then, when I was accepted it was just unreal. My father could not believe it. I think that in his mind, the girls who went and joined the services were bad girls – they’d go to bed with anyone or whatever. That was in his mind, but it was never like that. I think he felt like that because you were going into a white man’s world; he thought that you were just fair play for the white man. He never ever said it, but that’s what I thought was going through his mind. He wanted to protect me more than anything else. In those days it
was 21 years of age that you had to be before you could join, or sign any forms. The Aboriginal people didn’t even have the vote. I went and I forged my father’s signature and I got in – and he never knew. He would be very angry if he found out! My brothers and sisters thought I was mad because I was going away from home. But that was it.

I did not know what I was getting myself into. The fighter pilot I worked for didn’t talk about that. He just said, ‘You’ve got the brains to join something’. He said, ‘Scrubbing floors is too menial’. He just thought that I was bright and he planted the seed and it grew. When I joined the Air Force we had to have tests to see what mustering we would come under. I came under a mustering of a teleprinter operator – that’s like a telegraphist. I worked with signals. I heard later from a cousin of mine that was in the Air Force who said, ‘You must have mustered one of the highest mustering’. I said, ‘Well, I didn’t know’. When we sat for our aptitude tests in Brisbane, I passed and then we went to join the Air Force. You had to sit to see what mustering you went into and because they don’t know who you are, you just send this form in and you’re just given a number. So my number came up that I passed and that’s where I was sent: to Ballarat to do signals. It didn’t worry me because I just thought that was great.

At training I remember marching. Marching was something that you had to do. You had to make sure you carried everything in your left hand because you had your right hand to salute. Your shoes had to be polished and the seams on your stockings had to be straight and all these things. Then after six months, they became second nature to you; you just did it. You also had to do chores, like making sure your beds were made. We learnt how to make bed rolls in case there was a war and all these things. But, you know, I thoroughly enjoyed it. Men had to go through the same training if they came into the signals; the men did the same as the women. But there were other things that women were not allowed to do, like go down to the hangar and they weren’t allowed to fly the planes. But they had women transport drivers. They had to pass a very rigid test; they had to learn how to change a wheel and all that. But they weren’t allowed to touch the aircraft, from what I can remember.

Life in the Air Force was getting up and making sure everything was done properly because if you didn’t you’d get confined to barracks. I went through to Point Cook to do four weeks and then we went to Ballarat to do the radio training. We were there for six months and that’s when we had to learn everything.

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4 The Women’s Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF), formed in late 1950, was the successor to the Second World War Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF). Women were employed in WRAAF in non-combat roles to free up male labour. The WRAAF was disbanded in 1977 as women were integrated in the regular Air Force. There is currently no published history of the WRAAF, but the history of the WAAAF is available from Joyce Thomson, *The WAAAF in Wartime Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991); Clare Stevenson and Honor Darling (eds), *The WAAAF Book* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984).
We had to learn to type and to do every single thing to go into the field. Five of us completed the whole thing. We women were not allowed to train with the men, who were training in a different building. We had a very strict, nasty fellow that was on top of us. He was just nasty, as if women were just awful, but we used to play tricks on him. We’d wait outside until the last minute and his face would be all red because he was coming in. Then we’d hide the papers so we couldn’t type, and silly things like that. There’d be no typing paper or we’d hide the thing across the top of the keys so you couldn’t see the keys. There was no such thing as electric typewriters. You had to use those old ones that you had to press and you had to memorise the keys, so we’d hide those things to cover the keys. He’d be just ropable; he’d just go ballistic. We put a pair of fluorescent women’s scanties up on the flagpole one Monday night and we had a full dress parade on the Tuesday morning. The poor orderly sergeant pulled the pants down to change the flag from the ensign to the full flag. He nearly freaked when the pants came down because we had all the bigwigs there on parade in Canberra. He just ripped the pants from the line and the boys got into trouble for putting the pants on the line – and we didn’t. We didn’t say a word! It was fun. And then the strangest part about it? After that, my sister went and married his son. She was in Canberra as a dental assistant and she met his son down there. Oh, it was really interesting.

At the barracks in Ballarat there were administration people too and I would say, in all, there would have been about 27 women and there would have been almost 1,000 men. The women all lived in the same quarters and we had a great big sergeant; she was big in size, as well as big in voice. She would make sure that we were all in bed every night. She just looked after her trainee WRAAFs as if we were her little chickens. It was really great fun, but she was very strict. She wouldn’t allow any rot or anything like that to go on. When we went to the mess to eat, the women had a separate area to eat in.

I remember one story – I hadn’t gotten my posting as yet and a friend of mine had been posted to somewhere in Melbourne, but she didn’t have a suitcase. She took my suitcase to take her clothes away and then she sent me a telegram to say that she’d put it on the train to come back. I was in the post office with this telegram and this fellow came in and said to me, ‘Oh, you’ve got a telegram. What’s it about?’ Now this was a training station and I thought, ‘Top Secret’. So I said, ‘Oh, it’s just to tell me that I’d won the Golden Casket in Queensland’. I think it was £15,000 at that time. He said, ‘What!’ I said, ‘Yes, I did’. Then I had to go off as we were having a top-secret viewing in a theatre of what not to do. They were looking for me all over the base. The Commanding Officer even had the press come out to interview me and when they found me, they said, ‘Quick, quick, quick, the Commanding Officer wants to see you’. I went down to the office and he said, ‘Come in, come in. You’ve won all this money’. I looked
at him and I said, ‘What?!’ He said, ‘Yes, you’ve won all this money’. I said, ‘No, I haven’t. I just told this private bloke that I’d won this money because he was sticky-beaking into my business’. He said, ‘Well, I better go and send the press away’. I said, ‘What? You’ve got the press out here?’ He said, ‘Yes, to take your photo and everything because you’ve won all this money’. I said, ‘Oh my goodness gracious. That’s ridiculous!’ I just shot out. When we went to tea that night I had many proposals of marriage; it was not funny. I was so embarrassed because it was just a lie. One fellow had his meal coming along and he was looking over at me and making eyes at me. We had big poles in the middle of the mess and he walked into the mess pole with all his soup and everything went everywhere. Oh, it was shocking. It was terrible. I felt terrible and they said, ‘Well, it serves you right for telling lies’. I said, ‘No. That fellow was sticky-beaking and this is supposed to be a top-secret area’. So yes, it was fun. But the funniest part about it was that I was the only dark person there.

After about six months in Ballarat, a recruit arrived who couldn’t sew. They gave her this pair of shorts that was too long for her legs, so she couldn’t run. Seeing as I could sew, I stitched them up quickly. One side was coming out and I was telling her it was coming out, but she was running along and crying because she got homesick so much. She said, ‘These shorts are coming undone’. I said, ‘Well, pull the whole lot down’. It was so funny. She was running because we had to get all these needles and then we had to go and do exercises; she was the person who had three left feet. I felt sorry for her. She was so uncoordinated, but she’s a lovely person. She married the cook from Canberra and then he joined the police force. Some of the WRAAF that I was in, there were women who married men from the Air Force.

The only time I went out with the men was when there were six or eight of us all going out together. I never, ever went with one of them by myself – only when they took me on a special coffee trip, because I would trust those people. I think I still have the thought of my mother shooting that door. The men always wanted to be seen with me in uniform in town. It was a thing with them. It was a little pet thing that I just went along with because I used to have my coffee and have a meal and go out for dinner. I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was something new for them. It was really strange, but I could get a nice meal in town without having the mess food. I was being treated differently not because of the race, but because of the colour. There was one fellow whose family had a cattle station or something. While I was in Canberra, he used to like to take me to the big top restaurants in there because his family had a cattle station. He’d just say, ‘Watch their faces. Watch their faces’. I’d get dressed up to the nines and the two of us would walk in and everyone would turn around and look. He said, ‘Oh geez, I just love that’. But they were really nice people.
The women were never an issue. In those days, you were not allowed to be in the Air Force as a lesbian. You had to get out straightaway and all that sort of thing. We did have a couple of them, which to me, now when I look back, we were really shocked when we found out. We went into this meeting. I wasn’t the only one thinking that we knew everything about sex, but we didn’t know that. We didn’t know about two men or two women. When we came up there was another girl from north Queensland who was with me and she said, ‘Do you understand what they’re talking about?’ I said, ‘I have no idea whatsoever’. She said, ‘Are they telling us that …?’ I said, ‘I don’t know’. Then I thought, ‘Well, how stupid’. This was just the two of us speaking after the meeting. She came to see me about 10 years ago and we sat and laughed about the silly things. We were so naive – and then there’s real little innocent. They were telling us about the different sexual things that you could catch. We never had a clue because she grew up further north than I was and I think they were more backward than we were! As far as those sorts of things go, it was just husband and wife, and that was it. There was nothing else, until we came across it in the thing afterwards. We’d meet up, probably in Melbourne or Sydney somewhere, and they’d say, ‘Oh, we’ve got two of those sorts of people in our place’. And they’d say, ‘Yeah, but they don’t touch you; do they?’ I said, ‘No. As far as I’m concerned, they’re quite nice people’. It was part of the training to get us to understand homosexuality, but we didn’t look at it as sexuality. We just looked at it as a thing that they were telling us about. It was really weird when I think of it now. I’d like to be a fly on the wall down in the barracks just to see – although maybe I wouldn’t like to. The men had that training too, in separate things. These are raw kids from the bush; I suppose the city kids probably knew all about it, although maybe they didn’t because everyone had a family life then, didn’t they? Families were together in those days. If you joined the Air Force, you probably came from a good family.

But in the Air Force, I thoroughly enjoyed myself. We’d drive from Canberra to Sydney and have a whole weekend in Sydney. We wouldn’t do the same things in Canberra as we did in Sydney because that was like home base and we didn’t want the Air Force there to know. No one in Sydney knew who we were once we got all dressed up and we sprayed our hair and we wore all these clothes. We went out and we walked into this place in Queanbeyan. They started playing the song ‘Beatnik Fly’. It’s all about people called hippies now. Well, that’s how we were all dressed – in all these sorts of clothes. This lady that was sitting at the next table to us said, ‘I cannot stand these university types!’ So the Air Force got away with something else. We used to have fun going out. We never, ever went to Duntroon, but to Fairbairn and the Navy base in Canberra we’d all go and have a party. The girls from Duntroon would go across to the Navy or come across over to our wet canteen and have a party there.
We were all friends together. We all played softball as the combined services. We played hockey, netball and that as combined services, but then we also still played those things against each other. The Army played the Navy and the Navy played the whatever, but then we'd combine all together. The thing was they'd choose a team out of there to play netball or hockey or softball or whatever. You had to have so many sports under your belt before you could get a blazer — and I got a blazer. I've still got the blazer at home, but it won't fit me now. I have fantastic memories from the sports because you made a lot of friends that were there for life. This lady came up to me in the street about 10 months ago and she said, 'Were you ever at Fairbairn Air Base?' I said, 'Yes'. She said, 'Oh, I was the Navy Madam'. Well, they were all madams. We didn't connect being a madam with anything rude because we were just so naive. There was one with really white hair who was the madam of all the Air Force in Australia. She was the 'head serang' and it was great because you'd never see her unless she was there at your air base to do an inspection.

I've only seen three of the crew that we were with in Ballarat since. I don't know who's died or who's still alive. I've seen a lot of the other ones who had other musterings, but we were the main ones. They used to call us the 'gaga' people because we couldn't talk about anything that we did at work. I remember when I had my first child, I went into hospital and this nurse came along and she said to me, 'Oh, you were in the Air Force, were you?' I said, 'Yes'. I was coming out of anaesthetic and she said, 'What did you do in the Air Force?' I said, 'Now, that would be telling'. I didn't say another thing about it and she said, 'My God. You must have been brainwashed'. I said, 'No, it's just preservation'.

I still can't say too much. Signals, yeah — I was in the Department of Air in Canberra. That is where I worked, taking and sending messages. The only other thing was if you didn't have your little card to leave, they'd ring the security. Like if you dropped it somewhere where you were working and you couldn't find it, they wouldn't let you out. You'd have to find your card before they'd let you out. That's how secretive it was. I think it's still like that. So when we met up with this friend of mine and the other fellow that was there that day, the three of us could talk freely. You see, when I got married, they sent me a telegram with all the coded messages and I had to decipher it to see what they said. Sort of silly things like that that you did that stayed within the signals area. It went to the people who you knew.

We were over in the Administrative Block in Canberra, opposite the Old Parliament House; the Army was there, the Air Force was next to it, and the Navy was over here and we were all in there. One time, one of the Army chaps decided to clean the machines and then he lit a cigarette afterwards. You were allowed to smoke inside then, and he lit a cigarette and everything just went up! Everything just went schwoom and this fire started. Then the Air Force got
in it and they knew we had to cover everything first and lock it down before the photographers came in. The Navy had to do the same. Then we went to help the Army to see what needed doing there because that was where the fire was, but we closed all of ours up first. We had to crawl on the floor to get out because the smoke was thick, and we helped other people when we were out there because the fire had gone through. It was myself and this girl that came from up further north who did all those things automatically. We just did it and when we got outside, everything was fine. We helped everyone else and when everything was all over, both of us fainted. Oh, he did get into trouble; he would have because that was the Army. The senior men went in and made sure that everything was closed up before the photographers got in to take photos of the fire. They put us in hospital for a week. It was terrible. It could have been worse, but everything was done so quickly between the three services.

It was predominantly men, but we women were getting paid less. There wasn’t anything we could do about it. Women do the same work as men; we had to do all the same things as the men. Everything; even when we moved across over to Russell Hill, next to Bugs Bunny. We used to call that big thing on the hill Bugs Bunny; that’s the American War Memorial. The two women – there was only myself and this other girl from further north – the two of us had our times off together. Women could only do daytime work, not night-time work as the men did, so we were safe in that way. We were lucky. The men were very good to us. They treated us like ladies. They didn’t treat us any different. They expected you to do exactly the same work as them. You had to pull your weight and everything, but when you were out you were ladies. You weren’t WRAAF women. I found that so nice because when you were doing something and you didn’t send a signal when you were supposed to, they would go mad on the men before they’d say, ‘Did you send … ?’ If you said, ‘Yes’, they’d say, ‘God! He’s an idiot’.

There was no gender discrimination at all except the lesser pay, yes. To me, there was a job to do and I did it – the same as before I was in the Air Force. If a job was given to you to do, you did it. We were asked by order and those were the things that I wished would come back now. Then there wouldn’t be so much of this thing that went on in the Navy with the women, because the men treated the women as ladies when they were out and they had respect for them.

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5 Mabel is alluding to the sexual abuse scandals that have engulfed the ADF and Australian Defence Force Academy since being broken in the media in April 2011. Since then, the ADF has conducted a series of reviews investigating abuse claims dating back to the 1940s. The most prominent reviews are Gary Rumble, Melanie McKean and Dennis Pearce: ‘Report of the Review of Allegations of Sexual and Other Abuse in Defence: Facing the Problems of the Past’, Canberra, 2011 (also known as the DLA Piper Review); Defence Abuse Response Taskforce, ‘Report on Abuse in Defence’, Canberra, 2014; Australian Human Rights Commission, ‘Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force’, vols 1 and 2, Canberra, 2011 and 2012, and follow-up audit reports.
as if they were their mothers. This is how I saw it then, but it was fun. It was fun because you’d come out and because there were only three girls in there; a female Army, a female Navy, and a female Air Force personnel. One was on the front desk; some of them were females and some of them were men. It sort of all depended, but they only had one female from each service on the desk. We went out many a time with the bigwigs with the big flash cars. You could get in the limousines because many a time they gave us a lift back to the base if it was raining, and the car pulled up right in front. It would be the Air Force ones that would give you a lift back and then they’d have to go back to their own base, but they were very nice to us.

The first time I ever saw someone being pulled by their feet off parade was in Canberra in front of the War Memorial. They had to go there and do a service and this fellow fainted; he was pulled off by his feet and Mr Menzies was there. I had quite a lot of encounters with politicians. They were all really nice people and none of them put you down. A lot of them liked to have a photo in there with the Air Vice Marshal Scherger. He’s got an Air Force base named after him now: Scherger Air Force Base in the Northern Territory. He was very nice.

There was no racism at all – only coming home on the airplane on a civilian flight out of uniform because not many dark people flew in those days. This air hostess came along and she said to me, ‘Would you like a magazine to look at?’ I’m a person with words and I said, ‘Yes, thank you very much. I’ll have something to read’. She just looked at me. That’s the only sort of thing because you’re out of uniform. They flew us home for free on the civilian planes in those days. I don’t think they do it now. Our stamps were 1p each or half a penny each to be posted, whereas everyone else had to pay 5p or 3p or something like that to post a letter. My mother said that when she was writing to us, she’d only pay a half a penny to send the letter because it was to an Air Force base.

There were no dark men in the Air Force that I ever saw, even though I’ve read later that these men had been pilots. None of them were from Canberra at all and there were none in Ballarat that I saw. I was still the only one because it was unheard of. It was just unheard of, but there were some Aboriginal and Islander women and men in the Army. The minute there was a dark person, they’d want to team you up with that dark person. It was really strange when I got engaged to my husband. Everything had to stop. I had to be moved out of that area altogether and I had to be put in as a telephonist so that I wouldn’t see any top-secret stuff going through. But anyway, that’s beside the point. I knew that that had to happen, but the thing was when my husband came down to

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6 For more information on racism in the armed forces during this era, see Noah Riseman, ‘Racism, Indigenous people and the Australian armed forces in the post–Second World War era’, History Australia 10, no. 2 (2013): 159–179.
visit – well, he was my fiancé then – the two of us went into the mess to have Christmas lunch because I couldn’t get off for Christmas. It was like we were a pair of people from outer space. Everybody wanted to meet him. I’d consented to marry this fellow and he was darker than I am – very dark.

He was a cane cutter from the Solomon Islands and he had no other bloods in him; Colin was descended from indentured labour. I met him in Rockhampton while I was on leave because his cousin was going with my sister. He said, ‘Oh, we’re going down fruit picking in Victoria, so I’ll come across and we’ll see each other in Melbourne’. I said, ‘Oh, rightyo’. So I went down to Melbourne and stayed at one of the barracks in Melbourne and we all went out together. When he came to pick me up, he asked me to go out by myself with him, even though he was with some friends from Rockhampton, and even though we had only just met in Rockhampton. I hadn’t gone out with him by myself or anything yet. He asked me would I like to go out for tea that night and I said, ‘Yes’. I think it was quite funny that he turned up to meet me and he had his shirt on inside out. Years later I said, ‘Why did you turn your shirt inside out?’ He said, ‘You frightened the daylights out of me’. I said, ‘Well, if I frightened the daylights out of you, why did you come and pick me up?’ He said, ‘No, I just wanted to get to know you better’. I said, ‘Oh, rightyo’.

We didn’t meet again until we got engaged. I went home on leave in September 1960 and he came down and we got engaged. We had a sleep-out on the veranda, but Mum and Dad couldn’t have him sleeping out on the veranda outside my door (we had French doors on our house near my room). They decided to put his bed into this other part of the house and they got the bed stuck in the door. They approved of him, yes. Dad approved of him. Then we didn’t see each other until he came down at Christmas time – that’s when we went into the mess. Then we didn’t see each other until the following September and in 1962 we got married. When we got engaged, all the people that he knew here in Mackay were questioned by the people from the Air Force. He’s from Mackay and for security reasons they went and questioned everyone: his friends. We got married in May 1962. We’d only been out with each other seven times. The seventh time was when we walked down the aisle.

When I was married in 1962 we had to get out of the Air Force. As soon as I became engaged, I had to switch to be a telephonist; that just entailed having the old things on your ears and you plugged all the things in. Well, we weren’t allowed to have the things on our ears because the Air Force thought that those things on our ears were bad for our brain because of the things going into your brain. You just had the speaker thing that hung on your neck and was here in front of you; you just plugged and plugged and did everything like that. There was none of these press buttons. It was manual work. I did that from the time that I was engaged until I was discharged. Then we moved to Mackay and I just
IN DEFENCE OF COUNTRY

stayed at home. Colin was a cane cutter and we lived on the cane farm that he worked on. I had my two children there, five years after we were married. Zelda was born in '67 and Gabrielle was born five years later in '72. My husband didn’t want me to go to work. I didn’t order him around. There was a strong thing that, ‘Everyone else’s wife is not working. You’re not going to work’.

He’s died now, so 43 years we were married. A lot of people thought that it wouldn’t last because I’m such a bossyboots and he was so quiet, but then they don’t know that his quietness hid something. I’m so loud and demanding and he’s one of those quiet ones that just goes and does things quietly – one of those really nice men that wouldn’t be nasty or anything. But he’d let it be known when he was not very pleased; he let you know quietly – not with words, but by actions. It’s strange because he’s one of those people that you’d look across the room and if he was ready to go, and I wasn’t, he’d stay – and then you’d know that you’ve stayed over. He’d do the same to me and just by look we’d know that each other wanted to go home. It was a really weird relationship that one.

Both our girls went to uni and they’re both teachers. I had praise about my eldest one. We had Sorry Day not so long ago and she gave a talk at the school about Sorry Day.7 One teacher told another teacher who told me that it was the nicest Sorry Day speech that she has ever heard anyone give. She said, ‘There was no blame. There was no putting down, nothing’. She said something about, ‘Everyone is sorry. We are not sorry for one race and they’re not sorry for us. Everyone is sorry. So, we’ll just leave it at that’ – or something to that effect. Like, today is the day that we should all say sorry for something that we have done nasty to someone else, not just for the Aboriginals to say nasty. She said, ‘And coming from a dark person, all the teachers just couldn’t believe it’. I said, ‘Well, that’s probably how she thinks’. She said, ‘Well, the teacher was very impressed and so was the whole school’. I said, ‘Oh, thank you very much’. Yes, when you hear things back like that about your children, you must have done something right, somewhere. I think their dad had the same idea when he heard good things.

When Gabrielle was going to school this job came up in a quarry. These friends of ours started this quarry and they wanted a Girl Friday, so I was Girl Friday. I’d run their kids to school, I’d work in the office; I’d do all the little bits and pieces, like going to pick up things that were needed. I became generally good friends with them. I am still good friends with their children to this day. That was the only time that I was allowed to go to work. My husband didn’t

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7 Sorry Day has been observed annually on 27 May since 1998, the first anniversary of the handing down of the Bringing Them Home inquiry into the Stolen Generations. It is a day for reflection about the historical mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
want me to apply for a job. That was just something that I did and from there I went on. When they left there, I didn’t like the new fellow. I used to do the weighbridge, and carry the explosives and everything from town. When they left, this other fellow came in as the boss of the place and he was a nasty man. He was really, really nasty, but I stayed there because he wanted a girl to train for the office. So I trained this girl. He was nasty to her, too. I left then, after she was trained, and she left too when I left. Then I went in and this job came up to go and teach the special needs kids in about 1980.

It might have been ‘79 or something and then this job came up. You didn’t have to have things in those days to say you’d been to university or anything like that, so I got this job teaching special needs kids. They went from small to 18 years old and then they had to leave. That was in a very special needs school; they had the slow children who could read, but they were slow readers. There were some very disabled ones there also. I did that for 21 years until they put all the special needs children into mainstream schools; I forget which year that was. That was the saddest day for those children, as well as for the teachers, because they put them in there and they were like kids in a zoo. The other kids who went to school were poking fun at them in the bigger schools. It was really sad. It’s a bit better now, but the teachers in those high schools were not trained to be special needs teachers. That was one of the things that I think the government should have looked at before they moved them across. They just moved them across one Christmas holidays and just moved them over. I went and taught at the high schools then with the special needs kids. I taught them sewing, science, maths, English, and reading. I was like a personal aide to them in the mainstream schools. Then they gave me 10 or 12 kids to teach myself. I was so used to teaching them that they put them all together in my class and I had to take them to do all their work and everything. Those kids still remember me to this day. But, that was my job and I did it to the best of my ability. Even now, I get asked to go back and teach them, but that’s only on a voluntary basis. To me, that was lovely.

Then I just left there and then I went to TAFE. After all this, I finished teaching one Friday afternoon and Monday morning I started at TAFE as a sewing, cooking and English teacher. I did that for seven years and then I decided I’d retire. I think I was 65, 66 years old. My husband was working at TAFE then because I told him that he couldn’t be pushing these great big cane bins all his life. He got a job there as a cleaner and I said to him, ‘Look, just looking at your report cards, you shouldn’t be doing that. You’ve got a few more brains than that’. So he went there as a cleaner and learned the computers.

It was in 1967 when the Aboriginals had the Referendum; that was the year my first child was born. Before then, I was fighting for that. I signed a lot of papers in my time. I didn’t march or anything, but I acknowledged that I wanted
change for the Aboriginal people, like voting and things like that. That’s what I wanted and I made people aware of it. Some people in Mackay here, and my husband also, didn’t know what I was talking about. For instance, my sister also had a son in 1967 and she was down in Sydney in the hospital. By this time, she was a triple certificate nursing sister, and it was very bad down there in Sydney. They put her into this little back room out the back where all the rooms and everything were. They’d go out there and they’d talk about all these patients and everything; she’d know what they were talking about. So she said to her husband, who was a white person, ‘Would you like to bring me in my certificates, please?’ He said, ‘Yes, rightyo. What, what do you want them for?’ She said, ‘Just bring them in, please’. She set them all up on her desk and the nurses came in, then the doctor came in and they all had a look. They moved her directly from there into another room that was much nicer because they realised that she could understand everything that they were talking about because she was a triple certificate sister. She’d done midwifery and general nursing, and those sorts of things in the operating theatre. That was her part with the racism – sort of subtle racism.

I still say that subtle racism continues here in Mackay. It’s the little subtle things, like I went to the bank just after I was married. I went into this branch and the girl behind the counter kept serving all the white people before she served me. When I went up to the desk to wait for her to serve me, she’d serve the next person who came in. I just said to this other lady, ‘Excuse me? Is this the manager’s office? Just here?’ She said, ‘Yes’. So I just walked in. I pushed the door open and I said, ‘Excuse me, don’t you serve dark people in this bank?’ He said, ‘What?’ I said, ‘I’ve been waiting out there for almost an hour or more to be served and the girl there is serving every other person who is white before me’. So he came out. At that time, I had little jobs that I did. I was cleaning in the bank and saving money because my daughter had just been born. I was saving money to put away for her education. The thing is, he came out and he said, ‘Oh, it can’t be’. I said, ‘Well, just watch’. So I went back out and stood there. He was watching as she served people before she served me. He walked out and told her to pack her things; she had to now go because he didn’t want that sort of thing causing racism in his bank. She looked at me and she started crying because I’d reported her – but she wouldn’t serve me. She wouldn’t even listen to me when I said that I was next. I felt sorry for her, but I’m hoping that it taught her a lesson. That’s all I can say about that. That’s the first lot of racism I’d seen here in Mackay, but after that I didn’t have any. Oh well, I can’t help it. I was born black. I can’t help that.

When I first went to teach at the high schools, this Year 8 boy came in and he looked at me and said, ‘I just can’t stand blackfellas’. I just looked at him and I said, ‘That’s your problem, not mine’. After that, I took him right through
school. He was one of the special needs kids that couldn’t read properly and I took him right through grade 10 or grade 11 and did all the things with him. I taught him to spell, taught him to do his homework, taught him to write essays and do all those things. I’d completely forgotten about him after he left school, and one day I was waiting for my husband at TAFE and I saw him and he asked me if I came there every day. I said, ‘Yes. I come to wait for my husband’. About a week later he bought me a great big bunch of flowers with chocolates and everything in it and he said, ‘If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Thank you very much’. He was an only child. I always say that racism is learnt; it’s learnt from home or wherever it’s learnt from. I’ve seen him since and he came and introduced me to his wife and his children. You’re just thankful that I wasn’t nasty back to him because I could have been. I could have reported him and he would have been in big trouble, maybe. Yeah, but that’s a bit of racism that I got from the school kids. The only other time was when my children went to the primary school and when they went to high school. My daughter said to this girl, ‘Oh, have you seen so-and-so?’ – they were looking for this girl. And this girl just turned around and looked at her and said, ‘Well, is she black or is she white?’ My daughter was shocked. She said, ‘Mum, I never thought of people either black or white.’ She said, ‘They just had a name and that’s their name’. I said, ‘Well, there are all kinds to make the world’.

I became active in the schools, fighting for the Aboriginal kids in the schools. Like a lot of schools, they decided they’d have all the Aboriginal kids there because the Aboriginal kids got money to go to school. That went to do projects for them, but a lot of the schools kept the money and spread it across the schools, which I didn’t like. A lot of the parents were not really good money managers. I’m not trying to put them down or anything; I’m saying a truth. There were a lot of white people that were not good money managers, too. The Aboriginals were more or less brought to the fore, to show them up. At the special school, I took the money from the kids and put it into a trust fund in the bank, so that when they wanted to go away on trips they could go on trips. We had to go through all the proper channels to do this, but they had their own sleeping bags, they had their swimming togs, they had their towels, they had everything. We kept it there at the special school so that when things came up that they had to go on, we had the things there and they could go and we paid their fare. We paid everything. At the end of the year, they could have that money back. They had money to spend at Christmas, whether Mum got it or Dad got it or whomever, but that was their money and we gave it back to them. We’d start again the next year. I was called horrible names by the dark people because I did this to them. Because see, Mum or Dad was taking the money and going to put it on the pokies or something. I knew that, so I just decided to do it this way, so as those kids have something. It was tough love. That’s because I wanted them to have the same opportunities that I had. My parents never held back on anything.
When it was my mother's turn to make a cake to raise money for our hockey association, she'd make the cake. She wouldn't come, so we'd take the cake and raffle the cake. She used to make beautiful sponge cakes and everyone — even from the other clubs — would come and want to buy her sponge or her ticket in the raffle. I wanted the kids to have the same opportunity — especially the dark kids that were handicapped because they had a harder job to hoe.

We sent our children into a town school, a big school that had 500 or 600 children, rather than send them to the school down the road that had 20 kids or so. We could have sent them down there, but when they went to high school, they would find it very tough because they were nurtured there in the small school. My husband said, 'Oh, you're mad! I went to the same school, you know?' I said, 'No'. In this day and age, they have one mark against them before they even start and that's being black, but they can't deny you your brains. If you've got your brains, you're up there with the best of them. If you can use your brains to the best of your ability, you go for it! It doesn't matter what colour you are or anything. I think that's what got me into the Air Force in the first place — because this fellow had told me that I had enough brains to get in. Well, that's why we sent our children into a big school to start off with. Still, when my daughters went to university, they said that I had kept them wrapped in cotton wool, because going to a big town was entirely different than staying here in Mackay.

I would like to have one of my children join the Air Force. The youngest one went and did Air Cadets for about six years and she became pretty high in the Air Cadets. When it was the last year she wanted to join the Air Force. She went from here to Townsville to do the final Air Cadets. She went up to the Air Force base in Garbutt in Townsville and she passed everything, but they wouldn't let her join because she was only 16. She said, 'Well, I'm the same person as what I'll be when I'm 18'. Still, they wouldn't let her join. She said, 'Well, they can stick it', and just walked away and left it. She finished and she went down and did science at the university in Brisbane and became a teacher.

The Aboriginal kids these days don't know the fights that the dark people went through to get them to where they are now. They had Sorry Day. They have Reconciliation and all this sort of business. I even fought for the Reconciliation for the South Sea Islanders and things like that. I'm one of those people that doesn't like being at the forefront. I like to be just doing things and helping them raise some money so as the ones who were the leaders can go and do it. I'm really like that. The protest that I had when they put out the bicentenary book in 1988 is that there's not one mention of Aboriginals in the diary book. The only person that's mentioned that's black was a fellow that came out on a boat. He was an American Negro. I've kept the book, just so I could see the racism that went on and that's what I didn't like. Otherwise, I went and did
my voting. I was a quiet protester. That’s what I was because my husband was a Solomon Islander and he didn’t like those things. But myself, with my father being Aboriginal and South Sea, I had to stand for my rights. I quietly did it, without making a big show.

My one scream was when [Queensland Premier] Anna Bligh gave Curtis Island to the mining companies and they said that the Aboriginals and the companies have all come into an agreement. I thought to myself, ‘Well, I never saw any bill of sale for that land. There is no bill of sale, is there?’ They’re frightened to do what the Americans have done. They’ve given their [Native American] land back with an apology and that is their land, whereas the Aboriginals have to sign what they call Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs).8 It’s not even worth the paper that it’s on because once that’s been signed, the mining companies just move in and take it. It is ridiculous. The sooner there’s a fight for that, I will march for that. I don’t want these mining companies in here because they are ruining the land of the Aboriginals. I would fight against them because I’m a director with the Port Curtis Coral Coast Corporation. I went to this meeting and I asked the LNG companies, ‘Now, excuse me. How much will it be making in approximately a month?’ They were giving us $2 million for down in Gladstone as a one-off thing and they would make $16 billion a month. They’re raping our country and I told that man that was sitting there, ‘Do you mean to tell me that you’re paying us $2 million? You’re raping our country and you’re taking $16 billion out?’ I said:

For that money, I would like to see hospitals, schools, accommodation and everything like that in the areas where you are for elderly people, for homeless, for all the Australian people. It may be that we have to sign the ILUAs, but that land is used also by white people, Chinese, whatever. We’re all Australians, and you’re here working for this great big conglomerate and taking our money, our resources and selling it overseas and giving us peanuts. We’re not monkeys.

I sat down and the whole hall of about 200 people just screamed. I felt so embarrassed, but I was so angry at the time that this LNG Company was doing this.

The whole meeting was filled up with Aboriginals as well as native title people, South Queensland Native Title. Now, why did we have to have native title land use? Why? We can’t own it. It just annoyed me. It’s all very good for how they go on, but that’s something I will fight for. If I have to get up and go and lead someone now, I would do that. I’m just so passionate about it now. I was quietly involved on a personal level in native title in the 1990s. I was with their cause, but I didn’t march or become seen. I made sure that I became involved. I knew

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8 ILUAs were an initiative of the Howard Government since amendments to the Native Title Act in 1998. For more information, see www.nntt.gov.au/ILUAs/Pages/default.aspx.
[Eddie Koiki] Mabo; I knew his wife and I gave them my support for all that [Mabo native title case]. Even though my husband and I have different ideas of it, I gave my support. In the end, my husband came around to seeing what I was pushing for. I was pushing for land rights, for recognition. After Mabo won recognition, I became more active after that.9

Otherwise, my husband and I were very vocal in the South Sea Islanders organisations, but we didn’t go and do the things. There were three ladies and two men that were the ones in the forefront. We supported them. We raised money. We did all the things for them. This would be in the ’80s and ’90s. It might have been the end of the ’70s. To this day, I am still active in that. I go off to things that my daughters do. They’re in the two camps; they go for the South Sea Islanders as well as the Aboriginals. There’s no one thing for better or for worse. But they lean more towards the Aboriginal rights because they think that the South Sea Islanders got up and they did things. They moved forward quicker because they were made to talk. They brought them over here; they had nowhere else to go, so therefore they were kept down. They had to learn English quicker than the Aboriginals were. The Aboriginals had run away into the bush. The South Sea Islanders had nowhere to run, so that’s why they were kept down. They were downtrodden. We built a grass hut out here with all the artefacts in it. We put in all the artefacts for the South Sea Islanders. I tried to help with the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, but they decided that they were doing it their way. They classed me as a South Sea Islander because I’m married to a Solomon Islander. I don’t mind that, but anywhere I can help, I help.

I’ve only sat on the Murri Court as an Elder twice.10 In town here, when the young children go in you don’t treat them with kid gloves because they’re streetwise. You don’t hold their parents up as an example of what they should do. But then Aboriginal people didn’t like me telling them that because they see me as a South Sea Islander. Those are the little things that I wish I could overcome in their minds. I said what I wanted to say to those children and the other people didn’t like it. The Aboriginals didn’t like it at all. I’d been up to Townsville to the juvenile courts up there. One little boy came over and he said, ‘Can I call you Granny?’ I said, ‘You may call me Granny’, and he came

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9  The 1992 Mabo ruling established native title rights in Australia, which are particular types of rights over land by virtue of traditional occupation since before colonisation. For more information about the Mabo ruling and developments to native title since 1992, see Lisa Strelein, Compromised Jurisprudence: Native Title Cases since Mabo, 2nd ed. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009).

and snuggled up. He was just 10 years old. It was really, really sad, because that boy came from Doomadgee and that’s way up in the Gulf. I wanted to know why was this 10-year-old boy in gaol. What bad thing could a 10-year-old boy do? Why did the judge send him to gaol? Why didn’t they take him away from wherever he was there and put him into foster care in another town somewhere? Or something like that? Because they’d taken him from all loving kindness and all that is 10 years old. But that’s not for me to decide. Those people that are the great big Aboriginal activists who are lobbying the government for all this money and land, and fighting all the wild rivers or whatever it is, they should go in there and fight for those kids and find out the reason why those kids are in there. They say they want to save the children. Well, why not look in the gaols for the 10-year-old and the 12-year-old? That’s my fight, anyway.

The mothers and fathers of the South Sea Islander children look after them, but they’re mixing with the wrong type of kids through the courts. There are a lot of South Sea Island kids going through the courts now as adults. You see very few of them going through as children. You see them going through as adults, like 19 or 20-year-olds. Whether they’re nine years old or 29 years old, they all need love and acceptance. If you don’t give those people that, they’re going to go and do wrong things again, no matter whether you’re black or white. You have to have acceptance by society.

I remember one time that these skinheads were walking down the street and my youngest daughter said, ‘Mum, quick. Get in the car. These are skinheads and they don’t like black people’. I looked at these boys walking down and I said, ‘All those boys, they can’t read and write. And the whole thing is, they join together as a group and that’s what they do because they can’t read and write. All they can do is go and cause havoc everywhere’. They walked past and they said, ‘Oh, hello, Mrs Quakawoot. How are you today?’ My daughter looked at me and she said, ‘Mum!’ I said, ‘They all went to special school, darling’. It’s like that was because they didn’t have anyone to really continue that niceness to them. They’d learn a bit of school and then they’d get moved into another class. That’s why I’m teaching reading and writing skills to kids at home now. So that when they get into school, they don’t have to sit there at high school and think, ‘What is the teacher talking about?’ Like me with that woman who was giving this sexual talk about lesbians; at least they’ll know what the teacher is on about – not that I teach them about lesbians! I want them to know the reading and the writing of things because no matter what – even if you are good at maths – you still have to read something to learn about that math or that sum.

I’m currently doing this Certificate IV in Business and Governance. I want to ask if I can go into the Indigenous communities to find all the adult people who are illiterate and if I can set up classes in those communities so long as they pay my fare and my accommodation. I don’t care if I don’t get a wage because I get the
pension. I would go into those areas and I would teach them. These are things that Aboriginal leaders should be looking at: teaching adult literacy into these places so as those mothers and fathers can understand what their children are learning. If the mothers and fathers don’t know, they can’t teach the kids. They have most of the waking days at school. If it isn’t in them at home, they won’t learn it. This is where I see the government falling down. We’re going to have a lot of illiterate people. Like when you get kids going to join the Army now, they can’t spell or they can’t do anything like that. How are they going to read signals and signs and all that? These are things that I believe in for this country: black, white, red, yellow or what.

I started the cups of tea here in Mackay at the courthouse. It started when I went to court to give evidence once. It was the first time I’d ever been in a courthouse and this white lady was there with only thongs on. It was a cold July morning. She was there with her two small children and she did not have enough money to buy them a drink and the fountain was broken and the kids were hungry. I didn’t interfere, but I went home and rang the mayor. I rang the members for parliament, both federal and state. I told them, ‘Okay, they say that this is a beautiful town, but this is what happens behind the scenes’. I said, ‘Now, you know who I am, both of you. I’m Mabel Quakawoot. I want something to be done about this. I would like to have a room at the courthouse where these people go. I would like to have a room there that they could have a cup of tea and a couple of biscuits and sit down and have a chat if they want to’. Then these other two goody-goody women decided that I was black and I couldn’t do it, so I let them take it. We had to wait six years and nothing was done until Tim Mulherin, the member for here, rang me and said, ‘Mabel, whatever happened to that cup of tea thing?’ I said, ‘Well, these two ladies were going to do it’. He said, ‘Well, they haven’t done a single thing. Do you still want to run with it?’ I said, ‘Yes’. So he then got a room at the courthouse for me and put a table, a fridge, and a nice lounge and somewhere they could sit. Now we have cups of tea. I put my face in the paper pretending to have a cup of tea. I got many people to come and help, but I only wanted them for Wednesdays, as that was Children’s Court days, and the thing was up and running. When we first started it, everyone put in whatever they could, like $5 or $10 or $20 or something, so we could provide the first lot of biscuits and tea and coffee and everything. We did that. It’s been going for four years. We have not had to put in another cent because we’ve put a donation tin there. When they have a cup of coffee, they could donate. See, with things like that you look after the whole community, not just the black community or the white community.
There hasn’t been any movement for an apology to the South Sea Islander community. They had Reconciliation and that was only down in Brisbane. There’s never been anything else from the Federal Government. Yes, there have been pushes for something, but they don’t get anywhere. The feeling is, ‘We’ve apologised enough’. I just think that everyone that you meet doesn’t understand the South Sea Island thing. They’re so surprised because everyone thinks you’re either Torres Strait Islander because of your hair, or Aboriginal if the hair was straighter. I always say, ‘Our ancestors were brought over here as indentured labourers, a fancy name for slaves’. This is how I knew it, but there’s never been any push. There have been little pockets here and they put things up to say: ‘For the South Sea Islanders’, but nothing big like the apology to the Stolen Generations was. I wanted to build a great big boat and put a thing down in a hole that you could go down in and show how they were bought here to Australia. But there are some South Sea Islanders that say that I’m Aboriginal. I’m both. That Independent MP Rob Oakeshott, he just couldn’t believe that I’m carrying around all this stuff to do with all these things in my head. He said, ‘Why don’t you write a book?’ I said, ‘I have started writing a book. It’s about the two families and I’m going through each child in those families. It’s a long story and I hope it’s not published until after I’m dead, so they can’t sue me’.

I used to march every year at Anzac Day, but not now because I can’t walk very far. I’m also involved in the Brisbane WRAAF organisation. They don’t have it here in Mackay and the RSL here in Mackay has closed. They had the Air Force personnel league or whatever they call it here in Mackay, but I didn’t join, because they were all men. I started the first Returned Servicewomen’s League in Mackay in about 1978. We just raise money and give things to different ones. Every month, everyone takes an item to be raffled, and we buy these cent sale tickets. The money that we raise with the cent sale things, they give that money to a needy cause. It could be anything. And that’s what we do with our little bits of money. There are about 37 of us altogether and still growing. We go and we have a meeting once a month and we do all these things. I haven’t been to a meeting for ages now because I do religious education at the schools and the days that they have the meetings are the days that I have to go to religious education. But I started it up; I pushed forward for it. We have our meetings and everything in the RSL place, but it’s not all Air Force; it’s all services.

My brother and my sister served in the armed forces as well. My brother did two tours over in Vietnam with the Army and my sister was in the Air Force in Penrith, so neither of us went overseas. My sister was in the same mustering as I was and I said, ‘How did you get in?’ She said, ‘They put me in there because of you’. I said, ‘Oh, that’s a bit of a thing. They shouldn’t have put you in there. Why didn’t you get in on your own steam like I had to?’ She said, ‘Well, I did all right’. My sister did the same mustering, but she didn’t get sent to the Department of Air. One day we were talking and I said to her, ‘Oh, it’s a wonder they didn’t send you to the Department of Air’. She said, ‘No, I didn’t have as many brains as you, you stupid thing!’ It was just a little banter thing because I got sent to the Department of Air because that was the echelon of the Air Force. But as for my brother, he was a train driver and he almost got to the stage where he could be a stationmaster and he had to sit for this exam. I think that he always wanted to go into the Army, but he never let anyone know, until I went into the Air Force. Then he came home with all the papers and he put them on the table and said, ‘Well, there you are, Dad. If you want to go and be a stationmaster, there’s all the papers. You fill them in and you go to be stationmaster. I’m off to join the Army’. My father had pushed him into going on the railway and he was so disappointed when he went in and joined the Army. He did two tours over there. He was a demolition expert. They were first in and last to leave, setting bombs and letting bombs go and whatever they had to do.

Being South Sea Islander and Aboriginal, I was never discriminated against by the mainstream RSL, but I tell you what happened to my brother. He came out here in 1967 when he came back from Vietnam and he went into the RSL here in Mackay to have a beer. They told him they couldn’t serve him and his three mates. He said he’d been to war and they said they didn’t recognise the Vietnam War. As a matter of fact, it has since become quite embarrassing because I’m the only dark person that’s been in the services here in Mackay and it’s a thing like you’re in a fish bowl. Everyone wants to know you and say, ‘Oh, yes. Well, she was in the Air Force and she was … ’. It becomes quite embarrassing, so I very seldom say it.

Out at the hut here in Mackay there is a stone there on the ground with a plaque that has all the South Sea Islanders who have served in all the wars. They’re all there. It was sitting there for years and no one did anything, so I then started having an Anzac parade out there. It was a separate parade, but we got the mayor and the two members of parliament to come out there and give a speech. We kept that going and then, like all organisations, someone else takes over and they let it lapse. At every one of them, I had to speak. There were quite a few Vietnam vets that have come. There’s one that I know of who went up when they had to roll the marbles and pick the names out to go to National Service.
They were sent over there and one of them died over there. That was a sad thing, but no one will get up and say this story or when he joined; they just say that he was killed in service. I’d like them to say how and when they joined or that he wasn’t in the regular Army. It’s up to their family to say that.

There’s a thing for the Vietnam vets down near the airport and the library in there that is named after that young boy that went over there. They called it the Bobongie Memorial and the library [after Private Andy Bobongie]. Things like that have come through, and I’d like for them to get up, but they don’t want to get up. I think they say, ‘Oh, there’s Mabel spouting again’. If I say so, they get up and do it, but people don’t know what they’re worth. They’re so shy to get up, but anyway that’s them. They attend all these things, which is good. So, what happened last year, I was so sad that of all the people who went up to lay wreaths, not one of them went up to lay a wreath for the South Sea Islanders or the Indigenous. I’m going to bring it up at the next meeting because there wasn’t a wreath laid for the Indigenous soldiers who were killed in battle. That was the big RSL march in the streets when they go and put all the wreaths around the cenotaph. I want to see one of the leaders from the Aboriginal community and one from the South Sea Islander community to go up.

I think that the majority of South Sea Islanders and Aboriginals are very proud that they served their country. I would tell them (especially the young children) to do their lessons very well because in this day and age to go into the Army, Air Force and Navy, you can learn a trade and you can get paid as you’re learning the trade. I would tell the mothers and fathers to do all they can to get them into that because we are a minority and if we don’t stand up for ourselves, no one else is going to stand up.

I think we should bring back National Service for the girls and the boys. We have to pick our young ones up and they have to go and join something like that which has discipline and respect. But then, do the people in the armies – the captains and the WODs [warrant officers disciplinary] and all those sort of people – do they want to have that problem on their slate? That they’ve got all these people who are layabouts, cheeky, disrespectful? Do they want to try and knock that out of them? This is the saddest part because you see the young children nowadays – even in grades 5, 6, 7 – they are so disrespectful to everything. So when they get to 16, 17, if you made it compulsory to join the services and have two years in there, would they come out different people or would you be making them nastier than they are when they went in? These are things, but then I think that the government has to try something so that we don’t have all these drug addicts with nothing to do, and that’s what happens.
with this. They have all this sadness and they have to go and have psychiatrists, so why can’t we get them to join the services to do that or something? I think that we should find out some way to make sure that our children are not wasted; not become illiterates. Even as old as I am, if they wanted me to go back and teach the children to read and write, and help out, I would. I would go back and do it at the drop of a hat because there are too many illiterate youngsters around. They can’t spell properly and mainly most things now are just ticking boxes. Some of them can’t read what has to be ticked in the boxes. So I really think the government should look at taking those children to have a gap year or two gap years. Maybe they want to join, but to have two gap years from, say, 16 to 18. Then they can go and join, go into the university, or something like that so as they’re prepared to go into the university to then administer to the rest of Australia. This is how I see it; we’ve got to get them when they’re young. Maybe because I enjoyed myself so much in the Air Force, I just think that we should do something like that.

On reflection, the military is a good thing to join. Not that you could get a good job later on, but it is something that never leaves you. I think you become more proud of your country joining the services than you do if you don’t join. You’re respected when people know that you’ve joined the services. I had dared to go and join the Air Force 50 years ago. I can see in people’s minds when they find out that I was a black person in the Air Force, and a woman at that. One person said to me years ago, ‘You know, the Air Force is a Menzies’ Blue Orchids. They didn’t have very many black people in there, but you joined and you’re a woman, with it, into the bargain’. I said, ‘Well, I didn’t find that strange. It was just me. You know, I don’t look down and say, “Oh, I’m black”’. She said, ‘Oh, well, it is different. It’s different to know that someone has broken that barrier’. You don’t think of things like that. To me, that’s not a barrier; that’s just something I wanted to do. But she looked at it as a barrier that I’d broken down.
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.