Commemorating Indigenous Service

John Schnaars

John Schnaars has been at the forefront of efforts to recognise and commemorate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service. He is the founder of the Perth-based organisation Honouring Indigenous War Graves. The non-profit organisation arranges headstones for the gravesites of deceased Indigenous veterans. John and the other group members perform a small, moving ceremony at the gravesites to mark the placing of the headstones. John Schnaars is a Vietnam veteran himself, and what makes his story quite interesting is that he volunteered for National Service even though it was not compulsory for Aboriginal people. John’s story therefore provides insights not only into the experiences of Aboriginal Vietnam veterans, but also the fights for justice for Indigenous ex-service personnel.

I was born at King Edward Hospital in Subiaco in 1946. We were living in North Perth at the time and then we left North Perth and went to a place called Kwolyin, which is up in the Wheatbelt area. We went from there to Number Five Pumping Station [Yerbillon] where Dad was a truck driver carting wood for

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In Defence of Country

the pumping station about 280 kms away. Then he got a job as a truck driver on
the Rabbit-Proof Fence at Burracoppin when I was about five, and that’s where I
started my school.

One experience early in my life still sticks. There was this Aboriginal family at
Burracoppin and his father had served during the Second World War. I think I
was five; children used to be coming to school, but one day you’re playing
with them, the next they’re not there anymore. One of the children asked the
teacher, ‘Where are the children?’ She said, ‘The government came and took
them away to put them in a home’. He was working on the railways at the time
and he served Australia and that was the thanks he got – he had his children
taken away. So from that day on, that affected me, because every time I saw
a vehicle coming towards that school that looked official, I was planning my
escape. No one was going to take me. I was planning, checked the windows to
see if they were open. I had about five or six places around Burracoppin where
I knew I could hide out and no one would find me.

I had my exit strategy all worked out even at that young age. We lived on the
other side of the railway lines and in the middle were the wheat silos. If we
were going home for lunch during the day and I saw a vehicle at my place that
I didn’t know who it belonged to, I wouldn’t go home for lunch. I’d just tell my
sisters I’m not hungry, I’m not going home and if it was after school and we
were going home and saw a car there I didn’t know, I wouldn’t go home. I’d play
in the bush until my sisters came looking for me. It wasn’t till about four years
ago that I told my sister what that was all about. She used to say, ‘I often used to
wonder why you’d never come home and we had to come looking for you’. That
more or less stayed with me right through until I left high school – the fear of
these government people coming to take you away. I used to lie awake at nights
worrying if these people were going to come and take us through the night.
It really affected me immensely. For a bloke like John Howard to say that it only
affected those that were taken away, he’s got no idea what he’s talking about.
I know for a fact it affected other people too, and I was one of them. I’m not
sure why my family wasn’t targeted. A lot of people probably thought Dad was
white, but he had Aboriginal blood. His skin was really fair. Mum was fairly
dark-skinned so I’ve got no idea how we were not singled out. Dad served in
the Second World War as well, same as this other bloke. I know that if anybody
would have tried to take us away, there’d have been a lot of fur flying, because
Mum and Dad wouldn’t have let that happen. There’d have been hell to pay.
All these years later, I’m still having trouble sleeping.

Mum probably more so than Dad had a strong sense of Aboriginality. Dad’s
mother was from an Aboriginal family. On Mum’s side, our great-great-
grandmother was old Grannie Nelson, Ada Foss, and then my grandmother
was a very strict lady; if you stepped out of line, she put you back in line.
Our grandfather died, leaving Nanna Holland with 11 or 12 children to bring up on her own. In the whole of their working lives, not one of those uncles or aunties I could ever remember being on the dole. They all worked right through their lives because of the strict way she brought them up. When farmers around the district of Kwolyin would go on holidays, they’d get my grandmother to go and look after their sheep, cattle, chooks, and water and do their gardens because she was that reliable. They knew that if they left her to do it, it would be done. Many people had total respect for her. Mum was much the same as Nanna; if you done the right thing you were right, but if you stepped out of line … . The only time Dad would give you a cut with a bloody strap was if you done something wrong. Then, after he gave you a couple of cuts with a garden hose, you didn’t do it wrong again. You made sure you woke up.

I think Mum would have been about the eldest, or second eldest. Mum worked; all the aunties all worked. A lot of the time it was kitchen hands or cooks at the hotel there in Kwolyin. But they were all taught to work when you left school. The uncles all worked as shearers, wool classifiers, farm hands, etc. It was after the Second World War that Mum and Dad met because Dad had already been married before the war. He had four children, then he went away and that wife shot through with somebody else. Dad’s father wouldn’t let her take the kids so he kept the kids at his place until Dad came home. Dad married Mum and then Mum had nine. All up they had a baker’s dozen between them. With Dad’s first marriage, there were three boys and a girl and then with the second marriage, my sister Marilyn was the eldest, then there was myself, my other sister, then a brother, then another sister, then a brother and another sister and then two brothers.

Dad never really spoke much about why he enlisted. He told us things that happened while he was over there. One of the things he used to relate to us were the reasons why we were born. We’d ask him, ‘Why?’ He was in the artillery in El Alamein; he was driving the ammunition truck and it was his birthday. This Major Day who was in charge of them, they used to call him Major Apple a Day. One of the guys told old Major Day that it was Snowie’s birthday. So old Major Day said, ‘Snowie, here’s half a bottle of whisky for your birthday’. In the night-time Dad used to lay the tailgate down on the truck and put his swag on that, but this evening comes and he puts the tailgate down and puts his swag on it. Then he thought, ‘I’ll go and have a couple of drinks of this whisky with my mates in the trenches’. He done that and while they were down there, they got bombarded and the truck was blown to smithereens. So he said we owe our lives to Major Day and half a bottle of whisky. Dad served mainly over in the Middle East. He was one of the last four to be wounded at the Battle of
El Alamein. He had this big shrapnel wound across his shoulder and a bit higher up it probably would have taken his head off. He came home and that was the good thing.

In terms of racism, I don’t think anybody would have been game to say anything about it to Dad. The old man, he knew how to handle himself and I don’t think there would have been too many able to take him to town, that’s for sure. After the war, this Jewish bloke wanted to take him to America to have a shot at the heavyweight title. That’s how well he knew how to handle himself. He also did bike riding and played football. I was at Mum’s youngest brother’s 70th birthday and Ken Langdon and Don Langdon were there. They used to play football years ago and I think it was Ken’s son who used to play for the West Coast Eagles. As soon as someone said, ‘Oh, Don, this is Snowie Schnaar’s son’, he said, ‘I remember him. I can tell you some stories about him when he was playing football’. I said, ‘Oh what’s one of them?’ He said:

One day it was raining a lot and it was at Bruce Rock. The umpires were from Bruce Rock, and my old man didn’t like one fella too much so he knocked him arse over turkey. His head landed in this puddle of water and he put his foot on his head and just kept pushing it under. The umpire yelled out, ‘Snowie, for Christ’s sake take your foot off his head; you’ll drown the poor bastard’.

After the war Dad belonged to the Buffalos at Merredin. I don’t think he ever joined the RSL; I’m not sure.

Every Christmas we used to travel from Burracoppin to Kwolyin, which was a fair way when you had old vehicles. The whole extended family got together and they’d book the hall at Kwolyin for that Christmas night. The men would put up a Christmas tree; they’d rig someone up to be Father Christmas and all the kids would get some sort of present. That was amazing. I used to really look forward to that every Christmas and I used to look forward to my grandmother’s Christmas puddings. She used to make them in old flour sacks and boil them in the copper outside. Those Christmas puddings were something to look forward to – absolutely beautiful, but nobody seems to make them anymore. We were a very close family. That’s one of the things that helped me when I came back from Vietnam. A lot of blokes when they came back from Vietnam didn’t get that same support and many of them committed suicide. I was lucky I had a lot of family support, which is what you need when you come back from places like that.

I started school at Burracoppin; back in them days it was called Infants. The first time in school you had one room up to year three and I think then you went into the next room until the last year you were there. In the last years at primary school in Burracoppin I used to get paid five shillings a fortnight to clean the toilets on the weekends. That was good money. You could get a lot of ice creams
and go to the movies and all of that. It was a pretty shitty job but you just got in and done it and that was it; once it was done, it was done. You done it on a Saturday or a Sunday and then the teacher would pay you your five shillings on the Monday.

I remember getting into a fight with one of the farmer’s kids one day. We were stuck into it and I had him down on the ground giving him a couple of swift ones to the nose. His mate ran up and he pulled out a pocket knife and he opened it up and he said, ‘Here stab the black bastard with this’. I gave him a couple of extra ones and then the teacher came out and grabbed the bloody pocket knife and saved any more problems. There was a little bit of racism there, but it was just by a few that didn’t have too many brains going for them. The majority of it was all good.

I went through to the last year at primary school, then went on to Merredin Senior High School. From Burracoppin you’d get a bus through to Booran, then the high school bus would pick us up at Booran and take us to Merredin for high school. I ended up leaving in second term, third year of high school. The headmaster wanted me to go on, but I stopped to go to work and help Mum and Dad with the money for the rest of the family. When I finished school in ’62, I was 16 and I went up north to Mount Jackson, at the back of Bullfinch, cutting posts with the old man. That was mining area up there. Dad was cutting posts for this Tommy Brooks. The old man when he sharpened the axes, they were like you could shave with them. They were sharp and he used to go for what you call the plum axes. I was cutting posts and I was doing quite well this day when the axe glanced off a branch and I managed to cut my shin open. At first I thought it was the back of the axe that hit. I kept chopping until I felt all this wet, and I looked down and here’s this bloody great gap on the bone; you could see the bone. I yelled out to the old man. He came running and when he seen what I had done loaded me into Tom’s old truck. It was an old Bedford and had no brakes and was used to cart the posts out of the bush and down to the campsite. The old man’s driving it and old Tommy’s holding me sort of on the middle because there were no doors. The old man’s really making this old truck hum down through these little tracks. They got me back to the camp and Dad had his old Humber Super Snipe out there at the time. They gave me some snuff stuff to stop me from fainting and then it was a mad dash from there to Merredin to get it all stitched up. That was the end of my post cutting days. Then I got a job with the CBH, Cooperative Bulk Handling, and ended up in charge of silos with blokes working under me.

Then Vietnam came along. I volunteered for National Service. I got a letter back saying that they didn’t want me, no explanation. So I wrote them another letter then saying, ‘Well this is gonna look good in the media. I’m volunteering for National Service and you’re knocking me back and you’re forcing others
to go in that don’t want to go in’. It was about two to three weeks later I got another letter saying, ‘Go for your medical’. That was that. I was 20 and it was ’66. Right throughout, our family have all served. My four great-uncles on Mum’s side went away to the First World War and only one came home. Then my father served, four of his brothers also served in the Second World War. Two of Mum’s brothers served, and then on Dad’s side there were a number of uncles who served. My brother served in Malaya, so I thought it’s my turn to do my bit. Myself and others were led to believe when the Viet Cong took over South Vietnam they would carry on down to Australia. We decided we’d rather fight them on their own dunghill rather than wait and fight them on home soil. We found out later that they had no intention of going any further than South Vietnam. That’s why a lot of us went away. That was what it was all about. My family thought it was good when I enlisted because it was a tradition with the family.

We got on the plane here in Perth; it was a DC-3, I think. That my first ever ride in an aeroplane, which was a bit bumpy back then. We arrived at the airport near Seymour. We arrived there and it was freezing. The windows were fogged up with ice, everybody’s diving into cases for jumpers and it was unreal. Over here in Perth it was beautiful and over there it was freezing. We did our 10 weeks National Service training at Pucka [Puckapunyal]. I thought it was great. The years I had in the Army, I had a really great time. I didn’t really have to adjust to training because of the way I used to work and it was fairly easy really. Some people found it hard, but because I’d lived a lot away from home, working on CBH and looking after yourself and outdoors it was quite easy. Because of the way we lived our lives, to go in Army training at Puckapunyal wasn’t too bad. The only thing I didn’t like sometimes – especially at the first 10 weeks training – were some of the sergeants and the lieutenants; they’re pretty smart arses. But that was their job I guess. I didn’t really like taking the shit from them, all the same. They had to do it that way, so just get on with it. From Puckapunyal you put in for what service you wanted to go into. I put in for the Armour and I was lucky I got the first choice, so I went into the Armoured Regiment and completed training there then as a Gunner Signaller. That training was good because you met lot of different blokes all over again. That was a good life.

They were getting us ready to go over to Vietnam in January ’68. They needed some gunners to go over. We only had six months left of our two years, so there were a number of us all who volunteered to go across as gunners. Before we went to Vietnam, we were doing exercises out on the Puckapunyal Range and I was driving one of the fuel trucks and you had them all loaded with jerry cans. My mate had another truck loaded with jerry cans and we were doing all this under blackout conditions. We had to fill the tanks up late at night.
This night I was pulling in alongside this tank to fill it up with fuel, and it’s dark and one of the wheels dropped in a crater and hit the side of the tank. This big bloody lieutenant yelled, ‘Bloody Schnaars! You bloody useless so and so!’ I couldn’t say nothing to him then because if I whacked him then I’d have got in the shit. We finished the exercise. It must have been about half past 10 I think that night, and Major McInerney comes over the airwaves and says, ‘Right, everybody back to camp I’ve got an 18 gal keg all tapped ready for you to go, I’ve got blokes back there cooking steak and everything. Because I’m not coming to Vietnam with you, I’m putting all this on’. We get back there and he said, ‘All right I’ll have a chat to you boys. Wish you all a safe trip and a safe return. Tonight everybody’s equal. There’s no rank or anything, we’re all equal’. I didn’t realise until later that he was parked not far from where I was filling up the tank when I was abused by the lieutenant. I went over to him and I said, ‘Major, did you mean what you said that there’s no rank here tonight?’ He said, ‘That’s right, Trooper Schnaars. There’s no rank here at all tonight; everybody is equal’. My mate’s standing alongside of me; he said, ‘All right, Schnaarsie, go and get the bastard’. This lieutenant was a big bloke, so I went and bailed him up and I said, ‘You want to call me what you called me out there tonight?’ He wouldn’t say boo, so I called him everything under the sun and the blokes gathered around – ‘Come on, Schnaarsie, just whack the bastard anyway’. But I couldn’t even get him to say boo. About 15 minutes later we heard this jeep start up and off he went back to camp. I couldn’t hit the poor bastard; he would have started crying if I did. But the funny part then was years later when we were having this anniversary back in Puckapunyal. Whoever had done the seating must have remembered back then because they put me on one side of the table and him directly opposite. I was sitting down, I could see he was fiddling; he was looking everywhere but at me. I put my hand over and said, ‘Okay, mate, just forget whatever happened before’, and I could see he was relieved!

Before I went to Vietnam, I got a house in Seymour and invited some of my mates out. This sergeant, a friend of mine, and this corporal who I didn’t know, because he [the sergeant] came with somebody else. It was about three o’clock in the afternoon and I’d just gone inside for something. Tom Skalidis, who was staying in the same place as me, his wife came racing in. ‘John, John’, she said. And I said, ‘What?’ She said, ‘The sergeant and the corporal are going to start fighting out there’. I said ‘No way; we’ll be kicked out of this place’. I went out and I said, ‘Look if you want to do your fighting, jump in your vehicles, shoot off up the road and do it up there’. Sergeant Stewart said, ‘All right, Schnaarsie, no worries’. He starts putting his jacket back on and the corporal said, ‘No way; you want it here, you’re going to get it here’. He took a swing at him and just missed his wife’s face. I just let him have one and dropped him and split his chin open. Sergeant Stewart said, ‘Fucking hell, Schnaarsie! Thank Christ I listened to what you were telling me’. This guy got up and when he could talk, he was
saying, ‘I’ll get you. I’ll report you for striking a higher rank’. Sergeant said, ‘Don’t worry about it, Schnaarsie. I seen what happened; he’s got nothing he can do’. I never heard nothing more of that either.

There were two other Aboriginal soldiers in the group that I was with. Stewie was a reg and Homer was a National Serviceman. Ol’ Stewie was a funny character. He had this Holden. We’d been into Seymour and got on the piss a week before we were going to Vietnam. We had to go on the range the next morning for a last couple of days’ exercise. We went into Seymour and had a few beers and then said, ‘Well, better go back early and get an early night because we’ve got to get up early’. We were leaving Seymour and here’s this big bloody Army guy hitchhiking; he asked where were we going. We said, ‘Out to Pucka’. He said, ‘Can I get a lift?’ We said yes. We get out there – myself and Stewie in the front and another two of our mates in the back and this fella we’d picked up. We get there and pull up at the 7 RAH [hospital] opposite this car park, and said, ‘There you go, mate. We’ll see you later’. He said, ‘Are youse pissing me off?’ I said, ‘No. We just gave you a lift’. He said, ‘You’re going to a party; aren’t youse? I know what you’re up to’. I said, ‘No, we’re going home because we want to go to bed early because we’ve got to get up early in the morning and go out on the range’. ‘No’, he said, ‘You’re all bullshittin’”. I said, ‘Look, mate, just get out’. He wouldn’t, so I got out and went around and opened the door and said, ‘Go on, piss off’. So then he got out, but I didn’t realise he’d grabbed my mate’s beach towel off the back and was walking away with it. Then Stewie yelled out, ‘Schnaarsie, get that bloody towel off him! That’s mine’. So I walked over and I said, ‘Hey, mate, give us the bloody towel and stop your piss farting around’. He handed me the towel, and then I started to walk back. Next minute, Stewie yells out, ‘Look out, Schnaarsie!’ Just as he yelled out, I heard this bloke’s foot on this loose blue metal and as I turned my head around he’s taking a swing at me and just missed me. I just hit him in the jaw and dropped him. I was saying, ‘Come on, get up you gutless bastard. Want to do some more king hitting? Get up’. By this time there’s a number of people all standing around and this young girl, she’s looking down and she says, ‘He’s not playing’. She said, ‘He’s got blood coming out his ears’.

So in the end, MPs [military police] arrive and while they were waiting for the ambulance they were taking accounts from everybody that had seen what happened. Then they asked me to give my name. Then they put him in the ambulance and took him away, and the MP said, ‘Look, don’t worry, trooper. Everyone that I’ve spoken to tonight said exactly the same as what your story has been, spot on, so you’ve got nothing to worry about’. We got back to the camp and about an hour and a half later, I said to my mate, ‘I can’t sleep. I’ve got to go the hospital and see how that dickhead is’. He drives me down there and this matron turned on me like I was to blame. I said, ‘Do you know actually
what happened?’ And she said only what he had told her before he fainted again. I then told her what had actually taken place, then I asked her how he was. She said, ‘They’ve taken him down to Heidelberg’. Then I said if you want to go and talk to the MPs, you’ll get the story from them if you want the truth. Next day, I get a call that the major wanted to see me to hear my side of what had happened. After telling my side of what had happened I asked if he knew what was wrong with the wanker. He said, ‘They just found out that he’s got perforated ear drums, his jaw’s fractured in three places and he’s got a fractured skull when he hit the ground’. He said, ‘But you’ve got no worries. If he takes it to court, a civilian court or something, you’ve got no worries because every witness story backs everything you said’. Just under a week I think after that, we finished out at Pucka, and then we went to Vietnam.

I knew some of the National Servicemen when they first joined, they didn’t want to be there and yet some of those guys at the end of their two years joined up for another three years. Their whole life had been turned around when they found the mateship being in the service brought them. They really enjoyed the type of life, the type of environment. One thing I do remember when we were out was the Salvation Army, this old major. He reinforced things Dad used to tell me when he was talking about overseas. Dad said never ever go past the Salvation Army people holding the tin in their hands. Always put in some money because they’re the only ones that were there on the battle line with us. When we were in Vietnam, I really realised what he meant because out there, no matter where we were, if it was a hot day, this old major come out with cold drinks. If it was a cold day, he’d come out with hot drinks and chewies and take letters back and bring mail out. He was always there, yet the other groups if you wanted to see them, you had to go to their tent where they held their church service on the Sundays. This old bloke was out there all the time and at the time he must have been in his 50s I guess. He was someone special, so I’ve got a really great liking for the Salvation Army people. The Salvation Army guy was also based at Nui Dat. We’ve got a couple of Salvation Army people as our Honouring Indigenous War Graves members now as well.

At Nui Dat was a huge mess hall where everybody had their meals. There were tables and then the passage up the middle where you’d go up the front and get tucker. They had all these tables lined up and stools. I don’t know how much it must have held – a couple of hundred at least. One day tankies were in there and somebody else, and all of a sudden one bloke said something to another bloke and it was on. I’m standing back and it was just like something in the movies. There was tucker going everywhere, stools getting upended and I’m standing there watching. Next minute these two guys swung at me and I was just watching. That got me swinging back at them then and then the MPs came
IN DEFENCE OF COUNTRY

racing. We were banned from going to the wet mess for a fortnight after that. But it didn’t stop us from getting a few beers. But that was one hell of a time, that. You do all sorts of silly things to make life a little bit easier.

I only got down there to Vung Tau twice. Once, me and this bloke went down as guard for the Salvation Army major because we wanted to get haircuts.

I did have a bit of a disagreement with a sergeant over there in Vietnam. He flogged one of the little mates while we were out one time. When I came back in, I went down into the Sergeant’s mess, into the kitchen, and told the bloke, ‘Tell him to get out here. I want to talk to him’. He came out and I called that bloke everything under the sun. He was a big bloke and I wanted him to take a swing, but he wouldn’t. Then the duty sergeant came up and said, ‘Trooper Schnaars; nothing’s going to happen, so you may as well go now’. I said, ‘No worries. The stink’s getting too much for me here anyway’. And that’s it. He didn’t mind bashing a little bloke half his size, but when somebody’s nearer to his size, he didn’t have the guts to bloody do anything about it.

The only time I had anything to do with the Americans was we got the tanks off the jetty down there and then we went up the river on barges. The gunners had to be down inside, had the guns all ready to go, traversing the bank. I thought, if there’s someone over there going to shoot something and put a hole in this barge, I would get them before they get me. This thing’s going to go down horribly quick and I can’t swim. When we took them off the barges at this bridge, we were put on stand-to for two hours with turret down and it was stinking hot inside the tank.

There was only one bloke that tried to be smart with me because of my race. That was when we were in Vietnam, and I put him in his place. He used to call me blackfella or blackie until one morning when I was in a really shitty mood for some reason or another. When he said it again, I reached over and grabbed him by the throat, and I said, ‘Listen, arsehole, my name’s John or Trooper Schnaars. That’s what it’s gotta be – what you call everybody else. If you say that once more, I’ll ram this fist so far down your throat you’ll be able to suck my thumb with your arsehole’. Every time after that, he was a very changed man. That was the only one time.

I was in Vietnam for not quite six months. If they’d let us just finish that 12 months off, we would have stayed. At the end of that time when we were over there, we volunteered to go on to finish the 12 months over there. But they said, ‘If you want to do that, you’ve got to sign on for another three years’. So we said, ‘shove it’ and came home. The only time we were in Saigon was when we caught the plane back from Nui Dat. I know the baby Herc when it was coming in to pick us up, it swerved on the runway because a bit of wind was blowing
and I thought, ‘Bloody hell’. That scared the shit out of me a bit, as thinking is it going take off okay. But, leaving on that plane that day was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. There were bloody lumps in my throat and a few tears in my eyes because I had mates back there that might not be coming home. That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do in my life. On that plane back it was probably the only plane that I’ve ever … anyway, we drank it dry. Two hours out of Sydney we’d cleaned it out and the only thing that was left was rum. That was the end of my two years in the Army.

When we left Vietnam, we landed in Sydney at about eleven o’clock at night. There was nobody there from the Army and we had nowhere to sleep. We just had to sleep on benches. Three of us went out on the town. The next plane to WA didn’t leave till ten o’clock the next day, so we had to fill in time and we got to Perth airport and there was no one from the Karrakatta there to meet us. We had to pay for taxis and everything out of our own pocket to take us out to Karrakatta. They asked us that day if any of us that lived in the country wanted travel warrants and I said yes. I caught the train that evening to go up to Merredin and I didn’t return to Perth. The blokes living in Perth, they had to go back in there and report daily every morning for about a month before they were allowed to piss off altogether. They were supposed to be having bloody medicals and all that, but a lot of them were never having anything. I left and two days later I was up in Merredin driving tractors with these farmers. Yet the Army records reckoned I was down in Perth having a full medical. But I’d never been anywhere near there after I left there that day.

In Vietnam, we had the tanks up on the side of Nui Dat Hill. I jumped off the side after firing one night and twisted my knee and rammed up against the tank with my back. I hurt my lower back and knee and I was on pain killers, but I couldn’t leave the tank because there was no one else to take over as gunner. None of that was put in the notes. I was later able to track down the corporal at the time, who was the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] corporal, and he ended up leaving the Army as a major. He wrote a letter saying the reason why there was nothing in his medical report about this was because he wasn’t entitled to write anything in. The only person who could write stuff in was the captain or medical officer, so he said that’s why there was nothing in his report. But he said, ‘I can quite clearly remember treating him for it’. Then with this medical exam that I never had at the end of my service, DVA were trying to use that as what was written down to say that I had nothing wrong.

When I had to fight years later for my entitlements, they said, ‘Well, your full medical doesn’t say anything about this’. I said, ‘That’s because I’ve never had a medical’. They said, ‘Well how come these people have signed off that you did have?’ I said, ‘That’s bullshit’. They said, ‘If you have a look at the signatures’, and I said, ‘They don’t match up’. I had to take it to the Arbitration Appeals
Tribunal Hearing. Their DVA lawyer was in there and talking to me and the lawyer that I had from Legal Aid. I thought he was going to work with us and make it easier, but that was bullshit. He just used everything that we were talking about to try to screw us. I thought, ‘You two-faced bastard’. I told him as much after that as well. In the end, we had to go back for another hearing. Barnett, who was on the bench, said to Mr Pontasorearse, ‘Have you got these doctors here so that we can question them about what this man is saying – that he never had this medical?’ He said, ‘I’m sorry; no, I haven’t’. The magistrate said, ‘Well, how are we supposed to come to a conclusion what’s right and what’s wrong?’ He said, ‘You should have had them at least on a telephone hook-up so that we could question them’. The DVA lawyer said one’s in Queensland, one’s dead and the other one’s in Tasmania. Barnett said, ‘That’s not good enough. This man’s come here to try and prove what he’s saying is correct, and you don’t think it’s important enough to have these doctors on telephone hook-up so that we can question them. That makes it look very suspicious to us. You’ve been doing this a long enough time now to know that’s what should have been done’. They couldn’t come up with anything else. They had to put me as winning the case. That was back in 1988.

When I came back from Vietnam, my wife and I had four kids and then she shot through. I had met my wife back here in WA. I got married the day before I left to go into the National Service. When we got married, her father and mother wouldn’t come to the wedding. He reckoned I was a bodgie and a bloody blackfella and I wasn’t the sort of person he wanted for his daughter. I had to get my brother-in-law to give her away and I had to make our own wedding cake. Peter was born a couple of weeks before I went away. He was born the year I left WA, 1966, before we got married. Maitland was born when I first took my wife over to Victoria in ’67 and was born in Seymour. While I was in Vietnam, Graham was born in ’68, and then Sharryn was born in ’69.

It became like many of the marriages after Vietnam. Originally, when I came back I was drinking a lot. She obviously was thinking the grass was greener on the other side, so she shot through – in ’72 I think it was – and with one of her sister’s ex-boyfriends. It was about a year after that, he found out she was having it off with somebody else and he stabbed her with a screwdriver and put her in hospital up at Southern Cross. For the next two years she had nothing to do with my children at all. She never sent them Christmas cards, never sent them Christmas presents, never sent them birthday cards. I brought them up on my own then. When she shot through, I brought them up right through their school and I must have brought them up right because they’re all doing well.

For two years they never heard from her or anything and then she’s filing for divorce. I put in and couldn’t get Legal Aid, but she got Legal Aid. I thought, well, I’ve got to fight it on my own, so I went to the school, got all their teacher’s
CoMMeMoRATING INDIGeNouS SeRVICe
away from the drink. When I got to take over the kids on my own, then I was able to walk away from it, whereas others couldn't and then their family would walk away from them and the next thing, they've committed suicide. There was one bloke who committed suicide, an Aboriginal fella who had a lot of problems. He was finding it hard to get by and so his family took him to this counsellor. But the thing is, when you're counselling someone, you've got to realise if you're going too far and you've got to stop. She had probably not done too many veterans, and she just brought too much up in one hit and the next day they found him dead. He hung himself because she brought up too much at one time and he couldn't handle it. Years later, in 1986, I got help for PTSD, and it was the first time I was able to speak about it. The psychiatrist was really good, top guy, and I was able to talk to him about it. He said the only way you're going to get through this is being able to talk about it. When he saw I was having problems, he just kicked his shoes off and sat up on his desk and we started talking like two guys.

After the Army I tried playing football again, but I couldn't because of the problems with the knee. I started work again, then went back on CBH with the job that I'd left when I went in the Army. For the first couple of weeks up there, I was doing some tractor driving for a couple of the farmers I knew. After the wife left, I was bringing up the four kids on my own. I thought it was easy. I just involved myself with what they were doing; we were that close. I didn't think it was hard at all. We were right up in the bush and there weren't too many people that had TVs at that time up there. You never read anything about Aboriginal activism up in the country in the 1970s.

We came down to Perth about '78, I think it was. They were still going to school. Then I was working on that new bridge down at Fremantle, the big concrete Stirling Bridge, and I was pushing all those squares out. They were making them out at Kewdale and they were bringing them down on Brambles trucks and we'd lift them off with these big cranes and then put them on this trolley. Then I'd push them out with this Chamberlain tractor with a bucket on the front. We'd hook that onto the back of this trolley and then push them out, and there were people on the other end with the other crane who'd lift it off and then put it in place. We were on the very last one. We'd completed one side and we're just completing this other side and we had the very last one to put in place.

I was living in Gosnells, and one Friday night I said to Tom Howlett who was living in Gosnells also, 'Tom, you're sure you're going to work tomorrow morning?' He said, 'Oh yeah, I'll be there'. He got on the piss that night and never picked me up in the morning. I raced around about two blocks away to a telephone box. I rang up a taxi, raced back home; just as I got there the taxi pulled up. We're on the way down, but in the meantime the head engineer in
charge of the project got sick and tired of waiting for me to turn up to push this out. So he’s got this leading hand and his offsider to push it out. But they didn’t hook it up properly. Just as we pull up in the taxi, they’ve started pushing it and the bucket had come away from the trolley. They just put the bucket down and this leading hand’s standing in front of it. You’re looking at 38 tons of concrete on a 13-ton trolley. The gap between the bottom of the trolley and the top of the bridge, if he had tripped, would have dragged him. His offsider was trying to put bits of reinforced steel rod under these little tiny railway wheels on the railway line. All the time it’s getting a little bit quicker and so I yelled out from the taxi, ‘Get the bucket and put it on the trolley and put your brakes on’. No. So I raced from the taxi to the tractor, jumped on the tractor and I’m after this thing. I caught it up half way across that bridge, and by that time it was going pretty fast. I hooked the bucket on the back of the trolley and I’ve got the front wheels about two feet off the ground. I’ve got hold of the steering wheel and I’m standing on the brakes and it’s just dragging me across to the other side. Just as I was about to stop it, one of the wheels hit a piece of wood and the bucket had come off. It just slowly went and dropped over the edge. Now all the guys working inside the bridge came out, tears streaming down their faces. They wrapped their arms around me and this old fella kissed me on the cheek: ‘You saved our lives! You saved our lives!’ I was sitting down on the top of the bridge there and I was shaking like shit. Blokes who were working on the scaffolding under the bridge just jumped straight over; some landed in the water, some landed in the dirt.

The paymaster came out and he said, ‘Oh shit, Schnaarsie, you’re going to get a big bonus at the end of the year, at Christmas, 20 or 30 grand no worries’. I said, ‘Bullshit’. He said, ‘You’ve saved them bloody heaps, and you’ve probably saved God knows how many lives as well’. Anyway, so the Christmas party time comes, Peter Knights is there and he’s thanking everybody because the project is in front of time. And he said, ‘I have to thank John Schnaars for what he done that day. He stopped a major disaster, but if he’d have got here on time, it wouldn’t have happened’. I said to my brother that I was really going to let fly, but my brother was able to hold me back. He said, ‘No, John, don’t; let it go’. So that was it. That was the thanks I got. Years later, when I first started doing this Honouring Indigenous War Graves work, we had no equipment. So I wrote a letter to the owner of the company and he ended up having the paymaster, who was actually still working there, present me with this big picture of different sections of the bridge with a little plaque on it. I’ve got that hanging up at my place and they supplied us with three or four second-hand computers, chairs and tables. That’s how we got started doing this work back in 2001. He said, ‘I can remember the day, what had happened, very distinctly. You were definitely the hero of the day’. I thought about it after. One wrong slip like that, going over at those speeds, I’d have gone over the edge of
the bridge and drowned because I can’t swim. If that concrete section would have hit the end of the bridge at the speed it was going, that whole side of that section would have gone down into the river with those guys inside. Those guys would have dropped out and they would have been just crushed underneath.

In the early ‘80s I stuffed my knee and then I had to have two operations. Plus then I had to go back to hospital twice, had to go to physiotherapy for six weeks at a time, and I missed work. Back to hospital, have it manipulated, back to hospital for another operation on it, and finally they gave a payout. I was on that for yonks; they ended up putting me on a Disability Pension, not a veterans’ pension. I ended up putting my veterans’ pension in years later because I was still bringing up the kids at the same time and I couldn’t get an Unmarried Mother’s Pension because the kids didn’t need me full-time as they were going to school. Years later I applied for the Defence Service Pension. They just changed it over and then I started fighting for the Disability Pension, which happened. It took me three-and-a-half years to finally win that case for a Disability Pension. The thing is, the governments of this country need to get photos taken. ‘We’ll look after you when you come back’—that’s bullshit. They’re nowhere to be seen when you come back and they’ve got these bastards writing all this crap up to try to screw you. One question will be here to ask this, then another question asks you the same question a little bit further back, but the way you look at it, it’s a different way of answering it. So you answer it that way, then they’ve got you.

I was out of work for years, which made it easy for me because I was at home. I didn’t have a washing machine, so all the kids’ school clothes I had to wash by hand, plus all their sheets and doonas. I didn’t have any vacuum cleaner; I had to do it with the broom. Then you had to clean their rooms every day, make their beds up, cook. It was just full-on, and then I had my leg in plaster a lot of that time as well. Then I’d walk them to school. Well, that was about two kms on this, crutches, and then come home. It kept me busy. They all went to fifth year of high school, and then they started work. They’ve been working ever since.

Peter’s a supervisor on drilling rigs up north. Maitland started off as a croupier and now he’s an inspector at the casino. He only works part-time now because he’s got his own acting group. He just wrote a play that they had down at Yirra Yaakín Theatre. Then he took it up north for a fortnight to the schools. The theatre group is him and his mates; they’re all Aboriginal. Graham’s in his 20th year this year [2010] in the Air Force. He just came back from Timor a little while back, then he done three years earlier over in Malaya, in Butterworth. I’ve got a nephew who’s a major in the Army. It’s still going on. I’ve got another nephew who’s in the police force. Sharryn works at the old people’s home out at Armadale bringing up her two kids on her own. The old people really love her and she gets on really well with them.
I’ve brought them up the same way Dad and Mum brought me up: to respect your elders. If you want something, you go out and earn your money to buy it yourself; you don’t take something that somebody else has worked for. If I ever stepped out of line the old man got the garden hose. You got three cracks across the arse for that and if you were slow enough, too slow, you’d get the third one; if you were quick enough he’d just miss you. But we had total respect for Dad and Mum all the way through, and the only time you’d get that is if you’d done something wrong. He wouldn’t give it to you for no reason; you had to do something really wrong first, and I mean really wrong. They brought us up strict, to respect other people less fortunate than yourself, and to help your elders wherever you can help them, and that’s how I brought mine up, the same way. If they stepped out of line they got a cut across the arse with a strap. They have total respect for me, and they’re all doing really well.

In the 1990s I got involved in veterans’ causes, which eventually led to Honouring Indigenous War Graves. There weren’t really any ex-servicemen groups going up at Merredin when I lived there. There was an RSL. In the late ’90s, probably, I started helping this lady with Vietnam Veterans’ Federation who were based in Sydney. I started helping mid-’90s with veterans getting all evidence to present. She was an advocate and I was doing all the research for them to take to court, DVA, the arbitration appeals. Back in the 1990s, I started working on seeing if some of my cousins could get money that was owing to their father. It was a waste of time. When I found out we couldn’t get them the money that was owed to them I said, ‘Well, we’ve got to do a service for them’, and that is when we started the headstones for Indigenous graves. To do the other work we had to change to Vietnam Veterans’ Counselling Service and LINC [Local Indigenous Network and Communities]. This is the one we put together years ago in 2000.

I was looking into the family of Victor ‘Mighty’ Nelson, who was an uncle of mine. I knew that he was chasing money that he felt they owed him. He served in New Guinea in the Second World War. I went over in June to Canberra with the TPI veterans for a protest rally outside of Parliament House, and then I spoke to three heads of the Repatriation Department and put it to them that I was looking at taking them to court to try to get this back pay. They told me then that you’re wasting your time because they had to sign certain paperwork back then saying that after the war they couldn’t claim anything virtually. I thought, ‘Well, that stuffs that’. I thought, we’ve got to do something. We will put a headstone on the grave and do a service, and he was the very first one we did which was at Merredin on 16 September 2001. For that first one we had to raise the money. I think as that group we did about another 10 or 11. I was up at Bruce Rock in November 2004 getting out what we were doing to all the veterans up there.

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2 The Department of Repatriation was the precursor to the Department of Veterans’ Affairs.
The lady I’d been working with and this other bloke were down here going round to all the veterans who would never come to a meeting. They were telling the veterans stories to get them to sign proxy votes for a meeting in November 2004 where they put it up to have me removed as president of the LINC and this other guy take over, which is what happened.

I stayed trying to work with them until early March 2005 and I went to the last meeting with Victoria Thomas. I was getting that frustrated with them because I was wanting to do a service for Kenneth Forrest before his son died. Victoria said, ‘Well, you’re not coming ever back to a meeting here’. And I said, ‘Well, what am I going to do?’ She said, ‘We’ll start another group up and we’ll put things in place so the same thing can’t happen again’. So that was when myself and Victoria started working on putting Honouring Indigenous War Graves together, in early March 2005. We were working out of our own pockets, putting in long hours. She was really good with putting together constitutions and business plans. Chris Thomas, who does the headstones, said, ‘I know how much you want to do these headstones, Schnaarsie’. So he said, ‘I’ll put it in place. Then when you get the funding, which I know you’ll get, you can pay me’. So he put the headstone in place. We did that service on 15 May 2005 and we became incorporated on 16 May 2005. We haven’t looked back since.

We’ve been everywhere since. We’ve probably got about 300 members now. Most of the people from the other group [LINC] came straight across. The other group lasted another couple of months fighting amongst themselves. They look at our group as not just talking about doing things, but talking about doing things and making them happen. We’ve got a tremendous amount of support. We are working with the Defence Department. Wherever they can supply catafalque parties they will, wherever they can supply buglers they will, and they work as much as they can with me. We’ve got a husband and wife who are retired Salvation Army captains who’re now members of ours. They come to nearly every service we do and I’ll get her to do the Lord’s Prayer. We’ve got a couple of Indigenous pastors, especially one, Albert Knapp, who comes to nearly all of the services. We’ve got a couple of Elders. Elder Mort Hansen plays the didgeridoo, does the welcome for us. A lot of Vietnam veterans and Korean veterans and the Māori are all members of our group. They take part in everything. Then you’ve got the RSL people who give support wherever they can. We’ve got some RSL groups who now are corporate members of our group: the Port Hedland RSL, the Broome RSL. We’ve got shire councils who give us support and other organisations give us corporate support.

We do between 14 and 17 services a year. We always do at least one more than what we’re normally paid for. Until last year most of the services were in WA because that’s where we only get the funding to do it. I’ve got to apply for extra funding from the department to go over and do the ones east. It originally
started for all the early wars, like World War I, World War II, because Victor Nelson was World War II. Then we end up doing a Korean veteran, Vietnam veterans, and we’ve done seven funeral services now. That all came about by doing a funeral for Cyril Fogarty up at Dalwallinu when he died. The family wanted us to do a service. So I said, ‘Well, I’ve never done one before, but I’ll give it a go’. That went really well, so I’ve done another six since then. Some of these families have had quite a few other members of their families that have served. That’s how it virtually started, and then it’s just gone on since.3

When I put it together I thought we’ve got to put this program together so that it does a whole heap of different things. You’ve got to be bringing communities together with a better understanding of each other. You’re sometimes bringing fragmented families back together, getting them back on talking terms. As former senator and Reconciliation Australia chair Fred Chaney puts it, the service that we do are some of the best grassroots reconciliation programs he’s ever been involved with. Coming from someone like Fred, that’s just amazing. On one instance, I had invited him to be a guest speaker on this Sunday at Karrakatta for this old Burton. His family didn’t know where he was buried until we found out, and then a lot of them for the first time were able to be there. Fred couldn’t come there because he had a prior engagement. So that morning we were starting and it was just on eleven o’clock. We’re about to start and then Fred walks up and he apologises to me again for not being able to be a guest speaker, and then he went to each one of these family members and shook their hands and apologised to each one of them that he couldn’t stay and be a guest speaker at this special service for them. I thought, ‘Well, how many people would do that?’ Then he went away to his other engagement. That to me was just something very special, and that’s the sort of bloke he is. That day we had the Bruce Rock Vietnam veterans’ trailer, which is set up as a big barbeque, we were cooking sausages and Fred ended up spreading buns. He just got stuck in.

There have been many times where the families have come up and had tears running down their faces and wrapped their arms around you, just thanking you for the fact that they lived long enough to see it happen. There was a group of tourists up in Northampton because a couple of our members were staying there at the caravan park. They asked what was going on, so they told them. They said, ‘Can we come along?’ And they said, ‘Yeah, of course you can. Anybody’s welcome’. There were about 18 of these tourists who came along. About half to three-quarters of the way through, this young lady was trying to remember her grandfather who we were recognising that day. The last recollection she had she was about three, and she kept breaking down. It was that emotional, and when

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3 The story of one Honouring Indigenous War Graves ceremony is told in ‘The Last Post’, Message Stick, directed by Adrian Wells, produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 2006, DVD.
I looked at these tourists at least 15 of them were wiping tears from their eyes. It was just wow. There have been many like that. The people that come along to take part, even though they may not know any of that family, they feel what they’re going through at the time and it affects them as well. It’s just unreal, and it’s something that you can’t buy with money. It’s something that’s raw. People say, ‘Why do you put in so many hours because it’s all voluntary, mate?’ I say, ‘Come to one of the services and you’ll know why and that’ll just explain better than I can’.

We went national in 2009. I was wanting to go east and try to get it into the other states. Hopefully somebody over there would start up, and then a lady by the name of Aunty Dot Peters got in touch with me and told me about her father who was buried on the Burma Railway. I said, ‘Well, if we come over we can put the headstone?’ She said, ‘Well, Mum’s grave’s here. She’s got nothing on’. I said, ‘Right, that’ll be good’. I said, ‘We can put his service details on the headstone, put it there with your mother’s details on’, and then we ended up putting a pillar in the middle because his brother was buried in there and he served as well. Then this lady, down at Fawkner in Victoria, got in touch with me as well about her father. That’s how I thought, well, we’ve gotta get this funding to go over and do these two requests for these two ladies. When we got that money, I got in touch with people in Adelaide to come up with a name of somebody that served so we could do one in Adelaide on our way back. We’ve got these other calls from these other people. That’s why I’m chasing money to go back over there.

A couple of years back now we put a memorial in Broome to honour the Z Special Unit men and women.4 This year we put a memorial in Bruce Rock to honour the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.5 I was able to work with the Kokoda Track Foundation and we brought out Faole Bokoi, a Fuzzy Wuzzy from back then, plus his son Saii as his carer. They were there for the unveiling, to cut the ribbon. They had a couple of old veterans – one who had been injured and become blinded in the jungle and the Fuzzy Wuzzy helped him out of the jungle. I got a call yesterday from this daughter who said her father’s still talking about it, and it’s just an amazing thing.

In between services, every year we do a major raffle. That takes a lot of time making sure that it’s completed and making sure that you make money. Last year we made $7,400 profit out of that. This year, it’s probably just over seven.

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5 See Riseman, Defending Whose Country?, chs 3 and 4; Angels of War, produced and directed by Gavan Daws, Hank Nelson and Andrew Pike.
That all helps with everything we’re doing. With other things, I put to the highest bidder last year a .303 rifle, which we got $2,250 for. This year we did it on a plaque instead of in a box and we got $2,800 for that, and a few other things I had up for auction which we made money on. This year we’ll probably come out $11,000–$12,000 in front. Last year was much the same, which is not bad, but it’s a lot of work you got to do to make sure it happens.

I got permission for us to march under our own banner in the Anzac Day march a few years back; we’ve done it three years running now. We march through the main street of Perth, and it’s amazing when they see the banner, people read it, and then the applause that comes out: ‘It’s about time’, and they applaud us. It’s just unreal. A couple of the ladies said, ‘God, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or what’. Old Albert Knapp said, ‘God, John, I felt about 10 feet tall and eight feet across the shoulders. When that applause went up, God, it was unreal!’ It’s just amazing. The most we’ve had so far has been 35 marching, but this year, 2011, I dare say we’ll have well over 40 marching. Where some of these other groups that are marching are getting less, we’re getting more. I didn’t march before Honouring Indigenous War Graves regularly, but I did every now and again. It took a while before I got permission to do it as Honouring Indigenous War Graves.

We also get together every year to do the memorial up at Kings Park in May, during Reconciliation Week. In 2007 we started it with myself and other people from DVA, from Legacy, and a couple of other groups. We also just had the book *Forever Warriors* about WA Aboriginal servicemen and women published. To get the funding to get the book done took a major part of trying, and I started off dealing with three publishers. Since it came out it has been popular. I go out and talk to community groups about Honouring Indigenous War Graves: Comet Bay College down at Mandurah, the Tuart Hill College, primary schools, high schools, Rotary clubs, other organisations, veteran organisations, RSLs. We get around a bit. A lot of the times it’s just myself on my own doing the talks. If possible I take a couple of other guys with us, and I’ll get them up to say a bit as well. Sometimes we’ll work in with the 10th Light Horseman memorial troop and they’ll put together a whole heap about the 10th Light Horse and then I’ll talk about the Indigenous veterans. One morning we went to the Manjimup High School, then we went and did Pemberton Primary School in the afternoon, then the next day we went and did Busselton Senior High School, and then that afternoon we did Karrinyup Primary School right down south. We covered must have been 2,000–3,000 kids in those two days. You should’ve seen the letters I got from all these little kids from the Karrinyup Primary School – unreal, just bloody unreal.

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6 James, *Forever Warriors*. 
I’ve got to fight for funding every year to do stuff where the governments of this country owe these old veterans millions of dollars. They should be just coming out and saying, ‘Look, here’s this much money. Do that. When you’re finished, if there’s anything left give it back. If there’s not, so be it’, without having to go hand in glove every year fighting for this every three months. Until all that gets changed, then, as far as I’m concerned that sorry was just words, and it’s easy to say words; anybody can say them.

So many non-Indigenous people ring me up, stop me at the services, and talk to me about the whole thing and just how proud they are that these old Aboriginal guys have finally been recognised. The non-Indigenous people are right behind getting it out there. The fact is that the Aboriginal people served right from the Boer War. A lot of these people have got so much respect for these guys because their fathers have spoken about these guys when they’ve been away fighting. Some women have rung up and said, ‘Look, it’s just amazing that you’re doing what you’re doing now when this should’ve been done years ago’. I said, ‘Well, better late than never’. I’d like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to think about their loved ones who did serve with pride, with honour, and total respect for the families of these veterans who went away and gave everything in a time when they had no rights, in a time when they were treated like flora and fauna, at a time when they come home from serving the RSL wouldn’t even look at them as diggers. Yet every time Australia got into conflicts these guys were there putting their hands up to go away, and so I’d like them to remember these guys with pride, the fact they went out there and against all of the odds and all that was against them at the time.

I recommend the ADF to any young person if they’ve got nothing to do. Nowadays, you get that many choices that you can do things. It’s all yours – you get your pay, your tucker, your clothes, travel. They get more opportunities now than what we used to back then. In general I think we’ve got to have the armed forces. There are so many different things that can happen these days. It’s a necessary evil you might say. I feel, if I had young guys growing up again, I’d just say to them all, ‘Look, join one of the services – Army, Navy or Air Force. Enjoy your time in there, do it with pride, and just respect everybody that you’re working alongside, and do your bit for Australia’. It’d be great if every country in the world didn’t need to have armies, but unfortunately we got too many idiots running around some of these countries. Some of those unfortunate people in some of these countries who want peace, you’ve got to be able to go and try to help them. You see kids walking around with no legs because they’ve stepped on bloody unexploded bombs. It really hurts you when you look at it; they’re innocent. These people didn’t want to be like this. They’ve
got no choice because they’ve got people running their agenda and they don’t want peace, and yet these same people you won’t see them on the front line. They get these other poor people that they brainwash.

I often worry in myself what our children, their children, and their children’s children are going to be facing in years to come. It really worries you because you want to be there to protect them, but you’re not going to be. The world’s going to be changing, that’s for sure.
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.