Gudjala man Harry Allie served in the RAAF from 1966–89. He did not see combat, so his service reflects that of many other Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) personnel who served in peacetime between the end of the Vietnam War and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since leaving the Air Force, Harry has been at the forefront of movements to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service. He is involved in the Coloured Digger Project in Sydney and was one of the organisers of the annual Redfern Coloured Diggers march on Anzac Day, inaugurated in 2007. In 2012, after this story was recorded in 2011, Harry was appointed as the RAAF’s inaugural Elder. In this role he serves as a mentor to current Indigenous RAAF members and also helps Indigenous recruitment. Harry Allie’s efforts on behalf of the Indigenous ex-service community have won him accolades from Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike.

1  This interview was recorded in Western Sydney on 4 November 2011.
I was born on the 2 December 1942 in Charters Towers, North Queensland. My mob identifies with the Gudjala tribal people. For my first 18 years I grew up in the town, mainly because it’s a pastoral area and we had a very large Aboriginal community. I was always aware of things, particularly with our people. I was very fortunate because the pastoral industry around that area meant that a lot of our people went to work on cattle stations, and even more so when a lot of them were placed under the *Aboriginal Protection Act*. Being under the Act they were only allowed into town twice a year, which was at Christmas time for four weeks, and the annual show which was around the end of June for two weeks. Then they were put back on trucks and went back to the stations. I was very fortunate my family we were never placed under the *Protection Act*, but we socialised and interacted with people that were, and we saw the many hardships they faced. That still didn’t take anything away from what we had to do. We made sure that we were kept clean and we were dressed properly and ensured that we worked.

In my younger days, we were always worried that we would be taken away and always worried about strangers calling in. As a result of those worries, we were often sent down into the bush, particularly when we heard the police truck coming down the road. We even did a stint of being hid behind the mosquito nets, and then wardrobes, but it was something that we grew up with and were very aware of. As a result of that, my mother wouldn’t let me go and work on stations as with all our families. I had two other brothers; they were fortunate to get jobs in the town – one with the local post office as a telegram boy and the other in the aged care facility – when they were quite young. Other than seeing the hardship that these families went through when they came into town for that period of time, we tried to have a social collective community where they could enjoy themselves before they went back to the isolation on these cattle stations.

My father started off in the pastoral industry dealing with horses. There was a period of time when they had to pay Aboriginal workers that weren’t under the Act the full wages. So a lot of the pastoral places could not continue to employ them, or they reduced the amount of people, or they only kept people that were under the Act. A lot of Aboriginal workers went into the railways as fettlers, but because there were only limited positions around that local where we lived, they had to go out into areas that were much further away from home, like say 100 miles away. As a result of that, they went away Sunday night and would come back the following Friday to have the weekend at home. Because of that situation there was a lot of responsibility placed on our mothers, aunties and grandmothers.
My mother couldn’t read and write because she never had the opportunity. She had strong values; they’re the values that carried us through and we pass on today. My father built a house, it was just the basic house, but it was our house, what we called home. We had a bed and we had blankets and we were fed. There were times when there were ration tickets that we had to go and buy things, but again that was the idea to go and start work early to help bring more income into the household. But we got by. To enable us to compete, I firmly believe that education provides the opportunities for our young people to go forward. I found that out first-hand as I moved into the next area where I did progress to.

My family was big: on my mother’s side there were 10 aunties and uncles and on my father’s side there were nine of them, so we all grew up with plenty of aunties and uncles. They were a sounding board and they also looked after our interests to see that we were progressing, particularly where my brother and I were the two that worked with jobs in town, as compared to a lot of other young men who worked on stations. For the girls it was different; they worked at the local colleges. There were a large amount of colleges, so they got domestic work, but it was a job. They were pleased that they had that opportunity to have a job. There were a lot of things that people did in the community, like making their own dresses and a lot of their own tailoring. There was a lot of community involvement in those days and it was all about improving your position in life. In particular there were not a lot of black politics in it, because in those days people were just worrying about getting jobs and getting children educated so that they could move them and make a better life. I had one cousin that went to what we used to call senior, about the equivalent of Year 12 in the modern education concept. That was very uncommon to have. They were achievers and the community looked up to us to be role models, even at that early stage, because of where we were going. It was hard work working on stations, chasing cattle or riding buck jumpers at that stage and the isolation.

I’ve got two brothers and a sister. I am the eldest, then Valerie my sister, then there was David, and the third, Phillip. Valerie is retired after a distinguished career in education. Valerie has a lot of involvement with our communities up in the Charters Towers/Townsville area to help our community move forward. We lost David about two years ago now and some of that is from Vietnam-related service. He had an interesting story serving in the Army, and that’s the way the services are. Phillip still works at the Townsville Hospital as an Indigenous Admissions Officer. That’s what they have in a lot of the areas now, particularly with Townsville being the size that it is. You have a lot of people coming from remote areas and they like to relate to an Indigenous person on being admitted to hospital.
My grandfather on my father’s side was Malaysian descent. Details on the wedding certificate that my grandmother had, and the paperwork that we’ve found on the web, says he was born in the Malacca Strait. During his time, in the late 1800s, Charters Towers was a gold rush town. He always related to being a woodcutter in those early days. From an oral story we believe my grandmother was born under a tree at Canobie Station in the Gulf [of Carpentaria]; from the records there were a lot of disease and floods in that period. The only other thing we can track is that we think a lot of the Aboriginal people were shifted from Normanton and that area, across to Yarrabah Mission. Looking at the Yarrabah records, you can see a name the same as my grandmother appears, but there are no other records. There were comments that were passed on to us that she came into Charters Towers during the gold rush, travelling down the Lind Road, through the back way from Cairns, under servitude, which they did in those days. She worked for a businessperson in one of the main streets of Charters Towers. We believe she got married very young and that was to get out of servitude, followed by marrying Charlie Allie. They then lived out at a place called Black Jack, which is about 10 kms out from Charters. As the gold petered out, the old Charlie Allie set up holding yards at the property out there. They used to bring all the horses in from the stations for World War I and they held them in the holding yards. Then they’d ship them out overseas into Egypt for Light Horse Infantry. That’s the story that was passed down. We have documented a lot of the oral history and are still researching so their journey can be properly documented and passed on to the next generation.

Although my grandfathers were of different cultural backgrounds, that wasn’t any debarment; because of the Aboriginal policies in place during that era if you fell into the criteria, then you were placed under the Act. On my mother’s side there was my mother and my grandmother was Aboriginal. Same as my father’s side – my grandmother was Aboriginal, but there’s the South Sea Island heritage. My grandfather was second generation by the time he married my grandmother, but they were all put under the Act. All the Santo family were put under the Act except my mother and her eldest sister. My mother and Aunty Elsie were working at another station when they put them all under the Act, so that’s how they missed out in that regard. My mother and Aunty Elsie were not placed under the Act, but the rest of the family were all under the Act. There’s another brother, who was sent to Palm Island. That’s how these things happened during that period, because I worked in the town, I observed first-hand a lot of the occurrences. The same as my sister remembers certain things because she’s seen it from a woman’s point of view. And then I’ve got a younger brother and he’s seen things differently to what I’ve seen when I moved on.
I only went to second year of high school and then I left to get a job. I didn’t pass what they called ‘scholarship’, mainly because my mother wasn’t in the best of health at the time. My father worked on the railways away from home, so a lot of responsibility was on me being the eldest child. That’s what happened in a lot of instances. I was fortunate to get a job with an ex-Air Force pastry cook. He opened up a pastry cook business and he employed me, so I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to earn wages. There would have been a lot of frustration if I couldn’t have got a job, and I probably would have had to look at going to work in the bush. I participated by playing football and other sporting things that went on in the town.

My mum’s health came good later. Like a lot of our people she had high blood pressure and diabetes and all of those things that lead into them. Certainly, back in those days you weren’t aware. You might go to a GP, but certainly in those areas they didn’t have other than the stock standard things that they dealt with in their own way. Some would get a GP, but certainly not send you on to a specialist for a further opinion. If the GP felt you had to be operated, well that’s where you ended up – where he said. Or you’d go to the public hospital and again, depending on what they said, then you were put in hospital. We were probably very fortunate because of the free hospital system they had in Queensland. That helped a lot. There were certain things that we noticed when my mother was admitted to hospital; whether there were other reasons for it, we don’t know. Like whether the Aboriginals were always put out on what they call ‘the veranda’, we just took that and away we went. There was covert racism in its own way. In that era they identified people that were hard workers and trying to make a life, I guess. But like a lot of things, we tried to always move forward. We made sure that we certainly joined in with the community.

When there were unsettling issues, with mothers and children, my mother assisted families that were not travelling as well. The husbands were away and working and sometimes they’d come home and my mother would ensure that they were settled. It was always that community spirit that brought us together. Or if there was a special occasion in the community, somebody made the cake, somebody made this or the stew, but there was always something there for these get-togethers. That’s community life and family life; that’s what we did. You made sure that if there was a wedding dress you couldn’t afford, the aunties would help get the material, and help make the dresses for the girls and often bridesmaids’ dresses as well. Because it was a special moment for them, they were so proud that somebody could make them a nice dress for their special day. Today it probably might still be like that in the more regional and remote type communities, but certainly it doesn’t seem to be as much in the bigger metropolitan places because people have got access to go and do their own thing. You probably don’t have that same community and family life, other
than your immediate relatives. We are trying to do that here in our community though. But sometimes when you’ve got people coming together, they’ve got their ideas, particularly from where they’ve come from. That’s a fact of life and you just make sure that they are well looked after and that they are not doing it too hard.

I went to a mixed school, but again I don’t know if there was racism because the way the curriculum was, we tended to be always sitting down the front. We did sit in our own area in the movies. We had two picture theatres and there were some things, but never said to us. Because we were out a lot there seemed to be a lot more in regard to dealing with the police. A lot of my people that I know had troubles with them because they extended the boundaries when they were confronted by the police, particularly if there had been alcohol involved. That was a fact of life right across Aboriginal Australia. In that regard, it’s like a lot of things in all the communities; you have ones that have jobs and are hard workers and then you have some that aren’t quite thinking that way as well. The same is to ensure that children are sent to school, and we always made sure that we attended school. We may not have liked to go, but we always made sure that we were there. And then like a lot of things, once you were there, well okay, let’s stay here for the day. We were only too pleased to get home, but that was life. Everybody went through that.

I left school at 14 and I worked in the post office for four years, then I changed over to a telephone linesman. I particularly recall an incident, when I sat for the post office exam to be a telegram boy: I came sixth, I think it was. The postmaster rang and said, ‘Oh, would you like to start as a telegram boy?’ So I came in to take my position. Then a lady came into the post office and there was a lot of loud noise at the front office where the postmaster’s office was located. She was quite upset by the fact that I’d been employed before her son. But the postmaster said, ‘It doesn’t matter who he is. He came sixth and your son came seventh’. I take my hat off to that man because he stood up for his convictions. I’ve got him to thank for where I am today because of his strong conviction to employ me. Because my father and all my uncles had always been hard workers, that work ethic was always there with me. It was no problem in that regard, but it certainly meant my life changed by having a permanent job. As a lot of our people used to say, ‘Get a good government job, then you know where your next fortnight pay is coming from’. It’s all these old clichés that come back to you and that’s exactly what did happen. I’d have to pay my rent and all that, but it was also to help the household. My mother made sure that I competed with my contemporaries. My mother was an excellent ironer and you could cut your fingers on the creases of my post office uniform. I’d be good in my job, so I progressed up and people were willing to help me. There may have been a lot of things not said to my face – and probably that’s what people tended to do
is make reference to you in a derogatory manner but not to your face because if they did that, they knew that they could possibly be in for something that they’d have to justify saying. All through my life I’ve never been an aggressive person. I’ve tended to talk to people and to understand people so that you’d come to a common end or common agreement.

As I progressed and did more time in the post office, I felt that there were other things that I wanted to do, especially because there was a strong involvement of our people in Charters Towers serving in the wars. My two uncles served in World War II, and my aunty served in the Women’s Land Army. When we came into the main lounge room there was always a proud photo of them in uniform, like in a lot of households. We were always aware of their contributions, so it was easier to have a desire to improve myself and join the Defence Force when the time came. After doing something like nine years in the post office (it might have been eight years), I decided that it was now the time for a career change and went to Brisbane to be a linesman. That opened my eyes up to big city living.

To be a telephone linesman I had to go to Brisbane to do a two-year course, and then I came back from Brisbane to do what they call ‘Western Service’ before they allowed you to transfer into a bigger regional city position. I did three years Western Service. I went to places like Hughenden, Magnetic Island, Julia Creek, Cloncurry and Mount Isa, and there were camping parties. At the time, because of the lead up of the activities in Southeast Asia, they had to upgrade the telephone capacity, plus they were upgrading the Townsville to Mount Isa railway line. Because they were trying to haul one-mile trains, they had to make it so there was not too much descent in the railway line. That’s where they deviated the railway line and we had to shift the telephone lines where the main railway line deviated. We would regularly have to cut across the main telephone lines so that we could change the direction of telephone line. We were camped in tents and there were a lot of men. Climbing around telegraph poles in the middle of nowhere, I never worried about bettering myself – other than reading the newspapers or the papers that used to be thrown out of trains when we were alongside the railway lines. To quote a particular funny incident: When we were all working alongside the railway lines, and even the fettlers used to sing out, ‘Paper! Paper!’ One day when I was on a train returning to work I casually said to a lady who was in the carriage, ‘I wish I had a newspaper to throw out to the men on the side of the railway line’. On my comment the lady said, ‘Oh! We’ve got to get that paper’. She then ran into the toilet saying that those poor men

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havent got paper, so she grabbed all the paper out of the toilets to throw out to those men standing alongside the railway line. When the train left Townsville, most passengers would buy newspapers or the latest papers to read on the train.

There was something like 1,000 or so workers, and a lot of the workforce was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. Because of the isolated locations and the long work schedules, the workers never returned home much in that period. The work schedule was they worked six days running, and on the seventh day they had a rest day; we used to play football, plus carried out maintenance of trucks, and washing, and all that. During the work days they were working 12- and 16-hour day shifts out there. There was that political thing in the way it was set up to get it done quickly – for a number of reasons. I'd had it. After three years of doing Western Service, I felt there should be something else; that's why I joined the Air Force. I became tired of looking at circling wind gusts and dust storms, so I applied to join the Air Force and I was fortunate enough to be selected. They had no vacancies for a qualified linesman as such, but there were vacancies in the logistics or supply side of things. I ended up leaving Townsville in January 1966. Whilst on holidays I went into recruiting to see if I could join the Royal Australian Air Force. I was always aware of the Air Force because they had a guarded Air Force base at Townsville. We'd always watch the planes taking off and landing. It was always a desire that I wanted to do. I was fortunate enough when I was selected; that's when the whole thing changed and I went away. In my previous job a lot of it was manual labour, but the military changed that away from the physical aspect. We never had much machinery to help us; we had old post diggers and all that, but there was still a lot of manual work involved, whereas the military took on a different concept. Particularly, there was a lot involved in training in the early days and then logistics was making sure that they had the right spares and anything to perform the role that they had to do. Certainly it was a change from doing physical work to doing a little bit more where you had to use your head and a lot more emphasis on appearance, particularly when you're dealing with the OH&S and things like that.

I wanted to join the Defence Force because of my uncles and my aunty. There was a large contingent of Aboriginal men that went away. There were even the guys that went away to World War I – it's well documented. I had no qualms about going, having seen the guys from Charters Towers and around that area and certainly seeing first-hand my two uncles, and the involvement of my aunty with the Land Army. Also, particularly with the influences of National Service, there was a big army base at Sellheim outside of Charters Towers, and also because of the Bredden Airfield. A lot of my aunties spoke about that, particularly after the Japanese bombed Townsville.
The Americans were staging a lot of their operations out of Bredden Airfield and Woodstock and all those inner airfields that weren’t on the coast. There was a very large contingent of American forces, including Afro-Americans, which made their presence known in Charters Towers. I can still remember them talking about certain instances that happened while the Americans were there. I was born in ’42, but they were still talking about it later on when I was older. They particularly talked about the liaison that they had with them. Because of the price of recycled metal there was a contractor who retrieved the old vehicles and machinery and scrap metal left behind by the Americans after World War II. Particularly because of their huge presence, people were aware of it and the outline of the airstrip is still there today. It appears that the Afro-American guys tended to mix a bit with our community. It appears that they were employed to do their washing and ironing, so there was a little bit of liaison in that regard as well.3

My brother and I joined the Air Force. I didn’t want to join the Army because they used to send National Servicemen up to Charters Towers. David had tried to join the Air Force, but they did not select him, so he went down the hallway and joined the Army. That’s the way things happened. Because the Army sent a lot of troops to Vietnam, David ended up there during his Army career. My family was quite pleased when I enlisted and was supportive. I spoke to them about how I was trying to better myself. If you were under 21 your family had to sign the permission form for you to enlist. You couldn’t go into hotels in Queensland until you were 21, so there were a lot of things which we couldn’t do. We’d taken things for granted, but you still had to get permissions for different things if you were under 21. Because the Vietnam War was starting up, my mother was a bit worried. Certainly, when my brother went over there, my family were very concerned. The Vietnam War was one of the first media reported wars because of the television. My family would get upset, particularly if there was something that got them thinking about my brother David. And there was always the thought that I could possibly end up over there too. Because the cost of phones being so dear, we always depended on getting the letters. My mother couldn’t write, so she used to get my cousins to come out and write the letters for her, when I was away. I would look at the writing of the letter to work out which cousin had come out to write the letter for her. Certainly, before I got married, I’d always be looking for the postman to see if there was a letter arriving from home. That’s why writing has never worried me today, because that’s what we used to do in those days.

From my brother serving in Vietnam, I came to respect those veterans who wished not to speak about their experiences in the early days, even about what they were doing. They might talk amongst their own guys, where they had camaraderie and togetherness, but not to a wider audience. The greatest thing David wanted to do was come back home to Sydney for his R&R. I think at the time I was at Richmond, so I went in and met him and had the weekend with him to catch up. That’s how our family was. We just had a laugh. The only other thing is when they had the Welcome Home Parade in 1987, they all came together. I went in to see him, but again it was their reunion and because you weren’t involved with it, you tended not to tread in their domain. You were always there to support them and that’s what it was. That’s what you do in the military: you support each other, the same if you served in any unit. You tend to have a rapport with those guys on those units that you served in. That’s the way it was.

David went through some issues, particularly with his tour over there and also other units he served with. I think that contributed to a lot of things that he had in later life. Again, he didn’t want to talk about it to us and I respect him for that. It’s the same as when we get together now with guys, particularly the returned guys. They’ve got that mateship, that camaraderie. When we are organising these ceremonies, you look and you’d soon know where they’ve served. So that’s what you tend to do, unless they want to talk. That’s the way to keep that mateship going with them. What may be okay to you is not right with them and you respect everyone. The same issue is with some of the blokes that went to Korea and served in other conflicts (there’s not too many because they are getting on, well into their 80s); you just listen to what they want to say, and say, ‘Okay’. My main role is to see that there’s been support; that’s something that I will continue to do while I have the opportunity.

The only skills requirements for the Air Force were the IQ and the psych test that you had to go through. I would say there would be a similar thing in the Defence forces, depending on what mustering that they’ve got you selected for. I would say that my educational qualifications didn’t help me. It went through an area and a period where there weren’t many people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. We were noticeable on our units. There was an element where some didn’t feel comfortable to identify, but again that’s a personal thing. I probably didn’t have any say in it because I am a little bit darker. They automatically said, ‘You are Aboriginal’, and you accepted that because that’s the way it was. In a small unit as people got to know you it was very good. You formed a mateship and there were people that understood and grew up with you. The lack of understanding seemed to arise from people that had never seen or been involved with Aboriginal people, who were uncertain. Nobody ever came up and made a snide remark to me because there would be people there
that would take it up for me. I was very fortunate in that way. If there was an odd occasion, I would question them on why they had to single me out, but again, I wasn’t privy to the discussion that went on. I had section commanders that would listen to me and I made a representation to be involved in Indigenous recruitment, because I felt it would be a career that Indigenous people could go forward and have to get the self-confidence to make something of their life. They all listened to me, but because of policy it didn’t go further than that.

Training at the time seemed very hard because I was homesick. The recruit course was in Adelaide; it was 10 weeks. I wasn’t as homesick because you had the mateship. We were all in the same position; we were all away from home, all 32 on my recruit course. When we went to Wagga Wagga for basic trade training, you were kept busy, you were on the go. When you were with the guys you tended not to dwell; you’d formed up with mates and you did things as mates. It wasn’t until I got a posting to East Sale (Victoria) that I became homesick and I just missed home. It was cold. Sale was probably one of the coldest places I’ve been. Again, there were good mates there that rallied around you. I was fortunate enough that I had an aunty that lived in Melbourne. I had a car and I used to go down to Melbourne to visit her which helped with the homesickness. I basically had five-and-a-half years at Sale, which is a longer period than the expected two-year term. Normally, postings last two years, so when we enquired from the Posting Personnel, we said, ‘Well, why have we been here for five years, what have we done?’ As a result I was posted to Amberley, Queensland.

Bev my wife was in the Air Force there; we also got married at Sale. Bev my wife was a clerk supply and I was in the supply mustering. Bev left the Air Force after we married. At that stage, servicewomen got married, they were discharged from the RAAF. In ’71 when it was time for us to be posted, we went to Amberley and we had a married quarter in Leichhardt at Ipswich. Bev did things in the community. The kids were ready to go to kindergarten, so the wives banded together. I was selected to go to America for the ferry of the F111s, and Bev felt that she’d like to go home to Manjimup in the south-west corner of Western Australia about 160 kms inland from Margaret River. Bev is non-Aboriginal, so while I did my five months in America, she went home to her family to stay with them.

It was an interesting time when I went to America because the POWs were coming back from Vietnam, Watergate was on, and there was a shooting of the First Nations people at the settlement of ‘Wounded Knee’, so it was interesting to see.4 This was around 1973 because when we’d go to the dining hall for our

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meals we would notice all the US personnel were always watching the televising of the Watergate trial which was in progress. In the US, I started at McClelland Air Force Base which was outside of Sacramento. Then we had to take an aircraft, down to Edwards Air Force Base for familiarisation flights. We were down there and I was in the logistics role. When those flights were finished they sent us back to McClelland, ready for the first aircraft to fly into Australia. So I stayed there after the first ferry left to come home and then before the next one, I was ready to come home.

One of the interesting things in the States was that I was the only person that was Indigenous. On arrival in the USA I just automatically walked up the back of the bus, but I could see the whites of the Afro-American driver’s eyes looking in the rear vision mirror with me going up the back of the bus. There were two mates and as soon as they saw me going up to the back of the bus, suddenly there were two mates that came and sat either side of me. In Charters Towers, in our early days of growing up, we lived on the outskirt of town and we used to always go up the back of the bus anyway, but not to the degree of what was happening in the States. They seemed to have more troubles with, and were more derogatory towards, the other nationalities. They made snide comments about those minorities, which I wouldn’t have been happy about. They were referred to in a manner which certainly would have made people feel very uncomfortable. To me, a lot of them didn’t fully understand where Australia was located and would make reference to and say ‘Austria’. It was mainly the ones that served in the Southeast Asia area that knew more about Australia. There were quite a lot of people that had never been to Australia, so they would often talk about how we spoke so quickly. I never thought of ourselves in a different light. Generally, a lot of the Americans that we dealt with were understanding of what we were trying to do. They would take us home to have a meal and invite us into their homes and that just made our stay a bit more pleasurable. At work it’s those little things that you appreciate when you are away from your home and your loved ones. Things were certainly good in that regard.

There was one time I had to go down to Burbank Airport outside Los Angeles to pick up spares for our aircraft and my biggest shock was driving out on the expressway at Los Angeles around peak hour. I had a Plymouth Ranch Wagon and there was a police highway patrol guy driving alongside of me waving a light baton indicating to me that I was not going fast enough and holding up the peak hour traffic as I was doing under 80 miles an hour. The LA [Los Angeles] freeways were very terrifying at times, especially after being used to driving in the traffic at Ipswich. It was an experience I will not forget when we were at Edwards Air Force Base. We were halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas so we tended to go into Las Vegas because you couldn’t be down that part of the world and not go into Vegas. Working in close liaison with the Americans, we were able to
see they had different opinions to Australians because they saw us as something different. In that regard it was very enlightening. Again, we were there to get a job done and as long as they were working with us to meet our priorities and targets, that’s what we wanted. But certainly to understand their way of life in their home country, you know they are a lot different, but certainly in their own home country they made us very welcome and were very good to us.

Eventually I was changed over and I came back to Amberley at Ipswich. I did my role with different jobs and wherever we had to go and to provide support when they were doing exercises. I did my time in Amberley and then I got a Western Australian posting and went to Perth, to the Air Training Corps Cadets for the two years. There was a change of government policy and the Air Force had to look after the Air Training Corps Cadets. They had a different role again, but we still supported them with the facilities until they got operational. I was then posted out of Perth into the School of Air Radio [Radschool or Radio School] for six months. Before I left Amberley I had been promoted to sergeant and then I did six months at the Radio School. After that I was posted down to the RAAF Publications Unit where they dealt with all the publications for the Air Force. I did five years again, I was a sergeant in charge of the warehouse and I had a number of personnel. We had an officer and I enjoyed that role. They were very good people. For the book binders, there was a permanent posting – that was the only such posting they had in the Air Force. It was the intention that the support personnel were changed over every two or three years.

After that I was posted to Townsville and I got promoted to flight sergeant in 1980. While I was there, I was recognised for my role at the RAAF Publications and awarded a British Empire Medal. I only did 11 months up in Townsville; this short period was very hard on my wife and children. My children had three state educations in 12 months because they then posted me out of Townsville into No. 2 Stores Depot here at Regents Park in Sydney. When I came back down here, I was put into the facilities side of the Air Force where I was looking after building maintenance and facilities and quarters. I did two years and then I was promoted to warrant officer. I went over to the Regents Park side and I was in charge of 2 Site Warehouse Complex. I did 12 months, and then I was posted into the RAAF Support Unit, where I liaised with Defence contractors and supply contractors. I completed a couple of years there, and then I was posted into the RAAF Base Butterworth in Malaysia in 1985. I did two years as a warrant officer in charge of the warehouse over there. Your family were able to accompany you, so we had married quarters on Butterworth, which was located on the mainland, which is across from the Island of Penang. I did my two years up there and then I posted back to my previous position at the support unit and Air Force supply. I finished up my years in that position and then I applied for discharge in 1989.
Malaysia was interesting because they had three nationalities. There were three cultures, which were the Chinese, Indian and Malay. They hadn’t seen many Indigenous people in the services, so they couldn’t make up their mind what I was. They felt there weren’t very many coloured people in Australia. So the Indians said, ‘No, he is Indian’, and the Malays said, ‘No, he’s a Bumiputera Malay’, and the Chinese couldn’t say much so they went along with them. I had 50 to 60 local people who were employed on the warehouse side of the operations. The local people who worked on the base were indeed great people and were greatly respected for their role. We certainly respected their cultures in every way and always remembered that we were visitors to their country. I went out of my way to have a better understanding of each of the cultures. We were invited into their homes to meet their families and did things like leaving the shoes at the front door and various other things, participated in events where invited, particularly their festivals. It was very eye-opening for my children. We played a lot of sport because that’s the way the after hours working operated when we were there. The wives were involved in club activities. It was a very social type of environment up there. It made things where we all came together and we worked together, certainly to keep things moving and to support each other. That just adds to that mateship that servicemen and servicewomen have.

Sometimes a lot of civilian people don’t quite understand why you want to get together with somebody you knew back in the late ’60s, like 40 years later. But you have so much in common: we were single, we got married in similar time frames, and we’d seen the children born and growing up. Plus we had things
that we did where we worked at different roles that we did, so it all builds up that bond and mateship. We have an East Sale reunion every two years. It’s those things that people want to come to and they always take an interest in what you are doing and how you are travelling, particularly as you get into the older age. Some of us are not as fortunate as others, but that’s why we always enquire on how everybody is going.

In the 23 years I served there was the odd racist thing, but as soon as they saw me they retracted. I know it was there because different people had said, but anything that happened was usually where people didn’t understand and there was a generalisation. But once they got to know you and especially when you were competing on the same level, you would progress yourself forward. I was very fortunate I was promoted to warrant officer in 17 years. I was given support in every way to enable me to be promoted and I was promoted in the minimum amount of time to warrant officer in the non-commissioned ranks. I always believed that I’m no different; we are all equals and that’s what equality is all about. In my case I got recognised: I got a Certificate of Outstanding Service and was nominated for a British Empire Medal, and also to be promoted in that time frame – I was supported in every way. It all goes back to my upbringing through my mother and my father to work hard. My mother would say in the early days, ‘You may not be the part, but at least dress well and look the part’. That went down to the way you were dressed and the way you conducted yourself: not to be too mouthy and always take time to listen. That’s something I have always taken on and it’s even something that I do today when I’m dealing with people. I try to be supportive and helpful. If there is a disagreement, then I ask, ‘Why?’ So we can come to a common agreement. But again, there are other things that I do which is to be fully researched before you go in if anybody’s saying anything to you. During my time of service I wasn’t involved in Indigenous politics like the 1967 Referendum, mainly because I was serving in Sale in ’67. Although, I did sometimes go to Melbourne or to church where Pastor Doug Nicholls conducted his services. I made some great friends while I had the opportunity. It was indicated that I was on the reserve list for posting to Vietnam while this was going on and I didn’t know when I was going to go up. I asked the guys, ‘Am I going?’ And they said, ‘You are on the reserve list’. Depending on where you were being posted to, you we were required to do particular training before departing. However, as time went on, the government of the day brought our involvement to an end and brought home all the veterans.

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We didn’t have the time for activism because we were expected to be front and centre first thing in the morning. When I went to Amberley I was involved with Neville Bonner because he was trying to get recognition for Aboriginal servicemen and servicewomen, particularly on Anzac Day. He would come out because he lived at Ipswich. He got onto the base to have Indigenous people to participate, so they recognised me and they would ask me to go in and attend the ceremonies that Senator Bonner was involved with.6

I left the Air Force in ’89 because my two children were ready to commence work or look at a university education. They hadn’t grown up with grandparents on either side and we decided to settle in Sydney here to give them the best opportunity, so that’s what we did. My sons were then completing schooling and looking for work; my eldest son was looking at a university education. My sons were playing top-level basketball and one was playing top-level Australian rules [football] for Sydney. We were team managers, helping them and going with them; we enjoyed that. My wife was also a good squash player and played golf. My eldest son is now a physiotherapist and my other son works for the Australian Sports Commission. He enjoys working for the Sports Commission and my son’s enjoying what he’s doing that with his wife and three children. We have always supported each other because that’s what we do. We did all of these things by moving around the country and when the time came, we decided that we were going to stay as a family.

I worked for Plessey Australia because they were looking for ex-Defence personnel. They had a major contract which was a major step in communications for the Army. As a logistics manager, I completed 10 years with the company. We were located at Meadowbank here in Sydney. We had our own home and we had friends here outside the service as well as those that were in the service that kept in touch. Again, that’s where we’re happy and we have access to anything that we want; that’s what life is all about.

During the process BAE Systems [British Aerospace Systems] was formed, had taken over the company at the time, and there were a number of changes that were implemented. Contracts were coming to an end and operations were being relocated to different areas. Because these changes were taking place, there were many personnel who were made redundant. After being made redundant, I was 58 years old and I took a while to get another job. I was fortunate enough to get a position with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC]. At the time they wanted somebody for a short term, so my supervisor said, ‘Oh, okay. We’ll put you on’. Meanwhile, that went from a short contract to being there nearly nine years. I was doing policy and advocacy for ATSIC and dealing

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6 Senator Neville Bonner was the first Aboriginal member of the Australian Commonwealth Parliament. See Angela Burger, *Neville Bonner, a Biography* (South Melbourne, Vic: Macmillan, 1979).
with supporting the elected regional council. We also had a commissioner, so I had a support role in the Sydney office. You had to be aware of the policies and programs that were being implemented in the region. When ATSIC folded, our department changed and were in the Department of Immigration, Multiculturalism and Indigenous Affairs and then we were changed again over to Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA]. Again, we carried on with them and we were told that we were in the Indigenous Coordination Centre where we had community engagement with the organisations in the Sydney region. This helps me now when I am dealing with issues in the community, where you try to pass on that knowledge to the various community organisations so they can negotiate, be aware of governance, and where they can compete if there’s any issue in their LGA [local government area] or community. They can apply for funding to meet those needs. It’s important, and I’ve always believed you pass on that knowledge and you help to educate the young people so that they can carry it on and pass it on and so that we have a happy, vibrant community.

I have been actively involved with various organisations, and assist organisations which ask for my assistance, including with my land council, which I am a member of up in the Gudjula area. There are issues of Aboriginality with people. They have to confirm their Aboriginality. Then I guide people in our communities and make them aware of who they can go to. There was a little bit more with native title starting to come. Again, it was identifying the families who were identified as the traditional owners and the connectivity to the land and the requirements of native title. That was a big thing where you tended to look after your mob because you were in high-profile jobs. You never got involved with the communities and the wider communities. It wasn’t until later in the piece when I become a member of the local land council here, and it wasn’t until I started at ATSIC that I became fully aware that the issues were Australia-wide. I saw the role that the broader commissioners and ATSIC were doing, as well as other departments such as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and other organisations at state level. While working for them and being involved with community engagement and Indigenous Coordination Centres [ICCs], you would hear these problems. Because of your background experience, you were able to help these communities and give them options to move forward by making them aware of funding things where they could look at inequalities that may be happening in their communities. But again, there’s always something and because of where I am now, I have a better understanding of the wider issues. Where we felt that government policy has been aired in

7 The Native Title Act 1993 set up the National Native Title Tribunal from 1 January 1994 in response to the 1992 Mabo ruling. The National Native Title Tribunal is the main forum through which Indigenous Australian groups can lodge a native title claim. For more information, see www.nntt.gov.au.
the best possible way, that people have had an opportunity to comment on it, and that it’s the best solution and scenario for that area or LGA, that has helped us have a positive debate.

I retired from my FaHCSIA job in July 2010. It was time to retire and I always believe in giving young people the opportunity. I was fortunate enough in the role that I was employed in to help the wider community, the region and people had access to me, I saw the changes we were moving through; ATSIC closed down and the demise that went on from there and the uncertainty. Then to see the coming on board of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, which is new hope to give people a word. I have seen a lot of that change in history from that side, particularly Indigenous affairs, and my own history as well which I grew up with. I like to see and to guide people so they can be involved in those social areas where we are still having problems: with health, education and employment, family violence and those other problems which are causing concern. I have had the opportunities, but again, I feel we’re at a stage now where there are vibrant people that can get the point across, help the debate, answer, and be representative of the people that they are in there for. I also still represent our people where I serve on a number of committees and boards and where I have been asked to participate, to give us representation. I certainly pass on information to the community and my network where I think it’s relevant to help to move things forward, more so in the last 10 years.

From a North Queensland point of view, I’ve always been aware of what’s going on up there, particularly from the Palm Island situation. That’s why I always go up and try to march. My brother and I used go back to Charters Towers to march for Anzac Day whenever we were able to get up there, so that the community can see that there were two of their community people who served their country. The Coloured Diggers Project in Sydney: there was a lack of understanding when the Redfern Community wanted to have their own march and commemoration service. The community felt that they wanted to give recognition to those people who had served their country and particularly those returned veterans. The Coloured Diggers Project, Babana Aboriginal Men’s Group Redfern and the NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans Services Association were instrumental in making the ceremony happen from that early period to today.

It’s a different life once you leave the service. That’s what you’re concentrating on once you get older; you’ve got grandchildren and things like that, so you can be involved with other interests such as community affairs and other odd interests that really jump up with the services. I’m a little bit more involved

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8 The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples was founded in April 2010 as a company meant to be a representative body for Indigenous Australians. As a private corporation it is not subject to the same government control as previous statutory bodies like ATSIC. For more information, see www.nationalcongress.com.au.
because of the NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Veterans and Services Association [ATSIVSA] and my involvement with getting recognition for our servicemen and servicewomen, and certainly working with the people in the Australian War Memorial and Department of Veterans’ Affairs and Defence here in Sydney and Canberra. We have a lot of dialogue with each other to progress and move things forward. I’ve been able to talk to people where the outcomes have been very positive.

When we’re having ceremonies or marches, there may be a thing about someone’s grandfather and I can ring the Indigenous liaison officers at the Australian War Memorial; if it’s something to do with veterans’ things, I talk to the Indigenous officers at the Department of Veterans’ Affairs; and if it’s Defence or to do with recruits, Indigenous recruit course, we go to the Indigenous people in the Department of Defence. I’m still not conversant with the Aboriginal ex-service community in Victoria, but they seem to do things the same as the people in South Australia and Western Australia. I have contacts in North Queensland because it’s veterans like some of the guys that know me from when we all joined up. They invited me to come on board. Just in our family alone there are quite a number of my relatives who have served in the military. There were a lot of them who had done shorter periods, but there’s a few of us that have completed in excess of 20 years. We have a lot of support from the government of New South Wales in a lot of the communications that have come out. While children are being educated they, and the wider community, have an understanding that it’s not all Indigenous; it’s a wider thing for everybody to have an understanding. But again, it’s an individual thing; if people want to come to events, they come and if they don’t, then that’s fine. We have a lot of involvement with the State Branch of New South Wales RSL where a lot of the things happen. They give us a lot of support, as does the DVA and some of the government agencies like Reconciliation NSW, NSW Department of Education and the Premier and Cabinet, as well as the NSW government and also the Aboriginal Catholic Education Commission here in Sydney. We have representations to have a display at the War Memorial at Hyde Park. There are a lot of people there that are helping to spread the word to give them the recognition that we have been working towards. But again, with a lot of these things, you don’t achieve overnight success. It’s something that has to be continually worked at. That’s why I’ve come on board to help Dave Williams [president of ATSIVSA NSW], who has always worked very hard in that regard. There are other issues, not only with previous service people, but with current serving guys as they leave the service. There are issues spreading the word, particularly with remote RSLs.

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9 Since the time of this interview, the City of Sydney commissioned an Aboriginal artist to design a sculpture to commemorate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military in Hyde Park. The artwork was dedicated in March 2015.
where the whole thing is still there. But we are building that confidence and going out to support them with the Anzac Days and participating so that they have people out there in the communities and it encourages them to participate as well. It’s an ongoing thing and hopefully we can get people that will support us to get more people up at face level. I wasn’t involved in the founding of ATSIVSA in NSW, but Dave and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs have had a big part in bringing that together. I can’t speak on behalf of the other state RSLs, but certainly the partnership that we have with them here is certainly good. I speak that from the first-hand because I work with them as a chair of that ceremony we hold every year during Reconciliation Week.10

It’s interesting to see now, 30 and 40 years later, the role and the advances that they have made to give Indigenous people an opportunity to join the services. That’s why I’ve always been very interested in watching Defence from afar on what they are doing. Now people are aware of our culture and heritage, whereas years ago they weren’t. Aboriginal people were seen as people that were lacking in so many ways, so they formed their opinions on that. But again, as we’ve seen, if you look at the migration over the period, the Australian attitude has been a bit that way as well. If you look at migration in its present form, the refugees are similar in that racist comments that are made are similar to any people that they didn’t understand. But that’s the way it is and what I try to do is encourage the younger people to be proud of who they are and to be proud of their Aboriginality – to give people self-confidence. I think if they do that then they can say, ‘Well, that’s why I am here to better myself’. Or they adopt their own strategy on how they can get over these things, especially dealing with the negative comments.

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Figure 8. Harry Allie today
Source: Courtesy Harry Allie
For Indigenous service they have always said that you go anywhere. Servicemen and women are role models in their communities; those are the ones that are proud of their Aboriginality or the heritage. It’s much bigger because they are a closer-knit community in the Torres Strait. Most of their representatives appear to have been in the Navy because of the role that they play up in the Torres Strait. It’s in those early stages, when you were trying to determine who you are, what you want to pursue, there are so many things because it’s a totally different environment. If you are homesick I would like to think that in this day and age that with the IT technology that they’ve got – Skype or mobile phone, web things – they can keep in contact with their loved ones, their community, or even if there is a little bit of faltering, their grandmother or their mother. Or the people that they identify with as their loved ones can give them the support. Plus there’s the role with Defence where they have got Indigenous units; then they can talk to them and there will be somebody to mentor them or talk to and get them through that next thing. They are no different to a lot of other recruits. There’s that uncertainty of leaving, particularly if they’ve come from an environment that’s been very close. There’s good and bad. There’s an opportunity for them to get home for a weekend and just get some reassurance. I would say that to get them over that first 12 months is probably the biggest hurdle – where they get into the step of their role and what’s expected of them. Sometimes when they are going through trade training and recruit, they are not patted on the forehead and kissed and put into bed each night. Sometimes some of them have troubles coping with that and the mixture of putting it all together to come out, the finished product at the end of the day.

They will see that we all had similar problems, and at the end of the day it was the way we handled it. You will also get stories where people couldn’t handle it. I grew up in an area where we had a strict community, we were watched and we were told by the community when we weren’t doing the right thing. Then you would be reprimanded accordingly and you had to justify your behaviour. That was never a problem in my situation, or I believe in the situation of my brother. We went first and got to go the way we did and to represent our country as well as to get a job done and work with mates. That’s what the military is all about: mateship. That’s been proven over and over since Gallipoli to the present day. But again today there are still people that don’t understand; that is why we spread the word. I believe we are moving forward, yes, but don’t rest on your laurels.