Seaman in the First Gulf War

Neil Macdonald

Australia was one of the first nations to offer its support to the United States-led coalition against Iraq after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The Australian contribution was primarily from the Royal Australian Navy. Serving on the HMAS Sydney was Gumbaynggirr man Neil Macdonald. Neil’s life story includes a long career in the Navy but also a strong commitment to Reconciliation, education and providing mental health support for Indigenous Australians.

My dad’s Scottish; Dad and his family came out in the late 1950s, early 1960s, and Mum’s Gumbaynggirr from Nambucca Heads. I’m the oldest; I have two sisters, and then I have a younger brother. Mum’s mum was the matriarch of the family. I had a lot to do with my Mum’s brothers and sisters. The family ended up at Alexandria in Sydney, which is just down the road from Redfern. We lived in Melbourne because Dad was an engineer, a tradesman at Cadbury Schweppes. Mum was a housewife and also she did office work for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Melbourne and other places too.

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1  This interview was recorded in Canberra on 3 and 5 December 2009.
I completed Year 12, did four years in South Croydon Primary School in Melbourne and the rest at the local Catholic boarding school up at Lismore for six years. It’s when I went to boarding school, that’s when being Aboriginal became a major issue. When I was living in Melbourne, you never got racism. Especially when you’re only up to 12 years old, no one worries about your race. When I went to boarding school up in Lismore there were a lot of people who came from Moree out in north-western New South Wales, whose views of Kooris were very completely different. They used to go, ‘You’re different’ and ‘this is what happens at Vegemite Village in Moree’. They’d put you in the same boat, but it didn’t happen all the time. There were a couple of other Koori people but you learnt to keep your mouth shut and not rock the boat. We [the Koori students] all had our own things. I had sport; I did athletics and played rugby league. One person didn’t like sport and the other person just liked footy and I liked athletics. And that was the way they went.

Sometimes I did rock the boat and it just used to irritate them. Some students would have a go at me about the New South Wales Land Rights Act. In the 1980s I think it was the Green Paper Act – they brought out for land rights in New South Wales. The issue that always came up was, ‘Oh they’re trying to claim the golf course in Moree’. Because most of the golf courses were probably on Crown land, the Land Rights Act basically said, and this is where I used to rock the boat, that if it’s on Crown land you can’t rule, you can’t make a claim. If they want to make a claim they can make a claim but in the Act it says you can’t, you’re not going to get it. The same went with private land. So it used to piss them off if I quoted the legislation back at ’em.2

I joined the New South Wales public service in April or May 1987. I was in with the Roads and Transport Authority in New South Wales. In the old days it was called the Department of Motor Transport. They’re the ones who issued licences and registration for cars. That lasted six months and then I went over to the Lands Department and I stayed there till October 1988. The Navy offered trades at the time and I wanted something different. I always wanted to join up and I just waited; you have to do it when the time is right. The time was right because Nick Greiner came in as premier and he was slashing the public servants. Because he froze the jobs for three to four months, I just decided then and there to leave and join the Navy. My Dad had been in the Navy before me. Dad was happy; Mum was a bit sad – she didn’t want me to join up.

It was three months initial training at Cerberus in Victoria, down at Western Port Bay. Recruit training was pretty easy – it wasn’t as difficult as boarding school. The only difference really was the fitness side of it. You still had to have

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that discipline like boarding school, which was the equivalent to what was happening in recruit school. I was in Moran division and we had co-classes. You had classes of about 20 people and in one group they lost half the class. You had a choice of optional discharge and it’s abbreviated to OD, for like overdose; in one class they lost half the people. And they had one of the better instructors. They literally said it just wasn’t for them.

Race didn’t come into the training from the instructors. You got all their stories, we call them warries – what they’ve done overseas, when they’re on the ship or in the naval career. They used to feed you all the information. They keep telling you ‘Oh this happened to me, oh that happened’ and so on. If anything ever bad happened it was the other ship or the other person. It was good; I enjoyed the recruits training, which was only three months. After that it was the technical training and that was just over nine months. That was just really basic electronics. That was pretty hard. You have to be there for nine months and most people left after six months. The training is different for every branch of the Navy. Stewards are only there for less than 12 weeks, cooks, four months. But marine mechanical was six months and then we were nine months.

I was looking at doing electrical or marine technical. You went for the basic training to get an understanding of the electrical side of things. What’s AC, what’s DC, what do batteries do, wires and gauges and all that so you just got a better idea. Coming up to about two-thirds of the way through, they ask you what branch category you want to go into. At the time you had the choice between being ETP [Electrical and Technical Power], as we say, electronics. Then you had the other one, which was just like being a basic electrician – electrical technical weapons system. And then you got communications and electrical technical weapons [ETW, also known as Gun Busters]. They were more into fixing up radios and all that. The branch I chose was weapons systems where we maintained the weapons systems, fired the weapons systems, or what I did was maintain it. What I went into was the naval combat data systems and at the end, later on in my career, maintained the computers and radar displays.

There were about nine or 10 of us in the class. I ended up getting on a ship in refit in Hobart. That was my first ship and I stayed on there for three to four months. I got a chance to go on Perth to do some sea time because I was nagging them to do some sea time. My first ‘overseas’ deployment was to Tasmania in early 1990; Tasmania was great. The next place was to Brisbane on the Perth. It was a DDG [guided missile destroyer] with about 330 people. That was the first cyclone that I went through. It was really rough and you got these belts and you would put your pillow underneath yourself. I put the belt on me so I wouldn’t fall out of my rack. The next morning we would hear that a lot of people fell out of their rack on the top bunks when we got hit by these freak waves that would turn the ship over and back over.
I’d say there were about 60 people in the electrics division. That’s just a rough estimate, because it’s a long time ago now. You became close with the other people in the branch because you went through training at Cerberus. You got to meet other people by playing sport with them. Everyone in the junior ranks knew each other. As people got to know you in the higher ranks, you got to talk to them more. Being electrical we were always told our nickname’s ‘Greenies’ because in the old days the officers used to wear their rank gold braids, green in there, which showed that they were electrical officers. And everyone says, ‘Oh you Greenies, you’ll go to sleep in your rack’. People think we don’t do much work. Half the time if there’s a fault we have to stay up and try and fix it.

It was great in the Navy. It was fantastic. Look, it’s not for everyone. People honestly compare the military by watching the American bloody war movies and the bastardisation that goes on, and I say, ‘Nothing like that ever happens’. They have got this extreme notion that people get bastardised in the Australian Defence Force. It’s a really different thing altogether. You’re under a lot of stress within the Defence Force. It’s no excuse, but some people do have to let off steam. I’ve seen it, but at the same time there’s got to be a limit. What I’m saying is that no one picks on anyone. If someone is not good at their job, no one is going to throw them off the ship into the water. They’ll give them a second chance, a third chance, and the sad fact is they’ll give them a fourth chance when really they shouldn’t. They should be saying ‘Right, we can’t accept you as electronics technician, but have you decided to go to another branch, become a writer, become a stores clerk, become a cook, something else?’ Some people can’t make it in their trade or their branch and it might be better to transfer over to another branch. If someone wasn’t good at their job, it’s not about getting rid of them. There have been examples where someone hasn’t been good at electronics but they’ve been good at the other job that they’ve been transferred to do. It saves the Navy money training someone else up, because they’ve already got the background.

On the Perth we went to Brisbane, came back, and then I went back to Hobart and then, about a month later, my chief called me up and he said, ‘You’re getting a posting on the Sydney, to go on the world deployment’. We went from Sydney to Fremantle; Fremantle to Seychelles; Seychelles to Alexandria, Egypt; Egypt to Istanbul, Turkey; Turkey to Gallipoli. From Gallipoli we went to Naples, Italy. And then from there we went to Tulane, France. From Tulane we went to Portsmouth, England, and we went from down there, Plymouth, Portland and then we went over to Kiel, Germany. Then we went to Sweden, Norway, back to Edinburgh and then we went over to Halifax, Norfolk, Virginia in the States. Stopped at the Panama Canal but in the US base there. San Diego, Hawai’i, Pago Pago in Samoa, West Samoa, American Samoa I should say, and then back to Sydney. That trip was six months. My nickname was Yasser. We were in the
Middle East area, Egypt, and the boys on the ship would make fun out of me by saying, ‘Oh, local make good’ [because of my appearance]. The major problem is, some people do go overboard, but you just treat it as a joke. You don’t know their limitations. I just left it at that.

We knew from Hawai‘i that we were going to go the Gulf after the invasion of Kuwait. This time it was only Navy going to war. We pulled into Hawai‘i overnight. We came back to Fleet Base East, Sydney, and everyone had leave and we got the ship prepared to go to war and we did work ups to prepare us for war. We sailed down via the Bight, up to Freo, and that was good because we got a lot of support. The day we left, one of the things that the sailors always have is all blue chux [wipes] and you see the waving when we were leaving Sydney Harbour. It was really good.

There are only certain things I can remember really well, but one of the main memories was when we were in the Hilton in Dubai before the invasion. A lot of us knew the girls that were on the West Australia because we went through training together and everyone knew each other. We were all in the Hilton and we were all drinking in our civvies and we were waiting for other people to come downstairs from their hotel rooms and meeting up with people from other ships. Behind us were all these Pommie, British businessmen, all dressed up in nice suits. The others were all talking. I had my back to them, I was listening and my mates were all sitting over there just talking. I was just having a beer being silent and what picked me up was they were talking about the war and when it was going to end and I’m going, ‘Oh okay, suits all right, could be officers’. But then they were talking about how they’re trying to get contracts to rebuild Kuwait. They kept going on about it and I was just listening and I was going, ‘Oh my god there are people going to die and all you’re talking about is trying to win contracts to rebuild Kuwait!’ And that really dampened a lot, how people see it. And that’s the way I see Iraq.

Once the invasion began, we stayed where we were. We spent 48 days straight out to sea and same with Brisbane. Our ship was protecting oil platforms, doing jobs that were prescribed to us by the Americans. For the first 24 days I was in defence watches where you’re six on, six off, four on, four off, six on. I can’t remember exactly, but they changed the whole defence watch system. During that time, I got a cushy job when we refuelled. When we got replenished at sea for stores and ammunition, I’d be on communications talking to the ships.

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We had been up there for a couple of months and every two weeks, we’d get the mail bags onto the ship. We were refuelling off this American ship and I was on comms and one thing I do is talk fast. Sometimes if I didn’t feel like talking, and they wanted to talk, I’d always talk fast and they’d stop talking because they couldn’t understand me. This particular Yank on comms asked me when we received our mail. And I said, ‘Oh we get it every week’. And then he said, ‘Well we’ve been up here for four months and we haven’t got one mail bag’. Oh god did I feel small. I could not talk any further. It took me about 10 to 15 minutes to get back into conversation with him. We had to confer on replenishment at sea [RAS], or transfer of fuel. I never felt so small in my entire life.

You’d see the task force going up with the US Marines that were supposed to invade Kuwait, but they didn’t. Then you’d see the old battleships and then you’d be hearing them bombing Kuwait. The skipper came down to the flight deck one day and he said, ‘Did you hear that noise?’ And it’s just explosions. And we’re saying, ‘Yeah’. We thought it was artillery from land bombarding some poor bugger. The skipper was saying, ‘That was the USS Missouri firing them big guns, doing a shore bombardment’. Oh god, hate to have been under those shells.

During the day, because of mines, the ship would go travel and be able to move, but at night all engines would be switched off and we’d float with the tide because you couldn’t see the mines at night. You can’t pick them up with sonar or anything. At least half the sailors lived below the waterline and where the sailors were, our hatches were shut. If we got hit by a mine, you’d probably not get out because the hatches, depending where the explosion was, have a hatch buckle so you wouldn’t be able to open it. People coped at the time – but if you understand what some of the psychiatric illnesses do, you would find that some people don’t worry about it, but some people would find it stressful. It’s pretty bad.

I’ll never forget that night before it became official that the war started (not the ground invasion). It was about 2 o’clock in the morning Persian Gulf time and I was up. This bloke came up and said, ‘Yasser, Yasser, I’ve got some information for you’. I said, ‘What, you can’t tell anyone?’ He said, ‘The war’s going to start at 2:45 in the morning’. I was on the afternoon late shift. He said, ‘Don’t tell anyone’. I kept it silent, right. It’s coming up to midnight, it was about say 10 o’clock. I went into the 67 millimetre magazine and a few people there and the XO [executive officer] was there and the XO goes, ‘By the way lads, the war’s going to start tomorrow morning; it’s to be declared tomorrow morning’. And that was after just talking to the boys. I was walking out and the XO said, ‘Yasser, don’t say anything to anyone’. I went, ‘Oh okay’, so no problems. I walked out, went to check our space was secured before I went to sleep. I did that and
I went downstairs, and then I went to this place called the breezeway and it’s where all the smokers are. I’ve never seen it before, but the whole breezeway was filled with smoke. It’s basically kept secret by everyone but everyone else bloody knew. It was so funny that night. The skipper made an announcement and went on. I didn’t listen to it much and I just fell back to sleep.

When the war ended we came in for port at Dubai and we were having fun. You had drinks and all that over and done with. And then we went back to sea and it was just a real anticlimax. And then after that it was like, okay what’s going to happen next? Rumours were going through saying our time was going to be extended. Some of these rumours came from the birdies [expression for the naval aviation crew] because some of them it was their first time out to sea and they wanted to get home. They’d be spreading the rumours that we were going to be extended for another two months. And the funny thing was for all of us we wouldn’t have cared.

After the Gulf War I got further training in electronics at HMAS *Nirimba*, which was near Blacktown at the time. I spent about 12 months there. Then after that I went to submarine training and me and subs didn’t agree. After my first dive on the submarine they just dropped me back at Sydney Harbour the next morning. Then I went on for further training in the multi-functional display, which is the radar display. The UYK7 computer, which correlates all the data coming in and gives the range and puts the computer bits and pieces to things, says what the ranges of the aircraft are.

Electrical training was changed and that was handled dismally. In the old days you only got your apprenticeship and that was it. So you became a warrant officer and you wouldn’t have any other qualifications except your apprenticeship in your particular trade. But the Keating/Hawke governments were a period of revamping the whole training scheme. TAFE qualifications were all of a sudden recognised by universities. The universities had to accept it, bad luck. So you got diplomas; by the time you were a warrant officer you got an advanced diploma, and people couldn’t see that. It was shocking. That lost more people from the services than the sexual harassment because people just didn’t like change. And it wasn’t negative change it was a bloody brilliant change. We were setting the standards; that’s what the Navy wanted to do. Some of it was bad, some of it was good. But overall it was going to help people. We were getting paid the same and at the end of the day the problem you’ve got is that a lot of the men didn’t see that. At the same time, the hierarchy didn’t know how to do things properly. It was spur of the moment. A ship is like a small town and they just didn’t really know how to get it. The good thing about it was you could take your qualifications from one state TAFE to another state TAFE, whereas before, you might have to start again. The Navy decided, right we’re going to
do it, it’s going to come in at this date, let’s push it forward. You might say they were at the forefront. Before, you got a diploma, but the new system gave the non-technical trades better qualifications (apart from the cooks).

There are a lot of positives that came out of the Navy. Because we were in the Navy and we travel overseas, the Navy had a good system set up where you’ll have a lieutenant, if you’re a junior sailor, as your divisional officer, and then you’ll have a chief, divisional chief and then your divisional petty officer. If you have problems you’d go through that rank structure. When you look at the other workforces, they don’t have something as strong as that. So in certain aspects it’s better than civilian workforce – it has its positives and negatives.

The Defence Force is really hard, though, especially for Kooris because you’ve got to have minimum of Year 10 education. If they’re not Year 10 they’re screwed.4 I think at the end of the day what you’ve got to see is that if they join the Defence Force and they’re from the outback, they’d have a lot more security than from say Bourke into Sydney, to have accommodation and food. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is the lower – you’ve got to have air, food, accommodation. Well, when you meet that you go to the next level and I see the Defence Force is doing that – security, jobs and so forth. Then they can self-actualise at the top and become what they want to become. It can be a good thing. They’ve also got to be strong themselves because sometimes they’re going to cop it. Instead of punching someone they can just walk away. Or say, ‘Right – I think you’re wrong because of this, this and this’, and leave it at that. You can’t run away from it. You’re going to sleep in the same block as them or on the same ship. You might end up sitting at the same bloody table on the ship and eating dinner together, or lunch or breakfast. So that’s the difference. On civvy street you can just walk away from it. You might take sick leave. At the end of the day, someone may be pissing you off but you can’t let your other mates around you down by chucking sick leave or something like that.

Eventually, I left the Navy when I was medically discharged. I was on a Veterans’ Affairs pension, special rate pension. I’ve been on it since October ’99. Since that time I’ve done voluntary work at Vietnam Veterans Federation, I’ve been also the Indigenous co-chair for ACT Reconciliation. I’ve been the secretary of the Sorry Day Committee. My belief is I may be a TPI but still I can offer myself

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4 In 2009, the ADF commenced the Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course (IPRC) to eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged between 17 and 54. The six-week course runs across six months, combining intensive week-long residential schools with other study in between. The emphasis of the course is on improving candidates’ fitness, literacy and numeracy skills so that they can meet the required Year 10 literacy, numeracy and science standards. The course does not guarantee participants a position within the ADF, but it has been successful at recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women since 2009. See ‘About IPRC’, Indigenous Pre Recruitmment Course, online, iprc.aboriginallearningcircle.com/about-iprc, accessed 12 January 2015; ‘Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course’, The Centre of Diversity Expertise: Indigenous Affairs, online, www.defence.gov.au/code/indigenous/career/ADF/iprc.asp, accessed 12 January 2015.
as a volunteer to other things. My aunty set up the ACT Reconciliation down here, so she asked me to be Indigenous co-chair and I said I would around 2000. When they got my TPI for me I decided to help out on the Vietnam Veterans side. So it worked quite well.

We got grants from the government to run adult education courses. We also won the national award for adult learning education week. I forgot what year that was. During that time, we ran a lot of camps and workshops. We’d be camping out at Nymagee, or be camping at Queanbeyan, talk about Reconciliation and it was great. It was brilliant having my aunty set it up because she came from that area. It worked quite well. Later, I got asked to do Journey of Healing ACT. I was Indigenous co-chair for a while. Then I got asked to be the secretary of the National Sorry Day Committee; I’m the ACT representative for the National Sorry Day Committee, and I do secretarial work. I just kept to that; it was just all I could do. I didn’t get involved in anything else.

I normally bump into Navy mates sometimes. I see them on Anzac Day, but I hardly go to Anzac Day marches anymore because the politicians always talk bullshit. They always sound like warmongers, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan [in 2001]. I remember one of my mates was still in the Navy and he just almost said word for word the Defence minister’s speech at Anzac Day. He knew exactly what he was going to say, and I said, ‘What, did you see it?’ And he said, ‘Nah I’m just hearing this crap a lot now’. My belief is it should be the Governor-General that does the speech, not the politicians. If they want to speak they can, following the Governor-General’s speech.

The [Canberra] Indigenous Anzac Day service is at 6 o’clock in the morning, after the dawn service. Again, it’s just the politicians who get up there and start speaking; it’s just one of those crappy things. The first time the Redfern Anzac Day March was on [2007], I did read about it but I didn’t know it was a continuous thing. I’d still go for a few drinks with my mates down at the RSL. We Indigenous veterans do meet up. You meet them on Anzac Day and you just have a chat. People have tried to hook us all into one group but it just doesn’t seem to get there. It’s really hard to and it’s no one’s fault.

Nowadays I don’t want to be a part of any organisation that organises. I don’t want to be part of the executive or committees because I’m now at uni and that’s my present priority. I’ve done TAFE. I started spatial information, geographical information systems, mapping. I did quite well there. I then started community education, because I wanted to go into adult education and do research in it. I’ve since decided to do psychology. I liked doing my counselling course, which was part of community education, so I can use psychology as a building
foundation to what I want to do. I haven’t started psychology yet. I’ve done basically almost one year of community education but I can take some of that over to a Bachelor of Science in Psychology.

As you do more research you see that Australia’s still got problems in its adult education field across the board. If you’re retrenched we don’t have a proper adequate training system. The government completely does ad hoc training, like ‘Oh right, all these people are going to get retrenched, we’ll give you money’. It shouldn’t be like that; it should be, ‘Okay you’re going to get retrenched, we want you to go off to TAFE and either improve your qualifications in the field you’re in or transfer. Now, we’ll sponsor you; you don’t have to pay school; you don’t have to pay the fees; you don’t have to do all that; we’ll look after you there, and don’t blow your money because we want to support you’. We’ve got to come up with a better way.

We have gone through a massive change in our adult education training, and that’s what it was in the Navy. I think I’ve probably done about 100 separate courses. Your career is course after course after course and you’ve got minimum of 65 per cent pass marks, 75 when it comes to fire fighting and sometimes even 100 per cent pass marks when it comes to issues of occupational health and safety. So you’re continually doing exams. In the military, if you want to go from school and thinking you’re going to get out of exams, that’s a load of crap. With my career now, I look at education as being an important issue with the Indigenous community. I look at education being very important within the Navy and it’s influenced me to look more into adult education.

When looking at Aboriginal politics today, one problem I do have is that activism, it’s a really bad terminology these days I think. I class it as a derogatory speech. It’s equivalent to being called an Aboriginal leader. He’s an Aboriginal leader. Aboriginal leaders are a King Billy statement, the chest plates that they used to give to Aboriginals to be the king of their tribe. I’ll read some of the articles by certain people who are Kooris and I just go, look mate you don’t represent my issues, whether you’re on the left or right. They generalise so much now and what you’ve got is that now all Aboriginals are the same as the Northern Territorians. Down here in Sydney or Canberra we’re supposed to be the same, if you read these articles. And I don’t agree with it. I want to put a paper forward on issues about how people are called Aboriginal leaders. They shouldn’t be called Aboriginal leaders. In the press, if you’re a white academic you’ll be called an academic but if you’re an Aboriginal academic, black academic, you’re called Aboriginal leader or academic.

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This is Paulo Freire, a Brazilian famous for the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.\(^6\) It was his study on the poor farmers who have been oppressed by the big farmers. He was saying that the oppressor will continue to oppress the oppressed by saying certain things or doing certain things, and the oppressed will accept it. He says the oppressed have to take charge of their lives and get out there, and at the same time, not to put the oppressor in the oppressed spot but just say to the oppressor, ‘Right we want to do what we want to do’. Aboriginals have to get up there and start making up their own terms. And if you’re an Aboriginal academic it should be just academic. So that’s the issue. So we as Kooris have to go out there and figure out if we have spokespeople, how they go out and represent our communities.

There are Aboriginals out there before Federation who were protecting their land against European settlement. They should be classed as heroes. If we’re going to get an Aboriginal memorial, I reckon it should be broken up in two sections. The first section should be with a traditional Aboriginal with the spear and protecting his family behind him. And then the other would be to represent today’s society where Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders have put on uniforms of Australia. They should have the three services, represent two males and female and that’s it. I feel personally that a memorial needs to represent two eras: prior to and after Federation.

As a veteran I get respect from both sides of society. When I’m at the Ngunnawal Centre at the University of Canberra, people say, ‘Oh he’s a veteran’, and I get their respect. In white society it’s the same thing. Normally, I say I’m a disabled veteran in white society, and that’s it. I’ve never come across any angst in that issue.

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