Peacekeeping in the Asia-Pacific

Steven Maloney

I was born in 1976 at the Mater Hospital in Brisbane. It was a good childhood. We lived mostly in the eastern suburbs of Brisbane. Sometimes we spent a lot of time on North Stradbroke Island and lived there from time to time. I have a mixed family – my father is Australian but his heritage is both Irish and German, and my mother is similar although with a British-Aboriginal heritage. My Indigenous side comes from North Stradbroke Island, the Qandamooka and

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1 This interview was recorded in Brisbane on 24 September 2012.
2 All military information is released pursuant to Australian Military Regulation 770.
Noonuccal people. I have two brothers – one older and one younger and quite a lot of cousins, aunts and uncles on both sides of the family. My father was an earthmover and he had a number of companies over the years and made quite a lot of money on different occasions. My mother was a housewife.

During primary school, years 1 to 7, I got on with my family quite well. We moved around quite a lot. There were dozens of houses because my father was in earthworks, so we moved where the work was. I couldn’t say I attended only one school because it was a lot of schools, and I couldn’t say I did too well at school but my parents always made sure that I went. My father started work when he was only 13 years old, so he never placed much emphasis on academics, rather work experience and a steady pay check. I started primary school a year early because I was born in February, so that meant I could jump up a grade and begin when I was five.

In terms of the education itself, I’d probably say there were times I wasn’t treated equally. One of the places I did feel as though I was treated equally was when I was at primary school on North Stradbroke Island, where there was quite a large proportion of Indigenous to non-Indigenous students. Plus it was my ancestral home and where my mother grew up, and also my Indigenous grandmother. It wasn’t a mainstream school; it was a community school, so that was the place I felt the most comfortable.

As an island, North Stradbroke is not accessible unless people want to get a ferry across. I lived in a place called Amity Point and there would be a local bus and it would pick students up to take them to school at Dunwich State School. You wouldn’t have full grades; you would have a teacher who would teach a number of grades and they’d also be teaching at a number of different levels. There were fewer people in that environment and it was definitely more community oriented. It wasn’t like a mainstream primary school in Brisbane; you’re on an island, so it was a tight-knit community with the local Indigenous residents and my relatives offering constant support. I can remember coming home from school hungry and would ask my mother for some food. She would reply, ‘Go down the street and catch a couple of bream’. And 10 minutes later, I would be back with two fresh, pan-size bream, straight from the ocean. She would cook them both up, one for me, and one for Mum.

For high school I went to Balmoral State High School most of the time – I think all of the time, from Year 8 to 12. I repeated Year 11, and I repeated Year 12, so I had three sets of school friends that I knew and still have today. I think attitudes were different back then for my parents – one was Indigenous and one was white. I’m not saying they weren’t accepted by the Australian community, but they were looked at differently to start with. The teachers didn’t seem to consider the Aboriginal children in the same way they would other students.
They were seen to be perhaps a lost cause; it didn’t matter whether they passed at school or not, however, it was only a mild indifference. If you said something in class, well then it’s just class, turn your head back to the teacher now and ‘Let’s get on with teaching the good eggs’. I could say that I was ostracised on different occasions. I was punished a little bit harder than the others; if I did something small it would be a case of getting detention or even the cane. Corporal punishment was still permitted in both primary and high school in the ’80s. In my early primary school days it would also be that you couldn’t go on school excursions. I personally felt that it wasn’t so much the punishment for not doing my homework, as it was more ostracisation from society and ‘It’s better for you not to be on this field trip because it’s for us white Australians’. There were different nationalities at school so I can’t say it happened to all nationalities, and I can’t say it happened to all Indigenous students. But I think Indigenous males especially were looked at as something that’s not a success story, with a happily ever after ending; it’s usually not worth the time or the effort for a teacher to put energy into an Indigenous student. The worst things at school would have been the name calling, the titles, the Indigenous kids getting into fights all the time, the Indigenous kids wagging school and getting into trouble with the teachers. Objectively it was mild, but that was my childhood experience. Did I feel as though I was treated differently? Yes, of course; without a doubt. I attended school formally until about grade 10 and then I started getting part-time jobs, like working in smallgoods factories or labouring with my father, though surprisingly I did enrol through to the end of Year 12. I didn’t receive anything for it after Year 10 because I didn’t get good enough grades in Year 11 and 12 – only a record of attendance and an exit statement.

I got charged with stealing when I was 13. We used to wag school and it’s obviously a long time ago. I’d like to think I’m a good person these days, but just as a child, we used to break into unlocked cars to steal money and some of the other kids used to even steal cars. We sometimes stole push-bikes; we used to get into a lot of fisticuffs and brawls in the schoolyard. I can even remember, only one time, in high school the principal and a few teachers came around to a friend’s house when we wagged school in Year 9 and some of my sillier friends were caught sniffing petrol. I had friends who died during high school as well, Indigenous friends; they’d hire a room out for the night in an expensive hotel or something like that, and then they’d all go up and party all night, and a school friend died that way through an overdose. He fell unconscious in a bedroom of the Hilton and never recovered. At the time, some school friends got up to so much mischief that they did go to boys-town gaol. Others dropped out of high school and others stayed in. It wasn’t a positive experience for me personally. I’m not going to say that I am resentful, but I always felt the other kids got a bit of a head start with education. It wasn’t a good value system to entrench
in yourself so young. I'd like to think my parents were concerned about my welfare, but didn't know how to address the complexities of identity and my apathy towards my studies.

I think one of the things that changed me the most was when I was in high school. It wasn’t so much the racism in the playground but one of my Indigenous uncles. He lived on North Stradbroke Island when I was about 15 and in Year 10. He was murdered outside the Point Lookout Hotel on North Stradbroke Island, where he used to smoke a little bit of weed when he drank beer at the pub. He went down to a car to buy some more pot and a guy with his dog pulled out a shotgun and shot him in the head. I don’t know why he did it, but it was ugly because it was something in which race had a big role to play. I heard the guy got less than five years gaol, and it was a bit upsetting for my family in the fact we all felt that justice wasn’t done – that you could kill an Aboriginal with a shotgun and be out in a few short years. If it was anyone else, I’m sure the court would have weighed their life more dearly. I used to fight a lot after that at school because I was quite angry at life. I also had Indigenous uncles who served time in prison; one uncle did time in Long Bay in the ’70s, and one did time in Boggo Road in the ’80s, and they were all pretty tough guys in their younger days. One uncle even got gangrene in his leg from sleeping in the park too often and it needed to be cut off. That was my upbringing, so that’s what I remember from high school.

I was particularly close to my Indigenous uncles and cousins; my two brothers are lighter skinned than myself, so I felt more of a connection with my Indigenous heritage. They got into a lot of mischief themselves. I’d call it mischief, but some of it was not a good example for me to follow. I guess on my father’s side of the family, my uncles and aunts grew up through an Irish influence because of my grandfather, who was Irish-Australian. He served in World War II as a driver and my father even said he drove General MacArthur on one or two occasions. I don’t think they had it any easier than the Indigenous side. Our two families were mostly connected through North Stradbroke Island, and the two families have a very close connection. For instance, my mother and her sister married my father and his brother. There were other relationships between the uncles and the aunts of each family as well. Then the grandparents – my great-uncle on my dad’s side was with my grandmother on my mother’s side after my grandfather died. It was just the day, but on North Stradbroke Island and Cleveland Point in the ’50s and ’60s, that’s kind of how the extended family operated. The two families had a lot of catching up on weekends with a lot of food and beer drinking. There was also a lot of playing cards, bingo and different social activities like feasting on seafood conducted by my elders, during my school years.
I remember seeing pictures of my parents married in Cleveland and you can see my father’s parents on one side and my mother’s parents on the other, and you can tell it’s a different day and a different age. It was just a simple marriage ceremony at the local Anglican Church. I couldn’t say they weren’t frowned upon, those mixed inter-racial marriages. I wouldn’t say that they were totally ostracised because of it either, but certainly there was something I think was always unspoken. If you had heaps of Indigenous kids running around the yard and you have the Indigenous mother and the white father in the house, they’re all tarred with the same brush. We perhaps weren’t treated the same as an all-white family would have been treated at the time.

I think being an Aboriginal played an important role in my childhood. You are different, so you’re treated differently and you have Indigenous relatives who live a different lifestyle. It may not be that it’s a traditional lifestyle with hunting kangaroos or throwing spears, but they definitely had different values from the other side of the family. When I was a lot younger and still at high school, I still managed to go on different school trips that consolidated my Indigenous identity, such as four nights at Carnarvon Gorge in Year 9 with the other Indigenous kids at Balmoral. The school had a number of programs catered specifically for Indigenous students, like tutorial and community associations. My Indigenous identity was mostly reinforced by my friends at the time. Some of my Indigenous friends in high school and even primary school have since been in adult prisons in their later years; some of them have also been successes – not so much at making a million dollars, but having a good stable family life with a job through an apprenticeship or something like that. It’s a mixed bag, but I guess Indigenous students usually didn’t aspire to academic success in the ’80s or early ’90s. It was something where you usually wagged school and you went and stole something, or went and got up to some mischief and got into a fight. But it was always the negative side of things with Indigenous students; for me, it wasn’t the positive things at high school I remember, like a Year 12 graduation ceremony which the other students received.

When I was about 14 or 15, I joined the Army Cadets. I did have members of the family who served in the military. My dad served in the Army for three years from 1967 to 1970. I have uncles who served in the Army; I also had an aunty who was enlisted at the time. I probably got my first idea about what the Army was when I was 13, but didn’t register for the cadets until I was a year or two older. About a week after I turned 17, I joined the Army Reserve.

During the last years of high school, it was a matter of getting different part-time jobs and also working in the Reserves. I was always looking at joining the Regular Army, but I didn’t have a high enough education. I only had a Sound in Year 10 English, and I took the path where I went to the Reserves first because
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I thought it was a little bit easier to get into. Then I could transfer straight into the Regular Army from the Reserves. When I was 19 I joined the Regular Army and stayed in until I was 24, and then I discharged and came to the University of Queensland not long after that.

I think my primary motivation to enter the armed forces was when I was 13. There was an Indigenous aunty and she made it all the way to Warrant Officer Class 2. She was in my corps, RA Sigs, and that was my saving grace. As much as you had your uncles who were a bit wayward, you also had an aunty who took to the good side of things and who’d been in the Army since she was young herself. She might have joined around ‘85. I remember she was posted up to Darwin at one point, so we both drove together from Brisbane to Darwin when I was a young kid. Other times she would visit and bring home Army friends. When I was 13 and I was living at Tingalpa, she brought home a boyfriend one day. He was a commando and he sat down with me and really told me about the Army. He said, ‘This is what we do … and this is where you want to get into, once you’re in the Army, and this is what I did the other day with Leopard tanks’. It stirred something in me; I was only 13 at the time, but I definitely wanted to say, ‘Well, I want to join up’. I think that’s where the spark took place. I would go and buy my own books on generals and other great military leaders when I was between 13 and 17 years old and say to myself, ‘Wow, this is what this guy did’. I remember buying General Schwarzkopf’s book, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero*.\(^4\) I went straight down to the store when it was first published and came home and read the whole thing in a few weeks. I used to also buy all the *Army Magazines*, the ones they give to the Army guys for free but you can still buy them in newsagents. I was still only in my early to mid-teens and saying to myself, ‘That’s where I want to be in life’. So my aunty was a good influence.

On the other side of the family there was another Warrant Officer Class 2; he was my great-uncle. Both male grandparents served in the Army; one was in World War II and I believe the other was in both World Wars. I don’t remember because he died when I was very young, but I know he had service medals. My grandmother on my dad’s side also served with the Australian women’s Air Force [WAAAF] during World War II. As for my Indigenous grandmother, she was an Elder on the Brisbane Council of Elders. So one Indigenous grandmother was an Elder, one grandmother was in the WAAAF, and the other two grandfathers served in the Army during the World Wars.

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\(^3\) In the Queensland education system a Sound Achievement is about the equivalent of a C.

Army Cadets was my first formal experience of the military and used to be a part of Balmoral State High School. When you are in your early teens and in the cadets, you’d do parades and do after school training with a compass or they’d give lessons. The guy who was looking after it was a cadet lieutenant, but he was in the Regular Army for a long time. He went to Vietnam and was a qualified marksman, so everyone looked up to him. You would have your different ranks for the cadets as well, but it wasn’t something you could ever use outside of the school grounds. We would go to the rifle range every now and then, and we’d fire .22s and other small arms. We’d be taught how to shoot in groupings and basic fieldcraft. I’d say it was one level up from boy scouts – boy scouts with guns.

The Reserves was the next obvious progression from cadets. I was calling up a recruiting officer even before I was 17 to try and get into the Reserves and they’d say, ‘No, you’ve got to wait until you’re 17’. I’d say, ‘No, I got told 16 and a half’, and they’d say, ‘That’s only if you want to be an apprentice’. I would finish by saying, ‘No, I want to be in signals; I want to be where this guy was, so I’ll wait’. I officially enlisted one month after I turned 17. I don’t think my family could have stopped me; I was joining up whether they liked it or not.

I remember Dad took me into Kelvin Grove to do an interview and I was saying on the way, ‘I want to be a radio operator’. There was a warrant officer who started the interview process who was obviously a Vietnam vet, and I remember he was sitting at the other side of the table from me and my dad. My father kept answering all his questions and he was going, ‘No, no, I want to hear from him. He’s only 17; I want to know whether he’s capable of being a soldier’.

For the Reserves, we still had to do the full testing as if you were joining the Regular Army. You were given an Army number and you have that for life. That’s where I got my initial Army number, from the Reserves after I took my first Oath of Allegiance to the Queen of Australia. This was ’93, so there were still quite a lot of Vietnam vets around at the time. We used SLRs [self-loading rifles] during that period, did our recruit training at Wacol, and then another course to complete your Initial Employment Training [IET] with communications. That second course would be more oriented towards your trade. My job was a radio operator, and after those two courses were completed we could go into areas around Brisbane and do exercises for a weekend. Sometimes we would do two-week camps. It was signals and radios, so we would drive a vehicle with a trailer, set it up, put the camouflage mesh over it, and then do radio shifts. It was a signals-based unit, so you’d be looking at higher communications networks with different types of equipment, to encrypt it and to protect the information. It was different from an infantry man with a radio on his back;
we would have radios in cars with much larger antennas and be required to maintain communications with headquarters. We were corps signallers, and regimental signallers were a lot different at the time.

Reserves was only part-time, so I was still labouring a lot in the summer and I went to high school as well, having repeated Year 11. I only just received my Year 10 school certificate, which I didn’t really deserve because the principal said, ‘We always give that out because you’ll understand later. A Sound Achievement in Year 10 English, that’s what you’ll need to get into the Army, isn’t it?’ If I didn’t have that junior certificate, I wouldn’t even have got in the Reserves. I can’t say that I earned it, perhaps I did, but then again it was something that got me a start in life so I don’t care anymore. I’m happy and appreciative towards the principal for doing that regardless.

Between ‘93 and ‘95, you could do quite a lot in the Reserves. If you wanted to do more you could do more; if you wanted to do less you could do less. I think it served my purpose in knowing that I was going to join the Regular Army, and it basically acted as a stepping stone until I was 19 and could serve overseas. I did have some tough sergeants when I was in the Reserves. My first drill sergeant had been to Vietnam and I was told by a corporal in the mess one day that he’d been on patrol in Vietnam, and a mortar had gone off near his head and blew the back of his skull off. I don’t know if it was true or if he was only scaring me, but he said he had a titanium plate on the back of his head. I respected the sergeant a lot more after that.

I don’t remember any other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander personnel who served with me in the Reserves. I did get the odd joke or two, but I guess it was no different to what everyone else copped. I could look after myself a bit better back then, so they didn’t give me as much stick as some of the other soldiers of different nationalities or ethnic backgrounds. I definitely remember times when I got fed up. One guy, I followed him out of the base in my car one Tuesday night from Kelvin Grove and I caught up with him at the traffic lights and said to him through the window, ‘Mate, I’ve had enough – stop riding me or I’m going to belt you’. When we were outside the military environment he didn’t feel so tough without his friends and said, ‘Fair enough’. On the odd occasion in camp I definitely got some Aboriginal stigma attached. But there was good stigma as well; they would think you might be a better scout or naturally better at fieldcraft. It wasn’t always negative stigma in the military; I’d say the positive stigma outweighed the negative in that you were much better at some things than others, and they were much better at some things than you.

When I transferred from the Reserves to the Regular Army in ‘95, I remember having to do the recruit course and my Initial Employment Training all over again. The recruit course was only two weeks in the Reserves and IETs was two
weeks as well, but in the Regular Army it was 13 weeks at Kapooka and then nine months at the School of Signals. I stayed about a year in Melbourne just getting onto the next level and to my new unit. I served in the Regular Army from when I was 19, in August ‘95, to May 2000. The corporals were pretty tough at Kapooka. I copped it there a bit. I also got into one or two fights with the other soldiers in Wagga Wagga.

The corporals would sometimes play games with me. I could probably say three times where they played games. I know it was only because I was an Aboriginal soldier. A corporal came in one time when our platoon had a rifle inspection with the CSM [company sergeant major]. He said, ‘Can I see your rifle barrel, Recruit Maloney? I just want to inspect it before the CSM gets in’. I was cleaning some other things at the time with another recruit, but gave him my barrel and turned around to keep cleaning while he checked whether it was clean enough for the formal inspection. He gave my barrel back to me and said, ‘This is okay; put your weapon back together’. He checked my friend’s barrel and then went around to the other side of the room and left. I said to my mate after he left the room, ‘Sorry, this isn’t my barrel; it’s your barrel’ and we both swapped. When the company sergeant major came in a few minutes later with the corporal to check all our weapons and that the room was clean, he checked my barrel and weapon and said, ‘This is all clean’, but when he looked down my friend’s barrel, there was a whole heap of dirt inside. It turned out when the corporal checked my barrel, he thought it was mine. When I wasn’t watching, he turned around and chucked a big handful of dirt down inside. So when the CSM saw this, he wanted to charge my mate. The thing the corporal didn’t realise was when he went around to fetch the CSM for the inspection, was that we both swapped our barrels right before CSM stepped inside. We were cleaning our weapons for like an hour before this, so both weapons were immaculate and in perfect inspection order. When the CSM was yelling and saying he wanted to charge my friend, the corporal was just standing there red-faced because he thought it was going to happen to me. The other guy got hammered.

Another time we went on four days leave from Kapooka, and you’ve got to lock your locker before you go. It’s the one thing that everyone remembers to do before they leave the room. Everyone locks their cupboard door and everyone double checks and triple checks. If you don’t lock your locker for four days and you go away, you are going to be in big trouble when you get back. I went out on holidays, I came back, and we looked up through the window from the outside and there was this locker undone. We were saying to each other, ‘That guy is so dead meat’. I went into the room and realised it was mine. Obviously, these are just cheap locks and if you mess around with them, they can be opened quite easily. Not to mention, the corporals had a spare copy of the key just in case someone loses theirs. I opened my locker and there was a framed
picture of my corporal standing on the parade ground with his finger pointing towards him. If you got the picture in your locker, it meant you had to see the corporal immediately and then get extra duties. It was silly things like that. You’re just saying to yourself, ‘Why are you stirring me up?’ Another time, the same corporal put me as the recruit platoon leader and he did it on the basis that he wanted the other guys to hate me because an Aboriginal was in charge of the platoon. He soon realised the other guys weren’t going to belt me, and were just as scared as I was. It backfired on him again, so he put me in that position for a day, and then said, ‘Don’t worry about it then’. I’m thinking, ‘You’ve put these other recruits in this position for two weeks or three weeks at a time, and you’ve put me in for only one day’. It was quite mean-spirited and I would say there was definitely a racial aspect there. It was perhaps only one corporal who gave me excessive grief. There were other corporals as well; don’t get me wrong they weren’t all the same. There were some good guys there too, like the lieutenant. He got me into the job that I wanted. I wouldn’t say that my section commander took a disliking to me, but he said to me one day, ‘I didn’t get it easy at Kapooka and I’m not going to give it to you easy either’. However, it wasn’t so much that he was less hard on the others in my mind; I think I felt I was a bit of a softer target for a bully. But, that was Kapooka … .

After Kapooka I went to Melbourne into the Royal Australian School of Signals. My trade was OISR. It was an Operator of Information Systems and Radios. This was my trade so you had to learn how to use radios and different equipment on a more advanced level than the Reserves, and you had to learn how to send and protect information to go to even higher headquarters in Canberra and other places around the world. You needed to know how to set up antennas and do your job which was to communicate messages. I spent 12 months there because there wasn’t a position open in OISR for the first three months before the course started. I was in Signals in the Reserves, and it was always my intention to get into RA Sigs [Regular Army Signals] because of what my commando uncle had told me about the corps. He said it was a good utility corps, and that means you could be employed in a lot of different areas. I understand today in the Army you select your corps and you select your trade, then you get drafted. They don’t just walk up and down the lines and tap you on the shoulder, like they used to in Kapooka, and say, ‘Armoured, Infantry, Artillery, Engineers, Catering … ’. That’s pretty much how they did it. If your corps wasn’t open at the time, well then you wouldn’t get it; you’d have to go to Infantry or Engineers. At the time there were no positions open in Signals and I said to the lieutenant, ‘I had my heart set on Signals. I’ve done my best here in recruit training and the Army Reserves to get into that corps, and I’d like to think that I wasn’t the worst soldier to ever pass from Kapooka. If you could see when the next course is and get me on it, this would be a good thing, for me at least’. And he said, ‘Yeah. I’ll do that’. He did that and kept his word, so I stayed in hold-overs for three months at Watsonia before they started the course. I went to Melbourne
straight from 1 RTB [1st Recruit Training Battalion] and did general duties for a while, and then I did two four-and-a-half month courses. At the end of it all, I was trade qualified so I got sent to my first field-force unit.
My unit was in Perth; it was a Signals unit and it was very surprising that I actually got sent there for my first posting. They were looking for soldiers who hadn’t been exposed to eastern states units. I guess they were looking for a clean slate from where they could train people up who had the potential to be what they required. There was only me on my course who got sent to that particular unit in Perth and it helped that an Aboriginal sergeant was the person to choose my posting. It’s definitely a real eye-opener going there. It was like going from being a kid to a very hard reality. These guys were the best at what they did and you were only this young, dumb kid who didn’t have any exposure to the professional Army. You were thrown in with the best of the best, and these were your idols from a really young age. You fly from Melbourne to Perth and as soon as you march into the barracks you’re asking yourself, ‘What am I in for?’ I was so young; I may have only just turned 20 and was one of the youngest guys there, if not the youngest. A lot of the guys were middle-aged or even older. If you went to any other unit in Australia, around 20 would be the norm; from perhaps ages 19 to 24. However, in this specific unit, it was late 20s to mid-30s. That was day one of the Army for me. Everything else was only a lead-up to this moment, and you get there and you know you’re in a special place; you can feel you’re not in Kansas anymore. It was professionally tough. I was in a privileged position, in a high profile and very professional unit. You had to really step up to the plate and say to yourself, ‘If you’re going to be here, make sure you do your responsibilities they give you and make sure you’re mature enough to handle what’s being done by the unit’. It was the frontier of the Army and all my training and military experience led me here.

There are definitely some good stories and memories. There was a lot of esprit de corps in my unit; it was something in which you were proud to get up every day for. We had a base that was on the beach; we were young, in our prime, and everything was exciting. You would try and outdo your friends at every opportunity, whether it be doing silly stuff when drinking, being out on an exercise or a course, picking up the girls and always trying to put one over your mates. The physical training was very hard. I remember one story comes to mind. We were on exercise in a place called Lancelin, and me and my friend were in a four-wheel drive with a trailer. Somehow we were driving across a huge sand dune and the trailer just catches on fire. There was an investigation after it, but what they said was that some of the gas bottles had been overfilled. There’s a safety release valve at the top, but because it was hot that day and the bottles were undercover, the gas expanded in the gas bottles. LP gas is heavier than air, so the gas went through this safety valve and dropped straight to the bottom of the covered trailer. A spark set it off, and we had these magnesium batteries inside. Magnesium burns pretty hot, but [laughs] when we got to the middle of this dune [laughs] the fire – I could see the trailer caught on fire. But we were apprehensive about unhooking the trailer by hand because we had things that could explode inside, not only gas bottles.
We stopped the car in the middle of this dune and all of this sand was around us. My friend turned the car off when he saw the fire and we both started running away and the car’s just sitting there with this trailer ablaze. We got about 100 metres in front of it and my friend said, ‘Mate, we’ve got to go back; we’ve got to go back for the car. You’ve got to unhook the trailer because the whole thing will catch on fire’. By that time the whole trailer was now on fire and we were waiting for gas bottles to explode and for these magnesium batteries to blow up. The mate says, ‘All right, let’s run back; I’ll jump straight into the car, and drive it off. But then you have to go around to the back and unhook the trailer first’. He said, ‘Just keep your head down’, and I said, ‘Okay, but we’ve got to do it quickly because if it gets any hotter these things are going to start exploding’. We run back to the car and he jumps inside, he puts it in gear and I jump under the trailer and unhook it. Just then the magnesium batteries started shooting up into the air and they were pinging off, and they shot about 50 metres all around like red and orange fireworks. I was holding my head down. These cells were shooting in different directions and I could hear the trailer baking and cracking, and then you could hear small explosions inside. I was protected from the side by the metal siding, but when I unhooked the car he drove it straight off. I remember running after the car along the sand dune laughing. After we got away safely, everything really started blowing up and we called in a safety helicopter that came shortly after. It was flying around this trailer that’s on fire, circling overhead and you could see your friends on board looking down and waving their finger at us. We were all laughing so hard when we were calling the helicopter; we didn't know how to do it without laughing because we were almost crying, saying, ‘We’ve lost tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment and it’s all exploding – how the hell did this just happen?’ The melted trailer was always put out the front of our headquarters for a long time, only to remind us by saying this is not something you should do. That was a really funny story for me and my friend.

Signals was a lot more sensitive because it dealt with information. My unit was definitely an important unit in the Australian Army and my role was to support the regiment in a Signals capacity. So whatever role the regiment played, there would be Signals support required. It was an operational unit in the sense that headquarters would be functional 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The unit was a very professional unit and a place where a lot of emotion was conveyed. They expected higher levels of emotion to be created within the unit, and to teach soldiers how to properly deal with it – the emotion of getting the job done right, going the extra step, knowing where the unit was being deployed and what they were going to be asked to do. When you’re exposed to that type of intensity, it’s hard to get rid of it or shake it off. It’s not only the adrenalin of training; it’s the nature of what the unit was about. I had a good friend who killed himself in the unit a few months after I arrived. He finished work one day
and was still in his uniform; he walked down to the showers and put a toggle rope around his neck and just knelt down. I remember the MPs carrying out his body in the morning and were just outside my room downstairs – he had been hanging all night. He didn’t deserve to die like that.

When I first got to the regiment, there was a sergeant there; he’d done a few years in the WA police force before he came across to the military. He was from Fiji, I think. He took me down to his office one day and said to me, ‘If there are any problems with anyone giving you stick because you’re an Aboriginal, just come down and see me’. There were only three dark-skinned guys in the regiment at the time. There was another Aboriginal corporal, there was the Fijian sergeant, and then there was me and perhaps a few others here and there. They were pretty much the only coloured guys that I knew or saw there at the time.

I’d like to think there wasn’t racism, but I believe that’s wishful thinking. It’s not that it was malicious, but it was something that was entrenched in the psyche of the military itself – more like institutional racism. You are an Aboriginal and in the Army, so you do sense it from time to time when you’re asked to do an unpleasant duty that you feel as though you were targeted to do. I think there were times in which some of the corporals deliberately targeted me, but it’s only those silly, childish games again. I remember when I got into my unit in ’96, it wasn’t so much that I was young – it’s that I was a young Aboriginal. I was feeling pretty good about myself and they thought they’d cut me down to size a bit. I was in a particular area and a corporal’s walked in and he said, ‘Your brother’s on the phone in the other office’. I said, ‘Well, how did he get patched through to this area?’ He said, ‘I don’t know, he must have called the lines and they patched it through’. I said, ‘Okay’. So I walked in to the other room and you’re supposed to answer the phone formally, but I just said, as you would to your brother, ‘Hello’. There was this corporal on the other end and he just revved the shit out of me over the phone and said, ‘Come down to my office’, and then he revved me again. I said to myself, ‘You pricks set me up for that’.

I also remember there was a rugby tour to go to England, and I was playing league in Perth at the time. These corporals got together and said, ‘You’re not trying out for the team’. I said, ‘Well, why not? I’m here in the unit. I’m entitled to go across there if I make the selection’. They said, ‘No’, and a corporal came up and said, ‘If you try out for the team, I’ll give you one’. I said, ‘Well, what can I say to that?’ On the day of the tryout I sat on the sidelines wanting to play, but they wouldn’t even let me try out. I think there were aspects of racism, not just inexperience in the junior NCO ranks, with the other corporals not wanting to accept a young Aboriginal to be part of a football team to go to England.
I found that especially in Perth. I wouldn’t say it’s a racist city, but if there are
a few white soldiers going out on the town, then you as an Aboriginal soldier
would sometimes act to their detriment when they are trying to pick up the
ladies. Generally, the white girls in Perth didn’t like talking to Aboriginals.
Perhaps it’s something entrenched from high school and it didn’t matter if
you’re in the Army or serving your country, they just don’t like it. You would
sometimes be ostracised from your friends when you go out together because
they wanted to talk to some girls. I remember one time in a nightclub, I was
talking to a girl, and she came back from her friends after buying a drink and
was a bit upset. I said, ‘What’s the matter?’ And she said, ‘My friends just asked
me what I’m doing talking to you’. I don’t believe that I was overly targeted; the
other guys did get their fair share of one-sidedness in different ways, however,
that was just the Army and the attitude of the ‘90s. I hope things have changed
in the twenty-first century.

In terms of operational service, I served in Cambodia for a short mission,
and I served in East Timor for a tour. Both of those countries had suffered
genocide and, at the time of me serving, were basically destroyed and razed.
Phnom Penh was on fire in a lot of places as well when I went in country. I was
a lot younger when I went to Phnom Penh than when I went to Dili, but they
were both very destructive and unhealthy environments. They were both on
fire and many buildings had bullet holes or RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]
damage, especially Pochentong Airport. Surprisingly, there were good things
you could take away from the experience. I suppose the two things I remember
most regarding my overseas service were on two separate occasions: one was
in Phnom Penh when we were evacuating Australian citizens on the very last
aircraft, leaving late at night. I was standing in uniform on the back ramp of
the C-130 Hercules and this civilian lady walked quickly up the ramp, and she
was the last Australian we were evacuating, and she said to me, ‘Thank you’.
And I thought it was a good thing at the time – she was pretty thankful!

The other time was later in East Timor. I was at the heliport and I was going
somewhere, but there were two young East Timorese girls who were in our
compound who used to wash our clothes. As I was walking along, they were
behind me and were singing. They were still only very young, probably
about 15 years old, and I thought, ‘You can sing all you want; you’re safe and
protected here in this compound’. I think that’s a good thing to take away from
environments that are really destructive and unhealthy: the fact you’re either
protecting Australian citizens or two young girls from whatever they might
have to face if your mission wasn’t there.

It was ’97 when I was in Cambodia; it was called a Service Assisted Evacuation.
Our team flew from Perth to Cocos Islands and then trained at RAAF Butterworth
in Penang for a few weeks. We were required to go to the Australian Embassy
in Phnom Penh and, without getting into too much detail, there were military personnel in the embassy, and there were RAAF personnel and Air Defence Guards who stayed at Pochentong Airport. I remember there were all different countries and nationalities who were evacuating their own respective citizens. It wasn’t a brigadier, but I think it was the equivalent in the Air Force who was responsible for the overall process. There were a lot of international civilians involved too and the Australian military was asked to provide support for the duration of the SAE.5

I was in East Timor from day one of INTERFET, only a week after I finished my 10-week Subject 1 for Corporal at the Land Warfare Centre in Victoria. It was different being there on the first day. It wasn’t pleasant; it was something in which these people lived through what was called a ‘scorched earth policy’. So militia and the TNI [Indonesian National Armed Forces] pretty much destroyed a lot of infrastructure before withdrawing and it was also cleaning up after 20 years of genocide. It wasn’t something enjoyable and, knowing the unit I was in, we would have a different type of role to play than other units. There were many other units conducting mainstream roles patrolling or doing certain things and I can’t speak for them personally. Our unit was based at the heliport so we would be first to respond to any incidents. We were called ‘Response Force’ and the role was carried out effectively and professionally – the squadron was actually awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation for their contributions to INTERFET and East Timor during my tour.

This is day one; it’s kind of like after the scene of the crime. You could always smell the fires in the air – that nasal smell where you’ve got that heavy stench. It’s hot, humid, and sticky, and there’s always an orange haze, the thickness of the smoke in your lungs and that dense air you’re breathing in all the time. Also, to top it off, no fresh rations for the first two weeks – only freeze-dried ration packs. I served in a number of areas and there were different multinational peacekeepers who were there as well. It wasn’t only Australian forces; there were individual nations doing other things to rebuild the country. But going from one area to another you would notice the difference with locals when they’re in the mountains as opposed to the cities, whether they were young or old; what their personal experiences were over the last 20 years. Some had only just come back from West Timor, so they didn’t see as much as the people who stayed throughout the entire genocide. I also remember being sick for a few days when I got dysentery from drinking bad water.

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Everyone who served with INTERFET experienced something different. I personally thought the local East Timorese people were nice; they were humble and decent. The TNI soldiers and pro-Indonesian militia were not so nice; they were getting kicked out of the country so they were unhappy about what was happening. They’d had all of the power for so long and then suddenly they had no power at all and became ordinary human beings, and they didn’t like that one bit. So they did things from time to time just to feel they still had power over people, like killing monkeys with a knife or pointing their weapons at peacekeepers or other Timorese civilians, but it wasn’t really effective against a professional army. It was an overwhelming and decisive victory in terms of the militia not being able to match what INTERFET had brought, with their Chapter VII mandate from the UN Security Council as well as the resources and professionalism of all of the people who served in East Timor. It is considered a successful campaign; it’s something that people identify with as how a UNSanctioned peace enforcement operation should be conducted. INTERFET was responsible for securing East Timor after the independence vote. There were things that happened there during INTERFET: there were contacts, there were deaths and there were mass graves.\(^6\)

I shook General Cosgrove’s hand in East Timor once, and I saw him a number of times in Dili. I’ve also read what he’s written in his autobiography about the country many years later.\(^7\) I had to do assignments on this as well, in subjects like the ‘Politics of Peace Building’. We would do case studies of East Timor in class and, going back a second time in 2003 as a student at UQ [University of Queensland], I met people whom I didn’t realise I’d actually met the first time with INTERFET. I even met a Nobel Peace Prize winner, José Ramos-Horta, and had a photograph with him on the beach in Dili. The East Timorese people would also fill me in on certain things that happened during INTERFET and I would get a better picture from all of this only years afterwards. I think the East Timorese are good people and were trying to rebuild after total destruction – when a country has been totally razed to the ground and destroyed, and then trying to rebuild on those ashes. They were humble people to start with because they lost everything and knew they had a lot of rebuilding and hard work ahead. But our work was also trying to lift their spirits through a hearts and minds campaign, trying to increase their morale and say, ‘On these ashes, you guys are going to build your new country. You now have the opportunity to build the country the way that you want to build it. You’re going to decide your own destiny from this moment forward’. There were also a lot of internally displaced people. Up and down the roads there were thousands of families.

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without homes. Sometimes you would see children who didn’t appear to have parents. We sometimes collected all the candy and chocolates from our ration packs and then threw them out of the back of vehicles when we drove around Dili and into the mountains. The children were happy with this gesture.

I was there from day one of operations in mid-September until a few weeks before the handover to UNTAET [United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor]; it was only one rotation. We didn’t get the blue hats and INTERFET was considered to be a UN-sanctioned, multinational peace enforcement operation, rather than a formal UN-sponsored peacekeeping operation. UNTAET took over in February 2000 and there was a 50-day overlap between other UN missions that began and the conclusion of INTERFET. I can remember a few weeks before the transition to UNTAET because people were building up to the blue hats. It was only a matter of taking off your helmet and armband and putting on a United Nations beret. The second time I went to East Timor in 2003, I wanted to see how the country had grown with the handover of UNTAET to full government autonomy. I volunteered for a few months with a legal NGO and travelled all around the villages and cities. I even managed to get sick again from a mosquito in the jungles of Los Palos and had to be admitted into the UN military hospital with dengue fever.

I put my discharge in from East Timor when I was in Dili in early 2000. I knew I was going home and that I’d achieved what I wanted to achieve in the Army. I’d served overseas twice. I’d received three medals and a Meritorious Unit Citation; one of them is an Australian Active Service Medal [AASM]. I have two others – an INTERFET Medal and an Australian Defence Medal – but they’re only your standard run-of-the-mill service medals; they weren’t for any gallant or noble actions. I know of other people from my unit who definitely got medals of gallantry with INTERFET. There were some good soldiers who did some outstanding things, brave things, and earned higher awards. My medals were routine service medals like my grandparents received. I only have three for everything I ever achieved in the military. I put in my discharge because I didn’t want to see any more destruction and death. I really couldn’t face it anymore. I had experienced first-hand the depth of what conflict can bring out in humanity, and although I could have stayed in my unit for another four years and been promoted on my return from Dili, there was no future in just going from war zone to war zone for the rest of your life. I came back with the intention of discharging from Enoggera and then perhaps going to the University of Queensland and studying Peace Studies, which I did one year later.

I don’t think my family would describe my transition from the Army as seamless, and I think there were a lot of difficult times in the initial stages. When I first left the Army I remember I used to be really angry, but I wasn’t sure why. I could be pretty violent when pressed by other people, but I was only recently discharged
and for the first few months I was very emotional. I think I was upset maybe at humanity itself – the level of depravity that people will go to. I was still only young. I started my first operation when I was 20. When I went to East Timor I was still only 23. I discharged when I was 24. I won’t go into specifics, but there were some pretty ugly things I needed to deal with in the military. I didn’t always sit behind a radio and pass orders to and from patrols; there were times when you’d have to jump on a chopper or a caribou to go somewhere or you’d have to drive into the mountains, or be attached to a team that did something. It wasn’t pleasant and it wasn’t healthy, but I think that’s probably what a lot of soldiers have to face now when they come back and they say, ‘That was a really unhealthy environment’.

The transition from the Army to civilian life was good from my perspective. I helped out my family quite a lot financially from time to time during and after the military. I remember I had over $20,000 saved from East Timor and it cost me $12,000 to start them off with a house deposit. I think they were only too happy to know I was part of something special between ’96 and 2000, doing a good thing and a service to the country, as my dad did in the Army as a serviceman in the Vietnam days. Taking up the chalice was only the next generation going on from my grandparents, to my father, uncles and aunty, to me and perhaps my older brother for a short time, and then to the next generations. For the seven years I was in the military from March ’93 to May 2000, when I was holding the chalice, I hope my family were proud to see that.

I haven’t really caught up with any mates from the Army since I discharged; I know there are still friends who are in the military today. I don’t know how they address some of the challenging environments they needed to be a part of, and still are. But for me, personally, it was academia and I also became an Anglican in late 2000. I wasn’t a Christian before I left the Army, but I became a Christian after I left the Army. I’d definitely call myself a proper Christian now, although my thoughts are slowly turning towards secular, rather than ecclesiastic law. I think the Army was the reason why I started looking at religion. When I discharged, I didn’t always have the intention of going to university and wandered around aimlessly for a few months, and was actually going to re-enlist in the British Army at one point. I had everything organised – I had a plane ticket, a working holiday visa, I had at least $5,000 saved and everything was ready. I even called a recruiting officer in Trafalgar Square. I discharged in May and I was pretty much ready to go a couple of months after, and my intention was to join the British Army in a parachute regiment. Perhaps it was something to do with my non-Indigenous ancestry. But that didn’t happen and it was kind of lucky that I didn’t go because I don’t think going from one army to another, where you didn’t have to deal with anything, was the answer. I was meant to fly out on a certain day, but I had a going away party the night before and had
second thoughts. My flight was booked for London via Japan the next morning, and all of my relatives came around and everything was ready. I had my bags packed but I just didn’t get on the plane. Some part of me still regrets at least not going there and doing a bit of time in the British Army, but another part says it was for the best and my role in Australia was far more important.

After I missed my flight I didn’t do a lot; I just sat around on the couch and played a lot of ping pong. I did nothing for a good six months after I discharged. But then come early 2001, I did correspondence courses through Open Learning Australia [OLA], and it was mostly to do with morality and moral issues. As I said, when I discharged I didn’t really have the intention of going to UQ specifically; I always had the intention of getting the education I never received in high school. I remember one of the subjects I did through OLA, ‘The Meaning of Life’, and the two others were to do with either philosophy or ethical and moral dilemmas. I just did a lot of thinking in that first semester and at the same time I didn’t do so well at finding work. Employers would say, ‘It’s great you’ve done what you did, and you’ve achieved what you have, but we really can’t apply that in our commercial business. It would be great if you are able to work on the sales floor, for instance. But how is getting your parachute wings or a roping course going to help you as a salesman?’ One person said, ‘Why don’t you go back to school and get a degree or something like that, and then you’ll be more employable’.

I started at UQ in semester two, 2001. I started with Ancient History and liked it so much that I ended up with a minor in Classics as part of my Bachelor of Arts program. It was the first time I’d been exposed to Ancient History, but I think that it was a really good start, getting into Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. I was pretty fortunate in that regard as well because I later travelled to Egypt in 2004 with my father. I think it’s important to have memories of taking pictures with your family in front of the Sphinx. I stayed in Egypt for two months to round off my Classics in Egyptology, but my dad only stayed for the first few days to help me get my feet in the Middle Eastern culture. There are a lot of people who perhaps can’t frame their experiences with any of their academia and once you start getting into Ancient History, you begin to realise these things have been happening for millennia. You don’t need to go any further than Rome to know just how brutal and savage people can be, and then you bring that back to the twenty-first century and say, ‘It’s not healthy, and it’s not good, but at the end of the day, this has been happening for a long time. You didn’t create it, and it’s certainly not going to finish in your generation. So just accept this is the reality of life and humanity, and that’s the bottom line’. I did both part-time and full-time study, but I studied Arts, then Arts/Law, then Arts again. I’m now enrolled in an LLB (Hons) [Bachelor of Laws with Honours] program at UQ and looking to be a lawyer; that’s my aspiration. I’m looking to work with the Indigenous community.
When I started doing some subjects at UQ, I can remember some of the titles, such as ‘Moral issues in International Relations’. This type of subject led me to finish my BA [Bachelor of Arts] with an extended major in Peace and Conflict Studies and choosing a lot of elective subjects in religion, philosophy and languages as well. I must have completed or attempted at least 30 subjects for my BA. However, I think those two streams, Peace and Conflict Studies and Ancient History, spared me anything that would make me lie down and not want to get up again, and dwell in negativity for the rest of my life. I guess finding a purpose through serving the Indigenous community also played a big role – having a good future, looking to be a professional, and helping people on another front outside of a war zone. I had the chance to come to the University of Queensland and study Peace and Conflict Studies, which is a rare privilege for an Indigenous Australian who started with only a Sound in Year 10 English. I’d served in military environments and then studied hard to understand them from an academic point of view as well. PACS [Peace and Conflict Studies] contained a lot of formal studies on the UN and this helped with a lot of my questions. University is not a place where your emotions are running wild like when I first left the Army and had no support. It’s a place that’s contained in a safe, enclosed environment and structured through your professors and with your peers. You can discuss moral issues in tutorials, and I think I’ve done the right thing in terms of the books I’ve chosen to read. I’ve picked up autobiographies I know were written about the times I was directly involved as a soldier, when there were some difficult decisions regarding life and death, and I got to see other people’s perspectives, like John Howard’s through his book, Lazarus Rising.\(^8\) I think he is really level-headed, and I’m glad that I read it from cover to cover.

Talking about post-traumatic stress, the Army has mechanisms. At the time, they had psychologists and they did address our unit in particular. They were looking at potential challenges for an individual. With some of the difficulties contemporary soldiers have to face when they discharge after serving on a few operations, they’d say, ‘Well, you might not see that in the initial stages, but it might manifest itself a little bit later on’. I think I was spared a lot of this personally because of the disciplines I chose to study at UQ and my strong spiritual beliefs. I think there were times where my family would have a different opinion about post-traumatic stress. They’d say, ‘It’s affected you a lot’. And it did. It’s taken me perhaps, I’d say, a good 10 years to understand what I went through and I think that I’m only now picking up the pieces, in the last couple of years and especially after I received my first degree. That’s the reality of the military; it cost me 10 years of my life following my discharge to normalise again. There was some really tough stuff. I haven’t looked for support,

\(^8\) John Howard, Lazarus Rising (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2010).
but I guess the thing is, I definitely wouldn’t want to go back to the last 10 years and do it all over again without support. I don’t think I’d have the strength to do it twice on my own.

If I were to give an emotional glimpse of the first few months after I discharged from the Army, it would be that I get back, I sit around and get really angry. It was just an explosive anger, not so much anything I could really understand. It’s not with me anymore, but it was only those first few months after I discharged, after everything had finished and I was home again. I think studying Peace Studies is probably the best decision I ever made following my military service. You study peace for 12 years and only then have you earned and created this mechanism, I personally believe, is far superior to any of those feelings and emotions you can’t control. So as much as there’s raw anger and emotion from during and before the military, there’s also a rational, reasoned approach developed from peace building and conflict resolution, built over the same period of time or longer. I guess it’s all about developing the skills to be able to deal with those unhealthy environments without allowing your emotions to take over too much.

From time to time I do have my thoughts about the military. I wouldn’t say I do anything special for Anzac Day and I wouldn’t say I catch up with any friends from the Army to have a beer and remember all the good times. To be honest, I am only now finding a sense of closure. I’m starting a new identity and a new role as a community lawyer. It did take 10 full years to not so much recover, but I guess rewrite my military identity toward being fully civilian and have a completely new frame of mind, with a new career and everything rewritten. I’d say right up until a couple of years ago, I was still in that military mindset where I had my thoughts about re-enlisting. I did try and re-enlist a couple of times during university but didn’t go through with it. I tried to get back into the Reserves and even tried out for the Navy. But now it’s all gone. To be honest, I don’t want to catch up with my old mates because it’s something I’ve been trying to rewrite since 2001. I’m now a civilian and since 2013, a qualified peace builder through my Bachelor of Arts. From time to time you’ll still have to address what you need to address when you come across a particular assignment or you’ll read something. For instance, maybe I’ll be doing an assignment in peace building and it will be a case study of East Timor. I’ll have to look into things and say, ‘Right, well in this particular case study, the first involvement by the United Nations in East Timor was with INTERFET following the independence vote’. You do a bit of research and you’d see something on a Dutch journalist who was killed by the TNI on day three, and you’d say, ‘Well I was there as a peacekeeper, standing only a few metres away from his dead body’. Or you’d say, ‘I was driving the second UN vehicle to that site behind General Cosgrove’s’. It would play on your mind for a few days. You wouldn’t do a lot during those periods; you’d just sit around home for a bit, maybe have a few beers, and then you’d get back to
your studies. But it’s constantly manifesting itself throughout that entire 10-year period. Sometimes you want to re-enlist, so you don’t need to think about those things anymore. But I think now, today, it’s settled in my mind and not a part of me anymore. I’m definitely looking to be a lawyer and study at UQ for the next five years until my second graduation in law.

I guess my primary motivation right now is to finish my LLB (Hons) program. Peace and Conflict Studies also has a direct application towards the Indigenous community in terms of Alternative Dispute Resolution. Although my life’s been based mostly around study for the last 12 years, I found time to volunteer with Amnesty International as well. I’ve done some volunteer work with the UQ Student Union as the Indigenous student officer; however, I’d say Amnesty International was the most influential organisation for me personally. There was a time in which I was really involved, but it’s now shifting from Amnesty International back to Indigenous-based issues. Over the last few years, I’ve also sought employment with other community organisations, like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service. ATSILS said they would be only too happy to employ me during my final year of law school and throughout my Practical Legal Training. My thoughts are mostly to do with justice and Reconciliation. I’m not necessarily looking so much at the international macro level and the United Nations; I’m bringing everything back to the micro level—all domestic issues at home in Australia these days.

I have been following the proposed referendum to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution of Australia. An expert panel came to Brisbane a few years ago led by an Indigenous community leader, Jackie Huggins, the former co-chair of Reconciliation Australia.9 I also spoke to a lawyer who was the president of the Law Council of Australia. When they were making these community consultations I remember making an opinion in front of an audience of mostly lawyers, and I basically stated that, ‘I served in the Army. I’m entitled to make an opinion as a citizen’. If you’re going to send people into conflict zones based on the premise of promoting democracy, yet don’t promote these values within your own country first, such as section 25 of the Constitution, it’s only saying to me, ‘Look how undignifying it is to think you could actually serve your country, but still be under the jurisdiction of these archaic race laws that deny the very freedom that you fought for’.10 I made an opinion to the expert panel based on the fact I was an Indigenous soldier. I felt earning an AASM is something that allowed me to make a legitimate opinion.

10 Section 25 of the Constitution allows states to disqualify citizens from the franchise on the grounds of race.
I contributed to the nation for seven years, and even saluted Prime Minister Howard in Melbourne during an Olympic function for the Atlanta games in ’96. The basis for my contribution in the military was to promote the liberal values that are currently being denied to every single person outside of an Anglo-Australian background through race laws. My statement was received well by the whole audience, that’s the thing. If you’re some Aboriginal off the street you wouldn’t have the same authority as having served your country. It’s different when you are discussing these points of freedom and liberalism and democracy with somebody who hasn’t contributed, or who wasn’t required to bring those values into other countries. I said:

If you are going to send soldiers overseas to promote those same liberal values, do it in your own country first and don’t pretend you’re a first-world nation and you have the right to be on the UN Security Council, but keep these archaic and valid race laws you don’t even think could be wiped away with a referendum, because the population isn’t mature enough to throw off the shackles of colonialism.

I always did Indigenous topics in both Peace and Conflict Studies and now in Law. I’ve done a lot of Indigenous subjects; I have a lot of friends who are now Indigenous lawyers and working for the same place that I hope to work for in native title,11 and working to reform the same things as well. Some of them have been involved in other community reforms to complement constitutional recognition, but I’d like to think my influence has been something that’s bettered their own understanding of freedom and cultural tolerance – two fundamental principles of neo-classical liberalism. I feel strongly about anti-race laws, and most Australians would agree they are terrible, outdated modes of thinking and often described as ‘archaic notions, not relevant in the twenty-first century’. I’d like to think I’ve influenced a lot of people who are involved in community-based organisations, to try and promote Indigenous reforms like striking out sections 25 and 51(xxvi) of the Australian Constitution.12 I certainly wouldn’t feel as though I had the confidence to try and promote these national issues within civil society unless I received my AASM. Once I had those three medals, it gave me the entitlement to have an opinion about my country. It says you’ve contributed; it says that you’re not only an Indigenous Australian who was born here, but you actually contributed something to the nation to entitle you to be a part of civil society and change things for the better. Without legitimacy from the military and my studies, I certainly wouldn’t feel as though I could

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11 He has since worked at Queensland South Native Title Services for three months as a Community Relations Officer in 2014.
12 Section 51(xxvi) of the Constitution gives the Commonwealth Parliament power to enact special laws for people of any race. The proposal for constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would replace it with a new section 51 that would allow the Commonwealth to make laws for Indigenous Australians and a complementary section 116 which would outlaw racially discriminatory laws and require that laws under section 51 only be permitted for the betterment of Indigenous Australians.
ever put forward some of the points I have put forward. Both active service and a Bachelor of Arts has definitely legitimised my opinions and improved my standing in the community.

There’s been Indigenous soldiers that I’ve worked with, and knowing the history of Indigenous involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, World War II, in Vietnam, in Korea, in World War I, and even to some extent the Boer War, everyone has contributed, including the peacekeepers and peacemakers. To say that only white Australians served in Gallipoli is a lie. Indigenous people have fought for freedom and contributed. I know there were at least 5,000 Indigenous military personnel from Queensland alone who served in World War II. So if these people did contribute to the nation, I think their next generations they have sacrificed their lives for should be entitled to a degree of freedom that other Australians have received from their forefathers. To not acknowledge the Indigenous contributions in war is disrespectful, and I think it’s something other Indigenous veterans wouldn’t be happy with. That’s something I’d like to correct in the future as a lawyer, not through retribution in any regard, but more through promoting an awareness of, I suppose, of needing each other’s culture in a way. I think Australia needs their Indigenous heritage as much as Indigenous Australians need the technology and the advancements of colonisation. But it’s not something I like to think of in terms of the Indigenous culture being slowly assimilated into an Anglo-Australian metropole, with their unique values being incrementally eroded. I think we can live together with the values both cultures cherish because of the contributions of Indigenous soldiers, who have done what they have done in order to preserve and keep their own culture alive, not just to preserve the mainstream Australian culture. It’s definitely about looking to a path that’s sustainable and promotes harmony between all communities within Australia, not only the descendants of European colonialists or first-nations people. A peaceful approach to constitutional reform, inclusion and Indigenous self-determination are all that matter to me. Perhaps future generations may even discuss the possibility of a treaty?

I don’t look back at my time in the military with regret. I’d say that it cost me dearly; however, it shaped me a lot as well. To think these small instances I’ve discussed make up all of my life in the Army I’d say would be a distortion of the truth. I enjoyed my time in the military. Obviously there have been challenges and there have been trials. There have also been difficulties. I’d like to think the Army’s evolving and getting better. Nobody ever looks at the military and believes they were bigger than the military, not even a general. The Army is a larger institution than any one individual, and I hope it’s adapting to the twenty-first century. The values I learnt in the military are good, decent, traditional values. I wore an Australian flag on my uniform and we all worked together as soldiers, for Australia, towards the betterment of Australia. I wouldn’t like
to see that destroyed any more than I’d like to see the Indigenous community
destroyed. I’m saying that things need to be reformed, but then again I’m not
going to burn the Australian flag at the same time. That’s some of the values that
I got; I’m not going to hurt the system because I believe in the system and I also
believe in working within the system. Having completed Peace Studies over the
last 12 years, and having already started my second degree in a Bachelor of Law,
with a third class honours in 2014, I know there’s a way to move forward without
necessarily destroying systems or cultures. You can work within systems and
tap into the status quo, and see that even one person has the ability to shift
community attitudes. Once those attitudes shift it will transform the nation as
a collective. With the status quo shifting forward, I hope this Constitutional
referendum gets momentum and successfully removes the last remnants of a
disgusting and disgraceful history, through the protectionist policies of the
early to mid-twentieth century. I’m positive, and I don’t have any regrets in
life. I’m not bitter; it’s just taking a long time, that’s all. I hope that perhaps a
young Indigenous Australian might see this story and say, ‘Well, maybe this
is a good thing if I contribute to the nation by being a soldier, or a sailor, or
an airman’, and doing something constructive for once instead of just sitting
around complaining.

Figure 13. Steven Maloney today
Source: Steven Maloney