Preface and Acknowledgements

From 2009–13 I had the privilege of travelling across Australia to interview Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who served in the Australian armed forces. I conducted 33 interviews in total with men and women who had served in all three services (Army, Air Force and Navy) between the 1950s and 1990s. These were whole-of-life interviews, asking a range of open-ended questions. It was important to learn about the speakers’ entire lives to understand how military service affected their life trajectories, whether reinforcing childhood plans or providing them with new personal and professional opportunities. Some of the interviewees spoke at length about their times in the armed forces, while others dwelt more on their pre- or post-service lives. Such variations indicate that for some interviewees, being an ex-serviceperson and the time they spent in the armed forces was a defining feature of their identity; for others, it was one step in a much longer personal journey.

Every interview was unique. It may be more appropriate to refer to the questions as prompts, because it was the participants whose life stories drove the directions of the interviews. Oral historian Lorina Barker describes her own similar experiences interviewing members of an Aboriginal community as yarnin’,¹ and that is a fitting way to describe the conversations. Several interviews left me (and sometimes the speaker) in a state of shock, just needing to decompress. I heard stories of racism, troubled childhoods, post-traumatic stress disorder and losing friends in war. I also heard stories of perseverance, overcoming hardship, community support and, unanimously, genuine respect and love for the Australian Defence Force. I learned something from every interview and am grateful to all of the participants for sharing their life stories.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to publish all of those interviews; this book contains a sample that I selected because they represent a diverse array of experiences in life and in the Australian military. The words are the speakers’

own with minimal editing. Where I have made changes, it has been primarily to preserve the flow of the text or to structure the paragraphs into a coherent narrative. All interviewees provided input into the editing process and reviewed the final texts of these chapters. I, like all other oral historians, acknowledge that something is lost when reading an interview transcribed into text. The pauses, the laughter, the facial expressions and the changing intonations of voice cannot come across in a written text. I therefore encourage the readers to listen to these interviews; those, where marked, are available from the National Library of Australia and can be accessed online. Those not in the National Library are being deposited into the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Though the words in these chapters belong to the interviewees, there are other people who played a role in preparing this book whom I must thank. At the top of that list are the speakers themselves for giving their time not only for the interviews, but also carefully reading these chapters, providing comments and ensuring that their words were not misrepresented. Thank you also to the three research assistants who helped with interview transcription: Sari Braithwaite, Christin Quirk and Rachael Lorenz-Stockdale. I appreciate the thoughtful feedback Dr Sam Furphy and Dr James Bennett provided on the manuscript. Colleagues at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) have been supportive throughout this entire project and have provided important advice along the way: Shurlee Swain, Nell Musgrove, Ellen Warne, Maggie Nolan, Hannah Forsyth, Melissa Bellanta and Cath Bishop. A special thanks also to Naomi Wolfe from ACU, who has provided significant support as a friend and colleague, and has been especially important at providing cultural advice. Richard Trembath has been my collaborator on this project, so I thank him for his hard work which complements these interviews in our monograph, *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945*. Funds supporting this project came from Australian Research Council Discovery grant DP110101627, an Army History Research Unit grant, the National Library of Australia and an Australian Catholic University Faculty of Arts & Sciences Early Career Research Incentive Award. Gratitude also goes to the Australian Catholic University for providing financial support for this publication.

Finally, as always, I need to thank my family and my loving partner, Michael, for their ongoing support. Michael in particular had to endure several bouts of my research trips away from Melbourne and hearing me ramble about these amazing people I was meeting for my work.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are cautioned that this book contains names and images of persons who are deceased.

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