

Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service Since 1945

by Noah Riseman and Richard Trembath

xi + 243 pp., illus, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2016,
ISBN: 9780702253977 (pbk), \$34.95.

Review by Joan Beaumont
The Australian National University

Much of the so-called ‘memory boom’ in Australia has been driven by the politics of recognition. Diverse groups who have felt marginalised – or, to use that overworked word, ‘forgotten’ – have claimed a place in the national narrative of war, the Anzac legend. Australia’s Indigenous servicemen and women are one such group. In the past decade particularly they have mobilised across Australia to gain recognition of the Indigenous experience of serving in war and the Australian defence forces across the twentieth century.

Defending Country makes an important contribution to our understanding of this experience in the years since 1945, a period not covered as well as the two world wars in earlier scholarship. Deftly interweaving archival research and life stories captured in nearly 50 interviews with Indigenous men and women, Noah Riseman and Richard Trembath explore the multiple dimensions of Indigenous military service: among them are the Vietnam War; regional surveillance units including NORFORCE; the evolution of government policy regarding Indigenous recruitment; the skilling of Indigenous women; the relationship between the Returned and Services League and Indigenous veterans; racism in the Australian armed forces; and the role of the Australian Defence Force in Reconciliation.

Racism is clearly the most important of these issues, shaping, as it did, all aspects of the Indigenous experience of military service. As is well known, for the first half of the twentieth century Australian government policy excluded Indigenous peoples from military service, on the grounds that they were ‘not substantially of European origin or descent’, as the *Defence Act 1909* put it. Despite this, some Indigenous men, for a mix of reasons which we can only

surmise, managed to evade this prohibition, which was itself relaxed, especially so far as men of mixed descent, or 'half-castes', were concerned during the manpower crises of both world wars. In the postwar years, when military service was seen by government authorities as a strategy in assimilation, Indigenous men could *volunteer* for national service. Unlike white males, they were still not obligated to serve – although, given that definitions of 'Aboriginality' varied bizarrely between states and the Commonwealth, some Indigenous men found themselves being penalised for not registering for national service in the 1960s.

Notwithstanding this racism in government policies, Riseman and Trembath conclude that many Indigenous people encountered little overt prejudice once they were actually serving in the defence forces. Racial epithets may have been used during the (traditionally brutalising) military socialisation of training, but in combat the need for unity of fighting units in the face of a common enemy ensured that colour mattered little. Whether this constituted 'egalitarianism' might be questioned. All military organisations are, after all, deeply hierarchical and a more significant indicator of equality might be the rates at which Indigenous men were promoted through the ranks.

Given this absence of overt racism – not just in combat, but also in war-zone hospitals and burial practices – it is difficult to speak of a distinctively 'Indigenous' experience of battle. Rather, the differences that Indigenous men and women encountered were more at the point of entry, and at exit when they found that they were denied the benefits of the full citizenship to which military service presumably entitled them.

One of the most intriguing chapters of this book documents how the Returned and Services League (especially in the southern states) championed the cause of Indigenous veterans' rights after World War Two: notably, for them to be allowed to consume alcohol and to vote in federal elections. Whereas at the local level some RSL branches excluded Indigenous veterans from Anzac Day marches, the federal RSL played a critical role in lobbying the federal government to grant Indigenous veterans the franchise in 1949. This was despite the RSL's leadership remaining passionately committed to White Australia. However, Riseman and Trembath argue, this tolerance on the RSL's part declined in later decades, especially when Bruce Ruxton became president of the Victorian branch of the RSL.

In the 1980s and 1990s, too, racism became more evident within the Australia Defence Force – at least in the perceptions of the Indigenous men and women interviewed for this book. It was not necessarily widespread but it reflected, Riseman and Trembath argue, a growing 'polarisation of popular opinion and entrenchment of anti-Indigenous biases' (p. 137) within Australian society since

the 1980s. Presumably also, Indigenous perceptions of racism owed something to the heightened sensitivity that accompanied growing political activism in recent decades.

Notwithstanding this, today's Australian Defence Force, the authors conclude, has made significant progress in recruiting Indigenous personnel and countering racism: in 2011 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constituted 1.4 per cent of the total ADF (p. 129). Meanwhile, the wider commemoration of Indigenous service, which has been supported by governments at both the state and federal levels, has granted the recognition that has long been denied Indigenous service. How this interfaces with the agenda of recognising 'frontiers wars' as part of Australia's military history is a much more contentious issue, however.

On balance, then, the judgment of this book is positive: taken collectively, military participation provided a means whereby Indigenous men and women could acquire skills and employment opportunities often denied them elsewhere, and thereby represented one particular route for their empowerment across the last half century.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 40, 2016*,
edited by Liz Conor, published 2016 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.