

## Aboriginal Contribution to Australian War Efforts: Proving Their Citizenship?

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MHIS201 Indigenous Settler Relations from 1750

At the time of World Wars One and Two, Aboriginal Australians were subject to great oppression and institutionalised discrimination under regulations such as the Protection and Assimilation policies. Despite this negative treatment, significant numbers of Aboriginal men volunteered for service in the Australian Imperial Force during both wars, choosing to fight for a country and empire which had dispossessed them of their land and culture and had denied them their basic civil rights. This essay will address the contribution made by Indigenous soldiers to Australia's war efforts during these wars, the reasons why Aboriginal men chose to fight for a country that had mistreated them for over a century, and the significance of this contribution to the Indigenous community in terms of their fight for citizenship and civil rights.

Despite formal legislation restricting the enlistment of non-Europeans in the Australian Imperial Force, it is estimated that between 400 and 500 Aboriginal Australians fought in World War One, serving in all but two of the sixty infantry battalions and all of the light horse regiments.<sup>1</sup> The uncertainty of these numbers has caused some difficulty in quantifying the Indigenous war contribution in relation to the rest of the community. However the primary significance of their contribution lies in the discriminative circumstances in which it took place. The Defence Act of 1909 prohibited the enlistment in the Australian Imperial Force (hereafter AIF) of any person not of substantially European. Following the 1914 outbreak of World War One, many Indigenous Australians attempted to volunteer for the AIF and were rejected on the basis of their race. Although there was no mention of race in the *Attestation of Persons Enlisting for Service Overseas*, Aboriginal volunteers were often recorded as being excluded from the AIF on medical grounds, with the power to determine race delegated to the medical officers who often listed Aboriginal

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<sup>1</sup> Philippa Scarlett, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers for the AIF: The Indigenous response to World War One* (Canberra: Indigenous Histories, 2011) p.3

volunteers as suffering from a 'defective physique' – this was not a reference to physical development, but instead a way to differentiate the volunteers by race.<sup>2</sup> To circumvent this discrimination, many Aborigines of mixed descent disguised their heritage, claiming to be of Italian or Maori descent<sup>3</sup> until 1917 when the need for reinforcement became great enough to force the Military Board to accept half-castes for active service. Following this change, the numbers of Indigenous soldiers enlisting in the AIF increased significantly. John William Bleakley, Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines, recalled that:

large numbers immediately volunteered, all claiming to come within that category [half-caste]. The recruiting offers scratched their heads, as one of them said, 'some of these are the blackest half-castes I've ever seen'. It seems a shame to disappoint them, but most, if not all, wormed themselves in at other centres and got into uniform eventually.<sup>4</sup>

As this quote clearly evidences, a fundamentally different attitude existed towards Indigenous volunteers, as Aborigines were not considered by white Australia to be equal defenders of Australia, and their presence in the AIF was not welcomed by all Australians.

Despite the broad discrimination experienced by Aborigines in Australia, the desire amongst Indigenous men to enlist in the AIF was widespread. At the time of World War One, racism and segregation were rife on the home front and Aborigines faced low wages, limited rights and poor living conditions; they did not hold the right to vote, nor were they included in the national census. Aboriginal men saw enlistment in the AIF as an escape from these conditions. In contrast to the prejudicial barriers faced back home, participation in the war gave Indigenous men a sense of empowerment, new economic opportunities, and a sense of equality. As members of the AIF, Aboriginal soldiers were treated as equals to white men: they were employed under the same conditions as other soldiers, received the same wages, and, for the most part, were accepted without prejudice. For many Aborigines, this was their first experience of treatment equal to the white enlistees. It is also likely that some Indigenous men chose to enlist in the AIF for the same reasons as many non-Indigenous

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<sup>2</sup> Philippa Scarlett, *The Lock Family in World War One: How Service Records Contribute to Darug History* (Canberra: Indigenous Histories, 2008). p. 55

<sup>3</sup> D Huggonson, "Dark Diggers of the AIF", *The Australian Quarterly* Vol 61, No 3 (1989). p.354

<sup>4</sup> JW Bleakley quoted in CT Wineguard, "A Case Study of Indigenous Brothers in Arms During the First World War", *Australian Army Journal* Vol VI, No 1 (2009). p.197

soldiers: pay, travel, mateship and as a response to aggressive recruitment campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Another factor motivating World War One volunteers was their loyalty to the Crown. However, this conflicted with popular opinion as many white Australians doubted such loyalty from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders following the frontier conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This belief and mistrust remained in the years following World War One; William Cooper of the Australian Aborigines League commented on this in 1938, stating that “it is unfair to treat us as a people of low mentality and treacherous tendencies.”<sup>6</sup>

Arguably the most significant reason Aboriginal men were volunteering to fight in World War One was their desire to earn the basic rights denied them by white society, which some believed would be won through war service. One anonymous soldier of Cherbourg, Queensland, made his feelings regarding this plain following the war:

There were three of us went to the great war out of my family, one was killed. I always thought that fighting for our king and country would make me naturalise[d] British subject and a man with freedom in the country but ... they place me under the act and put me on settlement like a dog. It seems as if the chief protector thinks that a returned soldier doesn't want justice.<sup>7</sup>

Some volunteers had also hoped that their contribution to Australia's war effort would bring about an end to systemic discrimination. As Philippa Scarlett notes following historian and author Charles Bean:

In the same way as white Australians viewed the war experience as transformative and testing, some Aboriginal volunteers and communities saw war participation as a chance to demonstrate their worth and as their own rite of passage to acceptance and equality.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite having proved themselves through war service, the contribution of Aboriginal soldiers to the war effort made little difference as the willingness to recruit Aborigines by the white community was a solely pragmatic choice, never having been

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<sup>5</sup> Scarlett, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers for the AIF*. p.33

<sup>6</sup> William Cooper quoted in Scarlett, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers for the AIF*. p.33

<sup>7</sup> Letter to C Tennant-Kelly quoted in Scarlett, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers for the AIF*. p.41

<sup>8</sup> Scarlett, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers for the AIF*. p.81

considered as a pathway to changing the social conditions for Aborigines.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to their desired equality, for most Aboriginal soldiers, the return to civilian life brought an end to the equal treatment they had experienced during their time in the trenches; instead they were subjected to the same prejudice they had experienced before the war. Aboriginal soldiers were considered ineligible for the same benefits available to white soldiers, and wide discrimination remained in areas such as employment, education, and civil liberties. War service also made no difference to the status of Aboriginal Australians. Under the various repressive state protection acts which had been implemented both during and between the war years, the powers of state governments over the daily lives of Aborigines were increased, subjecting them to greater control by the local Protectors of Aborigines<sup>10</sup>.

During the interwar years, a debate emerged as to whether Aboriginal military service should confer Australian citizenship rights, a prominent goal of many Aboriginal political organisations. The war presented an opportunity for Aboriginal political activists to publicise this demand, with 'the strength of the moral argument for citizenship and other reforms'<sup>11</sup> resting on the extent of Aboriginal military service. Both the Aborigines Progressive Association and the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) promoted the notion of military service as grounds for changing citizenship status. The Aborigines Progressive Association also campaigned for the creation of formal Aboriginal units within the AIF, believing that these distinct units would allow for public recognition of the Aboriginal contribution to the war effort, ensuring that the Aboriginal sacrifices in war time would not be ignored as they had been after World War One.<sup>12</sup> The Australian Aborigines League went one step further, placing conditions on the service of Aborigines enlisting in the armed forces. In 1939, William Cooper of the AAL wrote to John McEwen, Federal Minister for the Interior, urging that 'the enlistment of Aborigines should be preceded by the extension of citizens' rights'<sup>13</sup>. Cooper also argued for 'no enlistment without citizenship', contending that 'Aboriginal people had no status, no rights, no land ... no country and nothing to fight for'; to give them something to fight for, he argued that 'the enlistment of natives should be preceded by the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.63

<sup>10</sup> Huggonson, "Dark Diggers of the AIF". p.354

<sup>11</sup> Robert A Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1989). p.9.

<sup>12</sup> Russell McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation*, (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011). p.52

<sup>13</sup> Robert Hall, *Fighters From the Fringe*, (Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995). p.12.

removal of all disabilities'<sup>14</sup>. These petitions were supported by sympathetic white organisations such as the Aborigines Uplift Society, who demanded that 'immediate and full citizenship should be conferred on all Aborigines accepted for service in the AIF and that they retain the citizenship on their return to Australia.'<sup>15</sup>

Despite this political push for citizenship rights, on the eve of World War Two, Aborigines still occupied a marginal position in white Australian society. The change in government policy from protection to assimilation did not affect the enlistment requirements of the AIF, as they continued to reject applications from Indigenous volunteers for the first two years of the war. Aborigines were still considered to be inferior soldiers, and as Riseman argues, the government saw the military as a racial stronghold of whiteness for the protection of white Australia.<sup>16</sup> Under the military belief that Aboriginal and white servicemen could not comfortably fight alongside one another, legislative barriers and policies were developed to restrict enlistment to white Australians only. In 1940, the Australian Government specifically prohibited the enlistment of all non-white persons into the Army and Navy as they were 'neither necessary, nor desirable.'<sup>17</sup> However, following the need for additional manpower after the 1941 threat of Japanese invasion, these policies were re-assessed and indigenous involvement in World War Two rose to an estimated 3,000 Aborigines and 850 Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>18</sup> Aboriginal Australians enlisting for service in World War Two again hoped that serving Australia would help their push for Indigenous rights. Public support for Indigenous enlistment had again grown, with Arthur Burdeu, President of the Australian Aborigines' League, writing to Prime Minister Menzies in 1940:

As you have been informed of before, the Aboriginal population is intensely loyal to the Empire and the volunteering of the native men is for this reason. They are capable, with good initiative, and I am informed by those training

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Peterson and Will Sanders, *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities* (Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998) p.12

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *The Black Diggers*. p.12

<sup>16</sup> Noah Riseman, "Preserving a White Military: The Australian Armed Forces and Indigenous People in the Second World War" in *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the Construction of an Identity Conference, University of Melbourne, Australia 2006*. eds. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (RMIT, Melbourne). p.133

<sup>17</sup> Military Board memo (6 May 1940) quoted in Hall, *Fighters From the Fringe*. p.12.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Fighters From the Fringe*. p.60.

them that they will be excellent soldiers ... We have always sought full citizenship, which now includes the right to fight for King and Empire.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the increasing politicisation surrounding Indigenous enlistment, Aboriginal men continued to volunteer in World War Two for the same reasons as during World War One. Serviceman Phil Prosser commented on his motivation to enlist as an escape from the welfare experience of 1930's Western Australia:

I made up my mind that I was going to use the army, or the services, to benefit me at the better part of my life. Cos to me it was a way of getting away from this welfare mentality that you could see what was happening in the terms of the old Native Welfare Days. And the way they treated Aboriginal people or Aboriginal people was treated. And so to me it was a way out.<sup>20</sup>

Indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal described her reasons for accepting a position with the Australian Women's Army Service as the increased opportunities for further education:

One of the reasons I joined the army was it was the only way I could learn ... I would be allowed to learn and I thought after the war if I am still alive I'll be able to take extra studies with the 'dimwits' course and it was the only way that the Aboriginals could learn extra education at the time.<sup>21</sup>

Oodgeroo also commented on the surprisingly consistent treatment of Aborigines experienced while working in the Service: "There was a complete difference because in the army they didn't give a stuff about what colour you were. There was a job to be done ... and all of sudden the colour line disappeared."<sup>22</sup>

Concerns were again raised by the military about the loyalty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to Australia, as fear was expressed that the Aborigines might choose to aid the Japanese invasion. The AIF conducted several investigations into the state of Aboriginal loyalty, with one report by Lieutenant HB on the Aborigines of Cape York concluding that

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Prime Minister (7 July 1940) quoted in Department of Veteran's Affairs, *Indigenous Service: A Resource for Primary Schools*, Canberra, 2013. p.17.

<sup>20</sup> N. Riseman, "Equality in the ranks: The lives of Aboriginal Vietnam Veterans", *Journal of Australian Studies* Vol. 36 No 4 (2012). p.414

<sup>21</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, quoted in Department of Veteran's Affairs, *Indigenous Service*. p.15.

<sup>22</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, quoted in Hall, *The Black Diggers*. p.69.

“not one per cent could be relied upon to be loyal.”<sup>23</sup> Despite these fears, wider calls were made to utilise the specific skills of Aboriginal men in the war. In 1942, anthropologist AP Elkin wrote to Prime Minister Curtin urging him to allow greater Aboriginal contribution to the war effort: “I think at this juncture we should take every opportunity we can for giving the Aborigines a chance of helping their country, either in the fighting services or as auxiliaries to these services or in factories.”<sup>24</sup>

In line with Elkin’s suggestion of Aboriginal service as an auxiliary to the AIF, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders also contributed to the localised defence effort on the home front. During World War Two, the Army used the local populations to develop specific Indigenous units such as the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit and the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion. Formed in 1941, both units comprised of Indigenous soldiers trained under white military leadership, tasked with the responsibility of defending the northern coast of Australia from Japanese attack. Troops serving in such units were paid approximately half the wage of soldiers serving in other units, and unless they served overseas, were not considered eligible for veterans’ benefits. Despite the resentment of their low wages in comparison to the AIF soldiers, for many Aborigines, this was their first experience of receiving cash wages and their employers complying with the provisions of ordinance.<sup>25</sup> Riseman argues that these Indigenous units circumvented the army’s racially-based regulations as it was a de-facto force filling a gap unsuitable to white personnel.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to this informal service provided by many Aborigines in Northern Australia, Aborigines also contributed heavily to local industry during the war years, backfilling the manpower shortage caused by the enlistment of many workers. As the population of the Northern Territory increased, the AIF became heavily dependent on the Aboriginal labour contribution to the war effort. During this time, living and employment conditions for Aborigines increased greatly as they received adequate housing, fixed working hours, sufficient rations and access to medical treatment – none of which had been received under the pastoralist employment scheme of the early 1900s. The Army was considered to be a

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<sup>23</sup> K Saunders, “Inequalities of Sacrifice: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour in Northern Australia During the Second World War” *Labour History* No. 69 (1995). p.132.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p.134.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, *Fighters From The Fringe*. p.44.

<sup>26</sup> N. Riseman, “Exploited Soldiers: Navaho and Yolngu Units in World War II”, *Journal of Northern Territory History* Vol. 19 (2008). p.64

benevolent employer, and the success of employment in the AIF later helped to change attitudes towards Aborigines as employees. VJ White, Director of Native Affairs in the Northern Territory, commented on the new positive view towards Aboriginal workers in 1943:

The contribution to the war effort by the Northern Territory native is considerable and the demand for manpower has converted him into an economic asset, of real worth to the community... conditions prevailing at present have enabled the native to emerge from the obscurity in which he hitherto has been destined to work.<sup>27</sup>

However, in the post-war years of the late-1940s and early 1950s, the Aboriginal contribution both in the Australian Imperial Force and on the home front once again failed to translate into full citizenship rights. Despite this, the Indigenous involvement in the war had helped to re-align Australian race relations and quash the view that Aboriginal people would accept employment under low wages and conditions. The Aboriginal resentment of this discriminative treatment had done much to politicise the Indigenous population in the post-war period. Historian Robert Hall believes that this treatment was largely responsible for a rise in the assertiveness of Aboriginal Australians<sup>28</sup>, arguing that “[i]ndigenous involvement in World War Two wholly provided new opportunities that would lead to increased rights for Indigenous people in the post-war epoch.”<sup>29</sup> This politicisation of the Aboriginal community following World War Two led directly to improvements in their circumstances. The war had impacted on the status and position of Aborigines within Australian society, eventually leading to voting rights, increased support for integration, higher wages for Aboriginal labour in the Northern Territory, and increased funding for Indigenous affairs.<sup>30</sup>

The historical legacy of military service in World Wars One and Two has contributed to white Australia’s collective sense of national identity. For Aboriginal Australians, however, participation in Australia’s war effort, both overseas and as part of national defence and

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<sup>27</sup> Letter to RAAF Melbourne (23 December 1942), quoted in Hall, *The Black Diggers*. p.175.

<sup>28</sup> Hall, *Fighters From The Fringe*. p.32

<sup>29</sup> Riseman, “Exploited Soldiers”. p.64

<sup>30</sup> Noah Riseman. *Defending Whose Country? Indigenous Soldiers in the Pacific War* (Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 2012) p.81.



war-time labour, involved more experiences of institutional forms of racism. This included racial barriers to enlistment, reduced remuneration during service, denial of loyalty and diminished social rewards for their efforts in the post-War years. The ongoing racism and discrimination towards Aboriginal Australians, particularly those returning from war service, eventually inspired Aborigines to become more politically assertive and to challenge their marginalised status in society. The shared experience of war and the relative equality they had temporarily experienced during that time helped to integrate Aborigines into a culture which had excluded them for decades, and eventually led to social transformation through Aboriginal entitlement, recognition, and enfranchisement.

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