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# *The Forgotten Role of Indigenous Australians in the Anzac Legend*

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Just two hundred metres behind the Australian War Memorial, along the track leading up Mt Ainslie, lies a modest, privately erected memorial for Australia's Indigenous servicemen.<sup>1</sup> Very few people know of the existence of this poignant tribute to the thousands of Aboriginal Australians who have served under the Australian flag. Even more surprising to discover is that at least five hundred Indigenous servicemen enlisted in the First World War, and that over eighty died in this conflict, at a time when Aboriginal Australians were denied many civil rights.<sup>2</sup> To date, their voices are very much missing from the Anzac legend.

In 1914, at the beginning of WWI, Indigenous Australians were denied many of the basic freedoms that Australians of European descent enjoyed. Legally, they were British subjects, but in practice they were ignored by the census, not allowed to vote and denied Commonwealth benefits.<sup>3</sup> The Defence Act, amended in 1909, introduced compulsory military training for all men except those 'not substantially of European origin or descent'.<sup>4</sup> At the outbreak of war, this was extended to exclude all Aboriginal Australians from military service.

Despite these restrictions and the lack of acknowledgement Indigenous people received at the time, numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people successfully enlisted, often under the pretence that they were only distantly related to Aboriginal people. Some Indigenous Australians, like Jack Dunn, who enlisted in April 1916 at Cootamundra, claimed to be African American.<sup>5</sup> Also, there was a notable loophole which allowed many indigenous people to enlist – New Zealand Maoris were guaranteed the rights of British subjects under the Treaty of Waitangi, and therefore allowed to enrol in military

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1 Southwell-Keely, M. 2006, 'Aboriginal Memorial Plaque', *War Memorials in Australia*, <<http://www.skp.com.au/memorials2/pages/00013.htm>>, accessed 20/11/09.

2 Watson, L. 2006, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Soldiers of the First World War', *Kurbingui Star Special Supplement*, 20 October 2006.

3 Huggonson, D. 1988, *Too Dark for the Light Horse: An Exhibition of Photographs & Documents depicting Aboriginal Involvement in the Australian Army*, Albury, N.S.W., Albury Regional Museum, 11 August–27 September 1988 p.2.

4 Huggonson, D. 1988, *Too Dark for the Light Horse: An Exhibition of Photographs & Documents depicting Aboriginal Involvement in the Australian Army*, Albury, N.S.W., Albury Regional Museum, 11 August–27 September 1988 p.2.

5 Huggonson, D. 2000, 'The White Australia Ideal and Australia's Defence Policy', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, November 2000, p. 374.

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action.<sup>6</sup> This enabled many Aboriginal Australians to enlist as ‘Maoris’. Thus, by denying their heritage and disowning their culture, they condemned themselves to a gruesome and bloody war in far-distant lands. Whether they understood the full consequences of enlistment we can only imagine, but one thing is certain – we shall never know the actual number of Indigenous Australians who served in the First World War. It is only through meticulous research that researchers have been able to uncover any at all – most Indigenous volunteers did not have their ethnicity recorded and thus this aspect of their stories is lost forever.

In late 1916, the rules concerning enlistment were changed. The Allies were desperate for a breakthrough, so Australia promised Britain to commit more troops. A referendum was held in October 1916 to introduce conscription, but was defeated.<sup>7</sup> In light of this, legislation was passed that would allow ‘half-castes’ to enlist.<sup>8</sup> This move spurred many more Aboriginal Australians to enlist, now that they had a greater chance of being accepted. Many who had previously been rejected for ‘Unsuitable Physique (Colour)’<sup>9</sup> now reapplied and were accepted. They were promptly sent off to fight alongside white Australians in a war that had little significance to their lives. Once on the frontline, any racial issues were quickly forgotten. People who may have been hostile towards each other back home became united under the Union flag against the enemy, whether the Turks on the battlefields of Gallipoli or the Germans in the trenches of the Western Front.

An exceptional case of Aboriginal dedication to the cause during World War I was that of the Lovett family. Five brothers enlisted – Edward and Frederick in the 4th Light Horse, Leonard in the 39th Battalion, Alfred in the 26th Battalion, and Herbert in the 15th Machine Gun Company – and amazingly, all of them survived to return to Australia.<sup>10</sup> This devotion to King and Country by one family is virtually unrivalled, and exemplifies why collectively all the Aboriginal Anzacs are deserving of a greater part in Australia’s military history.

One Aboriginal serviceman who acquired surprising notoriety in the First World War was Private Douglas Grant, who unsuccessfully tried to enlist in 1915, but subsequently joined the AIF 13th Battalion. In April 1917 he was captured by the Germans at the Battle of Bullecourt and taken Prisoner of War. He was considered a phenomenon in Germany, and doctors measured and photographed him, scientists and anthropologists invited him to the Berlin University and sculptures were made of him.<sup>11</sup> He was treated as a specimen of high interest while in Germany, but tragically, when he returned to Australia he found himself unable to assimilate with either black or white society and died, depressed and unemployed, in 1951.<sup>12</sup>

Readjustment was the greatest problem faced by many indigenous Anzacs upon their return to Australia. While united with the ‘whitefellas’ on the battlefield, once they returned to Australia, they struggled to integrate with society. White society, with the exception of some of the veterans with whom they had served, spurned them, and Aboriginal society found it difficult to accept these Indigenous ex-servicemen

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6 Huggonson, D. 2000, ‘The White Australia Ideal and Australia’s Defence Policy’, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, November 2000, p. 374.

7 Huggonson, D. 2000, ‘The White Australia Ideal and Australia’s Defence Policy’, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, November 2000, p. 377

8 Kartinyeri, D. 1996, *Ngarrindjeri Anzacs*, Adelaide, Aboriginal Family History Project, South Australian Museum and Raukkan Council p. 6

9 Heath, L. 2008, ‘Determined to serve: a curator’s curiosity uncovers some surprising results’, *Wartime*, Issue 43, p 35.

10 Huggonson, D. 2000, ‘Family of ‘Fighting Gunditjmar’’, *ATSIC News*, June 2000, p. 45

11 Clark, C.D. 1973, ‘Aborigines in the first AIF’, in *Australian Army Journal*, No. 286, p. 24–25

12 Australian War Memorial, 2009, *Prisoners of the Germans*, <<http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stoloneyears/ww1/germany/index.asp>>, accessed 17/11/09

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who retained many European customs from their time in the army. Other veterans were granted parcels of land in rural Australia, yet the Aboriginal servicemen did not receive any of these post-war benefits.<sup>13</sup>

So why are their voices missing from the Anzac legend?

There has been very little recognition for these remarkable Anzacs who relinquished their traditional cultures and defied the rules to fight for the Empire. In 1931 and 1932, the NSW RSL magazine 'Reveille' sought information about Indigenous servicemen,<sup>14</sup> but this project was forgotten amidst the onset of a second World War. It was not until many years later that the cause of the Aboriginal servicemen of Australia was taken up again<sup>15</sup>. Indigenous Australians did not receive many of their civil rights until the 1960s and 1970s, which prolonged the wait for adequate recognition. While their numerical contribution may not have been substantial in relation to the thousands of non-indigenous Australians who served during World War I, the obstacles they faced just to enlist make their contribution a truly significant one, and one which we cannot afford to forget.

The Anzac legend is difficult to define yet it plays a pivotal role in Australian history, and to this day contributes to the Australian sense of identity. The qualities of an Anzac are most commonly listed as loyalty, resilience, a disregard for the rules, compassion, and above all mateship.<sup>16</sup> The Indigenous Anzacs exemplify all these qualities, displaying mateship with those who accepted them, intense loyalty to King and Country in their determination to fight for Australia, resilience in their unmovable desire to serve, a blatant disregard for the rules which forbade them from enlisting and compassion to both their countrymen and their enemies. Indeed, two (Private William Irwin and Corporal Albert Knight) were awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, the second highest medal for bravery after the Victoria Cross.<sup>17</sup>

War involves unimaginable horrors and those who serve their country deserve the honour and dignity of having their contributions recognized and voices heard. In its historical context, the contribution of Australia's Indigenous population during WWI is immensely significant. As a nation, we are to be condemned for failing to commemorate the missing voices of the Indigenous Anzacs, and as a nation we must strive to amend our wrongs and appreciate their patriotism, dedication and loyalty to our nation at a time when we did not even recognise them as equals.

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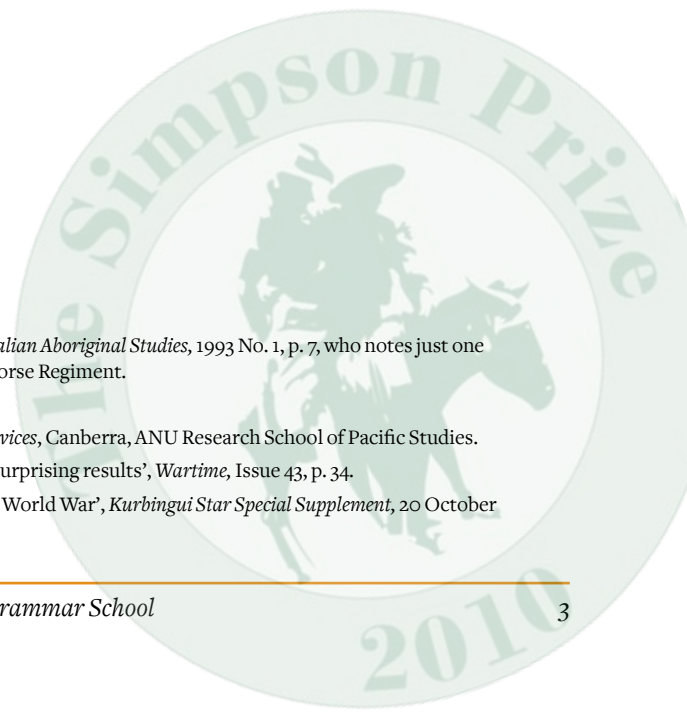
13 Huggonson, D. 1993, 'Aborigines and the aftermath of the Great War', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1993 No. 1, p. 7, who notes just one exception, Farrier Quarter Master Sergeant George Kennedy of the 6th Light Horse Regiment.

14 'Aborigines: 11th Light Horse', 1931, *Reveille*, 30th September 1931, p.6.

15 D.J. Mulvaney & P.J. Grimshaw, 1992, *Aboriginal History: Aborigines in the Services*, Canberra, ANU Research School of Pacific Studies.

16 Heath, L. 2008, 'Determined to serve: a curator's curiosity uncovers some surprising results', *Wartime*, Issue 43, p. 34.

17 Watson, L. 2006, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Soldiers of the First World War', *Kurbingui Star Special Supplement*, 20 October 2006 p. 4.



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