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The Anzac Legend and Indigenous Australians

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The ANZAC legend is one that was founded by the actions of Australians and New Zealanders on the shores of Gallipoli. It finally brought Australians together, uniting them as one nation, a task that the constitution set in motion but was not able to finish. The voices of Indigenous Australians are missing from this legend. Over four-hundred Indigenous Australians, who came from every state, went to fight in the First World War (WW1).¹ Although they fought side by side with their fellow Australians, upon returning home they were not celebrated like their 'British-Australian' mates, rather they were shunned and for them life only got harder. Even today the actions of Indigenous Australians in World War One have not been sufficiently commemorated and their contributions deserve further recognition. Indigenous Australians fought and died for Australia, but still their voices are missing from the ANZAC legend.

Indigenous Australians played a significant role in the founding of the ANZAC legend even though the odds were against them. At the time of the Great War they were heavily discriminated against: They were not classed as citizens, they could not own land and they were not allowed to marry non-aborigines, amongst other things. It shows loyalty to Australia on the part of Indigenous Australians to be willing to fight and die for a country that had treated them so. Five years before the start of the Great War the government passed the 1909 *Defence Act* that prohibited anyone not of 'substantially European descent' from enlisting in any of the armed forces, though many passed themselves off as half-castes and Maoris to do so.² Despite this over 400 Indigenous Australians enlisted, hailing from every one of Australia's states.³ It would have been a relief for many of them when they were not treated like they were in their civilian lives. "*The misconceptions and negative stereotypes that surely many non-Aboriginal diggers had in their minds when they joined would have quickly disappeared when they were living, eating, laughing and dying with these young fellas.*"⁴ Things were different in the trenches, walls that had separated the Aborigines and British-Australians in their civilian lives were torn down and they became mates under the barrages

1 Peter Londey, Indigenous Australian Servicemen, 'Australian War Memorial,' N.d <http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous.asp>. (23-25/10/2009)

2 Unsung ANZAC heroes 4, N.d 'http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/abled/apac/lessons/pdfs/apac166.pdf' (24/10/2009)

3 Peter Londey, Indigenous Australian Servicemen, 'Australian War Memorial,' N.d <http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous.asp>. (23-25/10/2009)

4 Garth O'Connell, Why did they join? 'Indigenous Australians at War,' N.d <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/IAAW/about.html> (23-24/10/2009)

of enemy fire, enduring the shared loss of friends. *‘War presented and still presents an opportunity for Indigenous men and women to enjoy an equality between black and white that was not available to Indigenous people at home and remains elusive to this day.’*⁵ It could be said that it was the demolition of these walls that led to the formation of the ANZAC legend. Against the odds Indigenous Australians found equality and mates in the trenches of Gallipoli and from this mateship a nation was born.

Indigenous Australians sacrificed their lives for Australia but for those who returned their voices were not heard or recognised as part of the ANZAC legend. After returning home, Indigenous Australians found that they were still treated with the same prejudices as before the war. They were certainly not celebrated like their British-Australian counterparts, rather they were ignored or even shunned by white Australia and the divide between Indigenous Australians and British-Australians grew wider than what it was before the war.⁶ *‘It’s when you get back that it gets hard on the black Digger.’*⁷ This clearly shows the contrast between the experience Indigenous Australians had when they were over seas compared to how they were retreated on their return. The names of Aboriginal diggers were omitted from most war memorials across Australia.⁸ The Aboriginals role in the founding of the ANZAC legend was not merely over looked it was blatantly ignored. They did not receive recognition for their bravery and they couldn’t even go to the pub with other ex-servicemen on ANZAC day. *‘Our people were denied the honour, recognition and respect accorded to other servicemen and servicewomen.’*⁹ The government set up property initiatives for returned servicemen that most Aboriginal soldiers were excluded from. These initiatives involved giving large grants of land to returned servicemen. Very few Aborigines received land under the ‘soldier settlement scheme’ albeit most of the best farming land on Aboriginal reserves was confiscated for this scheme. This left the Aborigines who had lived off this land for decades with no money and nowhere to go. Not only did the vast majority of Aboriginal returned servicemen and women not have access to the ‘soldier settlement scheme’ many had no access to health support. *‘Uncle Jimmy was the only one of the four brothers who got any counselling and was the only one who would even mention the war.’*¹⁰ This quote indicates that those Aboriginals who were wounded or mentally scarred because of their involvement in the war received little help and this came back to haunt them in later life. The ANZAC legend is one that excludes the voices of Aboriginal soldiers who fought for their nation but were treated so harshly on their return home.

The voices of Indigenous Australians who served in WW1 are still not sufficiently commemorated today. It is important that today’s generations of young Australians appreciate the sacrifices that this group of soldiers made and their contribution to the ANZAC legend. There are only a handful of memorials scattered around Australia to commemorate the service of the thousands of Indigenous Australians who have served in Australia’s Armed forces. At the Australian War Memorial, designed to commemorate all of Australia’s service personnel, the only permanent Aboriginal aspect are two carved faces among ‘Australia’s Native Fauna’ along the Roll of Honour.¹¹ *‘To this day, visitors to Australia’s War Memorial*

5 National Indigenous Times, The ANZAC Day legend & Coloured Digger ANZAC march, ‘Creative Spirits,’ N.d <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/anzac-day-digger-march.html> (24/10/2009)

6 Garth O’Connell, Why did they join? ‘Indigenous Australians at War,’ N.d <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/IAAW/about.html> (23-24/10/2009)

7 David Williams, The ANZAC Day legend & Coloured Digger ANZAC march, ‘Creative Spirits,’ N.d <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/anzac-day-digger-march.html> (24/10/2009)

8 The ANZAC Day legend & Coloured Digger ANZAC march, ‘Creative Spirits,’ N.d <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/anzac-day-digger-march.html> (24/10/2009)

9 Pastor Ray Minniecon, The ANZAC Day legend & Coloured Digger ANZAC march, ‘Creative Spirits,’ N.d <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/anzac-day-digger-march.html> (24/10/2009)

10 Susie Russell, The ANZAC Day legend & Coloured Digger ANZAC march, ‘Creative Spirits,’ N.d <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/anzac-day-digger-march.html> (24/10/2009)

11 Garth O’Connell, Why did they join? ‘Indigenous Australians at War,’ N.d <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/IAAW/about.html> (23-24/10/2009)

*in Canberra will not find too many traces of Aboriginal involvement in Anzac battles.*¹² In 2007 Aboriginal people organised the first 'coloured digger' march to draw attention to and gain recognition for those Indigenous Australians who have served their nation in the Armed forces. This change came too late for those Aboriginal ex-servicemen who helped create the ANZAC legend. Unfortunately their voices will not have time to be heard with the last Australian digger dying earlier this year.¹³ The voices of Indigenous Australians who served in the First World War are finally starting to be heard, however, there is a long way to go before one could say that they are no longer missing from the ANZAC legend.

Indigenous Australians fought and died for their nation doing their part to found the ANZAC legend. Upon returning home from the war they were shunned by white Australia and did not receive the recognition that they justly deserved. Only recently have many people become aware of the sacrifices Indigenous Australians made during WW1 and started to commemorate them. Unfortunately this may have come too late as all of Australia's WW1 diggers have now passed on and those Indigenous Australians who contributed to the ANZAC legend will never have a chance to tell us their story and let their voices be heard. The Indigenous Australians who served in the First World War have not had their voices sufficiently recognised as part of the ANZAC legend that united Australia and provided it with a national identity.

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¹² Irfan Yusuf, Fight your own battles, 'eniar.org,' N.d '<http://www.eniar.org/news/AboriginalANZACs.html>' (24/10/2009)

¹³ Last WW1 digger dies at 110, 'ABC News,' N.d '<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/06/03/2588010.htm>' (24/10/2009)