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Are There Voices Missing from the ANZAC Legend?

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The Anzacs landed at Gallipoli at 5 a.m. on the 25 April, 1915 which is commemorated today as Anzac Day. On this date, every year, Anzac gatherings are held all over Australia. At dawn services, bugles are played, the Defence forces march, prayers are said, hymns are sung, generations of veterans march and the nation stops. But when we stop, what do we think of? Our country fighting for freedom and peace. We think of that as the overall reflection but what about our soldiers and effects of the war on all the lost voices. Do we consider unexplored memories of those in the shadows? There is one group of Australians who has been almost totally ignored, the brave Aboriginal people who have laid down their lives for their homeland and have gone almost unrecognised. The indigenous people of Australia have had a controversial place throughout Australian history with the period around World War I being no exception.

At the time of the World War I, British-Australians still believed themselves to be superior to the indigenous people of Australia. This was reflected when the Constitution of Australia was established only 13 years earlier, in 1901. The Constitution excluded Aboriginal people by not regarding them as Australian citizens. In addition, not all Aboriginal people were given the right to vote at federal elections and with those in Queensland and Western Australia were being denied voting rights at a state level.

Between 1911 and 1929 Australian males aged between 18 and 60 were required to perform militia service within Australia and its territories. The Defence Acts of 1903 and 1904 empowered the Australian Government to call up 'unexempted' males in time of war. The Defence Act 1909 made training and service compulsory in time of peace. The Defence Act 1909 prevented those people who were not of European descent from being enlisted in any of the armed forces. Despite the legislation restricting Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders from enlisting, or their long history of being persecuted by the British, many Aboriginal people still wanted to support Australia by being involved in the war. Around 400 indigenous Australians from every state were said to have enlisted and fought in World War I for Australia and the British Empire. Although this may not seem to be a large contribution on behalf of the Aboriginal population, when 416 809 Australians in total enlisted for service in World War I, Australia's Aboriginal population was estimated to be only 80 000.

Canberra based historian, David Huggonson spent 20 years researching the Aboriginal contribution to Australia's military campaigns. He uncovered information relating to the names of 428 Aborigines

from every state of Australia who served as soldiers in World War I. Interestingly, Cape Barren and Flinders islands had the most significant number of early enlistments in the Great War. The fact that this information regarding their involvement was not revealed until the 13 April, 2004, strongly reinforces the fact that the Aborigines' voices were definitely long lost. David Huggonson said, 'Few Australians are aware that Aborigines have served in every war that Australia has fought in since the Boer War'. He also reminded us that, 'It wasn't until May 1917 that "half-castes" were allowed to enlist due to a shortage of volunteers and the damage on the Western Front'. As Mr Huggonson correctly suggested, it is important that the roles played by Australia's Aboriginal soldiers are recognised and it is imperative that their input is viewed as a significant part of the Anzac legend.

It could be assumed that most of the Aboriginal people wanted to be involved in the war for the same kind of reasons that the British-Australians did. They were swept up in the excitement of war and the belief that it would be their chance to see the world and to get paid for it. Although many Aborigines disliked the British because of their violent history, many felt strongly patriotic and loyal to Australia, believing that it was their nation also.

During the war, amongst those who were serving Australia and the Empire, the division of colour which sharply divided the British-Australians and the Aboriginal people in their civilian lives became non-existent. No longer were negative stereotypes attributed to the indigenous Australians. The young Australian men simply saw them as being no different from themselves and treated them accordingly. They lived, fought and died beside each other, never once thinking one was superior to another.

Unfortunately, this mentality did not spread though Australia while the soldiers were away. Aboriginal soldiers who had fought and survived overseas received none of the accolades that their British-Australian counterparts did. Often they were ignored or shunned by the white Australian community when they returned home. The Commonwealth government supported public opinion by insisting on legislation which ensured that even the Aboriginal soldiers who served in the war were not entitled to the same rights as the white population. As a result, Aboriginal servicemen were not permitted to have a beer in hotels along with the other returned servicemen. To further add to their frustration, the Aboriginal soldiers who went to war were not allowed to apply for the returned servicemen's Settlement Scheme. The aim of this scheme was to give parts of the land for agricultural development to those who had fought in the war as compensation for their sacrifices. The majority of Aboriginal ex-servicemen were denied this right to be granted an allotment. This scheme also affected the Aboriginal population who did not go to war, because the fertile land which was being given to the soldier Settlement Scheme had previously been Aboriginal Reserve Land. This meant that many Aboriginal people were forced to leave the land which they had lived off for decades. They had no place to go and were left without any money.

It is obvious that there were many negatives surrounding the relationship between the Aboriginal people and the British around World War I. Aboriginal involvement in the war is important, not only to modern Aboriginal history but also to Australian history. It is important to know that Aboriginal people were there on the battlefield, willing to sacrifice themselves for their nation at the time when Australia's national character was said to have been established.

The involvement of Aboriginal Australians in World War I was also significant because it set the precedent for World War II in which it is thought that 3000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders served. It was on the fronts of World War II that the division between white Australians and Indigenous Australians continued to dissipate.

On Anzac Day instead of thinking about an awareness of Australia's Aborigines will lead soldiers fighting, consider the unexplored memories of those in the shadows to a better understanding of war, with Anzac Day being no exception.

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