



# THE Simpson PRIZE

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*Clayfield College*



## *Are There Voices Missing From the Anzac Legend?*

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Maisie Biggs  
*Clayfield College*



Every ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, Australian men and women are commemorated for their service to their country in times of conflict. Every Australian child has been educated from a young age on the principles of courage, endurance, discipline and mateship engendered by the ANZAC legend: it is integral to the Australian national identity. They are taught about the tragic Gallipoli campaign in 1915 where the 'legend' was born. All this is well known. We take a few minutes each year to honour those who gave everything, even their lives, for our country. However, despite this tradition, there are voices unheard from our cumulative history. As Laurence Binyon reminds us

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them. (Binyon, 1917)

Binyon's injunction to keep the memory of those who will 'grow not old' fresh in our minds cannot be observed for those who served but whose memory has been denied us.

The North Australia Observer Unit was formed in World War II in response to the increased threat of a Japanese invasion of Australia. This need for defence in the North was reinforced by the air raids that heavily bombed and strafed Darwin, Broome and Wyndham in February 1942. These attacks resulted in over 615 casualties in less than a fortnight as well as damage and destruction of ships and aircraft, including twenty-three planes at Darwin alone (Walker, 1986 p.1). While the towns, especially Darwin, were heavily defended after these attacks, the reality of thousands of kilometres of undefended coastline in the North presented a real problem for the defence of Australia (McCarthy, 1959). The idea for a unit, similar to Smuts' commandoes of the Boer War (Pakenham, 1979 p.105), was that of Major William E.H. Stanner, an anthropologist before the war with extensive knowledge of Australia's north (Australian War Memorial, 2009). He envisioned a Unit which worked in small groups, mostly on horseback, who patrolled the North coast. The plan was to maintain surveillance of five points through which the Japanese would have to pass to ambush the Australian forces in the Northern Territory. This involved coastal observation posts at sea and on land, together with mounted patrols (Harrison, n.d.).

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What resulted was an unusually unregimented unit known as the 'Nackeroos', (a term coined by Lieutenant Travers as NAOU wasn't a particularly catchy name) (Walker, 1986 p.10), who operated as 'organised bushrangers' (McLaughlin, 1999). The unit consisted of approximately 550 men, most with a background in the outback and country stations, a large number of whom had been Light-horsemen. These men were chosen for their fitness, bush experience and horsemanship (Walker, 1986 pp.8-11). The nature of their work, patrolling vast expanses of uninhabited and hostile land with tenuous links to Unit headquarters by wireless, meant the mobile units operated without guaranteed medical assistance or casualty evacuation. Even access to essentials like water was at times uncertain. A shotgun was provided for food. These men's lives were endangered not by the Japanese, with whom they never directly engaged in battle, but by the horse-hungry crocodiles, unforgiving terrain and crushing isolation, all circumstances of their regular patrols. In extreme cases, lives were lost to exposure and dehydration as a result of groups simply not finding water in time as they navigated largely uncharted areas. It was chiefly on the Aboriginal members of the Unit that the men relied to survive (Walker, 1986). Each platoon was allocated three to four Aborigines, who were renowned not only for their abilities as trackers but also to supply food in what was, after all, their country. According to Lt Col Des Harrison, then a Corporal in the NAOU, they 'having once passed through strange bush country ... would never get lost in it ... there were many patrol instances when the food situation became desperate and no doubt some of us would have perished but for the Aborigine's ability to locate food and water.' (Harrison, n.d.). On a more personal level, Pierce Pidsley commented, 'The Aboriginal guides were great blokes. We had a lot of trust in them and on most patrols they were leading us. They were proud of the job they were doing and never let us down.' (Walker, 1986 p.138)

Under these circumstances, the Nackeroos exemplified and lived the ideals central to the ANZAC legend. The extreme conditions and nature of the patrols made it work only for men of endurance, discipline and initiative, demanding extreme courage and stamina. These experiences linked the platoons in ways often only war experiences are able, and the isolation of the Australian terrain was only alleviated by the mateship and unbreakable bonds forged between the men of the Unit.

Though the Nackeroos didn't serve in the front line, their role was pivotal to national defence from the very real threat of potential invasion. Should the Japanese have invaded, the closest allies were America, who, separated by the Pacific Ocean were weaker than the Japanese in the water, land and air; and India, who was in no position to offer assistance should the need have arisen, being engaged in the Middle East and Burma (McCarthy, 1959 pp.1-3). In the absence of allied support, it was essential for Australia to mount its own defence, however unorthodox. It was assumed the Japanese were intercepting their signal traffic, so all messages transmitted indicated a much larger force was on the ground, giving the enemy a highly inflated and misleading assessment of Australia's defence (McLaughlin, 1999). The Nackeroos' role in inhibiting the Japanese southward thrust has remained unknown and unacknowledged. For while other units fought on foreign soil, the Nackeroos were dedicated to protecting the shores of the homeland.

This remarkable unit has never been commemorated, barely recorded, and were often disparagingly referred to as 'Curtin's Cowboys' after the prime minister of the day. Although this Unit's covert operation was, of necessity, kept secret from the general populace during the war, military discretion concerning the Nackeroos has never changed. The extent of their commemoration is a small stone and plaque memorial erected at Timber Creek, in the Northern Territory, seven hours southwest of Darwin (McLaughlin, 1999). This site was chosen because of the importance of the Nackeroos to this community (Victoria Daly Shire Council, 2009), but it can be argued that this token memorial is hardly sufficient in view of the great sacrifices and valour of the men it commemorates.

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While we deservedly hold sacred those who have been memorialised at Gallipoli, Beersheba, Fromelles, Crete and Kokoda, it is now time that the voices of this courageous and unforgettable Unit are heard, and this unheralded group of men and their indigenous guides receive recognition for their sacrifices for their country. The ignorance of the general population of the existence of the Nackerroos does not do justice to their incredible story. In the words of Morrie Vane, 'There was only one NAOU' (Walker, 1986), and now their deserved commemoration should allow their story to resonate loudly and clearly through our military history.

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