

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service in the  
Second World War*

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On 19 February 1942, the Japanese Empire launched its first air raid on the north Australian port city of Darwin. The attack devastated the ill-prepared town, destroying eleven ships in and around the harbour, several Australian aircraft and numerous buildings in the township. Though reports have conflicted over the number of dead, the most commonly cited figure is 243. The Darwin bombing was the first foreign attack on white Australia in its history. Through 1942 and '43, the Japanese again attacked Darwin and other parts of northern Australia over 200 times (Powell, 2007).

While the bombing of Darwin forms a significant part of Australia's national war memory, what is less known is what happened next. A Japanese plane crash-landed on Bathurst Island – one of the two Tiwi Islands about eighty kilometres north of Darwin. Tiwi Islander Richard Miller describes what transpired:

After this crash, that Japanese fella [came] out of the plane and start wandering around in the bush. He didn't know there were Aborigines peoples just camping there, nearby. So, wandering around and walked through bushes, he finally came out of the camp...And all of sudden, all these

men and women start running, and they left that one little boy laying on blanket beside the tree. So he [Japanese] went and pick him up and carried him around...and this fella, his name is Matthias Ulungura, he had the little tomahawk. So he went and hide behind the tree. So, the Japanese fella came by and then passed him and Matthias then came behind him with the little tomahawk, he pointed at his back and say 'stick 'em up'. So he stood like this with that baby and he [Matthias] grab that boy, little boy, off him, and then he took the pistol (Burnett, 1990).

Matthias Ulungura had taken the first Japanese prisoner of war on Australian soil. The story is emblematic of the wider position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service in the Second World War: despite valiantly serving the country, and at times even providing vital support for Australia's home defence, Indigenous contributions to the war were largely forgotten. It is only in recent years that efforts to honour to Indigenous military service have begun to gain traction (Riseman, 2017).

This article examines the many sides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service during the Second World War. It draws on a combination of archival records, oral histories, and Robert Hall's ground-breaking scholarship published in *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Hall, 1997), providing new evidence and examples, as well as synthesising Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources hitherto examined separately. The Second World War Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience broadly fits into four categories: service in integrated units, service in remote Indigenous units, home front in settled areas (southeast and southwest), and home front in the remote north. While of course the home front is a significant topic, this article focuses primarily on the first two categories. It examines the policies surrounding Indigenous service, the motivations of Indigenous men and women to serve, and the social interactions they had in the forces. For the majority of those Indigenous men and women who served in or alongside the Australian forces, the Second World War represented a significant improvement from their pre-war social and economic situation, offering a glimpse of equality. Yet wartime service did not bring structural upheaval, as the war's end marked a return to the inequalities so rampant in the pre-war era.

## Policies on Indigenous Service

At the Second World War's outbreak, the Commonwealth government and military drew upon their own pre-existing assumptions about Indigenous Australians. Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made their own decisions about the extent and manner of participation in the war effort based on their previous experience. For this reason, the contexts of the First World War and the inter-war period are vital for any informed analysis of the war years.

The question of whether Aboriginal people could enlist arose early in the First World War. The *Defence Act* (1909) included two clauses stating that persons "not substantially of European origin or descent" were exempt from compulsory call-up, but this rule did not necessarily preclude voluntary enlistments. Even so, early on Australian authorities applied the rules about European origin or descent across the First Australian Imperial Force, thus limiting the ability of Aboriginal people to enlist. In May 1917, after the failure of the first conscription referendum, authorities relaxed the rule to allow Aboriginal men of mixed descent to enlist so long as they had at least one white parent. Historian John Maynard has found that notwithstanding the regulations, 62% of the nearly 1,000 Aboriginal men who served in the First World War enlisted before the rule change, with only Queensland witnessing a boost in Aboriginal enlistments from May 1917. Many managed to do so either by pretending to be Italian or Māori (who were accepted even though they were not-European), or because local recruiters overlooked (or were unaware of) the rule. Regardless of how, when or why these men enlisted, what was common was the sense of equality they experienced in the forces, including receiving equal wages, often for the first times in their lives (Maynard, 2018; Riseman, 2014).

At war's end the survivors returned to an Australia where discrimination was not only widespread, but most states had even expanded their laws governing Aboriginal affairs. Under the Australian Constitution the states had authority over Aboriginal people, and to varying degrees they were all enacting "protection" policies. This entailed legislation that segregated Aboriginal people, normally on reserves or missions, with state protection boards and/or chief protectors controlling every aspect of their lives, ranging from whom they could marry, to managing their wages to freedom of movement. Perhaps the most insidious element of protection was child

removal. The states' respective chief protectors were made guardians of almost all Aboriginal children and often used this power to remove children of mixed descent (so-called "half-castes", "quadroons" or "octaroons") so that they would be raised at institutions, where boys would be trained to be manual labourers and girls raised to work as domestic servants. Legislation authorising child removal had been in place since 1869 in Victoria, and by the 1920s across the country these laws gave chief protectors more authority. By the 1930s, states such as Western Australia were adopting policies of biological absorption. This crude, eugenics form of assimilation had the aim to "breed out the black" population within a few generations (Australia, 1997; Haebich, 2000).

The 1930s witnessed two related phenomenon: the emergence of assimilation discourse, and the beginnings of Aboriginal activism for civil rights. In 1937 Canberra hosted the first Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference to bring together the state ministers responsible for native welfare to hammer out a common approach to Indigenous affairs. The famous quote that came out of the 1937 Conference Resolution declared: "That this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end" (Australia, 1997, p. 32).

Meanwhile, Aboriginal people, particularly those in urban areas such as Sydney and Melbourne, began organising to protest the restrictions imposed by state protection boards. The most famous action was the Day of Mourning held at the Australian Hall in Sydney on 26 January 1938: the sesquicentennial of white settlement. The participants drafted a ten-point plan on Indigenous rights, summarised with the call for "ordinary citizen rights, and full equality with other Australians." A few days later a delegation met with Prime Minister Joseph Lyons to deliver the ten-point plan, but the Commonwealth government refused to implement it (Attwood & Markus, 1999). Thus, when war broke out in September 1939, the government was purporting to support assimilation of Indigenous Australians, while Aboriginal activists were asserting their right to participate in Australian society as equals.

In many ways the debates over Indigenous service in the Second World War echoed those of a generation earlier, but more loudly and this time with Aboriginal

voices as well. Minister for Defence G.A. Street wrote on 8 September 1939: “the [Northern Territory] Protector of Aborigines is of the opinion that the militia training to be received will prove of value to them [half-castes] in providing some occupation in hours when they are not otherwise employed” (NAA, A659, 1939/1/12995). Aboriginal activists such as William Ferguson, anthropologists such as A.P. Elkin, and white allies all wrote letters arguing for special Aboriginal units under the command of white officers. The white proponents argued that military service would be a great way to promote assimilation, while the Aboriginal activists considered military service an opportunity to prove their worth as equal citizens (NAA, MP508/1, 82/712/670; NAA, MP508/1, 275/750/1310). In a June 1941 radio interview, Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs even proclaimed: “We the Aborigines are proving to the world that we are not only helping to protect Australia but also the British Empire” (Attwood & Markus, 1999, p. 97)

Notwithstanding such calls to admit Aboriginal members into the armed forces, Prime Minister Robert Menzies wrote on 25 February 1940 “that the admission of aliens or of British subjects of non-European origin or descent to the Australian Defence Forces is undesirable in principle, but that a departure from this principle is justified in order to provide for the special needs of any of the Services during the war” (NAA, A2671, 45/1940). This policy is not surprising given that this was the era of the White Australia Policy and, as political scientist Hugh Smith argues, “it was government’s determination to preserve a White Australia and an even whiter army” (Smith, 2001, p. 132). Menzies also accepted that there were already some Aboriginal people enlisted and said that they would be allowed to stay in service, but “so far as the Royal Australian Navy and the Army are concerned, the admission of aliens or of British subjects of non-European origin or descent is neither necessary nor desirable” (NAA, A2671, 45/1940).

Being turned away from service could anger Aboriginal people, only compounding their sense of disenfranchisement. One gentleman named Herbert John Milera, who had actually served in the First World War, wrote a letter of complaint to Prime Minister John Curtin in January 1942. “I was told ‘We have received orders that no more aboriginals should be taken in any part of the Australian Army,’” Milera

stated. "We Dark Men are now Black Bald [sic] right throughout the Commonwealth. So much for that lot" (NAA, MP508/1, 50/703/12).

Notwithstanding this regulation, historian Robert Hall estimates that approximately 300-400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women enlisted during the first two years of the war. How they managed to enlist varied, but much of it had to do with local medical officers' interpretations of what constituted being substantially of European origin or descent. Instructions advised medical officers to take into account the local laws – a significant consideration because every state and territory had different legal definitions of an Aboriginal person, with some states including people of mixed descent, while others did not. Queensland's Director of Native Affairs even argued in June 1940 "that consideration could be given in certain circumstances to the enlistment of halfbloods or those of a lesser degree than aboriginal blood" (NAA, MP508/1, 275/750/1310; see also NAA, MP508/1, 323/723/972). Stewart Murray, who joined the Army in October 1940, remembers: "The recruiting officer never looked up to see who I was or what colour I was" (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 48). The larger impetus for Indigenous enlistment was Pearl Harbor, which brought the war to Australia's doorstep. The country needed all manpower and womanpower possible, so medical officers generally overlooked the racial restrictions. By war's end, an estimated 4,000 Aboriginal people and 850 Torres Strait Islanders served in the armed forces.

### **Indigenous Motivations and Experiences**

Why Indigenous men and women enlisted varied from case to case, as with non-Indigenous service members. One common theme in veterans' testimonies is that the very nature of the conflict mobilised the entire country, including Indigenous Australians. Being swept up in the moment, Charles Mene of the Torres Strait says: "I liked to enlist because some of the boys I know, they enlisted, and I thought, well, I might as well be in it too" (Hall, 1995, p. 93). This idea of heading off to war with their mates did not necessarily link to a sense of patriotic duty. Harold Stewart recalls, "I didn't join because I was patriotic. I joined because my mates had gone [to war]. And I make no apology – I'm not giving the Army a pat on the back for that one, or the

government" (AWM, F04051). Reg Saunders, the first Aboriginal commissioned officer during the Second World War, remarks: "I suppose I decided to join because of the family. My Dad was a soldier, and all my uncles and various cousins were soldiers ... servicemen, including my grandfather, and also [there was] the fact that there was a going on. My Dad felt there was a responsibility" (Hall, 1995, p. 63). Support for family was also a key motivator for Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker) to join the Australian Women's Army Service. She had two brothers captured as prisoners of war in Singapore, whom she felt obligated to support. She explains, "I joined the AWAS principally because I did not accept Fascism as a way of life. It was also a good opportunity for an Aboriginal to further their education. In fact there were only two places where an Aboriginal could get an education, in jail or the Army and I didn't fancy jail!" (Howard, 1990, p. 154).

One of the more common reasons to enlist was for the secure employment. Australia was just coming out of the Great Depression, and the military represented an opportunity for a steady income. Indeed, it would be an equal wage – something traditionally denied Indigenous people under the various state *Aborigines Acts*. Betty Pike, who joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force in 1943 after a cousin kicked her out of their home, explains: "Well what was I to do? I hit on this idea I'll go and join up in the Air Force. I did.... This was all 1943, the war is already going on. I was underage. If I didn't join up then I had nowhere to go" (Pike, 2011). Service provided not just pay, but also other amenities such as lodging and meals. Jack Kennedy points out, "It was hard to get a job before the war. You work here, work there and it was hard to save up your money to buy your tucker or buy clothes. In the army everything's free, and the pay was five shillings a day. A man was made. Coming from my background, it was a lot more security" (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 33).

Notwithstanding the barriers to enlistment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service members found a generally welcoming and egalitarian atmosphere once in the services. The military-socialisation process focused on breaking down recruits' individuality and rebuilding them as a cog in the team. The shared experience through basic training and the common lodging, uniforms, haircuts and rules represented an equal environment where there was little room for racism – particularly for those servicemen in active combat. Charles Mene recalls: "But I had no difficulty making

friends and getting on with the white soldiers. We were all in it [together]" (Hall, 1995, p. 93). The strong camaraderie was necessary in a military environment because everyone had to know that his back was covered. Common danger, common obligations, the need to work as a team, and the shared emotional and psychological experience contributed to growing senses of equality within units. Bill Egan commented, "I don't think being an Aborigine in the army made any difference. We got on pretty well, we were treated pretty much the same" (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 31). It was not just those in combat roles who experienced the egalitarianism, and this also extended to women. Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote in a speech: "[In] the army, I was accepted as one of them and none of the girls I trained with cared whether I was black, blue or purple. For the first time in my life I felt equal to other human beings..." (Papers of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Box 30).

This is not to say that Aboriginal people were completely immune from racism. Harold Stewart recalls: "When they wanted to feel superior, I suppose, they'd remind me that I was Aboriginal. And no matter what I said to those fellows in those days, they it seems to me on reflection now that they got a feeling of superiority by reminding me that I was Aboriginal" (AWM, F04051). Even so, Stewart mentions that once in combat, those same men always put their prejudices aside. This spirit of egalitarianism carried Indigenous Australians through every campaign of the war, from Greece and Libya through to Papua New Guinea. It also set expectations for similar treatment upon their return to Australia.

The skills and education opportunities provided in the military also benefitted Indigenous servicemen and women. Some of the learning was informal; Tommy Lyons says, "The only time I picked up reading and writing was in the Army. I used to send letters" (Rintoul, 1993, p. 301). For other Indigenous service members, the nature of their work taught new trade skills. Betty Pike worked as a mechanic in the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, where she learned about the different types of oil and engines (Pike, 2011). Leonard Waters always had an interest in engines and had worked as a mechanic before the war. When he joined the RAAF he was not yet qualified to be a pilot, so he started as ground crew. "I became a flight mechanic and I studied all the time," he says. "Lots of times when the other fellows were out on leave, I'd be over in the library studying up, swotting up. Late in 1943 they finally asked for remusters to air



crew and I was able to get into air crew then" (Hall, 1995, pp. 159-160). Waters thus became the first Aboriginal pilot in the RAAF. Other Indigenous people were able to take advantage of education courses offered by the armed forces. For women in particular such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, this was an opportunity to acquire job skills that were otherwise inaccessible in civilian Australia. She explains:

You see, Aboriginals weren't entitled to any extra concessions of learning and it was the Army who changed the whole thing around. They said if you join the Army, you are going to go into the "dimwits" course and you can learn... And as soon as I got out of the Army, of course, I went into the "dimwits" course and did a stenographers course, shorthand, typing and book-keeping. But it was the only thing open for us, to improve our lot (Hall, 1995, pp. 130-131).

The downside to egalitarianism was that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men had to face the same challenges of war as other Australians, whether in Greece, Libya, Syria, Papua New Guinea or as prisoners of war in German or Japanese camps. Rather than discuss the traumatic combat experience, many veterans' tales focus on the challenging living conditions such as the fleas and poor food in Tobruk, health problems like malaria, rough environments, or life back at camp (Hall, 1995; Jackomos & Fowell, 1993; Rintoul, 1993, pp. 302-303). Those stories that mention combat tend not to go into great detail, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps. One such example is from Bill Edwards: "We didn't take any prisoners [in Papua New Guinea]. No prisoners were taken by either side. What could you do with prisoners on Shaggy Ridge? Beside, the Japanese thought it shameful to surrender. It was bitter fighting" (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 54). Lester Marks Harradine similarly describes fighting in Tarakan near Borneo: "We'd go from one ridge to the other clearing the Japanese, pushing them back ... we came in and we pushed the Japanese out and the Dutch came back and took over. But the Japanese held on tooth and nail" (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 55). Reading against the grain reveals that Aboriginal men faced the same traumas as their white mates, and it is not surprising that they, too, are hesitant to go into detail.

Whether in combat on the frontlines or serving at a base in Australia, Indigenous Australians in integrated units felt significant pride in their military service. They also broke down barriers through their interpersonal relationships with other servicemen and women. Stewart Murray effectively summarises the effect that their service had on

non-Indigenous servicemen and women: “Most of the other young blokes did not believe that Aborigines had to live on reserves or church missions or could not drink in hotels like white people. They were good mates and proved it in many ways later on in battle” (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 48).

### **Defending the North**

Even before Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Australian authorities recognised the vulnerability of the north coast from Queensland across to Western Australia. The 30 June 1941 census placed the total number of Aboriginal and multiracial persons in the Northern Territory alone at 14,488, while there were only about 3,800 Europeans (Hall, 1980). While publicly the Australian government expressed confidence in the British fortress at Singapore to defend the Pacific, in private there were murmurs of concern (Powell, 2007). There had been a loose network of coastwatchers organised across the Northern Territory since 1919, working for the Naval Intelligence Section of the Royal Australian Navy. In 1927 the coastwatchers received a guide with instructions about monitoring for enemy craft, and in 1937 the coastwatchers began to use coded messages (NAA, F1, 1939/59). Yet authorities knew that a loose network of coastwatchers, mostly missionaries or pastoralists, did not really constitute a defence network. Given the sheer vastness of land and the population imbalance, effective defence would require the active support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had longstanding contacts with Japanese fishermen and pearlers since the early twentieth century, including familial relations (Ganter, 2006), so the Australian government harboured genuine fears that they would support a potential Japanese invasion (NAA, A373, 5903; NAA, MP729/6, 29/401/618; NAA, MP729/6, 29/401/626). There is no evidence of this ever coming to fruition, partly because the relations between Indigenous people and Japanese had soured in the 1930s over sexual relations with Indigenous women (Egan, 1996). Anthropologist A.P. Elkin pointed out that Aboriginal people, not knowing there was a war going on, might unwittingly assist the Japanese. He added in an April 1942 letter to Prime Minister Curtin: “If it comes to infiltration and counter-infiltration, then that side which enjoys the support of the natives will be able to walk slow rings round the other

... If we do not get hold of them there is little doubt that the enemy, if he gets a chance, will" (NAA, MP508/1, 240/701/217; NAA, A659/1, 1942/1/3043). Employing Indigenous labourers for the Army would therefore achieve multiple aims: it would deny the enemy access to Aboriginal knowledge, ensure Aboriginal loyalty and also free up white servicemen to perform other tasks.

Especially after Pearl Harbor, both Australian and American forces deployed across northern Australia. As the closest Allied territory to Japanese-occupied islands, northern Australia became an important staging area to support forces fighting in the Coral Sea, Papua New Guinea, Timor and present-day Indonesia. The main defence installations were in Darwin and Adelaide River, but the RAAF and Army deployed small numbers of servicemen across northern Australia. These soldiers and airmen employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander locals in a variety of capacities – the most prominent being building airstrips, constructing roads, coastwatching and patrolling. Aboriginal trackers accompanied white servicemen such as the North Australia Observer Unit as they monitored for Japanese landings. There are tales of Aboriginal men rescuing crashed American and Australian pilots (Burnett, 1990; Graham, 1994; Riseman, 2012; Sheffield & Riseman, 2019; Walker & Walker, 1986). Benedict Munkara relates a story of an Aboriginal man executing multiple Japanese prisoners on the Tiwi Islands:

The five Japanese walked towards them. Louis and Mariano stood up. The Japanese airmen became afraid. Louis Mariano asked, "What you reckon, you English, American, Japs?" He repeated this but got no answer. Louis asked with signs if they had come from "plane and where from". Some shook their head and pointed in the opposite direction to Darwin. Louis was far from believing this. He left a guard of his kinsmen to watch. He found Matthias Ulungura, now recognised as an expert, having already captured one enemy pilot. He then went to Fr. McGrath and asked for a 303 rifle and bullets. Father told him he was short of ammunition. "Alright", he replied, "give me one and I will keep them in line." One 303 bullet go through the five of them. He became known as "*Line 'em up Louis*" (Pye, 1977, p. 50).

Most examples such as this represented Aboriginal people informally assisting the military. These men and women were never enlisted, and their remuneration (if they received any) would usually be tobacco or maybe some trade goods.

Though still not enlisted in the forces, there was a more formal arrangement for Aboriginal employment at five labour camps set up in the Northern Territory from April 1942. These labour camps employed approximately 1,000 Aboriginal men and women on tasks including moving ordnance, construction, farming, butchering, cooking, and cleaning. They received wages for working at these Army labour camps, and the living conditions were a substantial improvement over what they had been accustomed to previously on cattle stations. The Aboriginal workers received issuances of clothing, food, and lodging which were similar to the Army soldiers who worked alongside them. The Aboriginal labourers were not formally enlisted in the armed forces, however, and received less pay than white soldiers. Indeed, pastoralists and local politicians feared that the Aboriginal people would expect continuing increased wages after the war (Berndt & Berndt, 1987; Sheffield & Riseman, 2019).

The only times the government were advocates for Aboriginal workers' welfare was within an assimilationist framework. Brigadier Commander E.M. Dollery wrote in November 1943:

It is no exaggeration to say that up to the present time, with rare exceptions, the native has ranked in the Northern Territory on the approximate level of cattle ... If the Army can show that at least a proportion of the natives are capable of more skilled work and are fitted to hold the status of soldiers, there is reason to hope that these natives may, after the war, be able to hold their positions in the Territory as skilled or semi-skilled labourers and to command a higher reward for their services than the periodical stick of tobacco which they received before the war (NAA, MP742/1, 92/1/302; NAA, A431, 1946/915).

Other persons mirrored Dollery's concerns for how Aboriginal people would fare after the war. They advocated that the camps integrate practical education in fields such as horticulture, building, mechanics, and medicine to prepare Aboriginal people for post-war life (NAA, MP742/1, 92/1/302; NAA, A431, 1946/915). These proposals did not come to fruition, but they reveal the importance of remembering the wider historical context before and after the war: even though Aboriginal people witnessed improvements to their living situations because of war work, white authorities continued to measure these changes within an assimilationist framework.

There are two examples of formal Indigenous units of enlisted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers. The first was the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU), organised in February 1942 by anthropologist-turned-RAAF Squadron Leader Donald Thomson. Building on his fieldwork between 1935 and '37, Thomson formulated and organised this unit of fifty-one Yolngu men to patrol Arnhem Land east of Darwin. Thomson, with the assistance of his Aboriginal guide and friend Raiwalla, trained the NTSRU members to fight a potential guerrilla war against Japanese. He purposefully did not arm the men with modern weapons, preferring them instead to use spears and their traditional bush warfare. The NTSRU scouted Arnhem Land between April 1942 and '43, even building a small outpost. Their only payment was trade goods such as tobacco, wire, and fish hooks. The men who joined the NTSRU were mostly known to Thomson and joined out of loyalty either to him or to the Elders he recruited (Riseman, 2012; Sheffield & Riseman, 2019; Thomson, 2003).

While Thomson played a significant role as organiser of the NTSRU, the Yolngu participants had their own motivations to serve, not the least of which was to defend their country from another invasion. Mowarra Gamanbarr, the last surviving member of the NTSRU, recollected in 2000: "Thomson said, 'If they win, this will be Japanese country, and our children won't have the chance to learn our culture.' Thomson said we had to combine with the white people. This was never done before. We all went to war, fighting for this country of ours" (Moore, 2000). Phyllis Batumbil, a Yolngu Elder, says that the men who joined the NTSRU saw themselves as allies of the Americans and Australians. The Second World War also represented an opportunity to end internal Yolngu war that had been waging since the mid-1930s (Batumbil, 2005). Not until 1992 would the Australian government award back-pay to surviving members of the NTSRU and the families of other members.

The other formal unit was the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion (TSLI), formed in May 1941 (before Pearl Harbor). This battalion eventually enrolled 488 personnel, 440 of whom were Torres Strait Islander, the remainder being mostly Malay. The Army also raised artillery and transport companies in the Torres Strait, bringing the total number of Torres Strait Islander servicemen to about 850. Unlike the NTSRU, the TSLI members received regular training as an infantry unit, including weapons handling, trench digging, regular patrolling, and exercises. Much of their work was to

support defence installations in the Torres Strait, such as the airstrip on Horn Island, or tasks such as loading and unloading ships, food provision, and even embarking on some patrols in the jungles of Papua New Guinea – including active engagements against the Japanese (Hall, 1997; Osborne, 1997).

Like Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders enlisted in the TSLI for various reasons. The immediate Japanese threat was the largest motivator. Saulo Waia recalls that he enlisted “because during the war, in the middle of the war, we joined in ... 1941 ... we joined in. War in New Guinea already. Japanese in there already. So, we only last chance. Only last chance, we are. Not very far from New Guinea. Thursday Island group of Torres Strait” (Hall, 1995, p. 142). There are some suggestions that there were elements of coercion in recruiting Islander soldiers. One Torres Strait Islander woman recalls: “The army boat came, they grabbed those boys off the [fishing] boats and what’s left on the islands they went around recruiting. Just grabbed anyone. More or less they don’t ask, grabbed them and sorted them out on TI [Thursday Island]” (Osborne, 1997, p. 109). Tom Lowah, who served in the TSLI, states: “But they [recruiters] rounded up some of our boys with fixed bayonets and they got nearly everyone there in that recruiting drive. They seemed to scare people and that made me kind of ... I don’t believe in this. If they come in polite manner or something, to ask for recruits, that would be different ... but with fixed bayonets!” (Hall, 1995, p. 174). The oral histories of Army soldiers rounding up Torres Strait Islanders problematises the TSLI history. Historian Elizabeth Osborne suggests that Torres Strait Islanders may have had a particular perception about aggressive recruitment tactics which drew on their previous experiences of colonialism. She provides some of the most succinct analysis to reconcile the post-war recollections of Torres Strait Islanders: “the men wanted to join the army, but it was the manner of recruitment that angered and even frightened them and made them feel they had no choice” (Osborne, 1997, p. 113).

Racist ideas played two significant roles in the TSLI. First was the matter of who could enlist. European racial hierarchies had consistently placed Torres Strait Islanders on a higher level of civilisation than Aboriginal people. This attitude persisted in the TSLI, with instructions explicitly indicating that “under no circumstances are Australian Aboriginals to be enlisted.” One Army major wrote: “Aboriginals, I feel certain, would be nothing but an embarrassment to me in the event of any action, as

they are not in the same fighting class as the Torres Strait Islanders.” When officials discovered that a few Aboriginal soldiers had successfully enlisted in the TSLI, authorities ordered their discharge in 1944 (AWM, 54, 628/1/1B).

The other significant form of racial discrimination was the matter of wages. Despite being regularly enlisted soldiers, TSLI members’ pay was set at one-third the normal Army rate. Like the case of the Army labour camps, much of this was based on worries that after the war, Torres Strait Islanders would demand to continue to receive equal wages. Moreover, much of their wages went into trust accounts controlled by the Chief Protector, meaning they likely never saw the money and it became part of the payments withheld by the government known collectively as the stolen wages (Kidd, 2006). Torres Strait Islander soldiers were discontent with this situation, particularly as the Malay men working alongside them were paid equal to the white soldiers.

Members of the TSLI expressed dissatisfaction on multiple occasions, culminating in a formal strike in January 1944. Tom Lowah succinctly explains: “Nobody wanted to be working because of lower wages and all this sort of thing we are not getting” (Hall, 1995, p. 177). While the TSLI members saw this as a strike, authorities accused them of mutiny. Two of the three striking companies returned to work within a few hours, while the third took a little longer to return to work. Subsequently, authorities did examine the wage issue. A June 1944 conference concluded:

although from a strictly legal point of view, the above personnel, both Torres Strait Islanders and Australian aboriginals, were entitled to full rates of pay, such payment should not, in fact, be made. There were two reasons for this:- (a) the sum involved [approximately £30,000,000 liability]; and (b) that if such natives were paid at such rates – far above the rates earned by them in civil life before the war – it would cause considerable trouble when they eventually left the Army (AWM, 54, 628/1/1B).

Torres Strait Islander soldiers did receive a small raise to approximately two-thirds of the white wage. In 1982 the government awarded backpay of over seven million dollars to surviving members of the TSLI (Sheffield & Riseman, 2019).

## Conclusion

As this article has shown, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contributed significantly to the Australian armed forces during the Second World War, both at home and abroad. While there was some coercion in northern Australia, overall Indigenous people were happy to volunteer for war service, finding it to be an empowering experience. Indeed, because regulations officially prohibited enlistment of persons “not substantially of European origin or descent,” it took significant agency on the part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join the services. Those men and women in normal integrated units experienced equality, often for the first time in their lives, and had access to new skills and education opportunities. Though the experience in remote Australia was not equal to white service members, it was still a marked improvement over the pre-war situation and therefore also emboldened Indigenous people to expect a better lot both during and after the war.

Unfortunately, the end of the war marked the return to the pre-war status quo. State authorities continued to deny equal citizenship rights, coming up with new laws pushing an assimilation agenda. Pastoralists, pearlers, fishers, and other employers in the north continued to pay unequal wages and to deny land rights to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Yet a change was in the air; though the war was not transformative for Australian government policies, it was transformative for those men and women who had served or who had worked alongside the armed forces (as well as those men and women who had taken up new employment on the home front). These Indigenous men and women would not be content to languish under inequality, and as the 1960s rolled in many of these men and women became activists demanding civil rights (Riseman, 2018). Jack Kennedy’s words seem a fitting conclusion summarising Aboriginal veterans’ attitude to the war, military, and Australian polity: “I really liked life in the army anyway, and at the end of the war I was gonna join up again but Bob Menzies, the Prime Minister said, Aboriginal people or anybody with Aboriginal blood didn’t have the intelligence or education. He didn’t want us in the forces, and this was after we had all served. I was angry. Bob Menzies never did anything for us” (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 33).



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