

Forgotten heroes: Honouring the Service and Sacrifice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Background information

Overseas armed conflict in which Australian Defence Forces were involved includes:-

- South African War (Boer War), 1899–1902
- China (Boxer Rebellion), 1900–01
- First World War, (WW I) 1914–18
- Second World War, (WW II) 1939–45
- Occupation of Japan, 1946–51
- Korean War, 1950–53
- Malayan Emergency, 1950–60
- Indonesian Confrontation, 1963–66
- Vietnam War, 1962–75
- Afghanistan, 2001–
- Iraq, 2003–

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women became members of the Australian Armed Services during overseas wars and conflicts from as early as the Boer War. Australian Armed Services regulations and government policy prevented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women from identifying their cultural heritage, so we may never know how many actually served, however it is known that over 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women served during WW I and in excess of 3,000 during WW II. Their collective and individual service or sacrifice has failed to receive appropriate acknowledgement. The casualty rate was one in five of enlisted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women, a rate similar to other service personnel.

Actions at a local and national level are now being taken to erect war memorials and conduct ceremonies to commemorate the service and sacrifice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women.

From the time of European settlement (1788) individual Australian colonies held exclusive power to legislate and manage the affairs of the First Nation peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Even following the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 the federal government was precluded from making laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in the states. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities living within state borders came under the jurisdiction of each state's Aborigines Department or Protection Board. State legislative acts regulated the lives and work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their wages, voting rights, entitlements, land ownership, relationships, family and community contact and right to enlist in Australian Armed Services.

It was not until the Referendum on 27 May 1967, that authorised amendments to the Australian Constitution gave the Commonwealth Government power to legislate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in the states and to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national census (see 1967 Referendum Education Pack – www.reconciliationsa.org.au). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples held the right to vote in federal elections from 1962, when the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended; however this was not compulsory, as was the case for other adult Australians. It was not until 1967 that they were fully recognised as citizens of their own land and the Commonwealth was empowered to legislate in relation to Aboriginal affairs. In 1972 the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was established and the Federal and state governments have had shared legislative responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since that time.

It is against this political and social backdrop that we consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who served and sacrificed their lives for their nation. Service regulations and government policy meant initially that they were prevented from enlisting and later when permitted to do so, they could not identify their cultural heritage on enlistment forms. In seeking to amend the gap in national recognition and to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women, we contribute to Reconciliation.

Teaching and Learning through an Inquiry Approach

Inquiry tasks and activities promote:-

- Knowledge of Australia's participation in overseas wars and conflict.
- Understanding of ceremonies, memorials and symbols that ensure remembrance of wars and conflicts and commemoration of servicemen and women.
- Action towards recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women.

Please be aware that resources, books and films suggested for use may contain the names, images and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may now be deceased.

Students should also be made aware when using primary resources that the language and views expressed in some of the documents reflect the historical period in which they were created. Today the views and language may well be considered inappropriate or offensive.