



Aboriginal Heritage Office

Ku-ring-gai, Lane Cove, North Sydney, Northern Beaches,
Strathfield and Willoughby Councils

www.aboriginalheritage.org

Yarnuping Education Series

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Yarnuping 3 ANZAC DAY - Lest We Forget

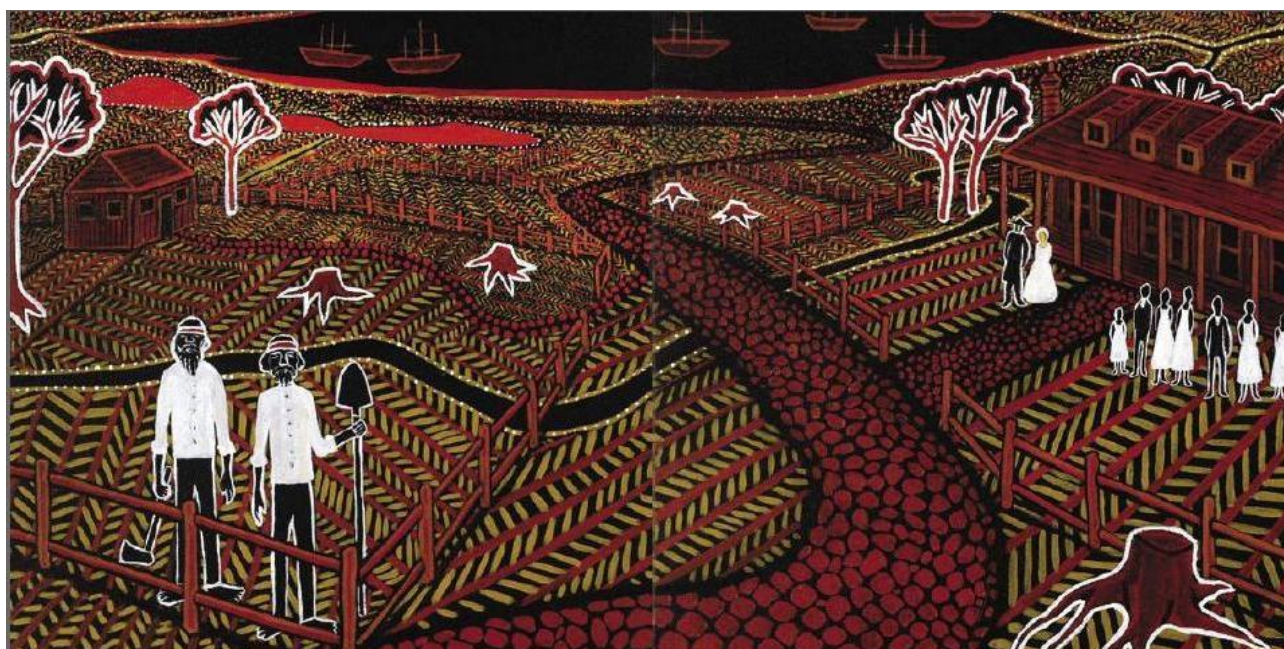
Karen Smith Education Officer

ANZAC Day is a day where we remember all who have fought in the wars of the world. It is also a time when we think of our families' stories and I would like to share a story from my own family.

On May 1816 Governor Macquarie promised 30 Acres of land to Nurragingy and Colbee, son of Yarramundi from the Boorooberongal Clan. Macquarie said it was granted for '*their fidelity to Government and their recent good conduct*'¹ for their work in guiding. In 1820 the land was officially given to '*Colbee and his heirs and assigns to have and to hold forever*'². By 1920 the government had forcibly removed the heirs and sold the land.

"It is an irony that in the period prior to this final dispossession, when their family was increasingly under attack from Government authorities, descendants of Maria Lock and families connected to them were amongst those young and not so young men who sought to serve with the Australian Imperial force of first AIF"*³.

* Maria Lock is Yarramudi's Daughter, Colebee is Maria's Brother



Leanne Tobin's Painting of Macquarie's Land Grant
opposite the Native Institution were the children were taken

Copyright: Leanne Tobin

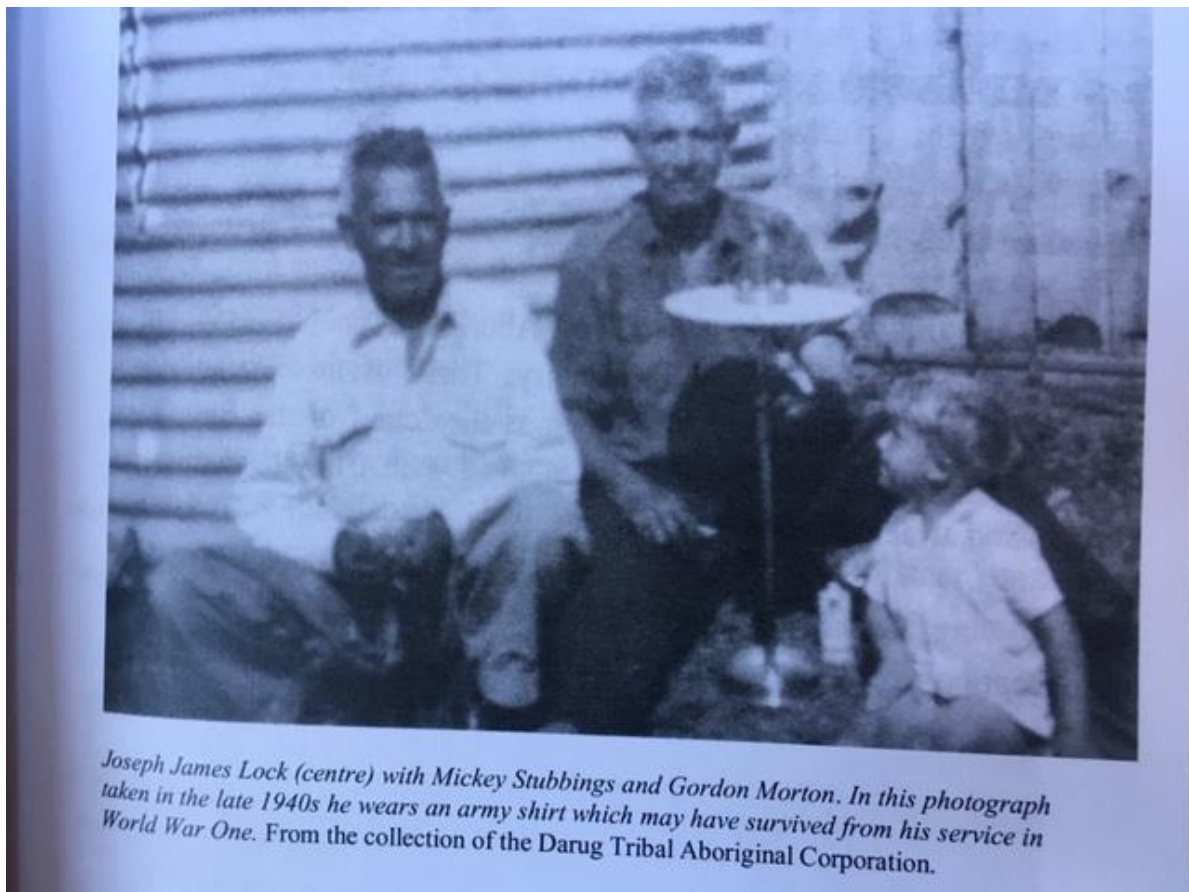
Many Australians do not know the history of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the Australian Defence Force. The Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra is collecting the stories of Aboriginal people in the services. These stories have for a long time been a forgotten part of Australia's history.

The AWM is presently compiling a list of Indigenous Australians who have served, are serving and who served in an auxiliary roll with the ADF. Veterans Affairs, AIATSIS, National Archives, Indigenous Affairs-ADF and various state archives and privately compiled lists, are feeding into this project.

At present it is thought that 1000 plus Indigenous Australians fought in the First World War. The AIF treated them as equals and paid them the same as other soldiers; they were generally accepted without prejudice whilst in uniform. Many who tried to enlist were rejected on the grounds of race but this did not deter others who managed to enlist. It was usually left to the recruiting officer to make the decision whether to allow the person to enlist.

Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders have fought for Australia, from the Boer War to the present day.

It will probably never be known how many Indigenous Australians served in the ADF. This is due to the fact that ethnicity was never required to be documented when joining up. Even today in the ADF it is only voluntary to tick the box *"are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander"*.



Photograph of Joseph James Lock⁴

Joseph James Lock (Maria's Grandson) was 21 when he enlisted in 1916. *"His complexion, noted routinely in his record, was given the uncommon description of 'tan'."*⁴ All the members of the above photo come from the Lock family.

By October 1917 when recruits were harder to find and one conscription referendum had been lost, restrictions were eased. A Military Order stated the following, *"Half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical Officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin."*⁵

Why did Aboriginal People join?

It is not known what motivated most Aboriginals to join the AIF but loyalty and patriotism would have played a part. Also there was the incentive of a wage. There may have also been the thought

that having served would give some equality after the war. Also the thought that by serving they were protecting their land and community may also have played a part.

Aboriginal people served with the same conditions of service as other members. Many experienced equal treatment for the first time in their lives in the army. They were paid the same as white soldiers and were generally accepted without prejudice while in uniform, except for the Torres Strait Islander Battalion who were paid less.

Over 300,000 soldiers returned to Australia from WWI. In all some 40,000 returned servicemen and women took up an offer of farming land, made possible by Soldier Settlement schemes in all the states of the Commonwealth.

At present only two Aboriginals are known to have received land under a "soldier settlement" scheme, one of which WO2 George Kennedy, 6th Light Horse.

On returning to civilian life in Australia Aboriginal servicemen experienced the same discrimination and prejudice as before. For them, peacetime meant discrimination, segregation and marginalisation.

So Aboriginal men on their return were not granted 'Soldier Settler Grants', and were not allowed to attend the RSL. Sometimes the land gifted to return soldiers was actually taken from Aboriginal families and communities who had worked the land and built infrastructure and businesses.

Read **Jacksons Track** https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1238354.Jackson_s_Track
Also read **Invasion to Embassy**
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/22101515?selectedversion=NBD12232004>

The army began to employ Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory in 1933 but conditions were similar to pastoral stations with long hours, poor housing and diet and low pay. During the war, when the army took over control of settlements from the Native Affairs Branch, conditions greatly improved. Adequate housing and sanitation, fixed working hours, proper rations and access to medical treatment in Army hospitals became available.

At the start of the Second World War, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander men and women increasingly enlisted or were conscripted, but in 1940, the Defence Committee decided that the enlistment of Indigenous Australians was "neither necessary nor desirable". When Japan entered the war, the need for manpower forced this to change. The Torres Strait Islanders formed the first ever totally indigenous unit, The Torres Strait Islander Light Infantry Battalion, but always the rank of sergeant and above were white. By 1944 almost every able bodied male in the Torres Strait had enlisted. By proportion to population, no community in Australia contributed more to the war than the Islanders of the Torres Strait.

The RAAF sited airfields and radar stations close to missions that could provide labour. Aboriginal people in defence work were working on construction sites, army butcheries and on army farms. They drove trucks, handled cargo, worked as aids in hospitals and provided general labour around camps.

Over 50 Aboriginal men were recruited in 1942 and served as a guerrilla force for scouting and reconnaissance in Arnhem Land, a tradition that is still carried on today by the Aboriginal people of the Regional Force Surveillance Units. Hundreds of Aboriginal people served in the 2nd Australian Imperial Force and the militia, hundreds also dying, some as POW's. The first Japanese POW captured in WW2 by Australians was captured by two Aboriginal men.



Left to Right:
Friend: Uncle Walter: Charles
Taken sometime in 1945

In my mother's family - Uncle Charles, Uncle Walter and (not pictured) Uncle John all served in the Military during the Second World War.

My Grandmother, Alice Sims, pulled Uncle Charles out of the Military as he was an epileptic. This condition caused his death, swimming at South Curl Curl. Uncle John put his age up to enlist and served at North Head and in Darwin. Uncle Walter worked removing mines and booby traps in Libya, fought the Italians in the desert, and then his unit was sent to Greece to fight the Germans.

*"The Greek campaign lasted a little more than three weeks. From 24 to 29 April some 50,000 Allied troops were evacuated. Left behind were 320 dead Australians – a further 2065 became prisoners of war. More than 290 New Zealanders were killed and over 1600 captured. And by the end of May, the strategic Aegean island of Crete had also fallen. For Australia, the numbers had increased to a total of 868 dead and 5132 taken prisoner, by far the largest number of Australians to be captured by the Germans in any single campaign of the war."*⁶

Uncle Walter was one of those captured. After many daring escapes, where he followed the stars and the rivers, Uncle Walter was finally recaptured and imprisoned in Terezin, a Concentration Camp.

*"The young men in **Stories from the Fortress** were an elite, high spirited group whose service to their country exposed them to the worst of human nature. They were taken prisoner by the Germans early in WWII and became persistent escapers from their prisoner- of – war camps and work parties. Some broke free seven or eight times. They knew it was their duty to*

*escape but never thought about it piously; they just felt bad about being captured and wanted to make up for it. Most barely in their mid- twenties – just boys- when they were finally recaptured in northern Czechoslovakia, handed over to the security police and sent to a place they'd never heard of, a place called the **Small Fortress of Terezin**.”⁷*

The horror of what happened here and the denial of the Australian Government that any Australians were in the camp, caused one suicide and my Uncle to speak out and reveal a story he had kept hidden all his life.

Please read Paul Rea's 2007 Book, *Voices From the Fortress – The extraordinary stories of Australia's forgotten prisoners of war* ABC Books ISBN 978 0 7333 2095 8

Paul Rea placed in his forward a quote from one of the men:

To Walter Steilberg '....he was our mainstay, he was the backbone of us all.'

After the Second World War the army reimposed restrictions on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enlistment but in 1949 all race restrictions were lifted. Since then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have served in the Korean War, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam and nearly every other Peace Keeping operation where Australia has sent personnel. Today the Australian Defence Force has taken on board that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are a valued part of the Defence Force of Australia and recruit Indigenous Australians for both uniformed and civilian sections in the ADF.

Please see or separate [APPENDIX - Frontier Advocacy at the end of this article](#)

The Ode

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.

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7. Paul Rea 2007 – *Voices From the Fortress – The extraordinary stories of Australia's forgotten prisoners of war*

APPENDIX

Frontier Advocacy

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By Liz Parsons and Nadine Walker
2016 Year 10, Killara High School

On Thursday, 3 November 2016, ten students from Killara High School on Sydney's North Shore, with HSIE Head Teacher David Browne, travelled to Canberra to meet with Dr Brendon Nelson, Director of the Australian War Memorial.

The students were: Tori Aston, Indira Courtness, Taylor Hosken, Rebekka Krause, Hannah Nouri, Elizabeth Parsons, Amabel Roebuck-Krautz, Clara Seibel, Issy Swatridge and Nadine Walker.

In addition to their meeting with Dr Brendon Nelson at the Australian War Memorial, students also visited AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), the National Museum of Australia, Reconciliation Australia and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

Nerves running. Adrenalin pounding. Palms sweating. Our eyes flittered nervously back and forth. This was it. Dr Brendan Nelson, Director of the Australian War Memorial, sat across from us at an enormous boardroom table. Behind him through the window, looming over the lush lawns, stood the War Memorial. Watching. Listening.

We were all set: Ten students, papers, books, laptops, mind-maps and speaking notes. We'd spent hours, days, weeks and months preparing. We were ready.

Taylor fired the opening shot, "*Dr Nelson, how do you define a war, here at the War Memorial?*"

Five months earlier, we had been examining some tough questions in Aboriginal Studies:

Settlement? Contact? Colonisation? Invasion? Are we a nation built on peace and democracy, or violent dispossession? Was it really a war? Frontier Wars? So we wondered aloud, "If it was war, what does the Australian War Memorial say?" We found some words on the website, but not a word *within* the Memorial.

Our curiosity rose and we began to investigate. Why is this war not recognised? Is the general public aware that this eminent piece of our history is missing? What are the different perspectives on this? In the end it came down to one final, looming question: What are we going to do about it?

We decided to write to Dr Nelson. To our surprise, and his credit, Dr Nelson wrote back with an extremely detailed and personalised response.

We disagreed with almost all of what he said, but we had been heard. We had argued that the Memorial should commemorate the Frontier Wars and we requested a face-to-face meeting. To our even greater surprise, he agreed to meet.

The Australian War Memorial is the most iconic institution commemorating Australia's war history. It remembers our fallen heroes. The Memorial's charter notes its aim to "assist visitors to understand the Australian experience of war" and "engage all members of the Australian community". We had come to find out what sets this war apart from all the others.

We knew that Dr Nelson had advocated and proactively changed the Memorial for the benefit of Australian society, upholding its legislation and charter. The '*For Country For Nation*' exhibit is a fine example of this. We were going to suggest to Dr Nelson that, despite this good work, he has more to do to fully uphold the Memorial's charter.

In preparation for the meeting, we divided a range of different jobs among our group. We worked productively and effectively as a team, collaborating on ideas and helping each other. We built valuable communication skills in writing and in many verbal forms.

We invited Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal guests to a 'rehearsal' and learnt how to take constructive criticism - then apply it to benefit the overall experience and enhance our impact. And, most importantly, we learnt about advocacy and what it takes to make a real change.

So here we were: ten passionate students sitting in the Australian War Memorial boardroom discussing the Frontier Wars with Dr Nelson.

We had four main points: the Frontier Conflicts were “wars” or “warlike conflict”; the War Memorial *should* commemorate this; the War Memorial *can* commemorate this; and commemorating Frontier Wars in the War Memorial will help Australians come to terms with our past and will further Reconciliation.

Dr Nelson stuck to his guns and argued that the Frontier Wars do not sufficiently fit the characteristics of warfare. He was in strong agreement that this story should be told, but argued that the War Memorial was not the place.

Our very firm submission was that the Frontier Wars, although lacking official recognition and form, do contain all the war and warlike features necessary and we felt supported by the weight of literature by Australian historians.

The clock ran down and we came to our concluding statements. The result ? Under Dr Nelson’s directorship, the Australian War Memorial would not remember the Frontier Wars. With our arguments still clear in our mind and adrenalin levels high, it took all we could not to argue further.

As we left, we discussed what had happened with Mr Michael Bell, Ngunnawal man and Indigenous Liaison Officer for the War Memorial. He contributed to the meeting, spent an hour with us beforehand inside the Memorial itself, and shared his thoughtful navigation of a complex issue.

Dismayed, exasperated and exhausted, our guns had fallen silent. Months of preparation and early morning rehearsals had come down to one hour and the result was clear. Or was it?

We de-briefed alongside Lake Burley Griffin where the common emotion was frustration. We were frustrated at the lack of depth that the meeting went into; we were more prepared, we had additional arguments and research to contribute.

We were unsurprised, but frustrated. So we revisited our ambitions and reminded ourselves of our more realistic goals. We knew how much work and preparation we had put in. As we processed what had happened, we were increasingly positive about what we had achieved - and optimistic for what lay ahead.

Our meeting with Dr Nelson made a small but positive contribution to the ongoing advocacy for the Frontier Wars to be included in the Australian War Memorial.

Although immediate change did not occur, we added our voices to the many others fighting for change. Our passion, determination and arguments will resonate within the War Memorial.

“Your meeting today makes my job easier”, Mr Bell observed.

Also, by sharing our experiences with family, friends, peers and Community we have ensured that the discussion continues. We can only hope that the War Memorial continues to receive similar visits and Dr Nelson continues to participate in similar discussions.

As we walked away, we pondered one final memento from Mr Bell, *“You are forty years ahead and these conversations take time. You can’t force people to agree.”*

True, but we can keep the conversations going. We are ready.
