

# Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Servicemen

## NSW Parliament: Legislative Assembly

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About this Item

Speakers - [Cochran Mr Peter](#); [Markham Mr Colin](#); [Kernohan Dr Elizabeth](#)

Business - Matter of Public Importance

### ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SERVICEMEN

#### Matter of Public Importance

Mr COCHRAN (Monaro) [3.28]: I move:

That this House notes as a matter of public importance its acknowledgment and tribute to the courageous and dedicated service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders during the second world war.

During the six years that I have been in this Parliament I have attempted on various occasions to draw the attention of the House at significant times to the tremendous dedication and the honourable efforts of the soldiers and servicemen of the second world war, of the Australian Imperial Force and those representing Australia in the second world war in various theatres of the South Pacific and the Middle East. Much has been said and sung about Gallipoli, and there is no question that it was a significant point in the history of Australian military records. The defence of Australia and the South Pacific and the bravery and total commitment of Australian, British and Allied Forces is largely unsung, but they have been recognised.

However, there is one group of Australians that has been almost totally ignored and those brave Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who laid down their lives for their homeland have gone almost unrecognised. Vietnam veterans, including myself, greatly appreciated the welcome home march in 1987. This is a matter I have raised previously in the House and it has been recognised by both sides of the House as being significant in the event of the military history of this country. The great tragedy of Australian military history is our failure to recognise the contribution of our indigenous people, the Australian Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders. With the assistance of the librarians in the Parliamentary Library last night, I was able to research much of the history of the involvement of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Pacific battles of 1939-45. In one publication, under the heading *Black Diggers*, Robert A. Hall states:

At Morlancourt, France, on the night of 28/29 July 1918, Private William Rawlings and his comrades attacked a German communication trench system. Rawlings was first bayonet man in a bombing team which worked its way down the enemy trench, routing the enemy and establishing a block in the trenches. Rawlings displayed rare bravery in his gory duty,

ruthlessly killing many of the enemy, brushing aside opposition and clearing the way for the bombers of his team. His courage set a wonderful example and he was awarded the Military Medal for his achievements that night. He truly displayed the digger spirit. Rawlings was an Aborigine.

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Rawlings was one of perhaps three or four hundred Aborigines or 'part-Aborigines' to serve in the First World War. Although the exact number of Aborigines in the First AIF will never be known, there were at least the 300 from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Almost one-third of this group became casualties - a rate similar to that of the First AIF as a whole, indicating that Aboriginal and Islander soldiers shared the rigours of the First World War in equal measure with their white comrades. Yet despite their service and their competence as soldiers, Aborigines were excluded from the 'digger legend'.

Before the First World War both government and Services opposed Aboriginal military service.

In 1994 it is almost inconceivable that Aborigines, or any other race, could be denied the right to serve their nation or homeland in active service on the basis of the colour of their skin. Current Australian service personnel have a proud tradition to uphold and the past failures of our military leaders should not make us ashamed - provided that we are prepared to acknowledge those failures, and correct them. Some weeks ago, after 27 attempts and a good deal of lighthearted ribbing, I succeeded in having the fall of Singapore recognised in this House. Publications are available which, during our long debate last night, I was able to extract from the library. One is an article which appeared in the January-February edition of *Reveille*, a publication of the Returned Services League. Following on from my recognition of the fall of Singapore it is appropriate that I quote this article, which relates to the time immediately after the fall of Singapore. It states:

The victorious Japanese troops were puzzled to find a handful of dark soldiers among the remnants of the Australian battalions who were ordered to capitulate to them on 15 February 1942.

Privates Maurice Wright, George Cubby and John Knox of the 2/26 Battalion were just three of the indigenous diggers who the Japanese thought they might be able to use as informants against the white Australian prisoners.

Former Private Derrington, who now lives in Drummole in Scotland, relates that George Cubby was made a butcher for the Japanese guards while part of the 'F' Force constructing the Burma-Thailand railway at Songkurai Camp Young.

However, instead of becoming a collaborator as expected, at great risk to his own life George Cubby stole meat scraps to feed his sick mate with broth. Derrington was down to less than six stone in weight and could not keep his meagre rice ration down. Without George's help he would have surely died.

Ironically, George Cubby was not to see his home at Toomalah Mission near Boggabilla again but was to die of cholera in December 1943. He is buried at Kanchanaburi War Cemetery in Thailand. Maurice Wright and John Knox were also to die in captivity.

Other Aboriginal soldiers like Wally Alberts, Colin Ball, John Jackson and James Campbell were members of two labour forces sent by the Japanese to construction camps in Borneo, where they were starved, beaten and over-worked by their captors.

In May 1945 the Japanese, fearing an Allied landing in the Sandakan area of Borneo, marched all who could stand in two parties to Ranau, over 160 miles away across mountainous jungle. Only six of the 2,400 prisoners sent to Borneo survived the war. These six had escaped and were taken in by the indigenous tribes of the area.

In Australia to-day the Japanese, our once-hated enemy, are held in high regard by many Australians because of their business acumen and technological innovation. The Japanese are our largest trading partner and are welcomed in large numbers to our shores each year as tourists and capital investors.

Ironically, the Japanese are now permitted to own freehold land in Australia and, in fact, own some of the prime pieces of real estate in the country.

On the other hand, Aborigines, who have served in the Australian Army since federation, are often stereotyped as 'drunken bludgers'. Furthermore, deep-seated resentment is felt in some quarters of the society to judgements granting Aboriginal people title to areas of their traditional land.

It is fitting, 52 years after the fall of Singapore and with last year being designated International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, that we remember the Aboriginal Diggers of World War II who died in the defence of Australia.

That article by David Huggonson in *Reveille* certainly portrays the concerns of many Australians. It is a tribute to the author of that article that he was able to raise this matter and the concerns of many people in this country. Similarly, on the Kokoda track, records of the outstanding bravery of the fuzzy wuzzy angels are well publicised. Last week with New South Wales State President of the Returned Services League, Rusty Priest, I attended a function at the Paddington-Woollahra RSL Memorial Club where a joint venture fundraising campaign was launched by the Sydney Rotary clubs and the Returned Services League to establish a community health centre at Kokoda. This act of humanitarian care is, more importantly, a recognition of our debt to the fuzzy wuzzy angels, and both those organisations should be highly commended for their efforts. I thank the House for having joined with me in paying tribute to our unsung heroes - those fair dinkum Australians - our Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders. Lest we forget.

**Mr MARKHAM** (Keira) [3.36]: I support the motion. I believe it is very important, and probably not before time, that the efforts of the indigenous people of this country in the defence of their country, over many many wars, are recognised. I have no doubt

that some may consider it ironic that Aboriginal people have been at war in this country for the last 206 years to try to receive recognition for their own country and yet each time war has broken out and Australia has taken part in that war Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been there - but not always with the support of non-Aboriginal army and service personnel.

When the second world war broke out in 1939 social demands that Aboriginal people were pursuing were put on the back burner because Australian society at large saw the threat to this country being greater from outside than from within. At that time it is estimated that over 1,000 Aborigines signed up and served with the armed forces in World War II. No one really knows the number because no record was kept of their enrolment, their enlistment and their commitment to the defence of Australia. The official policy reaffirmed in 1940 was that recruitment be restricted to men, substantially of European descent,

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and many Aborigines were rejected. Aborigines in the armed forces were treated and paid equally but within Australia they were subjected to old restrictions. Australia was at war with Italy and one member of Parliament is recorded as saying:

Aborigines home on military leave or home from the Middle East wearing the King's uniform are not allowed to visit an hotel to have a drink. At the same time unnaturalised Italians may drink as they please and enjoy full citizens' rights. That is a rotten state of affairs.

That is a quote from the publication *Survival* which is the history of Aborigines in New South Wales. It is about time that we, in this country, recognised the great role that Aboriginal people played during the second world war, and other wars that this country has been engaged in whether by choice or design. In northern Australia, Aborigines were more directly involved in the war. An Aborigine in Darwin was the first person to capture a Japanese serviceman on Australian soil; 1,000 Aboriginal people worked for the Army and Air Force Labour Corps. They were paid a wage and they and their dependents were maintained on full Army rations. I assure honourable members it was better than what was happening at the missions.

In January 1944 Aborigines in the Torres Strait defence force mutinied because they were paid at half the rate of the newest white private. Following an inquiry they were given more pay, though not equal pay - and not back pay "because it would not be good for them". This decision is said to have saved the Government millions of pounds. I have heard what was said by the honourable member for Monaro, and I hope he is listening to what I am saying because it is very important that the members of this Parliament, and the members of other Australian parliaments, appreciate the fact that our Aboriginal service personnel did not receive just recognition for many years. It saddens me that it took such a long time.

One example of a major silence about Australia's history, which has only recently been addressed in a public way, concerns the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contribution to Australia's defence and foreign policy. The indigenous Australians who have served in every major war in which Australia has participated this century have been scarcely acknowledged until recently. Over 300 Aboriginal men served in the 1st Australian Imperial Force during World War I. Many Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people had been employed under poorer conditions, and were paid less than their white compatriots for their war service. Some contemporary leading indigenous and South Sea Islander identities, such as the late Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly Kath Walker, and Faith Bandler are returned servicewomen. In 1991 the first war memorial to Aboriginal servicemen and servicewoman was unveiled at Jebbribillum Bora Park in Burleigh Heads, south of Brisbane. In 1993 the Australian War Memorial contributed to the United Nations Year for the World's Indigenous People with an exhibition and tribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who served in Australia's armed forces.

Those facts are contained in a recently released document on reconciliation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in this country. What concerns me is what is happening today so far as Aboriginal people are concerned - probably the descendants of those Aboriginal people who were protecting their country, and in turn protecting our country, as members of the armed forces. When I consider the social dislocation affecting Aboriginal people in this State and country today, it makes me wonder why, at this one time of the year when we are approaching Anzac Day, the Parliament is so concerned and prepared to put forward a motion that recognises the contribution of the Aboriginal people of this State, when we should do it 365 days of the year. There is a war going on in this State at this very moment. It was not long ago that a report of a royal commission which investigated the deaths in custody of 99 Aboriginal people was handed down. I would like to know how many of the 339 recommendations of the royal commission have been implemented.

In New South Wales an ever-increasing number of Aboriginal people are being gaoled. Indigenous Australians are held in police custody at a much higher rate than non-indigenous Australians. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found from a study of police cell statistics that in 1988 the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander detention was 29 times higher than for non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal women also make up a disproportionate percentage of women in custody.

**Mr Cochran:** On a point of order: I am loath to take a point of order on a motion which should attract greater dignity than it has from the honourable member opposite. The honourable member is not addressing the motion. He is using this occasion to make cheap political capital, and I ask you, Mr Speaker, to bring him back to the scope of the motion.

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! I remind the honourable member for Keira that the leave of the motion is very restricted and his remarks have strayed well away from the ambit of the motion. I would ask him to return to the specific motion.

**Mr MARKHAM:** If my remarks have hit a nerve, I will not pursue that line. All I say is that Aborigines are part and parcel of Australian society. Aborigines have gone to war on many occasions in defence of this country and in defence of our freedom and democracy, yet we are not prepared to make sure that Aboriginal people in Australia today receive equal opportunities, so far as democracy and their existence in the country are concerned. They fought for our right to be recognised and to ensure that not only our children but also their children have a fair crack of the whip, and that is -  
[Time expired.]

**Dr KERNOHAN** (Camden) [3.46]: Anzac Day is a very special day for me - it always has been. My first memories of my father were of a figure in khaki who visited me on occasions - rather rare occasions - and made a big fuss of me. I was lucky. My father came home with few problems as a result of his

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wartime service. But this year Anzac Day will be special because this Anzac Day we will note the role of not only our servicemen and servicewomen but also some of the non-service duties performed by people during wartime - for example, the Women's Land Army. The honourable member for Monaro spoke about the fuzzy wuzzy angels and their role. Many non-service Aborigines played a role in the Northern Territory during the war. Today I want to refer to one particular Aboriginal Australian and acknowledge the role played by him and his brothers in defence of Australia during the war.

Honourable members might wonder why I want to talk about just one. I had the honour and privilege of meeting Leonard Waters at the fiftieth anniversary reunion of 78 squadron, which was held at Camden in the RAAF, according to Robert A. Hall's book, *Black Diggers*, there were four Aboriginal air crew, one of whom was Len Waters. He was the only Aboriginal pilot in the RAAF. He came from Nindigully near St George, Queensland. He was an intelligent man but was forced to abandon his schooling during the depression. Pre-war he worked, as did most Aborigines in North Queensland, in agricultural work. Until 1939, for seven days a week he received 10 shillings; he was a ringbarker. Then he became a shearer because he could earn a little more as a shearer.

On 24 August 1942 Leonard Walker joined the RAAF, working as ground staff and training as a flight mechanic. By December 1943, he volunteered for air crew, was selected and was training in Victoria. He studied at night to improve his chances, and excelled at various courses. The Royal Australian Air Force gave Len Waters the environment to advance through his own efforts. There were 375 would-be pilots in the course and 48 finished - only three of them in front of Len Waters. When asked by a categorisation board member - the people who decided whether the students became a pilot, a gunner or whatever - to imagine himself as a tail gunner on a Halifax or Lancaster bomber, Len Waters said, "I have a very disappointed look on my face, sir". The next day he was appointed a pilot; he was later selected as a fighter pilot - the elite of the elite.

Joining No. 78 Fighter Squadron, Waters served first at Noemfoor and later at Balikpapan. He participated in many attack sorties and flew kittyhawks. He had almost a year of operational service and completed 95 sorties. At the end of World War II he had achieved the rank of warrant officer. After discharge he planned to start an aerial taxi service to southwest Queensland, but lacked financial support. He returned to shearing. Len hitch-hiked from Queensland to attend the fiftieth anniversary celebrations and reunion at Camden. He did not have the money for a bus or train fare. He was welcomed with open arms by his colleagues and everyone there. He was a wonderful man. He was a gentleman. I was saddened to hear that he died soon after that reunion. Lest we forget.

**Mr COCHRAN** (Monaro) [3.51], in reply: I was pleased to hear the remarks of the

honourable member for Camden. I am glad the honourable member for Keira restrained himself from expanding on the political issue he was attempting to draw to the attention of the House. While we all share the concerns of the honourable member for Keira on this issue, today is not the day to draw attention to those matters. There are plenty of other opportunities for such matters to be raised in this Parliament. I was particularly pleased to hear the honourable member for Camden raise the history of a famous Aboriginal pilot. There are many other stories which Australian schoolchildren and members of the public could take great pride in reading. The honourable member for Camden referred to *Black Diggers* by Robert Hall.

I am extremely grateful to the staff of the Parliamentary Library who, in the early hours of this morning, were able to join with me in searching through various records to find something that would give an accurate description of the contribution the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders made in the great battles in the South Pacific. Only a few weeks ago I had the great pleasure of joining a reunion of wireless operators and spotters who had operated through the islands during World War II, particularly in 1944-45. They spoke fondly of an Aboriginal member of their unit who had little more than six weeks' training prior to his being posted to service in the islands as a spotter.

At the reunion in Queanbeyan there were 38 spotters and wireless operators. Of those, four had been awarded military medals and two had been mentioned in despatches. That speaks volumes for the standard of performance of those wireless operators and spotters during the campaign of 1944-45. I had just read a book on the issue. I was finally able to put faces to the names mentioned in the book. It certainly added a great deal of colour to the history of that particular effort in World War II. The Aborigines certainly played a significant part in World War II. As the honourable member for Keira mentioned, they played an important part in the Roper River area and mission in the northern part of Australia.

White Australians had extraordinary attitudes to the Aborigines who sought not only recognition but simple admission to the defence forces in an attempt to defend their country. For many years the Australian defence forces and the Government would not allow the Aborigines to join the defence forces because they were not of white Celtic background - they were perceived as an intelligence risk. It saddens me, and I am sure it saddens many others, to think that sort of attitude denied people the right to serve their country. I recall meeting another fellow in the Australian army during my term of service. He served in Vietnam in the same unit as I served. He spoke proudly of the history of the Australian Aborigines in World War II. Today, in a very short space of time, I have had the opportunity to pay tribute not only to those very brave and courageous Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who made the

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supreme sacrifice, but to those who served their time in prisoner-of-war camps. Many of them returned home injured, wounded and unrecognised. I thank the House for its indulgence this afternoon.

**Motion agreed to.**

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