

Let's talk...

Untold Anzac Stories



Reconciliation
AUSTRALIA

Long before they were considered citizens of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had a proud history of contributing to Australia's military efforts. Often little known, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander war stories are only now being uncovered. Take some time this Anzac Day to discover these untold histories and remember forgotten heroes. Lest we forget.

Did you know?



"Australian soldiers I met in the Army were not colour-conscious towards the aboriginal...native troops from practically every colony in the Empire fought and died in the struggle against tyranny and oppression, and Australian aboriginals were no exception."¹

Reg Saunders - the first Indigenous Australian to be commissioned as an officer in the 2nd AIF during World War II.

- Upon returning from World War I, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers were denied land under the Returned Servicemen's Settlement Scheme, despite having fought alongside non-Indigenous servicemen².
- Although forced to give up their land and rights, the women and children of the Cummeragunja mission, located 32km from Echuca in NSW, knitted 59 caps, 27 pullovers, 41 balaclavas and 77 pair of mittens for Australian soldiers³.

¹Ramsland, John, and Christopher G. Mooney. *Remembering Aboriginal Heroes: Struggle, Identity and the Media*. Melbourne: Brolga Pub, 2006. Print.

²http://www.skwirk.com/p-c_s-14_u-42_t-49_c-147/indigenous-people/nsw/history/australia-and-world-war-i/different-perspectives-of-the-war

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians fought against British settlers for 146 years on Australian soil, in what is known as the [Frontier Wars](#)⁴.
- The Sapphires is a true story of four Aboriginal women: Laurel Robinson, Lois Peeler, Beverley Briggs and Naomi Myers. They toured Vietnam in the late 1960's singing to American troops – an extraordinary achievement for four young Aboriginal people, considering that Aboriginal people had only just received the right to vote⁵.

Some quick statistics...

*"After the war I went back to being just another black fellow."*⁶

Leonard Waters - the first Aboriginal aviator and pilot to serve in World War II.



- **1 in every 20** Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people made a direct contribution to Australian WWII efforts, either as servicemen or women, or civilian labourers⁷.
- At present, it is known that **34** Aboriginal men served at Gallipoli, **12** of whom were killed⁸.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were serving for **87 years** in the armed forces before they were considered citizens of Australia.
- It is estimated that **27,000** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were killed in the Frontier Wars⁹.
- **3** Indigenous men are known to have received a Distinguished Conduct Medal in World War I, and a further **13** received a Military Medal for acts of gallantry and devotion to duty under fire¹⁰.

³ http://www.myplace.edu.au/TLF_resources/R9401/description.html

⁴ <http://thrivalinternational.wordpress.com/global-net/the-australian-frontier-wars/>

⁵ <http://www.hopscotchfilms.com.au/the-sapphires-film/the-real-sapphires/>

⁶ <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/rsls-anzac-day-appeal-offers-help-for-soliders-in-need/story-e6freoof-1226337476694>

⁷ Hall, Robert A. *Fighters from the Fringe: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Recall the Second World War*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995, p. 195.

⁸ Gary Oakley, Australian War Memorial

⁹ Reynolds, Henry. *The Forgotten Wars*. Sydney, N.S.W: New South Publishing, 2013. Print.

¹⁰ Gary Oakley, Australian War Memorial

Meet...Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker)

*"There was a job to be done...all of a sudden the colour line disappeared."*¹¹

Kath Walker- Army Corporeal, notable political activist and poet.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Oodgeroo Noonuccal, born Kathleen Ruska on the 3rd of November 1920, was a descendent of the Noonuccal people of North Stradbroke Island, off the coast of Brisbane in Queensland.

After leaving school at 13 to find work to support her family, Kathleen enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service in 1942 after her two brothers were captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore.

Although Kath had been warned that she might suffer racial discrimination in the Army, she found this not to be the case. Rather, she established many friendships within the Army, particularly with Black American Soldiers and white Australians¹². Kath was trained as a telephonist and was promoted to Corporal and given the responsibility of training some new recruits. Kath left the Army in December 1942 as a persistent middle ear infection made her unable to perform her job.

Racial prejudice continued to exist after the war with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people unable to vote or even own land. After Kath's positive experiences in the Army and the discrimination she faced after leaving, she became a fervent advocate for Aboriginal rights. During the 1950s, she became a member of the Communist Party, believing that this offered the best opportunity for advancing the interests of Aboriginal people¹³. She was the Queensland State Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) in 1962¹⁴. She was also a key figure in the campaign for the 1967 Referendum, lobbying Prime Minister Robert Menzies in 1965, and his successor Harold Holt in 1966, for their support in the campaign¹⁵. She worked tirelessly towards gaining equal opportunity and citizenship for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. She also wrote two books on the subject of Aboriginal citizenship, the first titled *Integration and Queensland Society* in 1968 and *My People* in 1970¹⁶. In 1970 she was also awarded a Member of the British Empire (MBE) for her services to Aboriginal people. However in 1988, frustrated by the slow progress which was made by governments in

¹¹ <http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww2/homefront/indigenous.html>

¹² http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf

¹³ http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf

¹⁴ <http://indigenoustrights.net.au/person.asp?PID=988>

¹⁵ Cochrane, Wright. *They spoke out pretty good: politics and gender in the Brisbane Aboriginal Rights Movement 1958- 1962*. St Kilda Vic: Janoan Media Exchange, 1998, p. 189.

¹⁶ http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf

Australia, she returned her MBE on the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia¹⁷. In 1988, Kath also changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, in recognition of her Noonuccal ancestors.

Oodgeroo was also a poet, and her poetry achieved wide acclaim in the post war years. She was the first Aboriginal poet to publish a volume of verse¹⁸. She began her career as a poet in 1964 beginning with *We are going*. In 1966 she released *The Dawn is at Hand* which won the Jessie Litchfield award for Australian Literature¹⁹. Later, Oodgeroo was also awarded the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award and the Dame Mary Gilmore Medal²⁰.

On September 16th 1993, Oodgeroo died after a brief battle with cancer however her contributions to the Aboriginal community will never be forgotten. Oodgeroo's experience of racial acceptance in the military contrasting with the harsh racism faced in Australian society, was mirrored throughout many other returned servicemen and women. For example [Leonard Waters](#) who, despite being the first and only Aboriginal aviator to serve in World War II, was unable to be continue flying upon his return to Australia.

Take Action

- Take time out this Anzac Day to remember the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service men and women to Australia's war efforts.
- Attend the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commemorative Ceremony](#) in Canberra, or attend a local Indigenous Commemorative Service in your state.
- If you're in Brisbane, see the [Black Diggers production](#), showing later in the year. This show explores the untold stories of Aboriginal soldiers in World War I, and the outstanding contribution they made to Australian History.
- Read 'Forgotten heroes: Aborigines at war from the Somme to Vietnam' by Alice Jackomos and Derek Fowell, or 'Forgotten War' by Henry Reynolds for insight into Indigenous accounts of war.
- [Watch the interview of Wiradjuri woman, Barbara Johnson](#), a current Army Private in the Australian Defence Force.
- If you have stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who served in the war or worked alongside in an auxiliary capacity, contact Gary Oakley at the Australian War Memorial (gary.oakley@awm.gov.au or 02 62434532) – he is always interested in hearing people's stories.



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¹⁷ http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf

¹⁸ http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf

¹⁹ http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf

²⁰ http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/oodgeroo.pdf