

# Let's talk...

## Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Military Service



**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a long and proud, but often little known history of contributing to Australia's military efforts**

### Did you know...?

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have fought for the nation in every war since Federation in 1901
- 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 servicepeople
- In 1944, nearly every Torres Strait Islander man was a member of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion – in proportion to population, no community in Australia contributed more to Australia's effort in World War II than the people of the Torres Strait Islands
- The first Japanese Prisoner of War (POW) in Australia was captured by Aboriginal people after his plane crashed on Melville Island, north of Darwin, in February 1942
- Despite being forced to relinquish their land rights, the women and children of the Cummeragunja mission knitted 59 caps, 27 pullovers, 41 balaclavas, and 77 pairs of mittens for Australian soldiers during World War II
- The Frontier Wars were a series of conflicts that were fought over a 146-year period (1788-1934), between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and European settlers

### Some quick statistics...

- Current estimates state that approximately **1,000** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enlisted in World War I<sup>1</sup>
- **3** First Nations people 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 fire

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<sup>1</sup> [Australian War Memorial](#)

- An estimated **3,000** Aboriginal, and **850** Torres Strait Islander Australians are known to have enlisted in World War II, despite regulations discouraging them to<sup>2</sup>
- **1** in every **20** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made a direct contribution to World War II efforts, either as servicepeople or civilian labourers
- **34** Aboriginal men are known to have served at Gallipoli – **12** of whom were killed
- 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 Australians were killed in the Frontier Wars
- As of 2015, there are **830** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people serving in the Australian Defence Forces<sup>3</sup>

### Take action...

- Remember the significant contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military servicepeople have made, and continue to make toward Australia's war efforts, on [ANZAC Day](#) (25 April annually)
- Attend a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commemorative Service in your state or territory
- Visit the [Australian War Memorial](#), where exhibitions, tours, and a wealth of information and resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military involvement are available
- Read *Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War from the Somme to Vietnam* by Alice Jakomos, and *Forgotten War* by Henry Reynolds, for accounts by First Nations writers
- Watch this short video, [The Frontier Wars](#), from NITV via SBS on Demand

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<sup>2</sup> [Department of Veterans' Affairs](#)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government – [Department of Defence Reconciliation Action Plan](#)