



Publication The Mercury
Keywords Guy Barnett
Story ID 255259
Customer ID 16

Words 630
Area of Clip 937.77 cm²

Date 11/11/2020
Page
Circulation 87000

Honour legacy of our

It is time to recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have taken part in Australia's response to conflicts since the Boer War in 1899, writes **Guy Barnett**

REMEMBRANCE Day is an opportunity to honour all Australian defence force personnel who served, or are serving, in war, conflict and on peace-keeping operations. Their courage, service, mateship and sacrifice have shaped the Australian character and values we hold dear.

With Remembrance Day this year coinciding with NAIDOC Week, it is a fitting time to recognise the part played by Australia's First People who have participated in Australia's response to international conflicts since the Boer War in 1899.

They have been present at every conflict since then — in both world wars, Korea, Vietnam and the Middle East. It is known that more than 1000 of Australia's First People fought in World War I — with five known to have been killed and buried at Gallipoli.

Many more tried to enlist to fight for their country but were rejected on the grounds of race.

At the time of their enlistment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not lawfully able to vote, marry a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, drink alcohol, own property freely, receive award wages or move freely around the country.

For many, life in the services would be the first experience of equal treatment in their lives.

Hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enlisted to fight for Australia during the Second World War with many killed fighting and at least a dozen dying as prisoners of war.

With the threat of Japanese invasion, specialised units, such as the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit and the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion (formed in 1941) were tasked with defending the northern coast of Australia from Japanese attack.

Others fought on the seas in the Royal Australian Navy and in the skies with the Royal Australian Air Force, including Warrant Officer Len Waters, the RAAF's first known Aboriginal fighter pilot.

There is no definitive number or reliable identification of Aboriginal Tasmanians who served in our armed forces. The actual numbers remain unknown.

During World War I, approximately 21 Aboriginal Tasmanians from Cape Barren Island served in the Australian Imperial Force and six were killed.

Private John William Miller, grandson of Fanny Cochrane Smith, served with the 12th Battalion.

Private Miller was killed at

the landing of Gallipoli in 1915.

Another local Aboriginal man, Francis (Frank) Maynard also served 14 months with the Australian Imperial Force with the 26th Battalion (Infantry). Mr Maynard was killed in action at Sunken Road, France in 1916.

In World War II, approximately 23 Aboriginal Tasmanian men fought overseas and another 10 served in the Vietnam War.

Much has happened since that time to recognise the role and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers and our First People more broadly.

Restrictions on race for enlistment were formally abandoned by the military in 1949.

In 1967, Australia's First People were recognised by the Commonwealth Government as citizens of Australia and entitled to vote.

In 1992, back pay and medals were awarded to Aboriginal members of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit, redressing historical errors.

As recently as 2009 — and following a campaign by myself together with others, and with the support of the RSL — the Australian government finally recognised the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, local civilians of Papua New Guinea who provided vital help to Australian soldiers during World War II.



“FOR MANY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE, LIFE IN THE SERVICES WOULD BE THE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF EQUAL TREATMENT IN THEIR LIVES

The spirit of all our servicemen and women are key ingredients of the Australian character and are part of what makes Australia great.

This Remembrance Day, I encourage Tasmanians to reflect upon the legacy of all those who served including Australia's First People who served.

Lyons Liberal MHA Guy Barnett is Tasmanian Veterans' Affairs Minister.



First People



The Last Post. Inset, Tasmanian Francis (Frank) Maynard served with the 26th Battalion (Infantry) and was killed in France in 1916. Main picture: AAP

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