

ADDRESS BY
HER HONOUR THE HONOURABLE SALLY THOMAS AC
ADMINISTRATOR OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
*Commemorative service to honour the service and
sacrifice of Indigenous veterans*
The Darwin Cenotaph
Thursday, 10 July 2014

Today during NAIDOC week, we gather to pay tribute to all Indigenous Australians who have served in the armed forces of our country.

Their early history is one of overcoming prejudice and poverty to eventually take their place alongside their fellow countrymen in the defence of their nation.

Next month marks 100 years since the start of the First World War. Next year is the centenary of Anzac and the landings at Gallipoli.

Throughout the First World War, and through all the conflicts that followed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served their country with honour.

When war broke out in August 1914, Aboriginal men were excluded from military service. Many, however, were determined to enlist, and more than 400 Aborigines and Islanders managed to join the ranks. They came from all over Australia, and served at Gallipoli and on the Western Front.

Among them was Willie Allen, a Darwin-born Aboriginal man. Private Allen was in his early thirties when he enlisted.

He was farewelled at the Darwin Town Hall on the 15th of December 1916 and left Darwin aboard the SS *Mataram* three days later, joining up officially in the next year.

Army records show that Private Allen was a labourer of Church of England faith whose address was recorded as being care of the 'Darwin Compound'. I wonder if this was the Kahlin Aboriginal Compound that, in 2013, commemorated 100 years since it was established.

Like most of the men accepted into the Army, Private Allen was first sent to Egypt to meet the threat of the Ottoman Empire. He served with the 11th Australian Light Horse Regiment. At the end of the war, he was repatriated to his home of Darwin.

I would like to think that members of Private Allen's family still live here.

Private Allen and his fellow Indigenous Anzacs served on equal terms with non-Indigenous Anzacs, forging strong bonds of mateship which endured through the realities of those war years. Some died; some were maimed. Some were taken as prisoners of war and sent to camps in foreign lands.

On the 3rd of September 1939, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that Australia was at war as a consequence of Germany's invasion of Poland and Britain's declaration of war upon Germany.

The very next day, the Army accepted the enlistment of 50 Aborigines from the Northern Territory, including Jimma and Samuel Fejo, and William Muir.

Special arrangements involving the personal intervention of the Minister for Defence had been necessary before the Army agreed to admit these men.

The Fejo brothers were highly respected trackers and later in the war assisted with the rescue of Allied airmen shot down over the Northern Territory. William Muir transferred to the Second Australian Imperial Force in November 1942, reaching the rank of Corporal. He died as a result of Cyclone Tracy.

It is estimated that more than 3000 Indigenous Australians served in the regular armed forces in the Second World War, with a further 150 serving in subsidiary units.

Aboriginal women also played an important role. Many enlisted in the women's services or worked in war industries.

Long before the Second World War, Aboriginals were employed by Navy ships surveying the north Australian coast.ⁱ HMAS *Geranium* employed six Aboriginal civilians in 1923, and HMAS *Moresby* from 1934 to 1940.

The men were usually recruited from Darwin and their job was to assist shore-based patrols in the erection of survey markers and in communicating with local countrymen along the coast.

Locally, the patrol boat *Larrakia* patrolled the coastline defending the country from illegal landings from Japanese fishermen: her crew included several local Aboriginals.

When Australia came under direct threat from Japan in 1941, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were able to draw on their intimate knowledge of the Top End's terrain, the waters, coastline and islands to fulfil their role of defending Australia.

Their knowledge and skills were advantageous.

The Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit was formed in 1941 under the command of Squadron Leader Donald Thomson, an anthropologist with extensive experience of working with the Yolngu people in Eastern Arnhem Land.

Personnel included 50 Aboriginal men, six Solomon Islanders and a Torres Strait Islander who were trained to fight using conventional weapons, but also traditional means in the event of an invasion while reporting on enemy movements towards Darwin.

The unit patrolled the coast of Arnhem Land from 1942 to 1943 searching for signs of Japanese military activity.

The North Australia Observer Unit led by anthropologist Major Bill Stanner performed a similar role. Nicknamed the 'Nackeroos', the unit was founded in March 1942, a week after Broome was bombed by the Japanese.

At its peak, 550 soldiers – mostly from interstate – were supported by Aboriginal guides and trackers as they observed and reported on enemy activity while enduring some of Australia's harshest conditions for months at a time.

One of the subsidiary units was Jack Gribble's unit on Bathurst and Melville islands.

Gribble was a patrol officer who recruited, but did not formally enlist, 39 Tiwi Islanders to work as coast watchers.

The men were issued with naval uniforms and weapons, and conducted armed patrols in the motor vessel, *Amity*, and in dugout canoes.

They watched for enemy invaders, and searched for downed planes and airmen. They escorted several allied airmen to safety, including the crew of a Dutch bomber and an American fighter pilot.

They also rescued eleven survivors from an American supply ship which was sunk off Melville Island.

At the end of the war they were taken to Darwin for a special parade.

Following the Second World War, the Australian Army reintroduced restrictions on enlistment by Indigenous Australians. But attitudes had changed for good, and these restrictions were abandoned in 1949.

Since then, Indigenous Australians have served in all conflicts in which Australia has been involved, including Korea, Vietnam, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan.

They have served in peacekeeping missions around the world.

They continue to serve in defence of Australia.

And they serve here in the Northern Territory in NORFORCE, the unit of which, as Administrator of the Northern Territory, I am the Honorary Colonel.

The men and women of NORFORCE patrol the wilderness of northern Australia, protecting their country ... our country.

Today, we remember Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans.

We honour them. We thank them.

Lest we forget.

ⁱ Fighters from the Fringe – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Recall the Second World War – Robert A. Hall (1995) .