

Frank MacDonald Essay

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Question 2: Aboriginal people in the First World War may have served on equal terms but after the war they found that racial discrimination remained, or indeed, worsened. Discuss this statement with reference to the experiences of Aboriginal soldiers during and after World War 1, particularly those from Cape Barren Island.

“If you are facing death together, it is easier to live together”. This is how Australian Aboriginal man Professor Wesley Enoch (2015) described the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous soldiers on the front-line during World War 1. For years before this infamous and devastating conflict, a strong divide in Australian society caused by misconceptions and dispute between First Nations people and European settlers had prevented Aboriginal people from having any rights in society, such as earning an income, owning property and voting. World War 1 brought forward the opportunity for a select group of young Indigenous men to join the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and be treated the same as their white counterparts. However, this ministrations was short-lived as after the war ended racial discrimination remained a problem, and in some cases worsened. Examples of this inconsistency in societal behaviour can be identified from the experiences of multiple Aboriginal men from Cape Barren Island, a community in Tasmania’s northeast region. Indigenous people were forced to keep fighting oppression within the country after the war ended for many challenging years to come.

Since the British colonisation of Australia in 1788, Aboriginal people have faced many challenges, predominately racial discrimination preventing them from being treated as equals by white settlers. During the 1800’s, Australia was labelled Terra Nullius, a term defined as “land belonging to no-one” when it was in fact, occupied by First Nations people for tens of thousands of years before Europeans arrived. The British government claimed Australian land as their own, and from then on Indigenous people were seen as inferior to the European race and treated abysmally by government authorities. In the early 1900’s mounting contention between European countries lead to the beginning of World War 1. Often referred to as The Great War, this conflict was the largest war that had ever happened at the time with over 30 countries involved between the years of 1914-1918 (“History.com Editors-October 2009”). Out of Australia’s total population of 4 million people, 416 809 men between the ages of 18 and 44 joined the defence force, including approximately 1000 Indigenous men (“National Archives of Australia-n.d”).

Many Australian men enlisted into the AIF as they felt a strong sense of patriotism and were willing to defend the British empire (“Department of Veterans' Affairs-n.d”), but for Indigenous men the prospect of joining the war was more than an act of nationalism. The AIF paid their soldiers to partake in warfare and for Aboriginal people the opportunity to have an income was a new development as prior to this, it was illegal for First Nations people to earn a wage. Although thousands of Indigenous men applied to join the military, a majority of them were rejected due to their race. As the war progressed and more soldiers were killed, exceptions were made to let more Indigenous people into the war, for example if they could prove to the chief medical examiner that they had at least one parent of European descent and had been raised in a non-tribal setting (“Indigenous Service in Australia’s Armed Forces in Peace and War – Overview | The Australian War Memorial-n.d”). Once they had been accepted into the AIF, Aboriginal people experienced something that until that point had been a foreign concept, fair treatment. Race was not noted on any entry records for the AIF, so Indigenous persons were not regarded as any different to their white comrades. They were paid an equal wage, developed bonds with fellow soldiers and experienced the same woeful and dangerous conditions as everyone else on the front line. Although derogatory slurs were still occasionally used against Indigenous people, the focus of the soldiers shifted from fighting with one another to defending each other’s backs. This was the case with a group of young First Nations men from Cape Barren Island, a region in Tasmania’s northwest.

Cape Barren Island was a small, primarily Aboriginal community off the south coast of Flinders Island in Tasmania. During World War 1, 27 young Indigenous men from the area were deemed eligible to join the AIF and of these 27 males, 21 enlisted and served in various battlefronts around the world (“Centenary of ANZAC - Tasmanian Aboriginal Soldiers-n.d”). Three Aboriginal brothers from Cape Barren Island, Frank, William and James Maynard were all accepted into the AIF respectively between May of 1915 and September of 1916. While at war, James was wounded twice over 2 years but returned

home to his mother Eva in 1919. His two brothers, however, were not so lucky. Frank was killed in action while fighting in France and the fate of William was never discovered (“Something to Remember Him by | One Hundred Stories -n.d”). Although numerous young Aboriginal men risked their futures akin to the Maynard brothers, upon arrival home they were never treated like the heroes they were. One descendant of an Indigenous Cape Barren Island soldier stated that “They've got their little plaque sitting on a wall overseas, [but] the men from Cape Barren Island who went and fought in the First World War have never really been recognised in an official capacity.” (“Tony Brown, From Paradise to Hell”: First Nations ANZACs and the Fight to Honour Them-n.d”)

For white Australian soldiers, various benefit schemes meant that they could apply for land to start farms and support their families. However, laws preventing Indigenous people from having rights in Australia were not abolished during the war, meaning that after the traumatized soldiers returned home it was still illegal for them to own land. According to the State Library of New South Wales, “Each Australian state government realized the importance of providing a source of income for returning soldiers as well as to recognise the personal and family sacrifices made by them.” (“State Library of New South Wales-n.d”). This statement only applies to soldiers of European descent and fails to account for the valiant efforts made by Aboriginal soldiers to defend a country that never supported them in return. Although returned Indigenous soldiers were eligible for some forms of government support, factors such as rural isolation and socioeconomic drawbacks for men living on Cape Barren Island prevented them from having access to financial, physical and emotional aid.

Racial discrimination in Australia also resumed with the continuation of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Recommencing in 1920, many children of returned Indigenous servicemen from Cape Barren Island were involuntarily extracted from their parents and taken to mainland Tasmania

to be placed in foster homes and institutions. The Australian Government assimilated First Nations children into the British lifestyle and deprived them of their spiritual rights in an attempt to wipe out the Aboriginal race and create a “white Australian Culture” (“Aboriginal Assimilation | White Australia Policy”). Policies such as these were just one way that the government brought additional suffering to Indigenous families who had showed nothing but loyalty and courage during the war.

The full extent of Indigenous people’s contributions to World War 1 is still unclear, but this does not mean that their services should not be acknowledged. Aboriginal soldiers demonstrated bravery, loyalty and perseverance in true Anzac spirit, even though their sacrifices were never officially recognized. "They were shot together, they died together, they buried each other together. There was no discrimination. Only discrimination they felt is when they came back home." (“Joseph Flick 2020”)

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