

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize 2023



Indigenous and non-Indigenous
Australians serving alongside each
other in WW1

(Museum and History, 2012)

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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.

World War one (WW1) commenced on the 28th of July 1914 and concluded on the 11th November 1918. Over four million Australian men enlisted, precisely 416,809, to serve their country in the war, including approximately one thousand of them being Aboriginal service men. This figure has conflicting information surrounding it as ethnicity was not recorded on enlistment documents. The Indigenous Australian service men are now commonly referred to as 'Black Diggers'. Although both First Nations and white men served on equal terms during the war, they were not counted as Australian citizens until a referendum in 1967. Due to this, the Aboriginal people who served in the war did not get appropriately nor formally acknowledged and recognised for their loyalty and courageous service to Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were subject to a great deal of discrimination and were treated as foreigners on their own land. Their rights were not recognised and they were not counted as Australian citizens until the referendum in 1967. This denied many Indigenous Australians of basic rights, which also meant they could not legally serve Australia in war. This was due to section 61 (h) of the Defence Act of 1903 that excluded "persons who are not substantially of European origin or descent" (Australian War Memorial, 2021), judged by medical authorities, from serving Australia in war. While this law was in place, a small number of Indigenous Australians still managed to pass the examination of the medical authorities by denying their ethnicity. Many of these people saw serving in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as an opportunity for a secure wage, an adventure, a chance to leave the missions and reserves, such as on Cape Barren Island, or as a chance of being rewarded with equal rights upon their return home from the war. (NACCHO, 2013) The law that inhibited Indigenous Australians from enlisting in the war saw the restrictions loosened in 1917, which allowed 'half-castes' to serve if it could be certified that one of their parents was of European origin. This law was changed due to a need for more manpower as a result of the many casualties on the warfront.

There were approximately one hundred and seventy Indigenous people living on Cape Barren island at the time of war. Twenty-seven of these people were considered eligible to serve after the restrictions were loosened in 1917 and twenty-one of these men enlisted, the majority of whom travelled a considerably large distance to Claremont in order to enlist (Scarlett, 2012). Cape Barren Island had one of the highest enlistment rates in the entire country due to the large number of people that enlisted, despite the small population living on the island at the time. Six of these men lost their lives in battle or as a result of injury or illness. During their period of serving, they endured harsh, yet the same conditions as their non-Indigenous comrades. This was the first time that they had faced equality among other Australians.

Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown (see Appendix A for a photograph of Private Brown) is just one example of the twenty-one soldiers from Cape Barren that served in the war, as well as one of the many casualties as a result of the war. He fought in the 40th Battalion for the AIF and sustained a gunshot wound in his wrist and left thigh. Because of this, he was moved to the "1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station. From there he was transferred to the 11th Stationary Hospital, Rouen. Here he succumbed to his wounds three days later at 5.15pm on 11 June 1917.

Brown was later buried at St Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen.” (Libraries Tasmania, n.d.) In honour of his service, Brown’s family received a memorial plaque, commonly referred to as a ‘dead man’s penny’, which reiterated the point that they faced equality not only from their fellow comrades, but from their superiors during their time of service and commitment to the country. (See Appendix C for plaque). A poem was also inserted in the Launceston newspaper, the Examiner, years following his death by his uncle, J. Everett (see Appendix B). Within this poem it says “you unto death were faithful, and yours is the hero’s crown.” (WW1 Exhibition, 2023) This emphasizes the Indigenous men’s faithfulness to the country in which they were rejected citizenship and other basic rights.

Upon their return home, many of these men had expected that the way society treats them to have changed. Unfortunately, despite having served on equal ground during the war, this was not the case. They returned back from overseas and faced the same, if not more, discrimination. Their efforts did not get acknowledged and their service to the country did not get recognised nor commemorated. They continued to be subject to racial segregation, unequal wages, no right to vote and were denied custodianship of their own children, what we now refer to as the stolen generation. In addition to these inequalities, they did not get access to the soldier settlement schemes and in many cases, were not allowed to enter the Returned and Services League of Australia (now abbreviated to RSL clubs) which was determined by others in their community. The soldier settlement schemes were put in place to “develop rural areas, encouraging returned servicemen to become property-owning farmers.” (Australian War Memorial, 2021) This was regardless of the fact that much of this land was taken from areas within the Aboriginal reserves to allow for more space for the returning soldiers. “In Tasmania, approximately 271,537 acres – comprising 1,935 farms – were allocated - none to Tasmanian Aborigines.” (Shaping Tasmania, 2013) This statement exhibits just how much discrimination and prejudice they faced subsequent to their return home from the warfront. If these men were denied access to any assistance, whether in RSLs or soldier settlement schemes, it shows how unavowed their service was, not only from their own towns and communities, but the entirety of Australia.

Continuing for the information above, while a number of these men saw the war as an opportunity for an equal wage, “in some states Native Welfare Agencies quarantined their wages and pensions.” (Libraries Tasmania, n.d.) In many cases this meant that their gratuity was passed on to and controlled by the Protector of Aborigines. In addition to this, if the men died in battle, any medals that they had received were, on occasion, not passed on to their families as a result of the Aborigines Act 1911. This prevented the soldier’s family members, or their next of kin, from receiving any appreciation of their service. Returned men from Cape Barren Island found it considerably more difficult than other areas around Tasmania and Australia because they had access to very few, if any, soldier benefits that other returned personnel had access to.

Fortunately for the Indigenous men and women of the present, much had changed in the century following the conclusion of the first world war. Nowadays there is a war memorial on Cape Barren Island recognising and honouring the twenty-one Indigenous men from the island who made an ultimate sacrifice to the country. It was not until 1949 that all restrictions were lifted, enabling all Indigenous Australians to join the Australian military forces. In 1975, the Whitlam government passed the Racial Discrimination Act that prohibited discrimination and segregation based on an individual's ethnic origin. This act provided the opportunity for those who served in the war to finally get officially recognised for their service. It also gave them a chance to access support in the RSL clubs if they sought help for their physical and mental battles, e.g. if they were experiencing post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from the hardship they experienced, ensuing their traumatic experiences during the war.

World War 1 was a time where Australia was riven by racism. A clear division between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians meant that First Nations peoples experienced discrimination, segregation and racism in every aspect of their lives. Only when Australia needed them did we see equality emerge between the two divisions, yet when they returned from their duties they continued to face prejudice and neglect from society. Their sacrifices for the country were ignored for decades following the conclusion of WW1, although today they get recognised alongside their non-Indigenous comrades for their service to the nation.

Appendix

Primary Sources

Appendix A

Image of Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown



- (WW1 Exhibition, 2023)

Appendix B

A poem from Launceston's newspaper, Examiner, from an uncle of Marcus Brown.

On Active Service.
BROWN.—Killed in action, June 11, 1917,
Marcus Brown, son of H. W. and the
late M. O. Brown, of Cape Barren
Island, and beloved nephew of L. J.,
A. B., and G. H. Everett, of Gasland
Grove.
**Mark, Soldier Mark, far away from Cape
Barren you sleep,
Far away, 'neath alien flowers and alien
winds that weep.
You volunteered for the war, Mark, and
sooly your life laid down,
You unto death were faithful, and yours
is the hero's crown.
"Until the day break and the shadows
see."
—inserted by L. J. Everett.**

- (WW1 Exhibition, 2023)

Appendix C

A memorial plaque given to Marcus Brown's family in honour of his service, after his death in 1917. They were often referred to as a 'dead man's penny.' This plaque is currently on display at the Henry Hunter Galleries, on loan from his family.



- (Shaping Tasmania, 2013)

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