

# The Frank McDonald MM Memorial Prize

## Holly Stark, Rose Bay High School

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.*



*Private Frank Maynard; Australian troops in a sunken road near Contalmaison, September*

Word count: 1,406 words

Aboriginal Australians have long been discriminated against. Brutally treated by white Australian settlers who claimed their lands and took them as slaves. There are countless accounts of massacre and discrimination, with some of the most horrific crimes against humanity here in Australia against its traditional custodians. Despite Aboriginal Australians sent to defend their country, and the many contributions they have made toward our nation more broadly, they were not recognised constitutionally until 1967. Aboriginal Australians still face discrimination as they are not yet recognised in the Australian Constitution (AREC, 2023). Therefore, we must ask ourselves; how can we pride ourselves as 'young and free' while ignoring the long history of racial discrimination against Aboriginal Australia?

At the commencement of World War I (WWI) in 1914, treatment toward Aboriginals was appalling. Aboriginals were excluded from participation in the defence of Australia and its allies in war. The Defence Act 1909 stated potential enlistees needed to be 'substantially of European origin or descent' (Trove, 2023). In October 1917, the first conscription referendum to enforce mandatory military service was unsuccessful, and it was becoming increasingly hard to find voluntary recruits. At first, the physical requirements were changed, which included age, height, and chest measurements to expand eligibility. New legislation was then introduced to allow enrolments from Indigenous Australians of mixed race. A new Military Order stated:

*"Half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical Officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin" (AWM, 2021).*

Many Aboriginals enlisted once these relaxed restrictions came into place, despite the ongoing discrimination they faced at home. Those who did not meet these requirements found other ways to enlist, by pretending to be Māori, Pacific Islander, or European descent, all of whom were accepted ahead of Aboriginals. However, this inclusion was never intended as a recognition of serving on equal terms, it was an act of true desperation for more troops to fight (AWM, 2021). Records estimate there were approximately 1,300 Aboriginal enlistees, but recent research has suggested that it was closer to 1,500 enlistees. This was around four times the national average participation rate in the military. It is impossible to truly know how many Aboriginal people served in the First World War, given the enlistment process did not record one's ethnicity. For Aboriginal people, wartime service was an opportunity to escape from the constant discrimination, along with the prospect of payment, equal treatment, and a chance to prove their worth to Australians of European descent, while hoping that serving would deliver greater equality after the war (National Archives of Australia, 2019).

Overall, Aboriginal soldiers were respected and valued by their fellow soldiers during the war. There was no discrimination in the trenches or on the front line. Indigenous servicemen finally got the chance to be judged by their actions as equals. In 1919, a Queensland nurse recalled how there was '*no discrimination on the battlefield and certainly none in the military hospitals*' (DVA, 2023). Even a decade after the war, another veteran wrote of a Queensland Aborigine who stated:

*"I become his brother and I was his brother still" (DVA, 2023).*

In 1933, a former private recalled the experience of Aboriginal soldiers at Gallipoli when he said:

*"I have stood shoulder to shoulder with them in Hell's Pit, on Quinn's Post, and seen them die like the grandest of white men" (DVA, 2023).*

This is clear evidence of how returned soldiers were horrified that Aboriginal soldiers were treated with greater prejudice and discrimination than before WWI, despite notionally serving on equal terms. Many Aboriginal soldiers originated from truwana / Cape Barren Island, located in Northern Tasmania off Bass Strait. In 1881, 400 acres of land on truwana / Cape Barren Island was made into a reserve for the descendants of remaining Tasmanian Aboriginals (Find and Connect, 2022). At the outbreak of WWI, approximately 170 people lived there. 27 men were deemed eligible to serve and 21 subsequently enlisted. Six of these men were killed in action. The surviving Aboriginal soldiers returned deeply damaged men, only to face further racial discrimination at home (AWM, 2023).

One of the truwana / Cape Barren soldiers was Private Frank Maynard, who served with the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Gallipoli, the Western Front, and Pozieres in France. Frank's brother William Maynard and his cousin James Maynard also served (ANU, 2023). William was killed and his body was never recovered. However, James survived and came home physically and mentally scarred. Frank left Australia in 1915 on the HMAS Aeneas A60 and headed to Egypt. His battalion landed in Gallipoli on 12 September 1915, where they were responsible for the defence of Courtneys and Steeles posts, and Russell's Top. The survivors in the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion left for France in March 1916, where Frank participated in the first trench raid undertaken by Australian troops on the Western Front. They then went on to fight at their first major battle at Pozieres in July and August 1916. Private Frank Maynard was killed in action near or on 30 August 1916, aged 37 years (Centenary of ANZAC, 2018). A touching tribute towards his bravery and service was written by his cousin, Clarence W Brown, published in *The Examiner* newspaper on 6 October 1916:

*"He sleeps not in his native land,  
But under foreign skies;  
Far from those who love him  
In a Hero's grave he lies."* (*The Examiner* as published on Centenary of ANZAC, 2018).

Sadly, Frank Maynard was never recognised or commended for his valiant contributions and service, as were many other Aboriginal soldiers who fought and died. Many families, including the Maynard's, never truly knew what happened to their sons, how they died or where they were buried. Considering a lack of acknowledgement of history, does the ANZAC spirit truly embody mateship when the stories of Aboriginal soldiers remain largely forgotten?

Post war, Aboriginal veterans did not experience any improvement in treatment. The belief in racial superiority intensified greatly. Along with a depressed economy and new discriminatory policies being implemented, Aboriginal Australians were finding their lives worsened. Aboriginal soldiers plunged further into poverty.

Land was taken away from them to give to returning white soldiers, military funerals denied, as well as wages and pensions quarantined so that the Government could provide sufficiently for white Australians (ABC, 2019). This caused decades long devastation, as Indigenous families were once again losing their children, including the children of returned servicemen, particularly on the remote Island of Cape Barren (AWM, 2023).

In a tokenistic effort, the Australian Government established the Repatriation Act 1918, which aimed to resettle returned veterans and help them adjust to civilian life and independence. While the Repatriation Act was supposed to provide support for all veterans, it was marred by discrimination and unequal treatment for Aboriginal veterans (DVA, 2023). Access to the

Repatriation Scheme was subject to rigorous medical examination and documented military medical records. These conditions were difficult to meet, especially for veterans in remote island communities such as truwana / Cape Barren, who had to travel to Launceston or Hobart to undergo assessment and interview. Distressingly, many Australian Imperial Force (AIF) medical records were destroyed accidentally in London in 1919 (AWM, 2023).

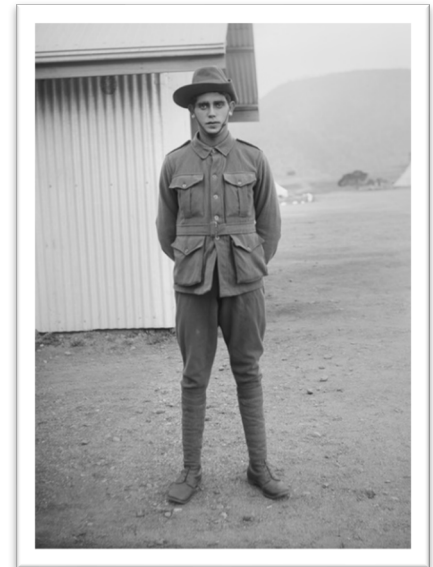
Combined with poor literacy, such obstacles were often too difficult for Aboriginal people to overcome to access benefits befitting returned soldiers (Scarlett, 2013). The story of the truwana / Cape Barren islanders is a true testimony the distinctive identity and their resilience and courage in the face of cultural genocide. Ricky Maynard, a descendant of several Cape Barren Islander soldiers, has documented *Our Island Heroes* (AWM, 2023). He documents the story of the bravery of Islander men who went to war, fighting for a country that long denied them citizenship, and that is yet to acknowledge their bravery or courage through the war and intergenerational trauma that they have faced (AHRC, 2023).

Despite this, some Tasmanian Aboriginals were able to access repatriation. Jack Roy Johnson MM, returned to Australia after the war having sustained serious injury from a gunshot wound in his hand and problems with varicose veins in his leg. Relocated to Hobart, Johnson undertook classes at the Hobart Repatriation Trades School to become an industrial trainee at a hydro-electric and metallurgy facility in Electrona, where he earned 40% of the award rate. Jack moved to the electrolytic zinc company, where he was only paid 65% of the award rate (National Archives of Australia, 2019). Despite the fact Johnson's wages were brought up to the minimum award rate, he too faced racial discrimination.

The sacrifices made by Aboriginal Australians for their country did little to alleviate their long suffering in their native lands, particularly truwana / Cape Barren Island.

Attitudes of discrimination and racism that had long existed prior to the war, were only intensified following the war. A combination of national economic depression and hardship, a culture of ethnocentric superiority intensified by the trauma of war, and segregation from society worsened racial discrimination. In remote communities such as truwana / Cape Barren Island, it was hard to overcome.

Lest we forget the valiant contributions made by all who served, especially First Nations people.



*"Brown" Outdoor portrait of an Aboriginal servicemen, probably 5054 Private Henry George Brown of Cape Barren Island, Tasmania (AWM, 2023).*

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