

The First World War exposed Australia's unyielding racism towards the Australian Aboriginal community. Discriminatory laws created by the Australian Government restricted Australian Aboriginal people from joining the Defence Force. Despite Australia defining itself as 'white' and not acknowledging Indigenous people as citizens, Indigenous Australians still hoped for a chance to serve in the war. For those that did serve in the war they experienced the same treatment and equality as other soldiers and made immense sacrifices. When returning from their services, Australia disregarded their achievements and excluded them from benefits such as job opportunities that other ex-servicemen received from the Government.

Australian Aboriginal people's attempts to enlist in the armed forces revealed that racial discrimination dominated the Indigenous experience. Enlisting for the war proved to be a struggle for Australian Aboriginal people; some travelled to other cities after being turned down from sites close by. Upon their arrival to enlistment offices some were immediately turned away due to the Defence Act of 1903 which stated that those not of European descent were excused from any military services<sup>1</sup>. Many Australian Aboriginal people turned to falsifying their attestation papers for a chance to fight for a country, which refused to even consider them citizens. For example, Indigenous soldier Private Richard Martin declared on his attestation papers that Dunedin, New Zealand was his place of birth, although he was born in Stradbroke, Queensland<sup>2</sup>. He started his services 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1915, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion in Gallipoli<sup>3</sup>. He continued his service even after multiple occasions of injury<sup>4</sup>. He joined the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion until March 1918 where he was killed in action, making the ultimate sacrifice for a country which did not even acknowledge him as a citizen<sup>5</sup>. This was not the case for all recruits, Private Edmund Bilney joined the Australian Imperial Force in 1917, although new laws were not set in place<sup>6</sup>. After only 16 days of training in South Australia Bilney was discharged by the medical board for a "deficient physique" -- in other words being too Aboriginal<sup>7</sup>. Whilst these enlistment restrictions continued for majority of the war, in October of 1917, Australian Aboriginal people with one non-Aboriginal parent were accepted into the Australian Imperial Force, on a satisfactory medical report<sup>8</sup>. This displays that those of European descent did not treat Australian Aboriginal people with respect, turning them down upon arrival for enlistment or discharging them from military training simply for their dark complexion. Australia as a young country was defining itself, and clearly did not want to be anything other than 'White Australia'.

During the First World War, First Nations people experienced a life away from discrimination. Any individual, including those of Aboriginal descent, serving within the Defence Force served on equal terms. For many Aboriginal people this was the first time they were given equal opportunities to those of European descent, including the same pay<sup>9</sup>. Amongst the estimated population of ninety-three thousand Indigenous people in Australia, only approximately one thousand Australian

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<sup>1</sup> "Australian Indigenous Service During World War I," Anzac Portal, last modified May 18, 2023, [Australian Indigenous service during World War I - Anzac Portal \(dva.gov.au\)](https://www.anzacportal.gov.au/indigenous-service-during-world-war-i).

<sup>2</sup> "Aboriginal Service During the First World War" Australian War Memorial, last modified December 20, 2019, <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service>.

<sup>3</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

<sup>4</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

<sup>5</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

<sup>6</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

<sup>7</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

<sup>8</sup> Anzac Portal, "Australian Indigenous Service During the World War I."

<sup>9</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

Aboriginal people passed racist enlistment laws to serve in the First World War, twenty-one of whom were from Cape Barren Island<sup>10</sup>. Indigenous soldier Albert Knight joined the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion in Ypres, Belgium where he survived attacks with large numbers of casualties in Northern France, nearby the village of Bullecourt and later on in the Somme battlefield<sup>11</sup>. Later in his career Knight transferred to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Battalion where he had great success, promoted temporarily to corporal<sup>12</sup>. Due to Knight's great efforts in an attack, scoping out enemy positions, he became corporal and received the distinguished conduct medal<sup>13</sup>. Of those Aboriginal soldiers who excelled at war, their efforts were honoured, and some were given promotions like Albert Knight.

All Australian soldiers who served during the war were given equal treatment, extending to care of the wounded. Private Marcus Brown, born on Cape Barren Island spent the beginning of his life as a labourer<sup>14</sup>. At the age of 20, in 1916 he enlisted for the war where he joined Tasmania's 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion<sup>15</sup>. Brown fought in the battle of Messines, he was wounded, enduring a gunshot to the left thigh<sup>16</sup>. After being wounded, he was given basic treatment at an aid post, and from there he was transferred to 11<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital, Rouen.<sup>17</sup> Three days later, he passed away. Private John Fisher, an Aboriginal soldier with parents from Cape Barren Island, who was born in Launceston Tasmania, joined the Australian Imperial Force in September of 1916<sup>18</sup>. Fisher served in the war, in Tasmania's 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion, where he joined the Battle of Passchendaele on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917<sup>19</sup>. Fisher was wounded in action during this battle; a day later he met his demise. In 1918, Fisher's belongings -- photos, a wristwatch, a certificate, unit colours and a wallet -- were returned to his father on Cape Barren Island<sup>20</sup>. This shows that Aboriginal soldiers were still treated with the same dignity as their non-Aboriginal peers after their passing. During the war Indigenous people were treated with the same respect and recognition as other soldiers, however, when they returned, Australia's adamant racism had also returned.

After the First World War, Australian Aboriginal soldiers who had returned home found that the entrenched discrimination had returned. Soldiers returning home were entitled to many benefits within a scheme provided by the Repatriation Department, constructed by the Australian Government<sup>21</sup>. The types of benefits the scheme supported included finding job opportunities, loans and induction programs<sup>22</sup>. They were also allowed to apply for affordable blocks of land, some of which were confiscated from Australian Aboriginal reserves, adding further insult to the Indigenous community<sup>23</sup>. For Australian Aboriginal soldiers this was not the case: they were excused from these

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<sup>10</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Aboriginal Service During the First World War."

<sup>11</sup> "Albert Knight," Australian War Memorial, last modified August 25, 2020, [Albert Knight | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Albert Knight."

<sup>13</sup> Australian War Memorial, "Albert Knight."

<sup>14</sup> "Private Marcus Brown," Libraries Tasmania, date accessed July 27, 2023, [Private Marcus Brown \(1895 - 1917\) - Libraries Tasmania](#).

<sup>15</sup> Libraries Tasmania, "Private Marcus Brown."

<sup>16</sup> Libraries Tasmania, "Private Marcus Brown."

<sup>17</sup> Libraries Tasmania, "Private Marcus Brown."

<sup>18</sup> "Private John Albert Fisher," Department of Premier and Government, Tasmania Government, Date accessed July 27, 2023, [Department of Premier and Cabinet \(dpac.tas.gov.au\)](#).

<sup>19</sup> Department of Premier and Government, "Private John Albert Fisher."

<sup>20</sup> Department of Premier and Government, "Private John Albert Fisher."

<sup>21</sup> "World War I: Reparation of Veterans," National Archives of Australia, date accessed August 14, 2023, [World War I: Reparation of veterans | naa.gov.au](#).

<sup>22</sup> National Archives of Australia, "World War I: Reparation of Veterans."

<sup>23</sup> National Archives of Australia, "World War I: Reparation of Veterans."

benefits, refused from any jobs and were not given any public or private support<sup>24</sup>. This went as far as rejection from public places like pubs or hotels<sup>25</sup>.

*Once that uniform came off, the army released you, you ceased to exist as a full Australian citizen. You became an Aboriginal and you went back to the community, and you did not get the benefits that the white soldiers got.*

Gary Oakley, ABC Net <sup>26</sup>

Although the Australian Aboriginal ex-servicemen showed great commitment and dedication, they and the rest of their communities were not allowed to vote and were excluded from Australia's census, although they counted heads of cattle, suggesting that the Australian government saw the Indigenous Australians as lesser than livestock.<sup>27</sup>. Australia was defining itself as 'white'. Despite the fact that Australian Aboriginal community was not included as citizens until 1966 many people accepted this and attempted to make the best of the situation.

*... the nature of who we are as Indigenous people, you don't like making waves, you don't like sticking your hand up, because it draws attention. And usually when it draws attention in the old days, there's a good chance you got killed...*

Gary Oakley, ABC Net<sup>28</sup>

Oakley's words show that Australia did not acknowledge Australian Aboriginal people, and when the soldiers returned home excluded them from support schemes and greeted them with blatant racism.

Australian Aboriginal people's experiences before and after the First World War were ingrained with relentless prejudice and discrimination, although they had been treated equally as soldiers and their sacrifices were acknowledged. At the conclusion of the war these soldiers were not given the same respect as the other soldiers, excluded from any benefits provided by the Australian Government and not even considered as Australian citizens. These people went to great lengths just for the slim opportunity to enlist and serve their country and still were met with racism, excluded from Australian life for only the colour of their skin without any measure of the content of their character. It is important to educate ourselves and recognize the experiences of the Australian Aboriginal communities during the time of the First World War so that we do not repeat this same treatment, in hope to reconcile these relationships and create new societal norms.

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<sup>24</sup> "Aboriginal Soldiers," Libraries Tasmania, date accessed June 21, 2023, [WWI Aboriginal soldiers | Tasmanian Archives - Libraries Tasmania](#).

<sup>25</sup> Libraries Tasmania, "Aboriginal Soldiers."

<sup>26</sup> "Gallipoli the First Days of Centenary Edition," ABC Net, Posted March 6, 2015, [Gary Oakley \(abc.net.au\)](#).

<sup>27</sup> "Indigenous Defence service," Australian War Memorial, last modified 10 March 2021, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/indigenous>.

<sup>28</sup> ABC Net, "Gallipoli the First Days of Centenary Edition".

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