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Investigation

Why have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enlisted at different times?

In this investigation students explore the changing legal status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia since Federation. Once not able to enlist in the defence forces because they were not recognised as citizens, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are now actively encouraged to serve. Despite their lack of citizenship rights for many years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served in the Australian defence forces in all armed conflicts including and since the Boer War. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, students explore both the changing policies relating to enlistment and why individuals chose to enlist.



Wangaratta, Vic. 1940. Group portrait of the special platoon consisting of aboriginal soldiers, all volunteers, at Number 9 camp.

AWM P02140.002

Background information for teachers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joined the defence forces for many of the same reasons as non-Indigenous Australians. They sought adventure alongside their friends and in the process made new ones. The opportunity to serve earned many of them money, independence and education. In addition, enlistment provided many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an escape from the restraints of mission life and the opportunity to prove themselves equal to non-Indigenous Australians.

Despite formal legislative barriers to the service of non-Europeans, more than 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are known to have enlisted in the First World War (1914–18), from a population of around 80,000. Accurate numbers are difficult to establish as the Army did not record the ethnic origins of enlistees. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people claimed to be Pacific Islander, Indian or Maori when they enlisted, to ensure their earnings were not controlled or reduced by the State Protectors of Aborigines. Initially, many men who tried to enlist were rejected on the grounds of race, specifically, that they were not ‘... substantially of European descent’. Nonetheless, they continued to come forward, and many succeeded in circumventing the restrictions.

Eventually restrictions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Army were eased. In October 1917 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.

Just one day after Australia’s entry into the Second World War (1939–45), the Army accepted the enlistment of fifty Northern Territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. At this time, the Army did not have a clear policy on admittance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For the first few months of the war, voluntary enlistment was not restricted in any way. Regulations were later introduced to bar the service of persons ‘... not substantially of European origin or descent’ and many were turned away when trying to enlist.

In early 1940 the Defence Committee recommended that for the Navy and Army the admission of Australians of non-European origin was ‘... neither necessary nor desirable ...’ unless demand for manpower became intense. These unclear regulations were administered inconsistently and led to a situation where some men were turned away from recruiting stations due to their Aboriginality while others were able to enlist. In some cases, First World War veterans were barred from enlisting in the Second World War.

Once the intense demands of the Second World War had diminished, the defence forces re-instituted restrictions on the enlistment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In 1949, however, barriers were lifted and they were free to enlist in the defence forces. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served in all conflicts in which Australia has participated since that time.

‘Protecting Country’ is now the official slogan of the Indigenous recruitment campaign in the Australian Defence Force.

The information provided in this section has been adapted from the Indigenous Australians at war from the Boer War to the present exhibition, Shrine of Remembrance, 2009.



Learning activities

Australian Curriculum: History – Year 6

Why have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enlisted at different times?

Key inquiry questions

How did Australian society change throughout the twentieth century?

What contribution have significant individuals and groups made to the development of Australian society?

Knowledge and Understanding

- Experiences of Australian democracy and citizenship, including the status and rights of Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islanders, migrants, women, and children.
- The contribution of individuals and groups, including Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islanders and migrants, to the development of Australian society, for example in areas such as the economy, education, science, the arts, and sport.

Historical Skills

- Sequence historical people and events
- Locate information related to inquiry questions in a range of sources
- Identify points of view in the past and present



Learning sequence

Activity 1: Times of change

In this activity students consider the effect of changing policies associated with the enlistment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

1. Explore the idea of enlistment in a class discussion. Ask students to consider the following questions:
 - What does enlistment in the defence forces mean?
 - Who can enlist in the Australian Defence Force today?
 - How would it feel to enlist?
 - How would your life be changed if you enlisted?
2. Distribute **Activity sheet 1: Times of change**, on pages 10–11, which asks students to consider policies relating to enlistment by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in four different eras. Students are asked to imagine the effect that each policy may have had on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Discuss with students the concept and meaning of the word 'policy' being a course of action adopted by a government or other authority.

This Activity Sheet contains complex ideas and words. Before students complete the activity, discuss the meaning and implications of the language and historical terms used in the sources provided on the activity sheet. Some of the sources contain language and perspectives that are considered inappropriate today. Terms such as 'full-blood' and 'half-caste' reflect government policies and societal attitudes at the time, which were discriminatory and based on ideas of assimilation.

When students have finished the activity sheet discuss the following questions:

- Why do you think Australia had the 1917 and 1942 policies about enlistment?
 - Why do you think these policies changed over time?
3. Explore source A on page 12 with your students: a 1942 article about an Aboriginal man in New South Wales who was not allowed to enlist. Ask students to imagine that it is 1942 and they have just read this article. Invite them to write a letter to the editor expressing their opinion about what they have read.

Activity 2: Many reasons

This activity allows students to explore four personal stories to reflect on why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have chosen to enlist in the defence forces at different times.

1. Provide students with access to sources B–E on pages 12–14.
2. Distribute **Activity sheet 2: Many reasons**, which asks students to use speech bubbles to express the reasons why the four people featured chose to enlist. Students then think about and express other reasons that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have had for enlisting.
3. Having explored the reasons for enlistment, ask students to design their own contemporary poster to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join the Australian Defence Force. Encourage them to think about images, symbols and/or words that may connect with the intended audience.

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Activity sheet 1: Times of change

Imagine you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person living in October 1917 and you have just learned about this new Military Order:

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.

Explain what this means for you. How does it make you feel?

Imagine you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person living in January 1942 and you want to enlist. The Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship has just received a letter saying:

... This decision definitely [excludes] the enlistment of full-blooded Aborigines, but instructions have been issued to medical officers that in deciding whether or not a person is substantially of European origin, they will be guided by the general suitability of the applicant.

Item 275/750/1310 MP508 NAA

Explain what this means for you. How does it make you feel?



Imagine you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person living in 1951 and you've decided to enlist (note: 'repealed' means ended):

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) officially repealed its discriminatory policy excluding Aborigines from service in 1951.

Indigenous peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War, 2012, Cambridge Military Histories, p.266

Explain what this means for you. How does it make you feel?

Imagine you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person living in 2000 and you see this logo in the window of a Defence recruiting office:



Explain what this means for you. How does it make you feel?



Senty Togo

Aborigine Sent Home By Army

Senty Togo, an aborigine, came 500 miles from Murwillumbah to Sydney to join the A.I.F., but says he has been ordered home without any explanation.

HE was passed A1 in a preliminary medical test at Murwillumbah, but was given no further tests here.

"Perhaps it was on account of our being colored Australians," said Togo, "but I have two colored cousins with the A.I.F. abroad.

"I was passed A1 at Murwillumbah, and was brought down with a batch of 16 from the North Coast.

"We picked up two other aborigines at South Grafton. The other 13 were white boys.

"At Paddington we were separated from the whites, and, a few minutes after, we were handed our return tickets and a packet of 2s dockets for meals at the railway refreshment rooms.

"The military brought me down. I am anxious to serve Australia, but, without any examination or explanation I am being sent back—a thousand mile journey for nothing."

A military spokesman last night said he was unable to offer an explanation, but promised that inquiries would be made.

Source A

Article in *The Sunday Sun*, 4 January 1942

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Sources B-E

These sources explore some of the reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people decided to enlist in the defence forces.

Source B



Oodgeroo Noonuccal c. 1942
Brisbane, Queensland

AWM P01688.001;
photographer unknown

Prior to the Second World War, Oodgeroo Noonuccal was known as Kath Walker. In 1942, Walker joined the Australian Women's Army Service and was trained as a wireless operator.

So one of the reasons I joined the army was it was the only way I could learn ... I would be allowed to learn and I thought after the war if I am still alive I'll be able to take extra studies with the 'dimwits' course and it was the only way that the Aborigines could learn extra education at that time.

From exhibition text: *Indigenous Australians at war from the Boer War to the present*, Shrine of Remembrance, 2009



Reg Saunders

AWM 057894

Source C

Reg Saunders was born in western Victoria on 7 August 1920 and brought up by his grandmother. Saunders was the son of a First World War veteran, and was the first identified Aboriginal serviceman to become an officer in the Australian army.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Reg Saunders joined the army. This was part of his warrior heritage as a Gunditjmara man, his people had fought many battles with white settlers to retain their land, his father had fought in France in the First World War, and his Uncle Reg Rawlings MM, after whom he was named, was killed in Flanders ...

Glenda Humes, Saunders' daughter from *'Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War, from the Somme to Vietnam'* 1993, page 38

After the war, his return to civilian life was not easy. Having been an admired and respected officer, once out of uniform he faced the discrimination experienced by other Indigenous Australians. He re-enlisted at the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–53).

From exhibition text: *Indigenous Australians at war from the Boer War to the present*, Shrine of Remembrance, 2009

Source D



Mayor Pedro Stephen 2010

Photographer Liberty Seekee

Mayor Stephen served with the Royal Australian Navy as Able Seaman, Marine Engineer, from 1971 to 1974. Since 1994, he has served five terms as Mayor of Torres Shire.

I grew up on the Department of Native Affairs reserve at Tamwoy, on Thursday Island ... I saw few opportunities ... I had great role models in my dad and uncles who were in the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion in World War Two and growing up and loving the sea I joined the Navy. The Navy gave me the opportunity for education and gave me exposure to other cultures and a deeper appreciation of others. The skills I learnt in the Navy have helped form my character as a leader through teaching self discipline, a high work ethic, and persistence to finish tasks.

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From exhibition text: *Indigenous Australians at war from the Boer War to the present*, Shrine of Remembrance, 2009

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Source E

Paula Matters served as a Leading Aircraftswoman in the Royal Australian Air Force from 1971 to 1977.

I joined the RAAF as I thought it provided a better life and future and was the best choice for a female, offering the best opportunities. I learnt skills and self-discipline, things I might not have learnt as a civilian. I really enjoyed making new friends and the travel.

Reproduced courtesy of the Torres Strait Heritage Museum

From exhibition text: *Indigenous Australians at war from the Boer War to the present*, Shrine of Remembrance, 2009



Paula Matters 2010

Photographer Liberty Seekee



***How World War Two Began (through the eyes of Rembarmga)*, by Gela Nga-Mirraitja Fordham.**

National Gallery of Australia, 90.1760.



Activity sheet 2: Many reasons

Look at sources B-E. Read the stories of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Use the speech bubbles below to write what you think each person may have said to their family to explain why they were enlisting in the defence forces. Use the last two bubbles to write other reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have enlisted.

Source B



Source C



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Source D



Source E





Other reasons

