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The Forgotten Indigenous Soldiers of Walhallow.

Lest we forget! Will we remember them?

Abstract

In 1934 the Gate of Memory First World War memorial was unveiled on the Walhallow Aboriginal Station, to commemorate the Indigenous servicemen of the area that served. On the school wall, an Honor Roll was placed, listing the 18 enlistees of the A.I.F. The Honour Roll has been missing for over 50 years.¹ This research project was to recover the names of those servicemen, and the eight men that gave the supreme sacrifice. Using Indigenous voices with the utmost respect, this essay will trace the stories and experiences of these men to argue that the memorial was constructed as a political form of resistance at a time when Indigenous servicemen were not recognised on local war memorials:

Russell Johnson had always had a degree of luck, shot through the neck as a young man at Caroonna and now having survived The Great War, he was on his way home. He was born in Quirindi New South Wales, on the Walhallow Aboriginal Station. George, his brother who worked at the local store and his mother Sarah Johnson were anticipating his arrival.² A widow, Sarah would welcome her son home, to hopefully return to his job as a labourer on Walhallow Station. Arriving from France, he boarded the Hospital ship *TSS Karoola* at Southampton, England, suffering from trench nephritis. The *Karoola* docked in Cape Town,

¹ "Honor Roll." *The Scone Advocate* November 23, 1934, p 3

² B2455, 1828777. NAA Johnson, Russell.

South Africa, on its way to Fremantle, Western Australia. That night, when Johnson went ashore on leave, he stepped in front of a tram falling under its steel wheels. His injuries exposed and severed his spinal cord at the 11th thoracic vertebrae. Johnson's trip home was halted. Sarah would receive a shattering telegram "Private Russell Johnson, disembarked Cape Town 29th May. Fractured spine, accidental, seriously ill."³ A month later he boarded the *Themistocles* and was delayed again. The *Themistocles* struck another boat. He finally arrived in Australia in August 1919, but he would never see his mother or Walhallow again. After disembarking Russell was transferred to Randwick Military Hospital in Sydney, where he died on the 30th December 1919 and was buried at Rockwood Cemetery.⁴ Despite serving in the Great War and being from Quirindi, you will not find the name Russell Johnson on the Quirindi and District War Memorial.

Gate of Memory

In 1934 two articles appeared in the Australian press regarding the establishment of a war memorial at the Walhallow Public School on the Walhallow Aboriginal Mission Station.⁵ The *Scone Advocate* reported this as "the first Aboriginal memorial in the State" and only second in Australia, the first being in South Australia, a stained glass window erected in the Point McLeay Mission Church in 1925.⁶ The memorial was unveiled in the "presence of the entire population of the Walhallow Mission of 258 residents" with the Police Commissioner, Chairman of the Aborigines Protection Board and the President of the Quirindi RSL

³ B2455, 1828777. NAA Johnson, Russell.

⁴ "The Themistocles." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 9, 1919,

⁵ "Honor Roll." *The Scone Advocate* November 23, 1934, p 3. "The Gate of Memory Raised by Coloured Folk." *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 17, 1935 p.11

⁶ "Point McLeay War" *Register Newspaper* 19 August, 1925. Adelaide S.A

attending. Further, the articles state, that at Walhallow Public School “an Honour Roll was unveiled by Mr Childs [the Police Commissioner] and contains 19 names, eight of whom were killed.”⁷ Unfortunately, the whereabouts of this Honour Roll is no longer known.⁸

In researching the missing Gate of Memory Honour Roll, I have had the privilege of compiling a database of Indigenous Gamilaroi WWI soldiers who have a connection to Walhallow. I intend to disrupt the perceptions that Indigenous soldiers were late comers to the war, needing employment and a scattered few. While showing this could have been a point of National reconciliation, that was torn apart after the war by a lack of recognition and remembrance.

The complexity of compiling the data included determining the relationship of the servicemen to Walhallow Aboriginal Station. ‘Walhallow’ was a property name, and hence was not regarded as the town or birthplace on military service records. Therefore, my search was based on the proximity to location and personal connections. The rationale for extending the search area beyond the reserve takes into consideration a report to the Board of Protection of Aborigines, stating the “board discouraged working men from living on the Walhallow Station” and thus younger men often left their families behind in search of employment.⁹ Walhallow is located on the Liverpool Plains, hence, surrounding towns were searched for birth records and as well as associated places of employment. Service records of 37 men were uncovered eight of whom were killed in military service and were located

⁷ “Honor Roll.” *The Scone Advocate* November 23, 1934, p 3. “The Gate of Memory Raised by Coloured Folk.” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 17, 1935 p.11

⁸ In Conversation with staff at Walhallow Public School 2019

⁹ “Drawing the Color Line.” *Evening News*. Sydney. May 16, 1907

within the search area. Entwined throughout this essay are “Aboriginal voices, stories and experiences” as it is these stories that are critically important and need to be told.¹⁰

To say that the Gate of Memory is one of the first Indigenous war memorials is problematic as it denies all existence of all pre-colonial and colonial acts of warfare. Reynolds observes in Australia military conflict is viewed through the lens of “wars fought far away” and while we are starting to remember with admiration the Indigenous soldier “who fought for the white man” we continue to forget the men that “fought against him”.¹¹ The Gamilaroi people had always been warriors.¹² The land Walhallow sits on is Gamilaroi land and was the site of hard-fought Indigenous resistance in the 1800s.¹³ In Eric Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres* the massacre of *Boorambil* is recounted, when “perhaps two hundred” members of the Indigenous population were murdered with dozens of settlers shooting the “painted” warriors.¹⁴ Additionally, Lyndall Ryan’s map of Colonial Frontier Massacres is splattered with further evidence of local Indigenous resistance and subsequent massacres.¹⁵

Walhallow Aboriginal Station

Walhallow Aboriginal Station also known as Caroona Mission was never a religious mission. In 1894, William Bassett, owner of Walhallow Station, a part freehold and government leasehold property, wrote to the Aborigines Protection Board for a reserve to be set up for

¹⁰ Maynard, J. “Missing voices: Aboriginal experiences in the Great War,” (2017) *History Australia*, 14:2, 237-249.

¹¹ Reynolds. H. *Forgotten War*. (New South Publishing) 2013 P.6

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Parry, N. Thematic History of the Liverpool Plain Shire. 2019. P7

¹⁴ Rolls, E. *A Million wild Acres*, (Nelson) 1981

¹⁵ Ryan, Lyndall, “Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788-1930,” *Centre for 21st Century Humanities*, Available at: <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/detail.php?r=627>

the 47 people living there.¹⁶ Mostly working on local properties including Walhallow, the properties had been fleeced of their white workers with the mania of the Bathurst, Uralla and Victoria Gold Rushes. Within the vast boundaries of Walhallow's 627 000 acres, in 1895, 150 acres were gazetted and "reserved for Aborigines". Walhallow Station was managed by FJ Croaker the travelling superintendent of the New Zealand and Australian Land Company until he died in 1920.¹⁷ Arriving in the late 1800s, Croaker was known as a "strong personality and of a sympathetic temperament" and with his wife, Amelia Jane worked well with the Aboriginal community.¹⁸ The couple would later have two sons and four daughters, who remained connected with the region and raised funds for the school and some of the Walhallow workers.¹⁹

Unlike the resistance of *Boorambil*, at Walhallow a different type of resistance was established which involved a successful coexistence.²⁰ The Aboriginal Station produced sought after horsemen, labourers and shearers and the station flourished in the pre-Great War years.²¹ Children were educated at the first Walhallow Public School, which burnt down in 1896 from an incident involving a 12 year old boy called Samuel Johnson.²² He appeared in front of the magistrate and was released after the event was determined to be an accident.²³ In 1882, in the NSW Legislative Assembly, the Protector of Aborigines commented, in a report that in the area of Quirindi all Aborigines were employed as "very

¹⁶ "Aborigines Protection Board." *Sydney Morning Herald*. February 2, 1842.

¹⁷ "Aborigines Protection Board" *Evening News*. March, 10, 1899

¹⁸ "Obituary F.J Croaker 1850-1920" *Pastoral Review* 16 December 1920, p.913.

¹⁹ "Caroon Concert and Social." *The Tamworth Daily*. 4, November 1916

²⁰ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin) 1996. p. 94.

²¹ "Walhallow Estate." *The Daily Telegraph*. November 10, 1910.

²² "Quarter Sessions." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 2, Feb, 1897.

²³ "Alleged Arson." *National Advocate*. 25 November, 1896.

useful” labourers and not in need of the Boards protection.²⁴ However, if someone was in need, Walhallow was a safe space and assistance was given.²⁵ The success of Walhallow resulted in population growth, and a further 230 acres were added to the reserve by 1899. The community autonomy created a unique level of independence and activism away from the Board’s glare.²⁶ Many Walhallow residents had registered to vote by 1913. ²⁷Hosting meetings with political leaders, their votes were sought after and in 1911 attributed to a swing in the local election.²⁸

In 1907, a protest from white parents, who objected to the presence of Aboriginal children at the Breeza Public School, led to the eviction of 26 “coloured children” being evicted.²⁹ The residents of Walhallow started building their own school on the station.³⁰ By 1910 the school was fully operational indicated by the *Daily Telegraph* report on the success of the school with the children, excelling “remarkably” be it in sewing or copybook. Marred by the xenophobic writing of the times, declaring the “absorption by the stronger race of ...conquering white man would ...fast decay the race”, what the article failed to acknowledge was the independence and success of the Walhallow community.³¹ Ironically the report continues, that in the classroom the piano plays and the children sing the song, *This bit of the world belongs to us.*³²

Nations numberless swarm the tropic seas
Where Australia’s lonely sentry stands
Soon our sturdy sons

²⁴ 1883 Legislative Assembly NSW Aborigines report of the Protector 31 December 1882. P.4

²⁵ Parry. Thematic History of the Liverpool Plain Shire. 2019.P7

²⁶ Duncan, Alan. Groves, Herbert Stanley. *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol.14 1996

²⁷ State Electoral Roll District of Liverpool Plains 1913

²⁸ Aboriginal Politics. *Goulburn Evening Penny*. Post. 31, Oct 1911

²⁹ “Drawing the Color Line.” *Evening News*. May,16,1907.

³⁰ Parry. Thematic History of the Liverpool Plain Shire. 2019.P8

³¹ “Walhallow Aborigines Reserve.” *The Daily Telegraph*. November 12, 1910.

³² *ibid*

Must stand beside their guns
Guns that they have fashioned with their hands
So, our battleships we'll build to guard our native land
We'll man them with the bravest at the game
For what the Yank can do
The sturdy Kangaroo
Should give himself a chance to do the same

Australia
The same old blood, the same old speech
The same old songs are good enough for each
We'll all stand together boys
If the foe wants a flutter or a fuss
And we're hanging out the sign,
From the Leeuwin to the line
This bit of the world belongs to us.³³

What should not be missed here is these children are being prepared for war, to be drawn into the notion that they belonged to an Empire. An Empire that had also failed to recognise them as citizens, and in four short years would take their brothers, fathers and classmates overseas to war.

Walter James Williams might have been one of those children singing. With the consent of his mother, Sarah Sorby, he enlisted and at the age of 19, he had found himself on a boat for France.³⁴

Fortunately for Walter, the ceasefire and the end of World War I arrived before he



Figure 1. Members of the 33rd Battalion awaiting treatment near Bois de L'Abbe outside Villers-Bretonneux 1918 were Ernest was captured. Source Harrower Collection

³³ Murphy, Edwin. *This bit of the world belongs to us*. (Greenslade Murphy 1909.)

³⁴ B2455, 1812697. NAA. Williams, Walter James.

reached France, on the 16th November 1918. However, his brother Ernest did not fare as well.³⁵ As a member of the 33rd Battalion, he was gassed by the German troops at Villers-Bretonneux, France and taken prisoner by the Germans.³⁶ Ernest returned home in 1919 and continued to work at Walhallow Station with his step-brother Bert Groves.³⁷

The Indigenous Soldier's Resolve

The Indigenous man's motive to fight for a nation that had discriminated and failed to recognise them is almost unknown and often dwelled on the need to find employment, argues Noah Risemen.³⁸ In contrast, John Maynard and Phillipa Scarlett's work on the Indigenous soldiers counters with a refreshingly optimistic view of the Indigenous soldier's motive for service, which is in 'opposition to the deeply embedded belief' of the negative experience of Aboriginal enlistees³⁹. Similar to European Australians, the chance of paid employment, travel, and the ability to be seen, or even as a form of Nationalism might have motivated them.⁴⁰

All the Walhallow men enlisting, had an occupation on their pre-service record.

Furthermore, the Australian Army wage of 42 shillings a week, set against the average wages for an Aboriginal man in 1914 of seven shillings and sixpence per week, must have

³⁵ B2455, 1806676. NAA. Williams, Ernest

³⁶ Never a Backward Step. *History of the 33rd Battalion AIF*.

³⁷ B2455, 1806676. NAA. Letter from Mr. John Milne to the Army Records to obtain his Army Discharge Certificate

³⁸ Riseman, Noah. "Introduction: Diversify the black diggers' histories." *Aboriginal History* Vol.39, 2015, p 137

³⁹ Maynard, J. Missing Voices. P.237

Scarlett, Philippa. "Aboriginal Service in the First World War: Identity, recognition and the problem of mateship." *Aboriginal History*, Vol 39. 2015

⁴⁰ Maynard, J. Missing Voices. P237

been a tempting opportunity for the men to receive equal wages to white Australians.⁴¹

Maynard argues many were caught up in the zeal of the advertising campaign to 'defend the Empire' and in the 'fight for your country' narratives, as their motive to enlist.⁴² Barber, an Indigenous soldier in camp at Armidale in 1915, declares:

After reading the awful atrocities committed in Europe. His heart went out in pity to the sufferers, and he felt it is his duty to offer his services.⁴³

We can start to construct that their resolve to enlist was a form of optimism for fighting for inclusion within the Nation.

In 1915, Aboriginal men who wanted to enlist were deterred from military service in the newly federated nation's Acts. The Commonwealth Defence Act of 1909 described them as unfit for service as "persons who are not substantially of European origin or descent".⁴⁴ At the recruiting depots, men would be read from the recruiting manual "Aboriginals, half-castes or men with Asiatic blood are not to be enlisted. This applies to all coloured men".⁴⁵ This did not deter the Walhallow men, they attempted multiple times to enlist, tried different town recruiting offices or changed their names.

⁴¹ Annual Report of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals for 1914, Queensland. *Parliamentary Papers* 1915-1916

⁴² "Aborigine Offers Himself." *The Herald* (Melbourne). 10 September, 1917.

⁴³ "Aboriginal Soldiers Resolve." *Evening News*. December 30, 1915. "Five Half-caste Brothers Enlist." *Warrnambool Standard*. 6, October, 1917

⁴⁴ The Commonwealth Defence Act. Military Orders 1909. Number 15 Australian Government.

⁴⁵ The Defence Act 1903, paragraph 61h



Figure 1. Thomas Williams and his daughter Sophie. Source AWM.

Thomas Williams was determined to fight in the Great War. In January 1916 he enlisted, had a medical examination in Manilla NSW on the 4th January and passed.⁴⁶ At the age of 41 years, he was appointed to the 33rd Battalion and sent to camp at Rutherford NSW. While being of “good character” unfortunately Thomas, was discharged in April 1916 medically unfit. Thomas Williams may have been “medically unfit” due to race; the standards the country recruitment officers accepted also knowing the abilities of these bushmen, were not in line with the career hardline officers of the major camps.

Three months later Thomas enlisted again under the name of Mathew Revenew, stating his age six years younger, at thirty-five.⁴⁷ He joined the 6th Light Horse regiment as a wagon team driver and was sent to Egypt. On the 5th November, he was injured when a team of horses took-off with a wagon, rolled and although thrown clear, Mathew broke his ribs. Local “native”, Admed Mohamed Ghazi, came to his rescue and stated the accident was not Revenew’s fault when Revenew’s actions were investigated.⁴⁸ He served until 1919.

Aboriginal men objected to being restricted from military service. Protests of racist treatment can be seen in letters of complaints to government offices. In his objection against being restricted a Kamilaroi man stated, “he can ride anything in the shape of horse-

⁴⁶ B2455, 1813276. NAA Williams, Thomas. AKA Mathew Revenew.

⁴⁷ Scarlett, Philippa. Aboriginal Service in the First World War.

⁴⁸ B2455, 1813276. NAA Williams, Thomas. AKA Mathew Revenew.

flesh and is prepared to go anywhere in defence of the Empire".⁴⁹ Similarly, families whose sons had lied about their age in the zeal to enlist, confronted the Army against having them sent home, thereby showing their willingness to exert their rights, against a Government organisation. Aged 18, Robert Stewart's service records hold a telegram from his father requesting his return. This father states he had no permission to enlist and while "there is no one more patriotic than me", having sent three sons 'to do their duty' Robert was needed back with the family. His request was granted, and Robert was duly sent home.⁵⁰

The Wallaby March

The Walhallow servicemen unsettle the narrative that Aboriginal servicemen mostly enlisted after 1916. Indigenous service is often interpreted as more palatable when the need for recruits increased after the mass casualties of Gallipoli, the bitter and costly battles in European winter and the Hughes Government was unable to win conscription favour in 1916.⁵¹ This dispels the myth Aboriginal people had only a partial role in the war. Beaumont argues the use of such narratives was away often used, to not invite the remembrances of Indigenous people into 'our' memories of ANZAC.⁵²

The majority of the Walhallow servicemen enlisted in 1915 – 1916. However, one major event might have shaped this early participation. On the 15th October 1915, at a Narrabri recruiting meeting a march similar to the Coe-ee March was planned. Called the Wallaby

⁴⁹ "War Notes" *The Northern Star* (Lismore) September 22, 1914.

⁵⁰ B2455, 3013977. NAA. Robert, Stewart

⁵¹ Huggonson, D. "Villers-Bretonneux: A Strange Name for an Aboriginal Burial Ground." *Journal of Royal Historical Society of Queensland*. 1991

⁵² Beaumont, J & Cadzow, "A Serving Our Country: Indigenous Australians, war, defence and citizenship." 2018 (University of NSW Press)

March, it commenced at Walgett on 1st December 1915. Gamilaroi man, Harold Frazer, was a foundation member of the march.⁵³ Frazer marched 38 days through Gamilaroi Country and each town greeted the marchers with cheering crowds, hosted dinners and held rallies. Recruitment rallies encouraged young men to join and every marcher was charged with also being a recruiter, including Frazer.⁵⁴ The recruits were given a blue shirt and joined the march to Newcastle. The Wallaby March may have contributed to the unusually high number of enlistees for Aboriginal men in 1916, if not joining the march, then enlisting soon after. The Wallabies formed the basis of the locally-raised 33rd New England's Own and 34th 'Maitland's Own' Battalions.

Interestingly, Harold Frazer's military record tells an affirmative story, while not forgetting he was one of the few men that survived to serve the duration of the war. Once in England Frazer, was sent to the Lyndhurst Bombing School, promoted to corporal and graduated as an instructor. He was sent to the Western Front and was injured in action on the 5th April 1918. Returned to London for treatment, he remained in hospital care for the remainder of the year. Within this time, he met and married Dorothy Eliza Wilson of London. They married on the 7th November at St Simon's Church in Paddington in the presence of Dorothy's father. With the permission of the A.I.F, Frazer brought his new wife to Australia in July 1919.⁵⁵ The acceptance of inter-racial marriage in 1918 shows a level of independence and tolerance that may have not been afforded a non-serviceman at the time.⁵⁶

⁵³ Dial, D.H. *The March of the Wallabies*. (R.H Kerrigan.) 1990

⁵⁴ B2455, 4033887. NAA. Frazer, Harold William Francis.

⁵⁵ B2455, 4033887. NAA. Frazer, Harold William Francis.

⁵⁶ Harold Frazer. *Harrower Collection*. <https://harrowercollection.com.au/indigenous-serviceman/>

Vincent Watley joined the march in Gunnedah on the 14th December. He was eighteen years old and he was only five foot three inches high. He joined with twenty-two other young men from Gunnedah that day. As they marched through the town 'aglow with flags and bunting' a spectator shouted: "your feet will be sore before you reach Sydney, matey". A blue-shirted recruit fired back, "Yes, me boy but it's not cold feet we'll be having." As the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter remarked 'a more heterogeneous lot of men would be hard to find'.⁵⁷ Vincent was killed in action on the 15th May 1917 and was buried at Villers-Bretonneux France among 10,982 Australian graves, thirteen of which are Aboriginal servicemen.⁵⁸ As David Huggonson states, Villers-Bretonneux is a strange name for an Aboriginal burial ground, Walhallow's William Archie Leslie, was not among Huggonson's thirteen but is also memorialised at Villers-Bretonneux. It appears overseas memorials were not caught up in the 'White Australia' policies of the early twentieth century and memorialised all men. Unfortunatley, to this day William Archie Leslie is not commemorated on a local memorial in New South Walse.⁵⁹

Strange resting grounds indeed, with their sons being buried at Beersheba, Israel; Menin Gate, Belgium; Heilly and Daours in France, it is no wonder the families sought to have their sons remembered on Gamilaroi land and partake in the growing observance of ANZAC Day. The last that was known of Oliver White (Norman Briggs), he was in France. His family was notified of Norman being missing in October 1917, and for four agonising months, they

⁵⁷ "Gunnedah's Response". *Sydney Morning Herald*. December 15, 1915. P14

⁵⁸ Huggonson, D. Villers-Bretonneux.

⁵⁹ *ibid*

waited until his status was updated to killed in action in February 1918.⁶⁰ His father wrote to the A.I.F and informed them of his correct name and that he wished for it to be changed on his memorial inscription. He penned these words:

In a soldier's grave, he is lying somewhere in France. Words can not tell the loss of the one we loved so well. Father and sisters Grace, Emily and Edward Briggs.

The inscription was never approved as it had 94 characters too many and the correction of his name was never amended.

Today at the Menin Gate in Belgium, it reads Oliver White, aged 21 – Son of Edward and Elizabeth Briggs of Manilla.

Metres away another Briggs is mentioned, Frederick Briggs also from Manilla who died a month before Norman. On his enlistment papers, he put down that his dark skin was from his father's Maori heritage, to sidestep the bias enlistment

process.⁶¹ Frederick Briggs was awarded the Military Medal for distinguished bravery on the 23rd March 1917:

No. 16. Private Frederick John Briggs - On the night of February 24th/25th in a raid on the enemy's trench, Private Briggs, while acting as covering bomber for the wire-cutters, was severely wounded in the right arm, but with great grit and determination he continued bombing with his left hand. He thus prevented the



Figure 2 Frederick John Briggs.
Source Harrower Collection.

⁶⁰ B2455, 1850085. NAA. Briggs, Norman. AKA Olliver White.

⁶¹ B2455, 3122751, NAA. Briggs, Frederick John.

*enemy, who were in readiness at the point of entry, from inflicting further casualties on our wire-cutters, who were enabled to complete their work. His action contributed largely to the raiding party's success in entering the trench.*⁶²

Briggs was reported by a fellow serviceman on the 1st October the same year as 'shot in the head' fatally, however, his body was never recovered. The two Brigg's boys were both memorialised at the Manilla War Memorial in 1924, nominations for names to be included on the memorial were by public paid donations from families.⁶³ This highlights their Indigenous families sought local recognition and remembrance.

The press reported Aboriginal soldiers involvement freely. The *Macquarie Advocate* reported on Frederick Briggs was framed in the narrative to change public opinion:

There have been too many types amongst Aborigines to warrant the drawing of the colour line. As a case in point, take Fred Briggs, of the 33rd Battalion of the A.I.F an Aboriginal, but one of the bravest soldiers who ever donned a uniform.⁶⁴

The effect that positive press reports had in countering the discriminatory narrative that usually graced the pages of the early twentieth-century newspaper pages is hard to measure. Scarlett argues that many of the articles were set to 'shame' the white man to enlist by holding the Aboriginal man up as being more patriotic.⁶⁵ However, she also states

⁶² B2455, 3122751, NAA. Briggs, Frederick John.

⁶³ Manilla and district Soldiers Memorial Fund. *Manilla Express*. Mar 21, 1924 p.2

⁶⁴ "Good Types." *Macquarie Advocate*. Oct, 19, 1917

⁶⁵ Scarlett, Philippa. "Aboriginal Service in the First World War.

that to get caught up in the oversimplification of generic concepts by homogenising the Aboriginal soldier denies them of the advocacy they demand.⁶⁶ Maynard adds that the Indigenous wartime experiences are complex and diverse, and the magnitude of the diversity of involvement makes it hard to examine them. In the dominated 'white' space of ANZAC, we must be careful not to overrun the Indigenous narrative.⁶⁷

William Allan Irwin is the only Indigenous soldier recognised by Bean in his official histories of World War I.⁶⁸ Irwin, a shearer, is an example of a 'missing voice' that is now heard as a story passed down through his family. Harry, William's brother told the story that his brother found out his sweetheart "Maggie had married another man". Jilted he enlisted.⁶⁹ Harry in 1916, raced from Walhallow to Newcastle to stop his brother, however, "the ship left a day early and he missed him". In Newcastle he boarded a train to Brisbane in another attempt to reach him, his 81-year-old nephew Merv Allan now recalls, but the ship did not stop.⁷⁰ Merv recounts he has "known the story since the day I was born" and would spend hours staring at his picture on the wall.

Irwin was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal on the 31st August 1918, as part of the 33rd Battalion in the Battle of Mont St Quentin:

Single-handed and in the face of extremely heavy fire rushed three separate machine-gun posts and captured three guns and crews. On his irresistible dash and

⁶⁶ Scarlett, Philippa. "Aboriginal Service in the First World War.

⁶⁷ Maynard, J. *Missing Voices* p.240

⁶⁸ Bean, Charles. *Official History of Australia 1914-1918*. 1921

⁶⁹ "Gomerioi, Soldier William Allan Irwin's Action will Forever Be Remembered." *Northern Daily Leader*. June,23,2018

⁷⁰ *ibid*

magnificent gallantry, this man materially assisted our advance through this strongly held defended wood: and by his daring actions, he greatly inspired the whole of his company.⁷¹

It was while rushing the fourth he was fatally wounded. Irwin was only recognised on his home town honour roll in 2015. RSL Northern Country Vice President said: “ Really its part of Australia’s shame that a lot of Aboriginal military history hasn’t been recognised....and we have been slow because of the laws that existed, and attitudes that existed right through to the early 70s.”⁷²

After the Great War

The Gate of Memory is a political space, a space of remembrance, resistance and of protest. Walhallow servicemen were not recorded on any local Honour Rolls, monuments or memorials within 100 kilometres of Walhallow Station. Only the two Briggs brothers were remembered before the outbreak of World War II, 123 kilometres away in Manilla, in 1924. Of the fallen soldiers, the only other memorialised Walhallow servicemen today are William Allan Irwin at Coonabarabran and Vincent Wortley at Gunnedah in 2014.

The lack of local recognition and the treatment of WWI returned Indigenous servicemen may have led to the construction of the Gate of Memory. With memorials being opened in Breeza, Quirindi, Werris Creek and Piallaway, between 1923 – 1924 without mentioning the men, and the upsurge in large city memorials such as the ANZAC Memorial in Hyde Park

⁷¹ B2455, 7360074, NAA. Irwin, William Allan.

⁷² “Indigenous digger William Allan Irwin DCM at Last Honoured for Role in WWI.” *ABC Western Plains*. October. 22, 2015

Sydney in 1934, the community sought their own space.⁷³ The memorial gave a site for reflection and the school held ANZAC Day services, as another generation prepared to go to war.

During the interwar years, there was a shift from absorption government practices to protectionism regimes that quickly slid into paternalism, maternalism and often authoritarianism.⁷⁴ The servicemen's newfound autonomy fighting for their country was soon washed away when they were welcomed home to a land of growing inequality. Walhallow land was eagerly subdivided under the Soldier Settlement Scheme and ex-servicemen bought up lots of Walhallow lands.⁷⁵ However, these land offers were not awarded to Indigenous ex-servicemen. Pensions, land grants and rehabilitation assistance were not afforded the returning Indigenous soldiers and it did not go unnoticed:

'You had no race prejudice against us when you accepted half-castes and full-bloods for enlistment in the A.I.F. We were good enough to fight as Anzacs. We earned equality then. Why do you deny it to us now?'

⁷⁶

Walhallow Aboriginal Station drifted into the repressive State government control associated with the interwar years.⁷⁷

⁷³ ANZAC Memorial Hyde Park. NSW War Memorials Register. NSW Government. Available at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/PL549483>

⁷⁴ McGregor, Russell. "Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation" (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra) 2011. 229 p.

⁷⁵ Notification Setting Apart Farm Within Settlement Area *Government Gazette* Oct 5 1923 Issue 119

⁷⁶ JT Patten & W Ferguson, *Aborigines claim citizen rights! A statement of the case for the Aborigines Progressive Association*, p.10 The Publicist, Sydney, 1938,

⁷⁷ Maynard, J. Missing Voices. P.237-249

Herbert Groves

In 1934 Herbert Stanley (Bert) Groves was a handyman at Walhallow, employed by the Aborigines Protection Board (APB). Born at Walhallow in 1907, Bert was an exceptional student, he 'pored over history books' reading the 'Magna Carta', the 'Petition of Rights' and the 'Bill of Rights'. Politically charged from a young age, he asserted the 'King was responsible for liberty and justice for all his subjects' - a stand he would carry to adulthood.⁷⁸ Groves formative years were lived through the Great War, and as he had kinship ties with many families at Walhallow, he would have witnessed the grief of the relatives receiving news of the fallen.

From his early twenties, he travelled the North-West working for the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) on the missions in the area including Angledool, Pilliga, Baan Ba and Werris Creek. Befriended by Bill Ferguson of the Australian Aborigines League (AAL), he was instructed by Ferguson to report back any violations of civil rights that he saw including the union violations of the Pilliga sawmill.⁷⁹ Groves was stood down from the APB for chairing a meeting of the Pilliga branch of the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA).⁸⁰ Bert Groves became associated with well-known political activists including William Cooper, who had lost his son in WWI and John T. Patten of the APA, both influenced by the work of Fred Maynard and the American, Marcus Garvey, of the Universal Negro Independence Association.⁸¹ The AAL and the APA lobbied for citizenship, self-management, housing and a

⁷⁸ He might petition King George. Groves "Liberty and justice". The Sun. Sydney 27 January 1946.

⁷⁹ Parry, N. Thematic History of the Liverpool Plain Shire. 2019 p.158

⁸⁰ Ellmoos, L. Bert Groves: *Barani Sydney's Aboriginal History*. City of Sydney

⁸¹ Maynard, J. "Fight for liberty and freedom: The origins of Australian Aboriginal activism." (Aboriginal Studies Press.) 2007

Federal Government takeover State supervision of Aboriginal matters.⁸² Faith Bandler who worked with Groves on the Day of Mourning campaign in 1938, cites Patten's influence on radicalising Groves and his push for his involvement in the *Abo's Call* and *Churinga* publications. Publications that motivated and informed activists into the late twentieth century.⁸³

Groves was also the Walhallow Aboriginal School's P&C president at the time the memorial was constructed and was working on the irrigation system of Walhallow Station.⁸⁴ He supported ex-servicemen and in the 1930s wrote on behalf of servicemen to have their medals reissued and to obtain financial support.⁸⁵ The involvement of Groves in the construction of the memorial can only be speculated, however, with his political voice, kinship ties to many of the servicemen and his interest in a military career it is unlikely he was not a driving force.

In 1946, Bert Groves, now a World War II veteran, campaigned for 'full citizenship for Aboriginal diggers', freedom to spend their war savings, deferred pay gratuities controlled by the Protection



Figure 3 Bert Groves in uniform in May Day March 1948. Source AWM

⁸² "An Appeal." *Northern Star*. (Lismore), July 6, 1927.

⁸³ Burrows, E. "Interrogating and interpreting the mediation of an emerging Australian Aboriginal social movement between 1923 and 1940." *Social Movement Studies*. 15:5 p 472 2016.

⁸⁴ Duncan, Alan. "Bert Groves" *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Vol 14 MUP 1996

⁸⁵ B2455, 1806676. NAA. Williams, Ernest .

Board and equal rights in line with 'white diggers' for land settlement and war pensions.⁸⁶

Demanding this right from Prime Minister Chifley in 1946, he said if necessary - he would 'petition the King' for Indigenous servicemen to have the same rights as 'white' servicemen.

⁸⁷ Gary Foley describes Groves as one of the key members of a new radicalised Aboriginal protest movement that laid the basis for reforms in Aboriginal activism in the 1960s.⁸⁸

Groves often marched in his service uniform and continued to campaign for the rights of Indigenous servicemen in both wars until he died in 1970.

ANZAC Day 1934

The Gate of Memory memorial was now finished, ready to be unveiled with the surrounding 'white' dignitaries- getting out of their cars. Mrs Leslie rode up on horseback, 84 years old she rides upon "a horse with the grace, agility and ability of a flapper". Mr Harkness, the Deputy Director of Education, comments "that girl might fall off!". He was corrected by a local, "No! Mrs Leslie is the best horsewoman in the district".⁸⁹ To be at the memorial meant more to her than most. The war had taken both her sons. William died of an infection on his way home from France and was buried at sea.⁹⁰ Lawrence was killed in action in Belgium just seventeen days later.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Ann Curthoys, "National narratives, war commemoration and racial exclusion in a settler society: the Australian case", in Roper, Michael, Dawson, Graham & Ashplant, T G 2004, *Commemorating war: the politics of memory*, 1st pbk. ed,

⁸⁷ "He might petition King George. Groves" "Liberty and justice". *The Sun*. (Sydney) January 27, 1946.

⁸⁸ Foley, Gary. et.al "The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State." 2013 Taylor & Francis group P.101

⁸⁹ Memorial. To Native Diggers. *The Sun* (Sydney) December 29, 1934. Accessed June 21, 2020

⁹⁰ B2455, 8202354. NAA. Leslie, William

⁹¹ B2455, 8193674. NAA. Leslie, Lawrence

The speeches continued:

*The Patriotism of those who fought and died for the Empire and Australia was,
therefore, all the more to be honoured.*

Members of Walhallow must have wondered why the 'all' did not see their loved ones included on the memorials in town. After the crowd started to disperse. The reporter then quietly went inside the school door and did what no other reporter did, he took out his pencil and wrote down their names:

*Private F. Briggs
Private A. Irwin D.C.M
Private L.
Private W. Leslie
Private J. Talbott
Private V. Wattley (Killed in action)
Private N. Briggs
Private R. Johnson (Died of Wounds)
Private R. Beale
Private W. Beale
Private J. Mattison
Private J. Morris
Private T. Porter
Private A Wattley
Private A. White
Private E. Williams
Private T. Williams
Private W. Williams*

Racism and exclusion denied many Indigenous men from having their names added to war memorials from both wars. By telling their stories we honour these men, for their service and sacrifice. Past histories may have chosen to exclude, deny and segregate. Hopefully, this research can be used by the Walhallow and the greater community to *Remember Them*.

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