

INDIGENOUS TROOPERS IN THE LIGHT HORSE – Jill Curry

At the outbreak of World War 1, many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders worked as stockmen on the mission stations especially in Queensland. Their tasks involved working



with horses and using rifles to protect the animals from predators. Despite these being skills needed to join the army, at the beginning of the war, they were forbidden to enlist under the Defence Act, as they were not 'white' enough. Some who were lighter skinned tried to fake their identity and pretend to be from other backgrounds but most were turned away. For example some said they were Maoris and that they were born in New Zealand. Others tried to enlist in other states where the regulations may be a bit more lenient. This has actually made it very difficult to trace who the Aborigines were that fought in World

War 1, as it was not stated on their enlistment forms, and they may have faked age or changed their name, or birth city in order to be accepted. Why would they be so keen to enlist, when they were not even recognized as Australian Citizens? One thing was that jobs were hard to come by especially for Aborigines and they could at least have a regular income as a soldier. Another reason was that many longed to be treated equal to whites. War is a great leveler. In fact, once accepted they were indeed treated the same – while in the army, that is. However, after the war ended, despite their service, they were not given the benefits that were granted to other ex-servicemen. They were not allowed to join the RSL, they were rarely given any gifts of land offered to white soldiers and compensation and support were also vastly less, if at all.

According to the Australian War Memorial, over 1,000 indigenous men served in World War 1¹ but further research is finding that perhaps the figure is more like 1,200-1,500. Most of the indigenous volunteers came from Queensland where some 500 men enlisted, but only 118 of these served overseas – about 20%.

One family that employed Aborigines on their property was the Chauvel family in Tabulam on the Clarence River in northern NSW. Descendants of French Huguenots, with ancestors who had been in the British army, the family had a large property of 20,000 acres with sheep and cattle. The means of travel was on horseback. Young Harry was taught to ride by an Aboriginal stockman and at age 7, he and his older brother were escorted two days on horseback by the stockman to get their first school. The aboriginal family was the grandfather of Ps Peter Walker and great uncle of Warren Mundine. Harry's father Charles, raised the first Light Horse troop at Upper Clarence in 1886 and the boys were enlisted. Harry later became General Sir Harry Chauvel who led the Light Horse troops in the Middle East to victory at Romani in the Sinai, the lightning breakthrough at Beersheba and commanded 34,000 Mounted troops to end the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.

By October 1917, with much loss of life in Europe, replacement recruits became harder to find and the requirements began to be relaxed. Also some of the soldiers from Palestine were transferred to the Western Front in the summer of 1918, so the troops in the Middle East had to be re-organised, re-structured and re-trained. Some of the Light Horse became cavalry

equipped with swords. As Aborigines were often well trained as stockmen or labourers on farms, they often had the skills needed to be part of the Light Horse troops. One group of reinforcements sent from Australia had so many indigenous members it became known as the 'Queensland Black Watch'. It had only 4 members out of 32, who were not indigenous. They joined the 11th Light Horse Regiment, which was part of the 4th Light Horse Brigade. This regiment backed up the 4th and 12th ALH regiments in the charge at Beersheba, although the 'Black Watch' did not arrive in Cairo until 1918.



One of the earliest Aboriginal recruits for World War 1 was Edward McDonald Lovett who enlisted in August 1915. He joined the 4th Light Horse and was part of the 13th Light Horse regiment that patrolled the Western Front. His family has a unique history in the annals of Australian Military history. They have had 21 members of their family serve in the Australian army and had representatives in every war from WW1 to the present day. What is more remarkable is that every one of them has returned to Australia at the end of their



service. There were five brothers that served in WW1 - Alfred, Leonard, Frederick, Edward and Herbert and four of these also volunteered for WWII, most of whom had seen action on the Western Front. They are from the Gunditjmarra nation in Western Victoria from the Lake Condah Mission. Leonard 'Charlie' had a daughter, Alice, who served with the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force in WWII, a son, who served in the Korean War and a grandson, Mervyn, who

served in the Vietnam War. Frederick served in Palestine with the 4th Light Horse regiment. His grandson, Sergeant Ricky Morris, has served in East Timor and Afghanistan. Edward's daughter, Sarah Pearl, also served in the Australian Women's Army Service during WWII. The Veteran's Affairs building in Canberra is named after this family to honour their distinguished military contribution.

Semakh



On September 25, the 11th LH regiment (including the 26 Aboriginal soldiers from the 'Queensland Black watch') and part of the 12th LH were given the task of capturing the railway intersection at Semakh, on the southern shores of the Sea of Galilee). The troops arrived under the cover of darkness, and found the station heavily defended by German guns and German and Turkish troops. They charged the station by moonlight and engaged in the heaviest fighting of this part of the battle. The Australian machine gunners eventually silenced the German guns and the troops broke down the door of the building and engaged in hand-to-hand combat through every room of the station building. Fourteen Australians died and 27 were wounded with nearly half their horses being lost. They killed 98 mostly Germans and captured 365. It was the last major battle in Galilee.

Frank Fisher



One of those in the 'Queensland Black Watch' was trooper Frank Fisher. He came from the Barambah Aboriginal Settlement, which was later named Cherbourg and enlisted in Brisbane on August 16, 1917. He was a well-known Rugby player and the great-grandfather of Olympic gold medal winning sprinter, Cathy Freeman. According to another of his great-grandchildren, who rode in the 2017 re-enactment in Beersheba, Frank Fisher was one of the two scouts that went before the main regiment to survey the situation and report back to the commander. As a result of their report, Brigadier Grant decided to make the moonlight charge at Semakh rather than wait for reinforcements, which would not have arrived until daylight. A day attack would have resulted in more casualties. Like hundreds of others, Frank succumbed to the Pyrexia fever shortly after which was contracted by the soldiers in the Jordan Valley. He did recover and returned home in 1919.

James Lingwoodock



James Lingwoodock was another member of the 'Black Watch'. His mother was aboriginal, but his father was from Pentecost Island in the Solomon Islands. His father, Jim Tabby, was one of the men captured by the 'Blackbirders' (kanakas) to work on the sugar cane farms in Queensland. They were recruited (often kidnapped) in the late 19th century as cheap (or free) labour in place of the Aborigines and often treated as badly, or even worse, than the indigenous population.

Jack Stacy

Jack Stacy joined the AIF in May 1916 at Narrabi in NSW, aged 19. He was attached to the 12th Light Horse regiment but served in the Imperial Camel Corps. He was in active service from March 17 to March 19 except for a stint in hospital with malaria. Camels were slower than horses but could last 5 days in the desert without water. They were extremely useful in the Sinai desert, mainly being used to carry water to the troops, carrying the wounded (but it was a rough ride), and could transport up to 145 kg. They were used in the battles in the Sinai, Gaza and Beersheba, like the Light Horse – i.e. to ride near to the battle then dismount to fight as infantry. There were almost 3,000 cameleers and up to 4,000 camels at its height. They were disbanded in mid 1918 and returned to riding horses, as the terrain in Palestine was more suited to horses.

Daniel Cooper



Another aboriginal family that sent several members to war was the Cooper family. Daniel Cooper was born Moama, near Echuca, in 1896. He enlisted in 1916 and served in France and Belgium taking part in the battles at Bullecourt, and Pozieres. He was killed in action at Ypres Belgium during shelling in the battle of Menin Road on 20 September 1917, aged 21. His cousins Joshua and Andrew Cooper also enlisted. Joshua served on the Western Front and did return to Australia, but suffered life-threatening injuries to his thigh and abdomen, and was eventually discharged. He did receive a military pension for his gunshot wounds as he was unable to do other work. His younger brother, Andrew began training as a sapper but was discharged as medically unfit and did not serve overseas.

Daniel's father, William Cooper, a Yorta Yorta man, seeing the injustices done to Aboriginal people after the war, became a great spokesman and activist for aboriginal rights. He moved to the city of Melbourne, founded the Australian Aborigines' League and wrote to many politicians, including King George V regarding Aboriginal rights. When the events of Kristallnacht (Night of broken glass Nov 9-10, 1938, when Jewish synagogues, houses and businesses were ransacked and many killed) hit the newspapers and the Jews were being persecuted and killed in Germany, he led a delegation to the German Embassy in Melbourne, to protest. While most of the world was shutting its eyes to the worsening situation in

Europe, William was leading a campaign for others on the other side of the globe, even when his own people in Australia had no equal status.

These are just a few of the hundreds of stories of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders who served our nation in World War 1.

Unfortunately, great racial discrimination was carried out in the early days of Australia and seek to reconcile with our indigenous people to forge a better future together and find a more just way ahead that will bring blessing to our nation.

Notes:

1. <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous/>

For Further Research, the following websites are recommended:

<https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/groupstories/7396>

<http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ww1/2017/05/26/queensland-indigenous-soldiers/>

<http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ww1/tag/queensland-black-watch/>

Australian War memorial - <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/indigenous>

Pictures:

1. Painting by indigenous artist R. Syron, Townsville Cultural Centre – Jill Curry.
2. Ist Reinforcements Egypt. June 1918. The photograph contains at least seven Aboriginal men although names cannot be linked to specific individuals.
<https://indigenoushistories.com/2015/04/15/charlie-alley-light-horseman-the-service-tradition-of-the-alley-family/>
3. Edward McDonald Lovett <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/person/341562>
4. Semakh Station <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C820 Photo B00283>.
5. Frank Fisher. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P00889.015>
6. James Lingwoodock <https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/49902>
7. Daniel Cooper – Shepparton, mural on a silo in honour of Daniel - Abe Schwarz