

ABORIGINES IN THE LIGHT HORSE TROOPS – Jill Curry

Australian Curriculum, Year 9 – ACDSEH095

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 not allowed to enlist 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.



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. One group of reinforcements sent from Australia was known as the 'Queensland Black Watch', as it was almost entirely indigenous. They joined the 11th Light Horse Regiment.



Charles Alley worked in a stockyard in Blackjack in Queensland where the horses were assembled before being shipped off to Egypt. Some of the indigenous worked as horse-

breakers at the remount stations. Charles' son (also Charles) enlisted in August 1917 stating his age as 18, when in fact he was only 16.¹ Other indigenous members of the 1st Reinforcements to sail to Cairo were Willie Allen, Glen Combarngo, Herbert Roberts (was injured before he could leave Australia), Patrick Brady, John Lewis, Harry Roberts, and Alexander Stanley. Charles arrived in Egypt in July 1918 in time for the last major offensive in Palestine and Syria in September. The 11th Light Horse was at the forefront of the moonlight charge and battle for the railway station at Semakh on September 25, 1918. They are to be remembered with a memorial to be erected at the restored station as part of the 100 year commemorations. Charlie Alley arrived back in Australia in August 1919 but enlisted again in the Second World War. He died in 1969.



Another Aboriginal to serve in the 11th Light Horse was trooper Frank Fisher, a well-known Rugby player and the great-grandfather of Olympic runner, Cathy Freeman. According to the Australian War Memorial, over 1,000 indigenous men served in World War 1² and received equal rights while in the army. However, after the war ended, despite their service, they were not given the benefits that were granted to other ex-servicemen. Most of the indigenous volunteers came from Queensland where some 500 men enlisted, but only 118 of these served overseas – about 20%.

Notes:

1. <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/P10678225/>
2. <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous/>

Pictures:

1. Painting by indigenous artist R. Syron, Townsville Cultural Centre – Jill Curry.
2. 1st Reinforcements Egypt. June 1918. The photograph contains at least seven Aboriginal men although names cannot be linked to specific individuals. It is possible that Charlie Alley may be one of their number. Too Dark for the Light Horse Collection. Courtesy David Huggonson. Website: <https://indigenoushistories.com/2015/04/15/charlie-alley-light-horseman-the-service-tradition-of-the-alley-family/>
3. Frank Fisher. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P00889.015>

Powerpoint:

1. Horace Thomas Dalton, 11th Light Horse Regiment <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P00889.003>;
Frank Fisher, 11th Light Horse regiment was a well-known Rugby player and Cathy Freeman's great-grandfather. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P00889.015>
2. Painting by indigenous artist R. Syron, Townsville Cultural Centre – Jill Curry.
3. Charles Alley senior. Courtesy Alley family, on the website <https://indigenoushistories.com/2015/04/15/charlie-alley-light-horseman-the-service-tradition-of-the-alley-family/>

4. Ist Reinforcements Egypt. June 1918. The photograph contains at least seven Aboriginal men although names cannot be linked to specific individuals. It is possible that Charlie Alley may be one of their number. Too Dark for the Light Horse Collection. Courtesy David Huggonson. Website: <https://indigenoushistories.com/2015/04/15/charlie-alley-light-horseman-the-service-tradition-of-the-alley-family/>
5. Semakh Railway Station partially restored – J Curry
6. Charlie Alley, World War Two. He wears his World War One service ribbons in this photograph. Courtesy Mrs Mavis Blackman.
<https://indigenoushistories.com/2015/04/15/charlie-alley-light-horseman-the-service-tradition-of-the-alley-family/>