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### Ex-service activism after 1945

Noah Riseman

*'He [Len Culbong] went overseas to fight for his country, and he came back and he was still fighting for his country, for recognition of his people and for social justice and things like that.'*

– Margaret Culbong

It is a story threaded through this book: Indigenous men and women joining the armed forces, protecting Australia at home and abroad, being treated in many instances as equals, and then returning to civilian life to face racial prejudice. It was not just individual incidents of racism that these ex-service personnel confronted. Until the 1970s (and the 1980s in Queensland), various state and Commonwealth jurisdictions continued to restrict aspects of Indigenous people's lives, such as access to wages, permission to drink alcohol and freedom of movement. For instance, it was illegal to serve alcohol to Aboriginal people in Western Australia until 1972; in Queensland 'assisted Aborigines' could be denied equal wages and the right to own property until 1971, and the *Aborigines' Act* 1971 continued to allow district officers to manage Aboriginal people's property in certain situations as well as require permits to enter reserves. In 2000 Western Australian Vietnam veteran Phil Prosser told two stories about the contrasting treatment he received in military and civilian life. The first is from early in his Army career, when a mate invited him to have a drink:

Walking up to the canteen, as you walk through the front door, to the right was what we referred to as the wet canteen, the bar, and to the left was the dry canteen. And of course it was just an automatic reaction, as I walked in I went to go left. This guy grabbed me by the arm, and he said, 'Hey come on, in here.' He says, 'You're allowed in here now.' He says, 'Those bastards can't touch you anymore.'<sup>1</sup>

In the second story Prosser was out of uniform at the Hotel Manly in Sydney with some Army mates:

And the steward came up to take orders. ... he turned to me and the guy said, 'I'm sorry; I can't serve this gentleman because he's Aboriginal.' And of course they became pretty upset, the guys. They said, 'But he's in the Army. You've got to serve him.' He said, 'I'm sorry but we can't.' So he refused to serve me.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, veterans such as Prosser were angered at returning to such inequality, and after 1945 many ex-service personnel played an active role fighting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civil rights. They were aptly suited among Indigenous Australians to become activists for several reasons. Not only had service in the armed forces given them a glimpse of equality, challenging notions of discrimination inherent in Australian society; but defending Australia and its supposed values of democracy and freedom also empowered Indigenous service personnel to fight for those very principles in their everyday lives. Moreover, while in the defence forces Aboriginal men and women were exposed to white bureaucracy and learned to work with(in) such frameworks. Whether through their military employment or through repatriation schemes, Indigenous service personnel also acquired new professional and educational skills that they could apply in their post-service lives.

There is a significant difference in how military service linked with activism during the post-war era when compared to the interwar years. As chapter 6 discussed, First World War veterans and the families of deceased Aboriginal servicemen cited their honourable military service as one of the reasons Aboriginal people should be granted equal citizenship rights. In the post-Second World War era, military service did not feature so heavily in Indigenous claims to rights. In the 1950s and 1960s, the arguments for equal citizenship rights were primarily grounded in international discourses of human rights and drew heavily on strategies and rhetoric from the Black American Civil Rights Movement.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1970s, arguments for Indigenous rights have centred around the language of self-determination, while still appealing to global human rights discourse. Although military service was not prevalent among post-war activists' arguments, there was a link through the individual ex-servicemen and women who became

involved in these causes for Indigenous advancement. It is those biographical experiences that drive this chapter.

Of course, not all Indigenous ex-service personnel became activists, and many who were involved in projects to advance the interests of Indigenous communities would shun the term ‘activist’ because of its associations with radicalism and protest. Yet, a significant number of ex-service personnel, whether upon their discharge or later in life, became strong advocates for their communities. This chapter will explore the many faces of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism and advocacy in the post-Second World War era. The early years tended to be state and national in focus, with veterans from the Second World War and Korea involved in organisations affiliated with the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and being at the forefront of campaigns such as the 1967 referendum. During the land rights and Black Power struggles between the referendum and the 1972 election of the Whitlam Labor government, ex-service personnel played a less prominent national role and were still focused on state issues. With the rise of Indigenous self-management and new bureaucracies during the Whitlam (1972–75) and Fraser (1975–83) governments, Indigenous ex-service personnel became more involved in the management and leadership of Indigenous organisations at grassroots and state levels, pursuing projects designed to address specific aspects of Indigenous disadvantage.

### **Indigenous veterans’ activism, 1945–67**

Generally it was not until the 1950s that Indigenous veterans of the Second World War began to organise for civil rights battles, but in the previous decade they found support from some non-Indigenous allies. The RSL, often viewed as a bastion of Australian conservatism, was one high-profile organisation that largely (though not wholly) pushed for Indigenous veterans to have equal citizenship rights. In 1946, the RSL’s annual congress passed a resolution that stated: ‘the Commonwealth Government be requested to grant the franchise to Aboriginal ex-servicemen’.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* 1949 granted Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander current and former servicepeople the right to vote in federal elections.

In the 1950s numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations emerged in urban and regional areas, usually in centres with growing Indigenous populations. Second World War veterans were at the forefront of many of these organisations. For instance, Joe McGinness had

enlisted in the Army and served in South Australia, Victoria and Borneo. After the war he worked on Thursday Island before settling in Cairns, where he became involved in the union movement. In 1958 McGinness became the founding secretary of the Cairns Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Advancement League, along with other veterans such as Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion member Elia Ware. This organisation challenged the state government's mistreatment of Indigenous people in far north Queensland, taking up cases of missionary and police brutality. Importantly, the Cairns League worked with white allies and strove to make connections with similar-minded organisations within Australia and overseas.<sup>5</sup>

Other organisations in Queensland with veterans at the helm were the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI) and the One People of Australia League (OPAL). Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly known as Kath Walker, was a QCAATSI leader and consistently credited her Second World War service as changing the direction of her life. She remembered the Australian Women's Army Service as an overwhelmingly egalitarian experience: '[In] the army, I was accepted as one of them and none of the girls I trained with cared whether I was black, blue or purple. For the first time in my life I felt equal to other human beings'.<sup>6</sup> Oodgeroo took advantage of repatriation courses offered to ex-servicemen and women – one of the few tertiary education schemes available to Indigenous Australians.<sup>7</sup>

After the war Oodgeroo moved to Brisbane and settled in what was, until then, a white neighbourhood, where she encountered casual racism. In the 1950s she joined the Communist Party of Australia because it was the only political party that included equal rights for Aboriginal people in its platform. However, she quickly decided she did not like their modus operandi and groupthink, so she shifted her involvement towards new Queensland Indigenous rights organisations. In 1958 she joined the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI) and by 1960 she was elected the organisation's secretary.<sup>8</sup> QCAATSI was the Queensland affiliate of the newly formed Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and therefore was involved in much of the groundwork for federal campaigns such as the 1967 referendum. But as a Queensland organisation, QCAATSI was also focused on state issues, such as the ongoing discrimination segregating Indigenous Australians and controlling them on reserves through legislation such as the *Queensland Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act*.

Another Second World War veteran who became a QCAATSI leader was Lambert ('Stan') McBride. His daughter, Linda McBride-Yuke, recalled in 2009 that he joined the Army for two reasons: 'It was guaranteed income, and he did honestly feel like he wanted to defend his country and contribute to the defence of it. So it's twofold: it was for purely economic reasons of a steady income; and also getting a trade'. McBride served in Townsville in the Transportation Corps, where he learned to drive Army trucks, and also worked as a carpenter on military construction projects such as building bridges and roads.<sup>9</sup> After the war McBride and his wife May settled in Brisbane, where he continued to work as a bridge carpenter. As an early Aboriginal family to settle in Brisbane post-1945, the McBrides were shielded from the most restrictive aspects of protection legislation. Lambert was someone whom newly arrived Murriss summoned for help, and gradually he became involved in organising the community. The McBrides were both active in OPAL and then QCAATSI in the 1960s, Lambert serving as QCAATSI president for much of the decade, while May was the publicity officer.<sup>10</sup> Their daughter Linda explained:

They'd be lobbying, mainly for that Queensland Act to be dismantled, but other kinds of issues on the side were Aboriginal education, Aboriginal employment, deaths in custody, housing: all that stuff that Aboriginal people had to fight tooth and nail to get because they were second-class citizens.<sup>11</sup>

Second World War veterans in other states, who were similarly focused on local and state issues, included Douglas Nicholls (Victoria) and Bert Groves (NSW). Both of these men represented links between the pre- and post-war activists. Nicholls had grown up on the Cummeragunja Reserve on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, before being forced out to fend for himself at age 14 under rules set by the New South Wales *Aborigines Protection Act* (1909). Nicholls found success in sport as a runner, then as a boxer, and finally as an Australian Rules footballer, playing for Fitzroy in Melbourne. In the late 1930s he became active in Fitzroy's growing Aboriginal community and William Cooper's Australian Aborigines' League, even attending the 1938 Day of Mourning Protest in Sydney. Interestingly, even though the *Defence Act* released Aboriginal people from compulsory national service, Nicholls did not ask for an exemption when he received a notice from the Citizen Military Forces in June 1941. Nicholls' time in the army was short-lived, however; in 1942 the police requested his discharge

so that he could return to Fitzroy and ease racial tensions among the white community and the rapidly growing Aboriginal population, as well as African-American servicemen.<sup>12</sup>

After the war, Nicholls became ordained as a minister and set up the Gore Street Mission to preach to and support Fitzroy's Aboriginal community. In addition to his charity work, he protested against the Woomera Rocket Range tests on Aboriginal land and the abuses perpetrated against Victorian Koories by the Aborigines Protection Board (reconstituted as the Welfare Board in 1957). In 1957 Nicholls was one of two Aboriginal people appointed to the Welfare Board, and in the same year he co-founded the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League. That organisation focused on Victorian Aboriginal issues, such as protesting against the planned closure of Lake Tyers Reserve in 1963 (an issue over which Nicholls resigned from the Aborigines Welfare Board).<sup>13</sup>

Bert Groves had briefly been involved in William Ferguson's Aborigines' Progressive Association in the late 1930s. He enlisted in the AIF in April 1943 and served in Australia for almost two years before being discharged in January 1945, with the official reason listed as 'there being no suitable vacancy in which his services could be employed'.<sup>14</sup> At war's end Groves moved to Sydney and continued his involvement in the Aborigines' Progressive Association, chairing meetings and organising social dances which doubled as fundraisers for the newly formed Redfern All-Blacks Rugby Club. Groves was involved in other Sydney campaigns, such as the small-scale protests against the rocket testing in the Western Desert (1946–47). In 1947 Groves became secretary of the Sydney branch of the now interstate Australian Aborigines' League, and in 1956 was elected inaugural president of the newly formed Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship.<sup>15</sup> Though this organisation challenged discrimination at the New South Wales state level, it also became actively involved in the organisation of FCAATSI and the national campaign for the 1967 referendum.<sup>16</sup>

The formation of FCAATSI in 1958 marked a turning point towards co-ordinated national activism. In 1961 Joe McGinness became FCAATSI's president, a position which he held until the organisation was discontinued in 1973. Other veterans, such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Lambert McBride, held leadership roles in state chapters such as the aforementioned QCAATSI. In its first decade FCAATSI campaigned for changes to Commonwealth legislation relating to social security, pastoral workers' wages, voting rights and Aboriginal health. FCAATSI also challenged assimilation policies, instead advocating for the integration of Indigenous

Australians. Whilst the distinction is subtle, ‘integration’ signified allowing Indigenous people to participate in all aspects of Australian society as equals, whilst not sacrificing their own cultural practices.<sup>17</sup> FCAATSI directed most of its energy towards securing a referendum to amend two sections of the Commonwealth constitution: firstly, to repeal section 127, which forbade governments including Aboriginal people in the census for population statistics; and secondly, to remove a clause in section 51 which forbade the Commonwealth from making laws relating to Aboriginal people.<sup>18</sup>

The abovementioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans were some of the highest profile activists lobbying for the 1967 referendum. Indeed, at one September 1963 meeting of FCAATSI delegates and Prime Minister Robert Menzies, four of the six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives were Second World War veterans: Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Doug Nicholls, Joe McGinness and Elia Ware. South Sea Islander FCAATSI secretary Faith Bandler – herself an ex-member of the Australian Women’s Land Army – in 1989 recalled an anecdote from that meeting:

When the meeting ended we all showed signs of relief and began to relax as the Prime Minister offered drinks. He turned to Kath Walker and asked her what she would like to drink; whether she preferred whiskey or some other alcoholic beverage. Kath told the Prime Minister that if he had made that offer to her in Queensland, he would have been gaoled. Shock clouded Menzies’ face and when he had regained composure he told Kath that he ‘was the boss around here’ and proceeded to pour her a drink. I believe that was the turning point – the incident caused him to give the situation of Aborigines more thought.<sup>19</sup>

**[Insert Figure 13.1]**

**FCAATSI delegation meeting with Prime Minister Menzies in September 1963. Left to right: Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal); Ted Penney; Gordon Bryant, MP; Elia Ware; Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister; Unknown; Joe McGinness, President of FCAATSI, shaking hands with the Prime Minister; Pastor Doug Nicholls.**

**Source: Fairfax Media.**

When the referendum was scheduled for May 1967, FCAATSI activists swung into action to encourage a Yes vote. Linda McBride-Yuke was young at the time, but she remembered her father Lambert working tirelessly:

He'd be going back and forth from Brisbane to Queensland, Brisbane to Queensland. Mum stayed at home a lot of the time because us kids were small, but some of the records show that they travelled in their own car, at their own cost. They'd do fundraising to get petrol so that they could go to all the different communities except for missions because they wouldn't have been allowed on the missions, because you need a permit from the white superintendent. Enrolling and encouraging them to vote, and leaving them with some PR thing about [what] you need to get enrol[led], who you need to vote for; we need your support.<sup>20</sup>

The 1967 referendum campaign also attracted service personnel from the post-war era. Korea veteran Ken Colbung was still in the army at the time, but campaigned with the Aboriginal community at La Perouse in Sydney. He recalled in 2007: 'We used to go out in our civvies and protest. We weren't supposed to mix politics with army life, and if they'd caught us, they'd have run us in, but we never did get caught'.<sup>21</sup> The 1967 referendum passed with 90.77 per cent of Australians voting yes – the highest Yes vote ever recorded in a federal referendum.

### **Indigenous ex-servicemen and women's activism 1967–80**

After the 1967 referendum, the Commonwealth government had the power to pass legislation relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but rarely did it exercise that power. Many of the veteran-activists therefore continued their work in FCAATSI and state organisations, pushing for the repeal of extant discriminatory legislation. As with the campaigns leading up to the 1967 referendum, this work entailed building coalitions with non-Indigenous organisations such as unions, religious and community groups. It also was a conservative form of activism, in that much of the work entailed lobbying activities rather than civil disobedience: petitions, holding public meetings, door-knocking and at times peaceful demonstrations.

As problems continued with poor Indigenous health, low levels of educational achievement and police brutality in custody, a younger generation of activists grew frustrated with the lack of



progress in Indigenous affairs. This new wave of activism tended to be urban-based and more radical, and derived its inspiration from the United States Black Power movement. These activists were not afraid of police confrontations and significant tensions developed, particularly in places like Redfern in Sydney.

The event for which Black Power is most famous was the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest in Canberra. Frustrated with the Commonwealth government's obstinate refusal to grant Aboriginal land rights, a group of activists travelled to the lawn outside Parliament House (now the Old Parliament) and pitched a beach umbrella with the name 'Aboriginal Embassy'. For almost six months they gathered national and international attention as the Tent Embassy became a lightning rod for Indigenous rights protesters. Members of the referendum movement joined this protest, including Faith Bandler and Doug Nicholls, who were captured in the footage of police violently breaking up the embassy protest in July 1972.<sup>22</sup>

Oodgeroo Noonuccal is one of the few persons with a record of military service who was involved in some of the other protests associated with the Black Power Movement. While not a Black Power activist per se, in 1969 she joined the newly formed Brisbane Aboriginal and Islanders Tribal Council. She was part of a growing movement within FCAATSI and its constituent groups to hand control over to Aboriginal people. When white members of QCAATSI objected to such propositions and even claimed 'We've made Kath Walker what she is', Oodgeroo walked out and subsequently led the push for Aboriginal control of the Federal Council.<sup>23</sup> She also participated in a 1970 protest against the re-enactment of Captain Cook's 1770 arrival at Botany Bay. She remarked at that protest:

No, I don't think we're rejecting modern white Australia. What we're doing is trying to do is wake them up out of their modern apathetic attitudes. Because we know how serious is the health of the race of the people – of the Aboriginal and Island people – and we are a race that could be wiped out unless the Australian public charges the government with the responsibility of doing something for the Aboriginal people.<sup>24</sup>

Oodgeroo's son Denis was a founding member of the Brisbane chapter of the Australian Black Panther Party. Later in the 1970s Oodgeroo became involved in the World Council of Churches, promoting Aboriginal rights and culture around the world. She also founded Moongalba on her

traditional land of Stradbroke Island in 1971, as a place for teaching culture to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In the 1980s Oodgeroo continued to be involved in movements such as opposing nuclear power and campaigning for Aboriginal land rights. While she did reduce her activism due to aging and ill-health, she was still involved in the Bicentenary protests, in 1987 returning her MBE (which had been awarded in 1970) and changing her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal.<sup>25</sup>

In Victoria, Second World War veteran Stewart Murray underwent a similar journey to Oodgeroo's. Murray was a founding member of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in 1957, taking on various leadership roles including the presidency during the 1960s. In 1969 he served for two months as one of six members of the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Council to the Victorian Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He resigned in protest, stating that 'the advisory council has no real power and the aboriginals who serve on it will be placed in a position where they will be under the State government's thumb'.<sup>26</sup> The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League had its own Black Power split in late 1969 when many Aboriginal members, including Murray, pushed non-Indigenous members out of leadership positions. Murray was also president of the Victorian Tribal Council, a precursor to the National Tribal Council formed as a breakaway Indigenous-only group from FCAATSI in 1970. Like Oodgeroo, Murray participated in a protest against the bicentenary of Captain Cook's landing in 1970, wearing a red headband 'to depict blood' and lamenting how few Australians knew 'the raw deal we are getting on our land'.<sup>27</sup>

Korean War veteran Ken Colbung also became involved in the 1970s protest movements. After leaving the Army in 1969, he briefly worked as a field officer in Charles Perkins' Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs.<sup>28</sup> In that capacity Colbung was exposed to the burgeoning Black Power Movement, before he returned to Perth and joined the Western Australian Aboriginal struggle. Colbung became the manager for Perth's Aboriginal Advancement Council, whose work focused both on lobbying for policy change while focusing on improving housing for Aboriginal residents.<sup>29</sup> In a 1972 interview with the ABC, Colbung criticised state and federal governments for hiring Aboriginal people as 'stooges for a political dictatorship'.<sup>30</sup> After confronting police at a few protests, Colbung tried to set up a Black Power base in Western Australia but found that the local Aboriginal people feared the term. He recalled in 2004:

When you'd say 'Aboriginal Motivation Group', they'd say, 'Well, what the hell is that?' But if you say 'black power', everybody stood up in their seats. And the Aboriginal people said, 'Like hell, we're not gonna be that. We're not gonna get killed.' 'Cause a lot of Aboriginal people were frightened that white people would gang up and kill them if they set up that black power.<sup>31</sup>

It was Colbung's mother who inspired him to return to a vision of black and white working together.<sup>32</sup> He left the Aboriginal Advancement Council, but continued to work with unions, while demonstrating for policy changes for Noongar access to social services. He also retained a more militant approach to his activism. At a meeting about the 1980 land rights protest at Noonkanbah, Colbung stated:

Well, we'll be as militant as we're required to be. If people wish to push us to the state that we've got to be desperately militant, well this is what we'll have to be. But this is not what's brought about, now, by the people concerned with starting this thing. Their militancy is going to be passive.<sup>33</sup>

He also invoked his military service to justify his logic when he declared:

My immediate reaction as a soldier of some nineteen years and a reactionary in the rights movement for preservation of civil rights was one immediate thought: What can we do with this? Can we start now using firearms in order to create the necessary saner thinking that's required?<sup>34</sup>

However, not all Aboriginal community members or activists appreciated Colbung's confrontational approach, and in 1979 members voted to dismiss him as chair of a board of management because his presence would 'not do the Aboriginal movement any good in West Australia'.<sup>35</sup> In the 1980s Colbung became involved in the Western Australian Aboriginal Lands Trust and in 1984 was the first Aboriginal Chair of AIATSIS.<sup>36</sup> In 1997, he famously travelled to the United Kingdom while Prime Minister John Howard was there to enlist his support for returning the Noongar resistance fighter Yagan's remains to Australia.<sup>37</sup>

**[Insert Figure 13.2]**

## **Ken Colbung meeting with Malcom Fraser.**

**Source: AIATSIS COLBUNG.K08.BW-N03946\_32**

Other ex-servicemen and women also went through a transformation in the 1970s, leaving behind the Black Power militancy while still emphasising Indigenous empowerment. Gerry Bostock served in the Army for nine years before moving to Sydney in 1970, where he became involved in Redfern activism and the land rights movement. He and his brother Lester began writing short sketches and programs to publicise Aboriginal causes. They helped to found Black Theatre in 1972, while Gerry continued to work as a playwright until his death in 2014.<sup>38</sup> Ken Brindle was a Korean War veteran heavily involved in Redfern's Aboriginal community in the 1960s and 1970s. He once said of his Army service: 'for the first time in my life white people were treating me as an equal. It made me realise that aborigines don't have to be inferior'.<sup>39</sup> Brindle joined the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in 1961 and was especially active in challenging police brutality in Redfern.<sup>40</sup> He was also active in the Redfern All-Blacks and then New South Wales state secretary of FCAATSI from 1967 to 1971.<sup>41</sup> In the 1970s Brindle continued to work at the Redfern grassroots, helping to establish Aboriginal hostels and serving as trustee of the Aboriginal Children's Advancement Society.<sup>42</sup> These sorts of local Indigenous organisations would become the principal site of advocacy for ex-service personnel after the Whitlam Labor government was elected in December 1972.

## **Leadership and advocacy**

During the Whitlam years the Commonwealth implemented a raft of Indigenous-related initiatives including: upgrading the Office of Aboriginal Affairs into a Department of Aboriginal Affairs; instigating the Woodward Land Rights Commission, which would frame the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* in 1976; passing the *Racial Discrimination Act* in 1975; and founding the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) – rebadged as the National Aboriginal Conference by the Fraser government in 1977 – as a forum for Indigenous input into government decision-making. The Commonwealth also introduced self-management policies, providing direct funding to Aboriginal service-delivery organisations in areas such as health, legal assistance and housing.

Some of those to work within these new bureaucracies and organisations had been 1967 referendum activists. Lambert McBride worked for Aboriginal Hostels across Brisbane;<sup>43</sup> while Stewart Murray, who had been so determined to assert Aboriginal leadership in Victorian organisations, continued as the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League's liaison officer from 1970. He worked directly with Aboriginal families advising on court mediation, family counselling and community consultation. Murray became Director of the League in 1972 and adopted a more conciliatory, pragmatic approach to working with the Victorian Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He was a co-founder of Victoria's Aboriginal Legal Service in 1972 and in 1974–75 worked as a senior liaison officer with the Victorian Department of Aboriginal Affairs. After stepping down as Director of the League, he became involved in other local projects including: establishing an Aboriginal youth hostel in Swan Hill; then being on the board of Victorian Aboriginal Hostels; establishing the Victorian Aboriginal Funeral Service; serving on the Victorian Aboriginal Land Council; and being administrator of Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative Ltd.<sup>44</sup>

Serving as leaders of government-funded or supported organisations did not necessarily mean that these leaders left government policies unchallenged. Len Culbong had been raised in a family that had an activist streak. This upbringing instilled in Len a sense of social justice, which would guide his career both during and after the Army.<sup>45</sup> When serving in Vietnam, according to his sister, Margaret, he was troubled by the killing of Vietnamese women and children.<sup>46</sup> Len returned to Western Australia, where the experience of being rejected at the Narogin RSL further radicalised him.<sup>47</sup> As Margaret said in 2015, Len 'took up the fight on the streets of Perth'. He also worked at the Aboriginal Legal Service, at one stage even as chief executive officer, fighting for 'a fair and just system'.<sup>48</sup> After the death in custody of Jon Pat in Roebourne in 1983, Len became involved in Black Action Group and the Committee to Defend Black Rights. He worked with activists in other states to document deaths in custody and toured nationally, as well as marching on the streets, until the Commonwealth government set up the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*.<sup>49</sup> Daughter Nicole recalled in 2015: 'My earliest memories of my father would be always protesting and always being on dad's shoulders – flags, and this proud feeling just being there and standing up'.<sup>50</sup>

Another West Australian leader, Rob Riley, had a tumultuous childhood as a member of the Stolen Generations, being raised at Sister Kate's Home in Perth, where he suffered abuse. He

joined the Army in 1973, serving for three years in the Armoured Personnel division and rising to the rank of sergeant. He wrote of this experience in 1987: ‘In the Army ... there was a system that everybody, no matter who it was, has to put up with, conform to’, but the system was capable of change.<sup>51</sup> He began a long career at the Western Australia Aboriginal Legal Service as a field officer in 1979 and within six months was in charge of the organisation’s field operations. Throughout the 1980s he was an active leader protesting against Western Australian state government issues affecting Aboriginal people, including police brutality, deaths in custody and land rights. Riley was elected to the National Aboriginal Conference in 1981 and became its chair in 1984. In this position he launched a powerful public attack against Prime Minister Bob Hawke for betraying Aboriginal people over national land rights. After the Hawke government abolished the conference in 1985, Riley continued to work in Aboriginal affairs, including working on the Northern Land Council; acting as advisor to Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Gerry Hand, working on projects such as setting up the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC); heading the WA Aboriginal Legal Service (1990–92); and forming part of the team negotiating with the Keating Labor Government to establish the *Native Title Act* (1993).<sup>52</sup> Riley’s biographer Quentin Beresford suggests that it was Riley’s time in the Army that taught him how to harness ‘this negative energy into a positive fight to end the kinds of injustice to which he had been exposed’.<sup>53</sup>

**[Insert Figure 13.3]**

**Mr Rob Riley, in his capacity as chair of the National Aboriginal Conference, conducting a press conference at Parliament House, Canberra, 16 August 1984.**

**Source: Fairfax Media, image courtesy of ACT Heritage Library**

Most other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-service personnel who worked in Indigenous organisations were less radical or outspoken in their criticisms of the government, but still credited their military experience as central to developing their skills. Vietnam veteran Graham Atkinson completed arts and social work courses after leaving the Army. He then worked in the Victorian Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, and as regional director of Aboriginal Development Commission for Victoria and

Tasmania. Atkinson says, ‘I’d like to highlight my involvement in Aboriginal affairs because I think it all started through my experience in the Army. It was Vietnam which forced me to become more aware of the social and political issues facing Aboriginal people’.<sup>54</sup> Phil Prosser worked with Aboriginal Visitors Scheme since its founding in 1988. Initiated as a result of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, the program sends visitors to local prisons and police lock-ups to provide counselling to Western Australian Aboriginal prisoners. Prosser has also co-ordinated diversity training programs for police recruits. Linking his Army service with these professional opportunities, Prosser stated in 2000: ‘Well it [Army] gave me the chance that I’d been looking for. A polite way to do things and to prepare me for later stages of my life. It furthered my [sic], I was able to further my education’.<sup>55</sup>

One of the most prominent Indigenous ex-servicewomen is Sue Gordon, who served in the WRAAC from 1961 to 1963. After a series of other professional roles, in 1969 Gordon began a long career working in Indigenous affairs – first in the Pilbara region with organisations representing the Iergamadu people, then for the welfare department and then for the Commonwealth Employment Service in Port Hedland. In the 1980s she took on more prominent state and national roles, including with the Aboriginal Employment Committee, managing the Aboriginal Development Commission in Port Hedland, and as commissioner of Aboriginal Affairs – the first Aboriginal person to head a Western Australian government department. In 1988 she became the first Aboriginal magistrate of the new Western Australian Children’s Court. For the next eight years, while working as a magistrate, Gordon completed a law degree part-time at the University of Western Australia. She also sat on national bodies including the National Committee on Violence, chaired the Western Australia Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities, and headed the Howard government’s short-lived National Indigenous Council (2004–08). Her most high-profile national position was as the chair of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce (colloquially known as the Intervention) in 2008. She attributed the discipline instilled in her through her upbringing at Sister Kate’s Home and her three years in the Army as what prepared her for these significant roles.<sup>56</sup>

Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-service personnel have been involved in Indigenous social advancement through the private sector. Vietnam veteran Bob Blair worked for the Central Queensland Aboriginal Corporation for Training and Resources, providing

training to several Aboriginal organisations in Central Queensland. In 1988 Blair was appointed the inaugural CEO of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre in Rockhampton. Since opening in 1988, the Dreamtime Cultural Centre has employed numerous Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, worked with Indigenous contracting services such as catering outfits and has expanded to include a conference centre and hotel. Blair has also been the Deputy Chairperson of Indigenous Business Australia and has worked with the ADF to assist in Indigenous recruitment. In 2010 Bob Blair attributed his management skills and style to his Army training, remarking: ‘there’s no doubt in my mind, whatsoever, without my Army background, this place wouldn’t be where it is today’.<sup>57</sup>

What these later examples have in common with each other and many pre-1967 activists is a conservative, reformist approach to Indigenous affairs. Rather than challenging the very structures of the Australian government, they were more prone to work within the existing framework, seeking reforms to support Indigenous communities. It is perhaps not surprising that those with backgrounds in the military – a conservative, hierarchically structured institution – would be drawn to more orderly, organisational approaches to Indigenous advocacy rather than civil disobedience or radical protest. What is less clear, though, is if the military influenced their approaches to Indigenous advancement, or if the military attracted people with an anti-radical mindset.

## Conclusion

Ex-service personnel have played leadership roles in other non-profit organisations and statutory bodies including the South Australia Aboriginal Prisoners and Offenders Support Services Incorporated; South Australia Commissioner for Aboriginal Engagement; Tangentyere Council (Alice Springs); ATSIC; Mt Isa Aboriginal Legal Services; Brothers’ Act of Random Kindness (BARK – a Townsville social enterprise employing Indigenous parolees); Murri Courts; Port Curtis Coral Coast Corporation; Wabubadda Aboriginal Corporation in the Atherton Tablelands; Western Australia Aboriginal Medical Service; Canberra Aboriginal Health Service; and ACT Reconciliation.<sup>58</sup> Just the diversity of these organisations demonstrates the numerous ways that Indigenous ex-service personnel have continued to serve their communities.



<sup>1</sup> Phillip Prosser, ORAL TRC 5000/183, NLA. See also Phil Prosser, 'Show Respect,' in *Speaking from the Heart*, Sally Morgan (ed.), Fremantle Press, Perth, 2007, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Prosser, in *The Forgotten*, directed by Glen Stasiuk, originally aired as an episode of *Message Stick* on the ABC, 27 April 2003. See also Prosser 2007, pp. 140–41.

<sup>3</sup> See Jennifer Clark, *Aborigines & Activism: Race, Aborigines & the Coming of the Sixties to Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2008; John Chesterman, *Civil Rights: How Indigenous Australians Won Formal Equality*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2005; Frances Peters-Little, Denise Haslem, and Robert Lewis, *Vote Yes for Aborigines: The 1967 Referendum and the Fight for Aboriginal Citizenship Rights*, Ronin Films, Canberra, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> General Secretary, RSL to JB Chifley, Prime Minister, 20 November 1946 in RSL papers, series 1, MSS 6609, box 158, file 2248c, NLA. See also *Argus* (Melbourne), 2 November 1946.

<sup>5</sup> Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu: My Fight for Aboriginal Rights*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1991, pp. 30–50; Sue Taffe, 'The Cairns Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Advancement League and the Community of the Left,' *Labour History*, no. 97, 2009, pp. 149–67; 'Elia Ware,' *Collaborating for Indigenous Rights*, National Museum of Australia <[indigenoustrights.net.au/people/pagination/elia\\_ware](http://indigenoustrights.net.au/people/pagination/elia_ware)>.

<sup>6</sup> No name or date of speech – simply 'Kath Walker', in papers of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Box 30, University of Queensland Library. See also 'Kath Walker', *This Is Your Life*, 1980, 25 min.; Oodgeroo Noonuccal, in Hall, *Fighters from the Fringe: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Recall the Second World War*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1995, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, in Hall 1995, pp. 130–131.

<sup>8</sup> See Noah Riseman, 'Escaping Assimilation's Grasp: Aboriginal Women in the Australian Women's Military Services,' *Women's History Review* vol. 24, no. 5, 2015, pp. 762–63. See also *Shadow Sister: A film biography of Australian Aboriginal poet Kath Walker, M.B.E.*, directed and produced by Frank Heimans, Cinetel Productions, 1977, 53 min.

<sup>9</sup> Linda McBride-Yuke, interview, 20 June 2010. See also Linda McBride-Yuke, 'Journey of a Lifetime: From the Sticks to the State Library – an Aboriginal Editor's Story', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> For more on OPAL and QCAATSI, see Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994, pp. 83–102.

<sup>11</sup> Linda McBride-Yuke 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Mavis Thorpe Clark, *The Boy from Cumerooogunga: The Story of Sir Douglas Ralph Nicholls Aboriginal Leader*, Hodder and Stoughton, Sydney, 1979, pp. 116–23.

<sup>13</sup> Clark 1979, pp. 116–23. See also Richard Broome, 'Nicholls, Sir Douglas Ralph (Doug) (1906–1988)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <[adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920)>.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert Stanley Grove, B883, NX200798, NAA.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Horner, *Seeking Racial Justice: An Insider's Memoir of the Movement for Aboriginal Advancement, 1938–1978*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2004, pp. 14–21.

- <sup>16</sup> Faith Bandler and Len Fox, *The Time Was Ripe: A History of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, 1956–69*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative, Sydney, 1983. See also ‘Subject files’, ASIO, A6122, item 156/REFERENCE COPY, NAA.
- <sup>17</sup> See Russell McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2011, pp. 101–12.
- <sup>18</sup> See McGinness 1991, pp. 71–83; Faith Bandler, *Turning the Tide: A Personal History of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1989; Sue Taffe, *Black and White Together, FCAATSI: The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1958–1973*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Bandler 1989, p. 98.
- <sup>20</sup> Linda McBride-Yuke 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> Ken Colbung, ‘The Spirit Has More Strength’, in Morgan 2007, p. 75.
- <sup>22</sup> On Black Power and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, see Gary Foley, ‘Black Power in Redfern 1968–1972’, *The Koori History Website* <[www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay\\_1.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html)>; Kathy Lothian, ‘Seizing the Time: Australian Aborigines and the Influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969–1972’, *Journal of Black Studies* vol. 35, no. 4, 2005, pp. 179–200; Kathy Lothian, ‘Moving Blackwards: Black Power and the Aboriginal Embassy’, in *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories*, Ingereth Macfarlane and Mark Hannah (eds.), ANU Press, Canberra, 2007, pp. 19–34; *Embassy Days*, aired as an episode of *Message Stick*, ABC, 2008; Gary Foley, Andrew Schaap, and Edwina Howell (eds.), *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> Kathie Cochrane, *Oodgeroo*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1994, pp. 80–85. On the split in FCAATSI, see Taffe 2005, pp. 219–313.
- <sup>24</sup> Kath Walker, in *Embassy Days* 2008.
- <sup>25</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *My People*, 3rd ed., The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1990; Cochrane 1994, pp. 119–20.
- <sup>26</sup> Richard Broome, *Fighting Hard: The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2015, chapter 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Broome 2015, chapter 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Colbung 2007, pp. 76–77. Ken Colbung, interview with Kerrie Jean Ross, *Away!*, ABC Radio National, 27 August 2007, <[www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/first\\_australians/resistance/yagan/away\\_audio\\_program\\_transcript](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/first_australians/resistance/yagan/away_audio_program_transcript)>.
- <sup>29</sup> Colbung 2007, pp. 76–77.
- <sup>30</sup> ABC television news and current affairs programs, K1129, item 1821482, NAA.
- <sup>31</sup> ‘Kenneth Colbung’, *Message Stick*, produced and directed by Kelrick Martin, produced by the ABC, 2004, <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s1070887.htm>>. See also Ken Colbung, interview with Kerrie Jean Ross, 27 August 2007; Colbung 2007, p. 77.
- <sup>32</sup> Ken Colbung, interview with Kerrie Jean Ross, 27 August 2007.
- <sup>33</sup> K1129, 1821484, NAA.
- <sup>34</sup> K1129, 1821486, NAA.

- <sup>35</sup> K1129, 1093624, NAA.
- <sup>36</sup> Margaret Culbong 2015.
- <sup>37</sup> ‘Kenneth Colbung’, *Message Stick*, 2004.
- <sup>38</sup> Gerry Bostock, ‘Gerry Bostock’s Story,’ *LivingNow*, <<http://www.livingnow.com.au/articles/living-with-spirit/gerry-bostock%25e2%2580%2599s-story>>; ‘Best Foot Forward,’ *Message Stick*, produced by the ABC, 2005, <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s1276741.htm>>.
- <sup>39</sup> Lyn Brignell, ‘Brindle, Kenneth (Ken) (1931–1987)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 2007, <[adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brindle-kenneth-ken-12255](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brindle-kenneth-ken-12255)>.
- <sup>40</sup> Bandler & Fox 1983, pp. 81–92.
- <sup>41</sup> Bandler 1989, p. 135.
- <sup>42</sup> Brignell 2007.
- <sup>43</sup> Linda McBride-Yuke 2010.
- <sup>44</sup> Gary Murray, ‘Murray, John Stewart (1922–1989),’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <[adb.anu.edu.au/biography/murray-john-stewart-15824/text27023](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/murray-john-stewart-15824/text27023)>; Broome 2015.
- <sup>45</sup> ‘Faith, Len Culbong Story’ 2015.
- <sup>46</sup> Margaret Culbong 2015.
- <sup>47</sup> ‘Faith, Len Colbung Story’ 2015.
- <sup>48</sup> Margaret Culbong 2015.
- <sup>49</sup> ‘Faith, Len Culbong Story’ 2015; Margaret Culbong 2015. On Jon Pat, see P.N. Grabosky, *Wayward Governance: Illegality and Its Control in the Public Sector*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1989, chapter five, <<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/previous%20series/lcj/1-20/wayward/ch5t.html>>.
- <sup>50</sup> ‘Faith, Len Culbong Story’ 2015.
- <sup>51</sup> Quentin Beresford, *Rob Riley: An Aboriginal Leader’s Quest for Justice*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2012, p. 75.
- <sup>52</sup> Beresford 2012. See also Fiona Skyring, *Justice: A History of the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2011.
- <sup>53</sup> Beresford 2012, p. 75.
- <sup>54</sup> Graham Atkinson, in Jackomos & Fowell 1991, p. 72. See also Graham Atkinson, AIATSIS, BOSTOCK\_G01-016549.
- <sup>55</sup> Phillip James Prosser interviewed by John Bannister in the *Bringing them home* oral history project, TRC 5000/183, NLA.
- <sup>56</sup> Sue Gordon, ORAL TRC 6260/5, NLA; Sue Gordon, interview, 1 September 2015; Riseman 2016, pp. 57–88; Riseman and Trembath 2016, pp. 104–108.
- <sup>57</sup> Bob Blair, interview, 22 June 2010.
- <sup>58</sup> Frank Lampard, interview, 28 November 2013 and 20 December 2013; Geoff Shaw, interview, 18 September 2015; Patricia Lees, TRC 5000/300, NLA; Harry Allie, interview, 4 November 2011; Chris Townson, interview, 26 September 2012; George Bostock, interview with Noah Riseman, 18 June 2010, Brisbane; Mabel Quakawoot,

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interview, 5 June 2011; Jacqueline Shaw, interview, 27 September 2012; Riseman and Trembath 2016, pp. 103–104; Neil Macdonald, interview with Noah Riseman, 3 and 5 December 2009, Canberra; Riseman 2016, pp. 27; 142–143; 169–171.