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Opening the military door 1945–65

Noah Riseman

‘No trouble. Made a lot of good mates. No trouble. We was young, you muck around ... yeah, good life, Army life.’ – Len Ogilvie

The Second World War offered new opportunities for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, but the coming of peace represented a return to the status quo of inequality. Assimilation policies became standard practice across all states and territories. Child removal continued and even accelerated, as state Aboriginal welfare boards (renamed from their earlier incarnations as protection boards) adopted policies reflecting the resolution of the 1951 Native Welfare Conference of Commonwealth and state authorities: ‘Assimilation means, in practical terms that, in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like other white Australians do’.¹ It would not be until the 1960s that the country witnessed the beginning of significant changes for Indigenous rights.

However, the two decades after the Second World War did witness gradual changes in policies governing the military service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Initially, as the active hostilities ended, their role in a changing defence force was uncertain. Very quickly the end of the war saw the re-imposition of rules barring persons ‘not substantially of European origin or descent’. Yet by 1948, under significant pressure from the RSL and public figures like the Aboriginal Lieutenant Reginald Saunders, the Army, and then later the Navy and Air Force, updated their regulations to permit Indigenous enlistment on a case-by-case basis. Consequently, there were a small

number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men who served in the Malayan Emergency (1950–60) and the Korean War (1950–53).

One of the main drivers of change was the introduction of national service in 1951 and its reintroduction in 1964. The *National Service Act* explicitly did not require Aboriginal people to register, yet the accompanying regulations and debates over the complex meanings of Aboriginality left many men still liable. For those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women navigating these complex policies, one thing was constant: once in the armed forces, the sense of equality that their forebears generally experienced in the two world wars continued. This chapter examines all of these themes through the lens of change and continuity: how changing Defence regulations gradually aligned their policies with the lived experience of interracial equality within the forces.

Service in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force

After Japan's formal surrender on 2 September 1945 the Allied forces, under American leadership, made plans for the country's occupation. Australia agreed to contribute to the multi-national British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF), which operated from 1946 until 1952. About 16 000 Australians, the majority of them from the Army, were among the 45 000 BCOF members drawn from across the British Commonwealth.² Only a small number of Aboriginal men were among these ranks, their numbers limited primarily because the Labor Government of Ben Chifley (1945–49) was determined to reimpose the colour bar that had been relaxed during wartime hostilities. Frank Forde, the Minister for the Army, decreed: 'Aboriginal members of the Australian Military Forces gave splendid service during the war, but most of them cannot conform to the standard laid down for the Japan force'.³ Consequently, only those Aboriginal men who were already in Japan as a result of serving in the 2nd AIF, or those few who again slipped through the colour net, served in BCOF.

Only snippets of information about these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are available. Among these Aboriginal soldiers was Donald Edward Waters, known as Jimmy, brother of the first Aboriginal RAAF pilot, Len Waters. Jimmy enlisted in Warwick, Queensland, at the same time as Len, and served with BCOF for 18 months.

Len once reported that Jimmy ‘had a ball’ in Japan, but according to Len’s widow Gladys, he returned traumatised from his overall war experience. Gladys also recalled in 2014 that Jimmy was not paid for part of his Second World War and BCOF service. When his wife, Ruby, found out years later, she sued the government and was awarded back-pay for Jimmy’s service.⁴ Photographs in the Australian War Memorial reinforce Len Waters’ observations about Jimmy’s and other Aboriginal men’s positive experience of serving in Japan. They show Aboriginal men casually mixing with their mates and even participating in inter-service athletics competitions. An Army Public Relations short film in the late 1940s entitled ‘BCOF on Parade’ showed an Aboriginal soldier participating in Bren gun training and practice.⁵

[Insert Figure 10.1]

Aboriginal serviceman Private SKJ ‘Len’ Lenoy attempts to clear the bar in a pole vault competition. He is participating in a British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) interzone athletics meeting, at Anzac Park, Kure, Japan. He was later killed in action on 24 April 1951 at the Battle of Kapyong in the Korean War. He had also served in the Second World War.

Source: AWM HOB0707

One of the few recorded Aboriginal oral histories about BCOF comes from Kenneth Colbung, who reflected when being interviewed by the ABC in 2004:

And then I saw that what had happened to the civilian population there and how they would cower down. I could really reflect ... how those people were feeling. It wasn’t the civilian population, it was the military that moved in and caused all the atrocities that were around. And, of course, the civilians had to take the brunt of it.⁶

Another member of BCOF, Torres Strait Islander Charles Mene, did not recall any problems signing up for BCOF. Mene said he wanted to see Japan because:

[We’d] been fighting them, and I thought I’d better go up and see what the place is like ... We used to go up to Tokyo to do the guards around the area. That was our duty. And then after a time, we would come back again to the Battalion area.⁷

Changing attitudes within Australia

Whilst only a small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men served in Japan, the military's reimposed colour bar was facing a challenge in Australia. Indigenous and non-Indigenous veterans alike wrote to newspapers in 1946 praising Indigenous efforts in the Second World War and calling for the armed forces to admit Aboriginal men. The most high-profile of Aboriginal ex-servicemen, Saunders, featured prominently in this campaign, even participating in rallies against the exclusion of Aboriginal men from BCOF.⁸ In March 1946 he described the colour bar as 'a very narrow-minded and ignorant attitude taken by both the Army and Government officials'.⁹ The RSL was generally silent at the Commonwealth level on the question of ongoing Defence regulations banning Indigenous service, but there were some local branches that challenged the ban.¹⁰ In November 1951 the Victorian RSL even suggested an all-Aboriginal unit, commanded by Saunders, to lift Aboriginal people's national prestige.¹¹

In 1947 the Army became a permanent regular force for the first time in Australian history. In response to public and RSL pressure the Army became the first service to reconsider its position and, at last, in 1948 lifted the colour bar that had formally been in place since the *Defence Act* of 1909. Order 177 removed the reference to recruits needing to be 'substantially of European origin or descent', theoretically opening the door to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers on a regular, rather than the hitherto exceptional, basis. Even so, Army officials were worried about the prospect of substantial Aboriginal enlistments for three prejudicial reasons:

1. 'Command: Given the ability, there would be no reason why an aborigine should not rise to NCO or WO rank and thus be in a position to command over white troops. This may not be desirable';
2. They would have access to liquor; and
3. Barracks would be integrated.¹²

Consequently, the Regular Army determined that they would allow Aboriginal (and presumably Torres Strait Islander) people to sign up on a case-by-case basis, after an interview and approval from the senior administrative officer of the Command of Military District.¹³ The Navy and Air Force continued to exclude Indigenous enlistments until 1951, when amendments to the *Defence Act* repealed the earlier section which had

exempted those ‘not substantially of European origin or descent’ from compulsory call-up in peacetime.¹⁴

These particular changes to the *Defence Act* were not related to Indigenous rights, but rather were tied to another defence reform: the re-introduction of national service. In 1951 the coalition government of Robert Menzies introduced the *National Service Act*, requiring Australian men aged 18 to partake in 176 days of military training. Since the government wanted national service to apply to immigrants, including non-Europeans, it needed to amend the *Defence Act* to repeal the clauses exempting persons of ‘non-European origin or descent’.¹⁵ Yet whilst these amendments, and the consequential Air Force and Navy policy reforms, ended the legal barriers to Indigenous enlistment, the *National Service Act* set up a new obstructive framework. Conscious that amending the *Defence Act* would open the door to Indigenous service, the Cabinet decided to exempt ‘aboriginal natives’ from compulsory national service under section 18 of the *National Service Act 1951*. This was a practical decision, as the racial discourse of the time principally considered ‘real’ Aboriginal people to be those of ‘full-blood’ who were living in remote areas.¹⁶

Despite the exemption in the Act, an unknown number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men did serve, both during this first period of national service, from 1951–59, and in its second incarnation, from 1964–72. Some served because they were unaware of their exemption; some volunteered; and others who were of mixed descent sometimes did not fit within the *National Service Regulations’* definition of Aboriginality, which focused primarily on so-called ‘full-bloods’. Chapter 11 explains in more detail the problematic aspects of the *National Service Regulations’* definitions of Aboriginality, particularly in relation to Aboriginal men of mixed descent.

Indigenous men called to register for national service included, for instance, Torres Strait Islander Eddie Koiki Mabo. When summoned, he told his local member of parliament that he did not want to serve. The member found out that Mabo was exempt and he ‘never heard anything from them afterwards’.¹⁷ Victorian Koorie man Noel Tovey, meanwhile, was excited when he received the letter summoning him for national service, as it represented an opportunity to reinvent his identity. He later said of the

experience: 'No one laughed or called me a poof or Choc or Darkie ... the great thing about our group was that, even though we all came from totally different backgrounds, once in uniform we were all the same'.¹⁸ He further stated that:

[W]earing the uniform filled me with pride and self-esteem and that I was even considering joining the Air Force permanently. In six months, I thought that I had been well equipped for the rest of my life and that I was on the right track. I would never have to answer to anybody about colour, background or indeed anything again.¹⁹

Tovey's comments in 2004, relishing his military service for the equality it provided, echoed with those of earlier generations of Aboriginal servicemen.

Malayan Emergency and Korean War

As the global order changed after the Second World War, Australia's geopolitical and military strategy, too, changed. With the coming of the Cold War and decolonisation in Asia, Australia's strategic planners progressively assumed that the United States would primarily maintain security in the Asia-Pacific.²⁰ Yet strategic links to the traditional ally, the United Kingdom (UK), continued. In 1950 Australia became involved in two conflicts that symbolised these dual fidelities.

The Malayan Emergency (1950–60) was a commitment in support of the UK, the colonial power in Malaya. Australia contributed RAAF personnel and, later, ground troops to intermittent operations suppressing a Communist insurgency.²¹ At least 15 Aboriginal men served in this conflict, two of whom were killed in action: Cecil Anderson and Cedric Charles Ingra. Anderson was shot by a hidden sniper at close range. Though mortally wounded, he still managed to return fire and cover his patrol until the enemy retreated. For his bravery under fire, Anderson was posthumously mentioned in despatches.²² However, most of the men who served in Malaya had little, if any, confrontation with the enemy. Charles Mene recalled in 1995:

I did lots of patrols but when I went we never come across any enemy. We were in the jungle, patrolling, yes, but we never come across any of the enemy. We were in the jungle for a fortnight sometimes, but we didn't come across the terrorists.²³

The Malayan Emergency formally ended in 1960, though Australian troops continued to operate in the country until 1963. Australia still retains a RAAF base at Butterworth as part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore) signed in 1971.

The fighting in the Korean War (1950–53), in contrast, lasted only three years but entailed widespread destruction and fighting. In response to the North Korean invasion of South Korea in late June 1950, the United Nations (UN) Security Council passed a resolution authorising the use of force to repel the attack and restore peace and security to the area. The UN coalition, led by the United States, quickly incorporated Australian forces already in Japan: the RAAF, the Royal Australian Navy, and finally the 3RAR (3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment). The battalion was brought up to strength by raising K-Force, made up of volunteers who agreed to serve a three-year period in the army, including a year in Korea. By 1953 over 17 000 Australians had served in the Korean War.²⁴ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership of this force was small: at least 36 men have been identified by the Australian War Memorial. Among them were poet Cec Fisher, actor Stephen Dodd, Second World War and Malaya veteran Charles Mene, Eugene and Charles Lovett (continuing the family's long tradition of military service), Reg Saunders and activists Kenneth Brindle and Kenneth Colbung.

A few oral history interviews were recorded before most of these veterans passed away, and all speakers commented on the harsh environmental and fighting conditions in Korea. The country has great extremes of climate, with temperatures in the winter falling to minus 17 Celsius in mountainous regions. When interviewed for ABC radio in 1998, Ned Egglestone recalled that the Australian Army's equipment had been run down and was not appropriate for the icy conditions in Korea. Like many other soldiers, he had never seen snow before; let alone was he prepared to fight in it. He remembered:

It was rugged [pauses], very very cold, your rifle – sometimes you could put your hand on the butt, on the steel, so it would stick. And your feet, and your ears and that. Ohhh ... and then your trench in the ground, that would get pretty snow bound.²⁵

Pat Owen's 1991 recollections revolved around the intersections between the bleak climatic and fighting conditions:

We were on the 38th Parallel near what we called the Valley of Death. Nobody could bury their dead. The valley separated us and the Chinese. If you were killed in a valley they had to leave your body there. Even at night they put flares up and you would get caught. There was thousands of bodies, all decomposing. The winter preserved them but in the summer, when the bodies were swollen and the wind was blowing our way, they were on the nose.²⁶

Veterans' memories of combat contribute further to a picture of Korea as a traumatising experience. Len Ogilvie was a machine-gun carrier who was injured and nearly died in an ambush on 5 November 1950. He recalled when speaking to this author in 2015:

They didn't give us that final order to move. I got out the trench to look where my mates were and they were gone. I was wounded and my mate was killed. I was behind enemy lines all night until they pick me up the following morning, straight out of there.²⁷

Ned Egglestone was part of the Battle of Kapyong on 22–25 April 1951, the most significant battle for Australian troops in Korea. He remembered that the Australians and Turks (serving in the Turkish Brigade) had to cancel their planned Anzac Day celebrations.²⁸ Pat Owen meanwhile said of Korea: 'I've never known anything like the war, being a young bloke you don't really know what you're in for. We were lucky we had veterans from the Second World War, so we had good instructors'.²⁹ Kenneth Colbung also recalled the psychological challenges and war trauma more than 50 years later:

I saw some pretty heavy duty fighting, but as a soldier you don't talk about it, you just get drunk. In a time of war you survive by putting the bad things to one side and trying not to think about them. That's why alcohol becomes important.³⁰

Besides the hard fighting and conditions, the other prominent memory among Aboriginal veterans was their interactions with the Korean people and the tragic circumstances in which these people found themselves. As Colbung remembered it, the soldiers had to flatten mud huts as they advanced across Korea, but as they proceeded, people were

scattered and crops were left unattended. Notwithstanding the danger, civilians would come behind the soldiers on the front lines to pick up brass shells to sell. Colbung also witnessed extreme poverty in Korea, including a camp of 5000 displaced children under the Salvation Army's care; they were barely coping with their limited resources. Even 46 years after the war, Colbung could distinctly remember the smell of rotting, burning flesh.³¹ Children also featured in some of the stories about Korea that Reg Saunders told his family. His daughter Glenda Humes recounted in 2014 an incident in which her father and his men came across an empty house with a crying baby on the floor, covered in rags. As the commanding officer, Saunders was responsible for figuring out how to look after the baby, an awkward situation until he could find someone suitable. Saunders also told a story about seeing a little girl who reminded him of Glenda. The girl was fleeing artillery which Saunders' company was firing on her village; as Glenda told it:

He said, 'I was watching her run with the binoculars, and I was saying, "You got to make this, make it." And she didn't.' And I think it was those types of things that really affected Dad much more than the Second World War did because there were children involved. And he was always really special around children, and it certainly changed him so that when he came back, my mother and their relationship wasn't able to withstand that trauma of Korea, I think. And for a lot of people, for those veterans, it was a different experience. They didn't talk about the trouble that they had sleeping and the nightmares.³²

The trauma and silences that Humes described partly contributed to Korea's popular status as 'The Forgotten War'. Its short duration, the smaller commitment of Australian troops, the war's stalemate ending and its positioning between the Second World War and the Vietnam War have all perpetuated the conflict's lesser status in public memory. So, too, has its status as a United Nations-sanctioned intervention, dubbed a 'police action' in the US. Egglestone believed there was little public interest when the soldiers returned (though histories show that there were indeed welcome home parades). Egglestone maintained that the RSL was not interested at all in veterans of the war in Korea, which was one reason so many joined the Korean Veterans Association of Australia.³³ Saunders was involved with the association's activities, as was his daughter. Some of Saunders' words are even inscribed on a specially dedicated wall of the North

Bondi War Memorial and a plaque in the Australian War Memorial commemorating the battle of Kapyong, Korea: ‘At last I felt like an ANZAC and I imagine there were 600 others like me’.

[Insert Figure 10.2]

Four members of the Salvage Unit of the Australian component of the BCOF. Left to right: back row: Ned Egglestone and ‘Tiny’ Taylor and front row: Jim Coxhead and ‘Snowy’ Dickson. The soldiers are brandishing bundles of banknotes with which they have just been paid.

Source: AWM P01795.001, donated by N. Egglestone.

It is not surprising that Saunders’ words are part of the Korean War memorial, as men who served under him remembered him as a commander who cared about their wellbeing. Humes said in 2014, ‘It was really great to be able to meet people who served with Dad – it was always how proud they were to serve with him’.³⁴ The respect Saunders commanded within the forces was echoed by the RSL, who led an unsuccessful push in 1953 to send Saunders to London as part of Australia’s official contingent to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The Victorian RSL executive pointed to Māori representation in New Zealand’s contingent, arguing ‘that it is important to Australia that overseas countries should be given an assurance that the “natives” are represented’.³⁵ The proposition was a marker of Saunders’ high standing within the Victorian veterans’ community, as well as his public position as a ‘successful’ Aboriginal man. In the 1950s, the media and government departments also included Saunders among a pantheon of Aboriginal ‘celebrities’, such as Albert Namatjira and Harold Blair, who were being touted as models of assimilation.³⁶ Yet, despite his high profile and respect within the veterans’ community, Saunders struggled to find steady employment in civilian life and still battled racism. Colbung similarly told stories of discrimination after Korea, even while he was still serving in the Army. He was at an Adelaide pub with some Army mates and the publican would not serve him. When he complained to a policeman, the response was: ‘He’s in his rights not to serve you. That’s the law. He can serve all of you,

except him'. Colbung and his mates went to another pub that would serve him, but only after they 'smashed the other place up a bit'.³⁷

New opportunities

There is no indication in the archival record as to when Australian military authorities ended the practice of requiring Indigenous recruits to have interviews with senior military officers. However, it is clear that gradually, through the 1950s, joining the armed forces became an employment opportunity for Indigenous people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were part of this process, joining the newly constituted Women's Royal Australian Air Force (1950), Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (re-formed 1951), Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (1951) and the respective nursing corps. Many of these women seem to have enlisted as a means to escape domestic service or because the armed forces provided steady employment not available in civilian life.³⁸ Mabel Quakawoot, for instance, was working as a domestic servant for a former RAAF pilot. She recalled in 2011:

He was the one who gave me the incentive, and he said, 'You have enough brains to join the Air Force.' [I] thought it was quite funny. But it was really great because they believed in me, even though I didn't believe in what I was doing. And I put in an application to join and I had to have an aptitude test, and I passed my aptitude test, and so I was in the Air Force [1957–62].³⁹

Although the thought of joining the Air Force had not originally occurred to Quakawoot, she actually came from a family with a tradition of military service; her sister later joined the women's services and her brother enlisted in the Army and served in Vietnam. Doris Follent joined the Army Nursing Corps in 1963, again as part of a family tradition; her father had served in the First World War and her brother was in the Navy.⁴⁰

Whilst the women's services provided a significant opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, their numbers were still small. Thelma Weston recalled in 2014:

I think I was the only Black nurse in that time period [early to mid-1950s] in the Army Nursing Corps. And I don't know – people used to ask me where I was from

all the time. I'd say, from the Torres Strait Islands, see a lot of people didn't know where the Torres Strait Islands were. And I think that they thought I was French.⁴¹

Yet, by the late 1960s, the women's services were gaining wider recognition as a possible career opportunity for Indigenous women. The New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board monthly magazine *Dawn* even featured a two-thirds page advertisement about career opportunities in the women's services.⁴² This was one of many *Dawn* features about the military. Indeed, throughout its publication history in the 1950s and 1960s, *Dawn* included stories about Aboriginal men training in the services, receiving awards for their service, and preparing to go to war in Vietnam. Aboriginal servicemen twice featured on *Dawn*'s cover: in March 1955 it was a photo of Citizen Military Forces member, Cecil Donovan, while the February 1962 issue carried a picture of Private Keith Walsh, with his seven children, commanding officer and the Minister for the Army all seeing him off to Malaya. *Dawn* even carried advertisements about job opportunities in the armed forces. As a publication specifically designed to promote assimilation to New South Wales' Aboriginal population, *Dawn* gave a prominence to the military and Aboriginal service across the magazine's history from 1952–69, which suggests that the board saw military service as aligning with its assimilation agenda.

Many members of the Stolen Generations also joined the military in the 1950s and 1960s. These Aboriginal men and women who had been forcibly removed from their parents were often raised in institutions where they had only limited education and job opportunities. In 2015 Len Ogilvie speculated as to the motives of many Stolen Generations members who joined the armed forces: 'A better life. Where else can you get a job that's everything supplied? And your money, in your pocket, is your pocket money – you're saving ... I didn't join the Army for King and Country, I can tell you that!'⁴³ Sue Gordon explained in 2015 that she and the men from Sister Kate's Home in Perth, who served in the military regularly, attend commemorative services together. They consider themselves as family and even wear the medals of the deceased. Gordon related that Korean War veteran, Andy Sanford, once said: 'We grew up as brothers and sisters, so we're entitled to wear them'.⁴⁴

In other jurisdictions, signing up may have required the approval of the welfare board, or other guardians, if the Aboriginal person were still a ward of the state. David Cook, for instance, was a member of the Stolen Generations who had lived at the notorious Kinchela Boys Home before being fostered out. He joined the Australian Navy in 1962, but did not adjust well to the lifestyle. According to his oral history interview in 2010, there was a particular officer who did not like him because he was Aboriginal.⁴⁵ His welfare file, though, contains letters from the Navy addressed to the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board, indicating that he was having disciplinary problems.⁴⁶ Regardless of the real reason for his discharge, it is significant that the Navy was corresponding with the Aborigines Welfare Board about the problems their 'ward' was having. Cook left the Navy after a few months and then enlisted in the Army; on his application for enlistment, the guardian's signature is from the 'Supt of Aborigines Welfare Board, GPO Sydney'.⁴⁷ Cook fit in well in the Army. Indeed, for many of the Stolen Generations men and women who joined the military, the discipline instilled in them at the institution prepared them well.⁴⁸ The pattern of Stolen Generations survivors joining up would continue into the Vietnam era and beyond.

The Indonesian Confrontation

In the early 1960s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen were deployed overseas again, this time to Malaysia. Conflict arose with Indonesia in 1963 when the creation of the Federation of Malaysia (Malaya, Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore) was taken by Indonesia's President Sukarno to represent a British attempt to maintain its colonial rule in the region. At the request of both the British and Malaysian governments, Australia sent a battalion to Borneo in January 1965. Australian troops rotated through Borneo until the end of the so-called Confrontation in August 1966.

Geoff Shaw was one of the Aboriginal men who served in Borneo, and when interviewed in 2015 he vividly remembered the jungle and high treetops with orangutans.⁴⁹ Reuben Chadburn likewise recalled night-time jungle exercises: 'the tigers used to circle us of a night. You could hear them and smell them'. Troops would take anti-malaria tablets every day because 'the mosquitos would come in clouds'.⁵⁰ Dave Cook was a member of the Royal Australian Engineers, who were tasked with building a

road for the British supply lines. His best memory of Borneo, recalled in 2010, was playing against the visiting British Lions Rugby League Team, which passed through on its way to tour Australia: ‘It was a pretty close game because they couldn’t handle the heat, coming from England. It was a friendly but it was pretty hard. So I played against the British Lions. That’s one thing a lot of people can’t say’.⁵¹

While the Confrontation involved no large-scale battles, there were long patrols on both sides of the border between Borneo and Indonesia. Torres Strait Islander Mial Bingarape maintained later that his background and knowledge, hunting in the bush, prepared him well for such patrols, priming him to sense problems in the jungle.

So there’ve been times, three or four times we’ve gone in and I’ve looked at the area. I was called forward by my forward scout, looked at the area and I could sense – oh what I – I look at it, ideal ambush site: ‘I’m not going to put my boys through there.’... If I change direction and traverse, he [platoon commander] always says, ‘There’s got to be a reason for this. Bing wouldn’t do that.’

However, patrols could result in contacts, and bring casualties. Bingarape also remembered when he lost a close mate, Vince Vella. Just before Vella went out on patrol, they had been talking about their families catching up in Australia after their tour. On the patrol, a scout suspected something and called Vella forward to check it out. When the forward scout stepped aside, he tripped a wire, blowing both himself and Vella to bits. This particular loss still weighed heavily on Bingarape in 2014.⁵²

[Insert Figure 10.3]

Four members of 1 Platoon, A Company, 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), about to move off from a secure area after taking a break during a patrol near the Kalimantan-Sarawak border. The section commander, Bingarape (standing) has just given the section’s forward scout Private McGrath a compass bearing and the general direction to follow.

Source: AWM P00944.06.

Bingarape’s story is also of interest because, like many Torres Strait Islanders, he had Malay heritage. His biological and adopted fathers were both Indonesian, and his

older siblings were raised in Indonesia. Bingarape did not even think about the potentially tragic implications of this familial connection until he received a letter from his older sister telling him that two of his brothers were in the Indonesian Army. He later said:

It's a case of firing the first shot and hope for the best. Pray to God that you've done the right thing, you know. Oh [sighs], it was [long pause] [sighs] – it saddened me, really. Oh. I come to find out also [long pause] – yeah, they were on the other side patrolling. My elder brother was – he's two years ahead of me. He was a lieutenant in the Indonesian intelligence.

Another way that Bingarape's multicultural upbringing contributed to his Army work was his language skills: he could speak Kalau Lagau Ya, Torres Strait Creole and Malay. Often the patrol commander would send Bingarape to communicate with local village head men.⁵³

The experiences in Malaysia were in many ways a prelude to the next major chapter in Australia's military history, Vietnam. Although the casualty and fatality figures were low (only 23 Australian deaths), there were many other commonalities: assisting a fledgling postcolonial nation's defence, long patrols in the jungle, humid and harsh environmental conditions, a hidden enemy, major cultural differences with the locals, separate facilities among coalition partners, and lots of downtime at the base characterised by excessive boozing and misbehaviour. By the mid-1960s, there were no longer debates over whether or not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could volunteer for the military (though the matter of national service was another story). In fact, many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men who served in Borneo and Malaysia would also be sent to Vietnam. Their stories continue in the next chapter.

¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Australia, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997, p. 34.

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- ² See Robin Gerster, *Travels in Atomic Sunshine: Australia and the Occupation of Japan*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2008.
- ³ Quoted in Cameron Forbes, *The Korean War: Australia in the Giants' Playground*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2010, pp. 285–286.
- ⁴ Gladys Waters, interview, 8 July 2014; Robert Hall, *Fighters from the Fringe: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Recall the Second World War*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1995, p. 170; Donald Edward Waters, B883, QX51818, NAA.
- ⁵ See AWM 146170; AWM F07526, 'BCOF on Parade in Japan'.
- ⁶ 'Kenneth Colbung', *Message Stick*, produced and directed by Kelrick Martin, produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 2004. [Have removed link] See also Private Kenneth Colbung, Royal Australian Infantry Corps, interviewed by Bill Bunbury for ABC Radio National Hindsight for program 'Korea, 1950-1953, The Forgotten War', AWM S01906.
- ⁷ Charles Mene, in Hall 1995, p. 101.
- ⁸ 'Protest', *Examiner* (Launceston), 28 March 1946, p. 1.
- ⁹ 'Aboriginal officer hits at army ban', *The Daily News* (Perth), 26 March 1946, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ See 'Action by RSL', *National Advocate* (Bathurst, NSW), 13 March 1945, p. 3.
- ¹¹ 'R.S.L. Suggests Aboriginal Unit', *The Age* (Melbourne), 10 November 1951, p. 2; 'Aboriginal Battalion Suggested', *Queensland Times* (Ipswich), 5 November 1951, p. 1; 'Aboriginal battalion suggested', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 5 November 1951, p. 2.
- ¹² Australian Military Forces Minute Paper, 'Enlistment of Aborigine in ARA', signed Director of Personnel Administration, 20 May 1949, MP742/1, 275/1/696, NAA.
- ¹³ MP742/1, 275/1/696, NAA.
- ¹⁴ See A816, 72/301/23, NAA.
- ¹⁵ A4949, C2391, NAA.
- ¹⁶ A816, 72/301/23, NAA. For more on National Service in the 1950s, see Pam Maclean, 'An Almost Universal Scheme of National Service in Australia in the 1950s', *Australian Journal of Politics & History* vol. 52, no. 3, 2006, pp. 378–97.
- ¹⁷ Noel Loos and Koiki Mabo, *Eddie Koiki Mabo: His Life and Struggle for Land Rights*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1996, p. 83.
- ¹⁸ Noel Tovey, *Little Black Bastard: A Story of Survival*, Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2004, p. 144.
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- ²⁰ Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1990, pp. 193–95.
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