

WARNING:

Please be advised that this document contains photographs of Indigenous people who are deceased.

Indigenous Australians in the First World War

Excluded from Serving

Indigenous Australians have served in all major conflicts that Australia has been involved in. However, during the First World War, they were not legally allowed to enlist. Australia's Defence Act 1903 excluded people who were not of European descent from enlisting. Many recruitment officers ignored this legislation as the army needed of soldiers desperately. However, on many occasions, Indigenous men were forced to claim another racial identity, such as Maori or Pacific Islander, in order to enlist. Many Indigenous men were able to enlist by using these two loopholes.

Motivation to Enlist

Indigenous Australians wanted to serve because they were attracted by the daily salary of six shillings. There was also some very convincing wartime propaganda. Indigenous men thought that if they returned from war a hero, they would be treated well and equally to white men. Furthermore, some Indigenous men wanted to use their fighting and warrior spirit to prove themselves to their community.

Douglas Grant

Douglas Grant joined the Australian Army in 1916. However, he was discharged soon after enlisting because his battalion was about to leave for battle and he had not yet received government approval, which was required for Indigenous Australians to leave the country. Douglas enlisted a second time and he left for France soon afterwards. During combat, he was seized by the German army and he was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. While he was there, German doctors, scientists and anthropologists travelled to the camp to examine him. Due to his 'scientific value', he was given special favour and allowed some freedom within the camp. During his time at the camp, Grant became president of the British Help Committee. In this role, he organised food parcels and medical supplies for the prisoners. Grant wrote to aid and humanity agencies in order to make this happen.



After the war ended, Grant was transported from Germany to England. He attracted a significant amount of attention while living there. In 1919, Grant sailed back to Australia, where he returned to his job as a draughtsman.

After the War

Indigenous men achieved some equality fighting alongside their white comrades for an empire that had previously deprived them in many ways. Many Indigenous Australians believed that they would get better rights once the war had ended. In reality, many Indigenous people faced even greater discrimination when they returned home. While they had been gone, the government had removed their children during their absence or taken their land without any compensation. This land was given to white soldiers under a soldier settlement program; Indigenous servicemen were excluded from this program.



Overdue Recognition

Attempts in recent years to recognise Indigenous Servicemen have been slow and difficult because of the poor record keeping regarding Indigenous people during the First World War. Very few official records exist of Indigenous soldiers so it is impossible to know how many actually served. It has been estimated that 1,000 Aboriginal men served in the First World War; however, it is likely that this number was much higher. It is now much more common to see Indigenous people march in Anzac Day parades. On Anzac Day, it is imperative we remember the Indigenous soldiers who fought during the First World War and the treatment they received when they returned to Australia.

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