

Please make a hard copy for your community so all Brothers can read this. You might make copies of last years editions if they haven't been given to your community. They are on the web site.

Please ring me if you would like me to visit your community to share with you some stories about our lives. My mobile number is 0408960875. Love to hear from you Julieanne.

INDIGENOUS TALK AND WALK

JULIEANNE MANSON

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION OFFICER
OCEANIA PROVINCE (NSW & ACT)

jmanson@edmundrice.org

Phone (02) 8762 4200 Mobile 0408960875

April 2011



April this year brings Easter and ANZAC day close together. I thought you might like to know something about how Aboriginal people even though they weren't Australians until 1967 still took part in the armed forces during the wars that Australia has been involved in. This Anzac day you might like to reflect upon the Aboriginal stories here and maybe go to a ceremony where Aboriginal people are involved.



Men of the 2/7th Infantry Battalion, including Sgt Reg Saunders, waiting at their troop train in Queensland, 1943



Lt R. W. Saunders and Lt T. C. Derrick congratulate each other following their graduation from officer training school, Seymour, Victoria, November 1944.

Indigenous Australian servicemen Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have fought for Australia, from the Boer War onwards. **Change in attitudes** Generally, Aborigines have served in ordinary units with the same conditions of service as other members. Many experienced equal treatment for the first time in their lives in the army or other services. However, upon return to civilian life, many also found they were treated with the same prejudice and discrimination as before. **First World War** Over 400 Indigenous Australians fought in the First World War. They came from a section of society with few rights, low wages, and poor living conditions. Most Aborigines could not vote and none were counted in the census. But once in the AIF, they were treated as equals. They were paid the same as other soldiers and generally accepted without prejudice.

First Aboriginal Commissioned Officer – Reginald Saunders

Many thousands of Australian Aborigines have enlisted and served in Australia's defence forces since 1901, and several have won decorations, but the first to be promoted to a commissioned rank was Reg Saunders of Victoria. Reginald Walter Saunders was born a member of the Gunditjmarra people, just outside Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve in the western district of Victoria on 7 August 1920. His father, Chris Saunders, and uncle, William Reginald Rawlings, had served with the first AIF. Reg was named after his uncle, who served in the 29th Battalion and was awarded a Military Medal for "displaying rare bravery in the performance of his duty ... his irresistible dash and courage set a wonderful example to the remainder of the team". Reg grew to admire the military feats of both his father and uncle. Reg enlisted in the second AIF (2/7th Battalion of the 6th Australian Division) in April 1940. His outstanding leadership skills, personable character and sporting skills were quickly recognized by his superiors, as he was promoted to the rank of lance corporal within six weeks. Three months later, he was promoted to sergeant. The first fighting Reg saw was in Libya, where he joined the battalion as a reinforcement; he took part in the continuing push to Benghazi, where he says he nearly died of fright. Then on 9 April 1941 Reg accompanied his battalion to Greece, where, under constant air attack, he took part in the fighting. The troops soon withdrew and made their way to Crete. On this trip, the ship on which he was travelling, the Costa Rica, was bombed and sunk. Reg managed to scramble aboard a destroyer.

Reg's brother Harry was now nearing his 18th birthday; in a hurry to enlist, he convinced the recruiting officer that he was old enough, and joined the 2/14th Battalion. Reg and Harry met up while they were camped near each other in Palestine and took leave together in Jerusalem. In Crete, Reg again took part in fighting against air attack. This was another ill-fated campaign, which saw the British evacuated from the island. Reg was one of several hundred troops left behind. After almost a full year of hiding out – an easy task for Reg, who had dark skin and could easily pass of being of Mediterranean descent – they were secretly taken off the island by a British submarine in 1941. Soon after returning to Australia, in August 1942, Reg was posted back to the 2/7th battalion and sent to New Guinea, where he proceeded to the Owen Stanley Range. "I preferred fighting in the jungle. You had more cover in the jungle. And, being a bush boy, I was at home in the jungle, because every time you ducked down you were under cover. In the desert, if you ducked down they'd just bounce bullets off you." It was while Reg was serving in New Guinea that Harry was killed in action on the Kokoda Trail. It was also while he was in New Guinea that he was nominated for promotion to a commissioned rank – the first Aboriginal Australian to have reached this level of command in the Australian Army. Reg was selected to return to Victoria and attend Officer Training School, at the Infantry Wing of the Officer Cadet Training Unit, Seymour. He graduated as a lieutenant in December, 1944. Reg spent the remainder of the war as a lieutenant in charge of a platoon of up to thirty Australians. Reg later served in the Korean War, where he was promoted to captain in charge of "C" Company of the 3rd Battalion, and took part in the famous battle of Kapyong in 1951. It was during this battle that the battalion was awarded a US Presidential Unit Citation. (Continued over.)





After having fought the battle for Hill 317, Reg finally left Korea in October 1952, and resigned from the regular army in 1954. He moved to Sydney after the war and soon became the captain of his local cricket team and president of a sub-branch of the RSL. In 1969, Reg moved to Canberra and took up employment as liaison officer at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, remaining there until his retirement in 1981. He was awarded an MBE in 1971, and was appointed to the Council of the Australian War Memorial in July 1985.

Reg died on Friday 2 March 1991, aged 69.



North Korea, November 1950. Reg Saunders and other soldiers from his unit, including a Korean interpreter, are gathered around a small campfire on which a billy is boiling.

When war broke out in 1914, many Aborigines who tried to enlist were rejected on the grounds of race; others slipped through the net. By October 1917, when recruits were harder to find and one conscription referendum had already been lost, restrictions were cautiously eased. A new Military Order stated: "Half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical Officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin." This was as far as Australia – officially – would go. **Why did they fight?** Loyalty and patriotism may have encouraged Aborigines to enlist. Some saw it as a chance to prove themselves the equal of Europeans or to push for better treatment after the war. For many Australians in 1914 the offer of 6 shillings a day for a trip overseas was simply too good to miss. **Too dark.** Aborigines in the First World War served on equal terms but after the war, in areas such as education, employment, and civil liberties, Aboriginal ex-servicemen and women found that discrimination remained or, indeed, had worsened during the war period.



The Post First World War Period. Only one Aborigine is known to have received land under a "soldier settlement" scheme, despite the fact that much of the best farming land in Aboriginal reserves was confiscated for soldier settlement blocks. The repression of Aborigines increased between the wars, as protection acts gave government officials greater control over Indigenous Australians. As late as 1928 Aborigines were being massacred in reprisal raids. A considerable Aboriginal political movement in the 1930s achieved little improvement in civil rights. **Enlistment and Service Second World War. To serve or not to serve.** In 1939 Aborigines were divided over the issue of military service. Some Aboriginal organisations believed war service would help the push for full citizenship rights and proposed the formation of special Aboriginal battalions to maximize public visibility.

Others, such as William Cooper, the Secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League, argued that Aborigines should not fight for White Australia. Cooper had lost his son in the First World War and was bitter that Aboriginal sacrifice had not brought any improvement in rights and conditions. He likened conditions in White-administered Aboriginal settlements to those suffered by Jews under Hitler. Cooper demanded improvements at home before taking up "the privilege of defending the land which was taken from him by the White race without compensation or even kindness". **Enlistment Second World War.** At the start of the Second World War Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were allowed to enlist and many did so. But in 1940 the Defence Committee decided the enlistment of Indigenous Australians was "neither necessary nor desirable", partly because White Australians would object to serving with them. However, when Japan entered the war increased need for manpower forced the loosening of restrictions. Torres Strait Islanders were recruited in large numbers and Aborigines increasingly enlisted as soldiers and were recruited or conscripted into labour corps. **In the front line.** With the Japanese advance in 1942, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the north found themselves in the front line against the attackers. There were fears that Aboriginal contact with Japanese pearlers before the war might lead to their giving assistance to the enemy. Like the peoples of South-East Asia under colonial regimes, Aborigines might easily have seen the Japanese as liberators from White rule. Many did express bitterness at their treatment, but, overwhelmingly, Indigenous Australians supported the country's defence. Service in the army. Hundreds of Aborigines served in the 2nd AIF and the militia. Many were killed fighting and at least a dozen died as prisoners of war. As in the First World War, Aborigines served under the same conditions as Whites and, in most cases, with the promise of



full citizenship rights after the war. Generally, there seems to have been little racism between soldiers. **The post Second World War period. Returned soldiers.** Wartime service gave many Indigenous Australians pride and confidence in demanding their rights. Moreover, the army in northern Australia had been a benevolent employer compared to pre-war pastoralists and helped to change attitudes to Aborigines as employees. Nevertheless, Aborigines who fought for their country came back to much the same discrimination as before. For example, many were barred from Returned and Services League clubs, except on ANZAC Day. Many of them were not given the right to vote for another 17 years.

