



Stories from the Plaques No. 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Note: this article contains the names and images of deceased persons.

While many of the plaques in the Memorial Rose Gardens are dedicated to individuals who fought in the New Guinea/Kokoda campaigns, there are others that commemorate an individual unit or group of individuals.

Our third story in this series focuses on one such plaque (located at the North Wall, location 110/3) that honours and pays respect to 'all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Servicemen and Women who fought in the Battle of Kokoda'.

As we celebrate NAIDOC Week, we are proud to bring you some examples of Indigenous servicemen who served during the New Guinea/Kokoda campaigns (and who went on to serve in other conflicts).

The story of indigenous service personnel in WW2 is a complex one, highlighted by entrenched racism and prejudice within Australia experienced by individuals and communities at the time (which continued in the following decades). Yet parallel to this, and despite these circumstances, it is estimated that over 3,000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders enlisted during WW2. While their reasons for enlisting were varied, there can be no doubt about their bravery and sacrifice.

Here are a few of the stories of these men.

- Harold West (NX43500) and George Leonard (NX43504)

Harold West and George Leonard were best mates who enlisted together at Goodooga in north-western New South Wales in August 1941. They were posted together to the 2/1st Battalion, and served together in the Middle East, Ceylon, and Papua New Guinea.



Images of George and Harold on their enlistment (source NAA).

Their tracking and bush skills were widely recognised in their unit, especially in the thick jungle terrain along the Track.



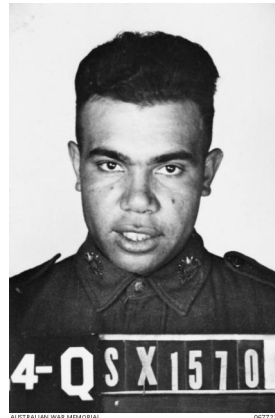
George Leonard and Harold West pictured in November 1941 (AWM 010375)

When George was killed in action at Eora Creek on 23 October 1942 (aged only 32), Harold began to seek revenge on the Japanese. Over the coming weeks he chose to go behind enemy lines to hunt and eliminate Japanese machine gun posts. However, in a cruel twist of fate, Harold accidentally broke his leg and, after being transferred to a hospital in Port Moresby, he contracted scrub typhus and died on 26 November 1942 at the age of 31.

- Timothy Hughes MM (SX1570)
Tim Hughes was born in Point Pearce (South Australia) in 1917, and enlisted on 4 December 1939. He was posted to the 2/10th Battalion and served in

Britain in 1940, Libya (he was a Rat of Tobruk) in 1941 and then onto Papua where he fought at Milne Bay in 1942.

In December 1942 he was involved in the heavy fighting at Buna. During this fighting his courageous actions on Boxing Day where he protected his mates as they took cover and then advanced to silence enemy positions (all while under concentrated fire from numerous enemy positions) earned him the Military Medal (MM). He was wounded at Sanananda in January 1943, and went on to serve until his discharge in September 1945.



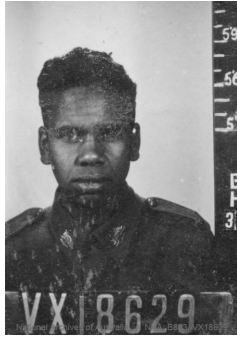
Tim Hughes on his enlistment in 1939 (source: NAA)

Post war, Tim returned to Point Pearce and leased a soldier-settler block in 1953 until 1975. His contribution to the community continued, becoming the first chairman of the Aboriginal Lands Trust, and then being appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1970. He died in April 1976.

- Reg Saunders MBE (VX12843) & Harry Saunders (VX18629)

The story of brothers Henry 'Harry' Saunders and his younger brother Reginald 'Reg' Saunders is an epic tale, matched by few others. The family had a proud history of military service from the First World War, which both brothers added to in WW2 and beyond.

Harry (born in 1921) put his age up on enlistment in May 1940, and served with the 2/14th Infantry Battalion in the Middle East. Along the Kokoda Track, Harry was at Isurava (in August 1942), but was separated from his unit, and he was reported missing in action. But seven weeks later he reached Australian lines, suffering from exhaustion and malaria. It was only a few weeks later on 29 November 1942 that he was killed in action at Gona.



Harry Saunders on his enlistment. (source: NAA)



The famous portrait of 9 Platoon, A Company, 2/14th Infantry Battalion, taken in August 1942. Harry Saunders is in the front row, fourth from the right. (AWM 089220)

Meantime, Reg Saunders (who was born in 1920) was in the 2/7th Battalion, and served in Palestine in 1941 (very close to Harry's unit). Later in Crete, following the fierce fighting against the Germans, Reg was posted as missing in action, but he evaded capture after a year in hiding and eventually returned to Australia. He went onto serve in New Guinea in August 1942.



A/g Sergeant Reg Saunders at sea, September 1941 (AWM 003967)



October 1943: a grinning Sergeant Reg Saunders with his men of the 2/7th Infantry Brigade. (AWM 057894)

Reg was seen as a natural leader, and went on to become the first ever Aboriginal officer, after being nominated for officer training in 1944. He graduated as Lieutenant in December 1944. For the remainder of the war, Reg commanded the No.10 Platoon in New Guinea, and returned to Australia in September 1945 (as an aside, he married Harry's girlfriend in April 1944, after receiving a letter from her following Harry's death in 1942, unaware Harry had a girlfriend).

Reg again volunteered for service in the Korean War, rising to the rank of Captain, and was involved in several major battles. He again returned to Australia, and left the Army in 1954, and eventually joined the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. In 1971 he was awarded the MBE, and died in 1990. Reg's service is seen as groundbreaking for the many Aborigines who followed his service in both WW2, the Korean War and other conflicts.

- Frank Archibald (NX15456) and Ronald Archibald (NX43862)
Frank and Ronald Archibald were both born in the Walcha district (on the northern tablelands in NSW), and eventually both brothers served on the Kokoda Track.

Frank (born in 1915, the eldest of 13 children) enlisted in May 1940. Like many of his contemporaries, he saw service in the Middle East before being sent to New Guinea in 1942. His battalion saw service at Templeton's Crossing, Oivi and on the Sanananda Track. He was killed in fighting around Sanananda on 24 November 1942, shot by a sniper while trying to save a mate from Japanese fire (his mate did survive). Frank was 27 years of age.

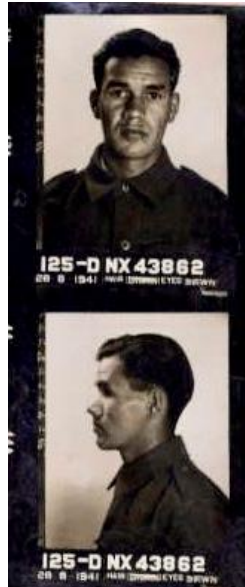


Frank Archibald on his enlistment in May 1940. (source: NAA)



Frank Archibald in uniform in a studio portrait.
(source: the AWM and the Archibald family)

Ronald Archibald (born in 1920) also served on the Kokoda Track, after enlisting in 1941. Like Frank, Ronald was a prolific letter writer, and these letters are still in possession of family members. Ronald was evacuated from Kokoda in 1942 with malaria, and was discharged in April 1944.



Ronald Archibald on his enlistment in 1941 (source: NAA)

Charlie Mene MM (QX6555)

Charlie Mene was born on Mabuiag Island in the Torres Straits in 1915. He enlisted in September 1939. Mene went on to become a professional soldier in the Army, and served in three different conflicts before leaving the Army in April 1961.

During WW2, Mene saw service in England, the Middle East then along the Kokoda Track between September and November 1942. From 1943 onwards, he then saw further service in New Guinea and Borneo.



An informal image of Charlie Mene (AWM P08297.020.001)

Following the end of WW2, he was in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan, then saw service in Korea, and Malaya, where his courageous actions carrying wounded comrades to safety under fire saw him awarded the Military Medal in 1952. He returned to Australia, and settled in Brisbane, and died in 1999.

While this list is not exhaustive of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who served on the Track (and elsewhere during and following WW2), it does reflect many willing men who, despite many obstacles in the times they lived, proved to be as capable and willing to fight and serve for their country.

While some paid with their lives, while others went on after the war to champion Indigenous rights. Their service should not be forgotten, and they are reminders of the proud heritage Indigenous men and women have given to Australia's military forces.

Lest We Forget.



The plaque in the KTMW's Memorial Rose Garden honouring all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service men and women.

Sources

For all men listed in this article, the Australian War Memorial's site on [Indigenous Stories](#) plus the relevant files for each person in the [National Archives of Australia](#) were used extensively.

Further details were sourced from:

Australian Dictionary of Biography: <https://adb.anu.edu.au>

Department of Veterans' Affairs: [Anzac Portal](#) and [WW2 Nominal Roll](#).

Medals Gone Missing (for details on Frank Archibald):

<http://medalsgonemissing.com/military-medal-blog/military-medals/not-black-or-white-but-khaki-private-frank-richard-archibald-of-the-22nd-battalion-ai-f-on-the-kokoda-trail-and-sanananda/>