

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association

Indigenous Veterans Commemoration Service

**Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC
Governor of Western Australia**

Wednesday 29th May 2019

Check against delivery

Thank you to Wesley College and Uncle Mort Hansen for the Welcome to Country.

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Whadjuk Noongar people – and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

It is a pleasure to be here with you all again at this important event.

Reconciliation week – should also be subtitled ‘Knowledge Week’. When the broader community gets to understand the contribution of our Indigenous community to the nation’s survival and happiness, as well as an understanding of the trials they have been through and suffered.

The theme of this year’s National Reconciliation Week is ‘*Grounded in Truth: Walk Together with Courage*’. It asks the public to consider that at the heart of reconciliation is the relationship between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. That to foster positive race relations, our relationship must be grounded in a foundation of truth.

Today’s service helps with this process of truth-telling.

The presence of Indigenous men and women in Australia’s armed forces was little known publicly until three-quarters through the twentieth century. Subsequent research has uncovered a record of Indigenous service dating back to the start of the Commonwealth era in 1901, and even a very small number of individual enlistments in the colonial defence forces before that.

Not only have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people served in both world wars but they have also served in every conflict and commitment involving Australian defence contingents since Federation, as well as during the intervals of peace since the Second World War.

Indigenous personnel have served on mainland bases and taken part in defence activities and operations around the nation.

Last year we honoured WWI service personnel particularly.

Of those who served, over 1,000 were indigenous and over 100 were from WA. They were all in the iconic battles of the war in the Middle East and Europe. Starting with Gallipoli and ending at the battles which broke the Hindenburg line in late 1918. From here many names are familiar. Four Farmer brothers, including Corporal Augustus Pegg Farmer who went on to win a military medal, and Larry and Lewis Farmer who served in Gallipoli, along with 11 other indigenous servicemen.

The question we need to ask is why these men were there. They were not supposed to be.

One of the many acts of discrimination against them, and even though Indigenous had served in the Boer War, was that they were not permitted to enlist. Not permitted on racial grounds, but they did. As casualties mounted, recruiting officers turned a blind eye. What did they fight for, hope for? They fought for mates and to be with mates. They looked for adventure. They saw equal wages and conditions. They thought about their broader country. But they hoped as there was equality in sacrifice, there would be equality in life. But there wasn't.

It took the Second World War to start to change things. Here, Indigenous folk enlisted in numbers up to 4,000 in regular units. Many more worked in the logistics of the battle for Australia. Many in irregular units patrolled the northern coast and islands. They were in the front line. They fought in every iconic battle. Greece, Crete, Northern Africa, El Alamein, Kokoda, Salamoia, Buna-Gona, across the north of New Guinea, Borneo.

Almost the last man killed was an Indigenous gunner, Flight Sergeant Arnold Lockyer whose Liberator Bomber was shot down over the Celebes. The Japanese executed him six days after the war ended. Our Indigenous people were really vital to the defence of our North. Their local knowledge and numbers, particularly in the War's early stages, were absolutely vital. There is not enough recognition of this. That ancestral echo can be seen these days in the Pilbara regiment, Norforce and the Far North Queensland regiment.

One thing we do as a people is to expect to defend ourselves. This inspires all of us. Responsibility is an equal opportunity employer.

Still, Indigenous people were suffering economic, social and political discrimination that denied even the most basic rights of citizenship – a situation not addressed until after the Second World War, and not corrected until the 1970s. But despite this, they enlisted to help.

In these circumstances the defence forces stood out as the nation's first 'equal-opportunity employer'. It provided a beacon of hope to the Indigenous community that their aspirations for fairer treatment by white Australians might eventually be realised.

Unfortunately, many Indigenous servicemen and women found that discrimination was still their experience when they returned home. Some RSL branches excluded them. But they fought their exclusion over a very long time, now successful. On ANZAC Day they marched with their units even when discriminated against more broadly. Their children have continued their service through our many wars and conflicts to this day.

Statements by the Department of Defence assert that the numbers of Indigenous men and women serving in the Australian Defence Force has been increasing since the 1990s, and by early 2014 there were 1,054 personnel (both permanent and active reserve), representing about 1.4 per cent of the Australian Defence Force's uniformed workforce.

Tomorrow I will attend the inaugural WA Police Force Aboriginal Service Medal Presentation. The long history of Aboriginals working with police in WA in significant roles such as Trackers and Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers, and the Commissioner's Apology Speech delivered last year has

led to its creation. The event will provide a tangible acknowledgement of the value that the WA Police Force places on their Aboriginal members both past and present, and work to heal the past.

Today we extend our deepest gratitude to, and stand in awe of, the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans who have served over the past 100 years, and we consider how each of us can contribute to a more unified future.

Those lost we mourn. Those living we honour. It is altogether right that this ceremony is a focal point of Reconciliation Week.

Lest we forget.