

WA Police Force

Inaugural Aboriginal Service Medal Presentation

Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC Governor of Western Australia

Thursday, 30th May 2019

I would like to thank Professor Colleen Hayward for the Welcome to Country she presented so passionately and so extensively

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

I believe it is a tremendous privilege to share this land with the oldest continuous civilization on earth. Preservation and celebration of their unique culture is something that should be at the forefront of our thinking.

I've said this at other places and it will take me slightly over length, but not much. We need to understand this, that at the time of the last ice age most of humanity was destroyed. The ice age killed about 85 per cent of the people who were living then. Not here. In Australia it killed about 50 per cent. So what remained here was a coherent, developed culture. What was left elsewhere was bands, groups, families, that would then take a few thousand years to resume a substantial cultural character. So we share people whose philosophies began well before anyone else's philosophies began.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all, especially the inaugural recipients of the WA Police Force Aboriginal Service Medal, to the Government House Ballroom.

I thank the Police Force and the Commissioner for inviting me to be here on this important occasion – our State's first Aboriginal Service Medal Presentation.

It is right that this ceremony is taking place within National Reconciliation Week, which has been running now for 23 years. This year's theme 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.

We come here today as a united group to take another step toward the practical process of this truth-telling and healing.

Yesterday I attended our State's 11th Indigenous Veterans Commemoration Service which honours and pays respects to the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans who have served over the past 100 years.

The presence of Indigenous men and women in our armed forces was little known publicly until three-quarters through the twentieth century. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people served in both world wars. Despite serving their country, they experienced discrimination when they returned. Some RSL branches excluded them. But they fought their exclusion over a very long time, now successful.

Those of us in the non-Indigenous community look back now with a sense of shame. Acts of discrimination and oppression are now recorded and understood. That this attitude should have extended to those who stood in the firing line is beyond shameful. At yesterday's service we recorded our deepest gratitude to, and stood in awe of, those who did so.

While serving in every conflict and commitment involving our defence contingents since Federation, as well as during the intervals of peace since the Second World War, Aboriginal men and women also served the country at home in the police force.

While relationships between the Aboriginal community and police, in the past, have been tumultuous, it is important to note that Aboriginal people have held instrumental roles in the WA Police Force for many years.

Historical records show that Aboriginal people have worked with police since the early 1900s, carrying out significant roles such as Trackers, Police Aides and Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers. More than 660 Aboriginal people have worked as Police Aides and Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers since the 1970s.

This is an extraordinary feature both of the members of the Aboriginal community in the armed services and those who served in the police forces. How much they had to struggle against ingratitude and disrespect, and nevertheless sustained a passionate desire to make a serious contribution to the totality of the community.

We think in this context of Trackers, for example, in police work tracking offenders. They have been more than just that. They are safety officers of the outback. In some ways we have been the nation of the lost child and the wayward traveller.

An article from *The West Australian*, published in April 1952, states that,

"At lonely police stations in our north-west, the local officer is very much dependent on his trackers," and that, *"The stories of trackers 'finds' are innumerable."*

The deeply embedded character of our Indigenous people in country has meant exceptional sensitivity of an understanding of human movement in a largely trackless environment.

The article includes an example:

"In 1911 a girl was murdered in heavy bush at Woodlupine – now Queen's Park. A tracker found the body and then led a party on a search which ended with the arrest of a man hiding in a railway siding near Moora. He was able to show the police where the man had picked up the girl in his arms and carried her, until her weight caused him to change the carrying position."

An earlier story from the Perth Gazette in 1835 provides evidence of what is believed to be the first recorded use of Aboriginal trackers, when two men known as Migo and Mollydobbin tracked a lost child through the bush near Pinjarra, discovering him alive. It was praised as 'miraculous'. And that was an event a year after quite horrible events in Pinjarra.

Unfortunately though, most names of trackers remain unknown. They were not credited with the results. Their contributions were many and significant.

Today, about 180 people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, are employed in various frontline, investigative, community engagement, administrative and leadership roles.

During NAIDOC Week last year, Commissioner Dawson brought to light how previous laws, practices and policies deeply affected the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through their inequality. In delivering an Apology Speech, the Commissioner acknowledged the significant role that police played in contributing to the traumatic history of Aboriginal people which caused them immeasurable pain and suffering.

In leading this Agency, the action he has already, and is taking, will go a long way towards the healing of relationships between the WA Police Force and the Aboriginal community of Western Australia.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge Commissioner Dawson for his commitment, foresight and humility, for taking actions to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a voice through the recognition they deserve.

The WA Police Force Aboriginal Service Medal gives tangible recognition to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's service, both past and present.

It demonstrates a commitment to improving relationships and fostering meaningful positive change for future generations.

Not only is this a ground-breaking step for the WA Police Force, it is a ground-breaking step across our nation.

The WA Police Force is the first police jurisdiction, nationally, to introduce a medal of this significance. You are the very first to receive a dedicated Aboriginal Service Medal for your outstanding contribution to law enforcement and community safety.

I congratulate all recipients of the Aboriginal Service Medal and I feel privileged to share such a historical occasion with you.

I would now like to invite Commissioner Dawson to the stage to join me for a special presentation.

As the Governor of Western Australia, it gives me great joy to announce the WA Police Force's newest Commissioned Officers – who are all proudly Aboriginal.

Firstly, I would like to invite Superintendent Brian Wilkinson to receive his Commission.

Superintendent Wilkinson is the first Aboriginal person to hold the substantive rank of Superintendent within the WA Police Force and it is with great honour that I am able to formally present the Commission to, our now, highest ranking Aboriginal police officer in Western Australia. I would now like to invite Inspector Geoffery Regan APM and Inspector Susan Parmer to receive their Commissions also.

Congratulations to Brian, Geoffery and Susan.

In closing, I look forward to a future when many more officers of Aboriginal descent join the WA Police Force and are able to achieve the success they have dreamed of.

I wish all of you a very special and enjoyable afternoon.