

# Australia: NAIDOC glorifies Aboriginal involvement in World War I

**Ellen Jones****13 August 2014**

In line with the Australian government's intensive efforts to condition the population to future military conflicts and boost recruitment, the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) has embraced the official centenary commemorations of World War I.

NAIDOC Week, a government-funded event held each July, purports to celebrate "the history, culture and achievements of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders." This year's theme—"Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond"—focused on the involvement of indigenous men in both the first and second world wars. Various public events, historical research and new publications, and a special \$5,000 national poster prize—"Those who Defend our Land"—promoted the subject.

NAIDOC's 2014 theme dovetails with the decision by the previous federal Labor government, and implemented by the current Liberal-National administration, to launch a four-year "celebration" of World War I. Altogether, more than \$600 million has been allocated, from government and corporate sources, for an intensive propaganda campaign, including art exhibitions, film, television, radio and theatre productions and school programs, to whitewash the real nature of WWI, drown out opposition to war and boost military enlistments.

Lionising indigenous participation in the 1914–18 war, or any of Australian imperialism's other military interventions, however, is not easy. Millions of people, mostly young working-class men, were slaughtered on the battlefields of Europe, in a fight between the major imperialist powers—Britain, France, Germany and the US—and their allies for global domination.

NAIDOC board chairman Benjamin Mitchell told the media that various events organised by the lobby group provided a "wonderful opportunity" for the relatives of former indigenous soldiers to tell their story. "It's a

rekindle of gratitude and thanks that our family members paid a price, the ultimate price in some cases, their life for our freedom."

Mitchell's claims are false. World War I had nothing to do with fighting for "freedom," let alone securing basic democratic rights for Aborigines. It was a bloody slaughter, fought on all sides for profits, markets and control of colonies. Australia went to war as a part of the British Empire, but determined to grab its own colonies in the Indo-Pacific, including the German territories in the region.

Indigenous soldiers, moreover, were treated with particular contempt, reflecting the "White Australia" doctrine of the ruling elite, the Labor Party and the trade unions. Aboriginal people were not citizens and had no democratic rights, including the right to vote, marry non-indigenous partners or buy land, and were the wards of the local Protector of Aborigines.

Aboriginal men were barred from enlisting until late 1917, when mounting casualties, falling recruitment and the defeat of two national referenda to introduce universal military conscription forced an easing of the ban. A new government order was issued stating that "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."

An estimated 800 indigenous soldiers, out of the estimated 80,000 Aboriginal population at that time, joined the military. Although they were paid the same as other troops, they were kept in the lowest ranks. After the war, they were officially shunned, refused returned soldiers' land grants and often denied war pensions and back pay. In some cases, the land given to non-indigenous soldiers was taken from indigenous communities whose men had enlisted.

This year's NAIDOC theme was not the first specific targeting of Aboriginal youth for the military. In 2007, an

annual “Coloured Diggers” march was initiated in the Sydney suburb of Redfern on ANZAC Day, the official national war commemoration day. This year’s march saw the unveiling of a six-metre mural of an Aboriginal soldier on the side of a prominent local building.

The following year, the Rudd Labor government launched an “Army Indigenous Strategy” to improve enlistment rates. Its aim was to almost double the proportion of indigenous members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to 2.7 percent, in line with the indigenous proportion of the overall population.

Labor’s enlistment “strategy” featured “Aboriginal defence pre-recruitment courses” or “boot camps.” It focused on impoverished northern Australian communities, many of which were also subjected to the federal government’s post-2007 military intervention, which stripped their residents of welfare and other basic rights, supposedly to help overcome poverty and abuse.

NAIDOC’s involvement in the WW I centenary events is entirely predictable. Established in the 1930s to protest the brutal treatment of Aboriginal people, the lobby group now speaks not for ordinary Aboriginal and Islander people—the most oppressed sections of the working class—but for privileged indigenous layers.

Appointment to the NAIDOC board of management is a career stepping-stone for selected individuals. Its annual achievement awards attempt to cover up the harsh social reality that faces the overwhelming majority of Aborigines and promote the false claim that anyone can claw their way out of grinding poverty and oppression, if they are determined enough.

One of the NAIDOC 2014 events was held last month at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art. It involved an indigenous panel discussion with two ex-soldiers, a woman whose father served in World War II and an ADF Aboriginal recruitment officer.

The opening question to the panel members was: “What inspired you to join?” This provided the setting for the primary objective of the event—probing how to attract young Aboriginal people to sign up for the military again.

The ensuing discussion noted that the main motivation was economic necessity: to get a pay cheque and improved living conditions, and somehow escape from life in their impoverished communities. Many Aboriginal men who enlisted during the world wars were also joined by other family members. They wanted to try to protect each other in the event of combat.

Somewhat out of tune with the evening’s agenda was the description of the life of Aboriginal soldier Percy

Suey, the father of one panel member, Linda Boney. Her recounting of her father’s horrifying experiences in World War II, and his struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder on returning home with no government assistance, was an insight into the reality. Suey eventually disappeared from his community and his fate remains unknown.

Panel members covered up the true nature of the wars and the horrendous conditions facing indigenous people, both in 1914 and today. ADF recruitment officer Colin Watego made the absurd claim, that unlike the experience of Aboriginal people in society, there was no discrimination in the military. In fact, the armed forces are founded on nationalism and patriotism that breeds racism and discrimination.

NAIDOC’s involvement in the official WWI centenary is part and parcel of the ongoing social and political oppression of Aboriginal people and the working class as a whole.

Even as NAIDOC regurgitates the official propaganda about WWI, the situation facing the majority of Australia’s indigenous population is catastrophic. Aboriginal life expectancy remains 17 years less than the national average, with communities plagued by poverty, poor health, little access to education, and among the highest imprisonment and youth suicide rates in the world. Indigenous unemployment is more than four times the national average and up to ten times the average in remote communities.

NAIDOC’s promotion of WWI and other wars is a warning of the methods that will be used to exploit the growing unemployment and social deprivation—worsened by the proposed slashing of welfare benefits—confronting young people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, to make the military seem an attractive option.

NAIDOC’s “Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond” is a key component in the strenuous government and media efforts to reshape public opinion to prepare for war, and to drum up the recruits that will be needed to fight it.



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