

# Indigenous Experience of War (British Dominions)

By [Noah Riseman](#) and [Timothy C. Winegard](#)

## Summary

Policymakers in the British Dominions of Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa confronted the common questions about Indigenous service in the First World War but with diverse approaches: Under what circumstances (if at all) should Indigenous be permitted to serve? Should they serve in separate units? Indigenous people, too, had to decide whether or not to sign up. Many hoped that by serving, they would be rewarded with greater civil rights after the war; rarely did such hopes eventuate. This chapter examines the dominant narratives of Indigenous service across the Dominions, while acknowledging the diversity of experiences.

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## Introduction

At the onset of the First World War, no [imperialist](#) European state, save for [France](#), regarded its colonial Indigenous populations as a source of military manpower for a European war. It was also believed that since these groups were the subjects of vast European [empires](#), prudence warned against allowing them to fight in a European war, thus forfeiting white racial supremacy. However, by late 1915, with mounting casualties and an increasing demand for manpower, [Britain](#) specifically requested the military inclusion of Indigenous populations from the five Dominions – [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), [South Africa](#) and [Newfoundland](#).<sup>1</sup>

The Dominions varied in their evolving approaches to Indigenous service, guided by their respective race policies. While the diverse approaches to Indigenous service ranged from integrated units to standalone Indigenous battalions, from outright opposition to Indigenous enlistment to targeted conscription, there were still several commonalities across the Dominions. First and foremost, while the extent to which governments initially did or did not encourage Indigenous enlistment varied, by 1917 the manpower demands in all Dominions meant that Indigenous people were allowed to, and in several cases encouraged to, join up. Hopes for better treatment motivated Indigenous peoples in all Dominions to enlist, and many wound up disappointed when there was little change to Indigenous affairs policies after the war. Racial hierarchical ideas guided how the government and media reported on Indigenous participation in the war.

## Aboriginal Australians

At the time of the First World War, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians<sup>2</sup> had few rights in Australia. The Australian Constitution left control of Indigenous affairs to the six states, meaning that the Commonwealth government only had legislative authority over the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory (from 1911). There were variations across the different states, but some common patterns. State protection policies segregated Aboriginal people on reserves or missions. Though many residents endured hardship, there was also at least a sense of community among the members of the missions or reserves.

Chief protectors and state protection boards controlled all aspects of Aboriginal people's lives, including where they could live, whom they could marry, and maintenance of their incomes. Legislation made chief protectors or protection boards guardians of Aboriginal children and in some instances adults. From 1869 (starting in Victoria), legislation across the states introduced practices of child removal. Aboriginal children of mixed descent (so-called "half-castes") were forcefully removed from their parents and sent to institutions where boys were trained in manual labour and girls in domestic service. The children forcibly removed from their families between 1869 and the 1970s are collectively known as the Stolen Generations.

It was amidst this backdrop that both the Commonwealth government and Aboriginal people themselves confronted the question of whether or not they could (or should) enlist in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) when Australia entered the war in August 1914. Policies in relation to Aboriginal enlistment evolved through the course of the war, but one constant was that they participated from beginning to end even though *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination persisted at home.

### Regulations Regarding Aboriginal Enlistment

Australia followed Great Britain into war against [Germany](#) in August 1914. Although Aboriginal affairs were not on the Commonwealth agenda to the same extent as in other Dominions, still the question emerged about whether or not Aboriginal people could enlist in the AIF. Amendments to the *Defence Act* in 1909 explicitly exempted from compulsory training and conscription persons "not substantially of European origin or descent." While the *Defence Act* ruled out *compulsory* call-up of Aboriginal people, the question remained of whether or not they could *voluntarily* enlist. Early in the war officials determined that the *Defence Act* clause against persons of non-European origin or descent would indeed preclude Aboriginal enlistment on a voluntary basis.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding such regulations, numerous Aboriginal men managed to enlist in the AIF. In some instances local recruiters overlooked the regulations in order to meet quotas. In other areas recruiters knew the Aboriginal men personally and therefore ignored the regulations. More common, Aboriginal men were able to "pass" as Italian or Maori (who, while not European, were allowed to enlist). Therefore, Aboriginal men served in the AIF on all fronts as early as with the [Anzac](#) contingent at [Gallipoli](#) in 1915. There were of course also those men who were excluded from the AIF because of their race. Some records of rejected Aboriginal applicants state "deficient physique," "not of substantial European origin," or, under disability, may read "no white parentage," "unsuitable physique aboriginal" or "unsuitable physique colour".

The regulations barring Aboriginal enlistment loosened in early 1917 because of the AIF's growing manpower needs. The Battle of Pozières in July-August 1916 resulted in a devastating 23,000 casualties. On 28 October 1916, a referendum to introduce conscription in Australia failed. By early 1917, the Australian government feared that without significant troop increases, the AIF would lose its position as an independent force within the British Empire. In March 1917, the Commonwealth government changed its position on Aboriginal enlistment: Aboriginal men with at least one white parent could enlist in the AIF. All states except Western Australia now allowed Aboriginal men of mixed descent to enlist, with Queensland's Chief Protector [John William Bleakley \(1879-1957\)](#) enthusiastically endorsing the opportunity. The changing rules in relation to Aboriginal enlistment did not necessarily represent an endorsement of Aboriginal equality. Instead, Aboriginal enlistees could now boost AIF numbers while also serving as a form of [propaganda](#) in the press to encourage white men who had not yet joined up. Such media reports highlight how Aboriginal Australians, unlike Indigenous peoples in the other Dominions, did not conform to the martial race [stereotype](#). Instead, their constructs suggest the men were viewed as a spectacle in the war effort rather than as natural soldiers.

### **Motivations to Serve**

Like non-Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal men all had their own personal reasons to join the war effort. Some joined for the spirit of adventure or for the supposed glamour of military service. There are references in some family correspondence to loyalty to King and Country. More common motivations stem from pragmatic economic opportunities or the hope for a better lot after the war. For instance, in 1914, the average wage an Aboriginal man earned was seven shillings and six pence per week; in the Army, a man earned six shillings per day.

Of course, there was also the hope that by fighting for white Australia, Aboriginal men would earn respect and be granted equal rights and opportunities upon their return. The link between military service and hopes for civil rights is especially common in post-war records from veterans and the families of deceased Aboriginal soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

Rarely did such appeals, which appeared sporadically in newspapers throughout the interwar period, successfully change government policies discriminating against Aboriginal Australians. Even during the war Aboriginal women and men left on the home front continued to live under restrictive regimes, with some servicemen's children even being forcibly removed while their fathers were overseas.

### **Experiences in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF)**

For those Aboriginal men who managed to enlist, the AIF was a mostly egalitarian

experience. There were no segregated Aboriginal units and all men were treated as equals. There are some recorded instances of white soldiers targeting Aboriginal men with verbal abuse early in their military careers, but such harassment dissipated once the Aboriginal men spoke up and especially once on the frontlines. The need for camaraderie and assurance that each man supported each other left little room for racism on the front.

Consequently, the experiences of Aboriginal men in Gallipoli, Palestine and on the [Western Front](#) were not dissimilar to those of non-Indigenous Australians: witnessing the horrors and traumas of war, homesickness, disease (including [venereal disease](#)), [gassing](#), shelling, amputations and of course the sense of mateship. The few recorded testimonies of Aboriginal veterans are almost indistinguishable from non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>5</sup>

Because they served in integrated units, Aboriginal men performed the same tasks as non-Indigenous soldiers. Over half of identified Aboriginal soldiers served in infantry battalions and a little over a quarter served in mounted units. The disproportionately high percentage serving in mounted units such as the Light Horse reflected the fact that many had previous horse experience working as labourers on cattle stations or as police trackers. Aboriginal men – especially in the mounted units – received praise for their keen eyesight and hearing abilities, and this was as close as Aboriginal people came to the invocation of martial race ideas. Recently, researchers identified Second Lieutenant [Alfred Hearps \(1895-1916\)](#) from Tasmania as the first known Aboriginal commissioned officer.<sup>6</sup>

Many Europeans found Aboriginal men to be a curiosity. One of the more famous instances surrounds Private [Douglas Grant \(1885-1951\)](#), an Aboriginal man of full descent who had been raised by a Scottish middle-class family in Sydney. Locals in Scotland were all intrigued to meet a black man with a Scottish accent. The Germans captured Grant in May 1917 and he was a [prisoner of war](#). Because of his race the Germans put Grant in charge of First Nations civil prisoners. Yet he fascinated German authorities, and scientists even came to study Grant, who confounded the race science of the era.

## Post-war Discrimination

Both during and after the war, Aboriginal people continued to face discrimination within Australia. During the war, chief protectors quarantined servicemen's wages or widows' pensions. Most Aboriginal veterans never saw this money and it formed part of withheld payments which have become collectively known as the stolen wages. After the war, prejudice continued to manifest through segregation of public spaces including hospitals, football clubs and schools. Aboriginal veterans were not allowed to buy or consume alcohol, even though many had done so in Britain and France. Aboriginal veterans did challenge

discrimination at times, whether through letters to newspapers or to chief protectors. Douglas Grant, who had somewhat of a media profile as “the” Aboriginal soldier, was on record with statements such as “The colour line was never drawn in the trenches.”<sup>7</sup> There are also cases where the Aborigines Protection Boards or chief protectors threatened to remove children from Aboriginal veterans whom they deemed “agitators”.

Some of the most blatant discrimination against Aboriginal veterans came through the denial of repatriation benefits. Though Aboriginal veterans technically were entitled to Commonwealth veterans’ benefits, their continuing subservience to state legislation meant that from a practical standpoint they could not receive their veterans’ benefits. Aboriginal veterans had difficulties accessing war gratuities because of state restrictions against Aboriginal people handling money. Aboriginal veterans did not have the right to vote in either state or federal elections.

Soldier-settlement schemes in particular not only barred Aboriginal veterans, but actually disenfranchised Aboriginal communities even further. Every state government set up soldier settlement schemes whereby returned veterans could apply for land grants. In New South Wales and Victoria especially, the governments closed some Aboriginal reserves, relocated the residents and re-allocated the reserve land for soldier settlements. Because state governments administered the soldier settlement schemes, continuing legislative restrictions imposed on Aboriginal people precluded them from access to soldier settlements. There are at least two confirmed cases of Aboriginal men securing soldier settlement grants, and the records suggest that this was only because the authorities assessing their applications did not realise that they were Aboriginal.

### **Aboriginal Veterans and the RSSILA**

After the war there was mixed treatment of Aboriginal veterans within the returned servicemen community. Some men who served alongside Aboriginal soldiers advocated for their rights, whether through letters to newspapers, letters to politicians or speeches on Anzac Day. Some also advocated within their local branches of the Returned Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA; now known as the Returned and Services League or RSL). As late as 1938, the Sydney sub-branch of the RSSILA passed a resolution advocating “that all men of Aboriginal blood who served in the A.I.F. be granted full citizen’s rights, and all social services be made available to them.”<sup>8</sup> The RSSILA magazine *Reveille* published the names of Aboriginal veterans from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria over a series of issues in 1931 and 1932, representing the organisation’s only significant effort during the interwar period to commemorate Aboriginal service.

Many other RSSILA sub-branches were less supportive and at times outright hostile. In rural areas especially, RSSILAs were vocal supporters of segregated public facilities. Many RSSILAs would not admit Aboriginal veterans or would only allow them to enter on Anzac Day. Some RSSILAs refused to allow Aboriginal veterans to march in local Anzac Day marches, while others only allowed them to march at the rear. While the RSSILA's treatment of Aboriginal veterans can at best be described as "mixed," that the organisation *en masse* did not take a strong stand on collective Aboriginal rights (despite sometimes lobbying the interests of individual veterans) further marginalised Aboriginal veterans' positions during the interwar period.

### **Legacies and Commemorations of Indigenous Service**

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, much of the First World War experience repeated itself. At the outbreak of war a small number of Aboriginal activists opposed participation in the war effort on the grounds that their hopes for civil rights after the First World War had yet to be fulfilled. The majority of Aboriginal activists, though, advocated for the right to participate, again couching their hopes for equal rights after the war. Again the Commonwealth government initially barred persons "not substantially of European origin or descent", again they had to loosen the restrictions (after Pearl Harbor and the Japanese threat) and again Aboriginal men served throughout the conflict in integrated units, mostly free from discrimination. Even so, there were significant differences. This time Aboriginal women served in the newly formed women's auxiliary services; Torres Strait Islanders served *en masse*; the Top End of Australia was a frontline, so Aboriginal people in remote areas formed guerrilla patrols and scouting units to protect their homes in Australia's north. In 1949, the Commonwealth government extended suffrage to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-service personnel, finally enfranchising both First and Second World War veterans. It would not be until the 1960s that Indigenous Australians as a whole were granted further civil rights – agitated from a generation of activists, many of whom served in the Second World War.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in Australia's military history has only recently emerged in the national consciousness. It was in the 1990s that the Australian War Memorial began its search for the identities of Aboriginal First World War veterans. Through the 1990s most estimates said about 400-500 Aboriginal people served, but now that list has grown to about 1,000. Indigenous organisations emerged in the early 2000s to commemorate the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service across all conflicts, regularly holding services, marching in capital cities' Anzac Day marches or even hosting their own Indigenous Diggers Anzac Day services. Now, the Department of Veterans' Affairs sponsors commemorative services in all Australian capital cities during Reconciliation Week

in late May.

## Canadian First Nations

The Dominion of Newfoundland, which included mainland Labrador, was independent of Canada until 1949. During the First World War, the 1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Regiment/Royal Newfoundland Regiment was raised, and distinctly maintained, from Canadian divisions and the Canadian Corps. Although Newfoundland-Labrador's First Nations and Inuit history, including that of the First World War, is now generally allied to that of Canada, it will be excluded from this analysis. Given its diminutive and remote Indigenous population (an estimated 1,700 in 1914), Newfoundland did not formulate any First Nations/Inuit-specific military policies. Through Canadian and Newfoundland-Labrador archival records, [Timothy C. Winegard](#) has confirmed only twenty-one men of Indigenous heritage who served in Newfoundland forces during the war.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, there is no evidence to suggest that the scattered Inuit populations of Canada, totaling roughly 3,450 in 1914, were given any consideration by either the Ministry of Militia or Indian Affairs as a source of military manpower. In fact, they were wholly ignored in both policy and practice. Accordingly, Inuits are generally excluded from this synopsis, as are the Métis. Métis were not legally bound to or defined by the tenets of the *Indian Act* 1876<sup>10</sup>, and they were able to enlist in the same manner as Euro-Canadians. The Canadian First Nations experience, therefore, is the focus.

From a population numbering 7.88 million, over 620,000 Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) between 1914 and 1919. This number included over 4,000 Canadian First Nations people from a total 1914 population of 103,774 (excluding non-status First Nations, Métis, and Inuits). This enlistment figure represents 35 percent of the male First Nations population of military age, roughly equal to the percentage of Euro-Canadians who enlisted.<sup>11</sup>

The exact number of First Nations men who served in the First World War cannot be decisively tabulated. Most status Indians were not recorded as such upon enlistment, as attestation papers did not record race. Likewise, Indian Affairs lists compiled through the "Return of Indian Enlistments" form by Indian agents for individual reserves in 1917, and again in 1919, rarely included First Nations from the Territories, and, most conspicuously, non-status Indians.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, through these lists it is certain that at minimum 4,000 status Indians were enrolled in the CEF.

With Britain's declaration of war on 4 August 1914, most First Nations communities and leaders openly declared their loyalty and sought avenues to exemplify their allegiance and worth to both Canada and the Crown. The majority of treaties and military alliances were fostered with Britain, not with Canada. Many communities offered support of men and money directly to the king, or the "Great White Father." The majority believed that by entering and engaging in Canadian society as First Nations, they could participate on equal terms and win the respect of the dominant non-First Nations society in order to gain rights for their own peoples. Accordingly, many viewed the First World War as an extension of this approach.

First Nations had been worthy British (and French) allies during the colonial wars in which Britain and France vied for North American hegemony. While First Nations lost their military importance as a collective, individual First Nations men continued to support British military campaigns after the War of 1812 when mustered by imperial/Canadian authorities. Given this pattern of allegiance to the British Crown, First Nations' enthusiasm towards the First World War was not historically unfounded.

The 1904 *Militia Act* also identified those Canadians eligible for military service.<sup>13</sup> The act, however, made no specific mention of First Nations. Although their use and value had diminished after the War of 1812, in times of need they were still called upon to provide their valuable skills in assisting Canadian or imperial ventures.

### Unofficial Exclusion

With the initiation of hostilities, the majority of British and Canadian politicians and senior commanders believed that the "war would be over by Christmas." Within this general atmosphere, Canada initially promulgated an unofficial exclusionist policy regarding First Nations enlistment. The war, however, was not short-lived, and both Canadian and First Nations contributions, overseas and on the home front in support of Britain, increased dramatically over the course of four and a half years of horrific [warfare](#). Although the majority of First Nations leaders and peoples offered their immediate support to the war effort, their active participation remained dependent on the existing 1904 *Militia Act* or, in the absence of any clear policy, on the whims of the federal government. Throughout 1914 the general policy towards First Nations service remained one of exclusion or limited involvement.

On 8 August 1914, four days after the British declaration of war, the Minister of Militia, Sir [Sam Hughes \(1853-1921\)](#), received a query from Colonel [William Egerton Hodgins \(1851-1930\)](#) asking, "Is it intended that Indians who are anxious to enlist for service Overseas are to be taken on the Contingent?" Hughes replied on the same day:

While British troops would be proud to be associated with their fellow subjects [First Nations],

yet Germans might refuse to extend to them the privileges of civilized warfare, therefore it is considered...that they had better remain in Canada to share in the protection of the Dominion.<sup>14</sup>

Many historians have incorrectly applied Hughes's statement to represent an official policy of exclusion, while others inaccurately argue that this passage was not widely disseminated. First, although the Ministry of Militia tried to dissuade First Nations enlistment in 1914 and 1915, no official policy of exclusion was ever promulgated. Second, this passage was identically reproduced, and extensively circulated, in correspondence concerning First Nations service, from its first usage in August 1914 until December 1915, when official authority was finally given to enlist First Nations men. Hodgins, who received the initial reply from Hughes, became the adjutant general of militia shortly thereafter. When replying to enquiries concerning his ministry's First Nations enlistment policy, Hodgins simply quoted the passage relayed to him earlier by his superior. Eventually, officials in the Ministry of Militia and the Departments of Indian Affairs and Justice frequently used this passage. It became the unofficial policy surrounding First Nations service until December 1915.

There was also apprehension that including First Nations in an expeditionary force could violate treaties. During the negotiations of Treaties 1 through 6 (1871–1886), First Nations chiefs specifically asked about military service. In October 1873, during the discussions of Treaty 3, an Ojibwa chief from Fort Frances, Ontario asked governmental representative [Alexander Morris \(1826-1889\)](#), "If you should get into trouble with the nations, I do not wish to walk out and expose my young men to aid you in any of your wars." To this Morris replied: "The English never call Indians out of their country to fight their battles."<sup>15</sup> Treaties were signed collectively, not by Canada, but in the name of [Victoria, Queen of Great Britain \(1819-1901\)](#); thus, First Nations saw treaties as an alliance with the Crown through Canada, not with Canada itself.

Throughout 1914 First Nations men rushed to recruiting depots for reasons other than loyalty to the British Crown. Although the warrior ethic had stagnated as a result of residential schooling, religious education, and isolation on reserves, it had not been completely repressed. While many joined for money, adventure, and employment, as did their white comrades, scores of others enlisted to revive the warrior tradition and gain social status within their communities.<sup>16</sup> War in Europe seemed a feasible means to circumvent governmental policies and the *Indian Act*, and it offered freedom and escape from docile reserve life.

In summary, unofficial policies of exclusion and inclusion were operating conjointly until

December 1915, although exclusion remained the dominant premise. This dichotomy led to great confusion within departments and among First Nations and their agents as to the regulations pertaining to First Nations service. Correspondence from agents, chiefs, and individual First Nations men asking for clarification of policy flooded into both the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) and the Ministry of Militia throughout 1914 and 1915. Most, but not all, replies were consistent with an exclusionist policy. However, under the frantic “call to arms,” units recruited directly from their regions, without interference from the Ministry of Militia or the DIA. Local recruiting officers, therefore, had absolute discretion over whom they enrolled, provided recruits met the medical standards. Although race was not recorded on enlistment documents, some recruiting officers listed ‘Indian’ under the section entitled “Description of [Name] on Enlistment—Complexion” on the attestation form.

Throughout 1914 the war was generally met with a jingoistic outpouring in the British segments of Canada, and support for the imperial government was given in the form of men, material, and money. The outward support for the war given by most First Nations leaders did not in all cases reflect the opinions of those whom they purportedly represented. Many First Nations did not endorse the recruitment of their men for a European war. This was no different from the divisions within the Euro-Canadian populations and should be viewed as such. Most French-Canadians, and some Irish-Canadians, did not back the war effort either. For many First Nations leaders seeking full and equal sovereignty, support offered directly to the Crown was viewed as a means to lobby the imperial government to pressure Canada to alter oppressive laws. As the war progressed, and Canadian forces expanded and accrued the horrific casualty rates of modern trench warfare on the Western Front, Canadian policies regarding First Nations service altered substantially to provide for greater inclusion to meet the pragmatic requirements for manpower.

### **First Nations Service**

Within this general atmosphere, in October 1915, the British War Office issued the most important imperial documents of the war pertaining to indigenes of all Dominions. Official inclusion of First Nations in the CEF and the clarification of policy in December 1915 were directly linked to the requests of the imperial government. On 8 October 1915 all governors general and administrators of British Dominions and colonies received a confidential memorandum from the Canadian-born colonial secretary, [Andrew Bonar Law \(1858-1923\)](#):

The [War] Cabinet have asked for a report as to the possibilities of raising native troops in large numbers in our Colonies + Protectorates for Imperial service. What is wanted is an estimate of the numbers that could be raised; the length of time needed for training; an opinion as to their fighting value; and any pertinent remarks on such points as climatic

restrictions on their employment, the influence of religion ... [and] the difficulty of officering.<sup>17</sup>

A second request was sent on 18 October. War exigencies now required the military inclusion of Indigenous men. Bonar Law wrote a third, albeit not as direct, call on behalf of the king on 25 October.

A November 1917 report from the Ministry of Militia replied to the question of:

whether there was any General Order of the Department by which Indians were not allowed to enlist. No Such General Order was issued. Towards the latter part of 1915, the number of Indians who volunteered to enlist was continuously increasing, and representations were made from the Crown ... that they should be allowed to do so, and the following circular letter was issued on December 10, 1915. This regulation has never been altered since that time.<sup>18</sup>

The response to the change in First Nations enlistment policy was overwhelming. A number of battalions formed after December 1915 had a high percentage of First Nations, although none rivalled the 107<sup>th</sup> and the 114<sup>th</sup> which were 50 to 75 percent First Nations in composition. Most were dispatched overseas in 1916, although all, save for the 107<sup>th</sup>, were broken up as reinforcements, many boosting the First Nations complexion of the enduring 107<sup>th</sup>. In November 1916, the DIA released and widely published the distribution of known First Nations enlistments (1,187) in newspapers across the country. The same report stated that First Nations had donated \$24,679.30 to various war funds.<sup>19</sup>

Canadian recruitment policies at the outbreak of war and into 1915 could not sustain national formations in the face of mounting casualties, a decline in voluntary enlistment, and an expanding expeditionary force. Canada introduced conscription with the controversial Military Service Bill on 11 June 1917, to the indignation of most French-Canadians. Confusion and capricious policy concerning the position of First Nations was immediate and pronounced. On 29 August the *Military Service Act (MSA)* legally sanctioned conscription.

The act applied to all male British subjects in Canada, including First Nations, Asians, and blacks, between the ages of twenty and forty. Driven by the necessities of the war, Canada's policy towards First Nations military service had shifted to the opposite of its 1914 position. Ottawa was now demanding, under law, First Nations participation. Before the closing registration date of 1 February 1918 arrived, however, Ottawa passed legislation exempting First Nations (and Japanese) from the terms of the *MSA* based on the tenets of prior treaties.

The need for manpower, however, drastically influenced the military position of First Nations

during 1917 and 1918, and voluntary recruitment drives were undertaken on reserves across the country. In addition to serving as snipers and scouts, Canadian First Nations men were employed in every other branch of the combat arms and auxiliary formations except for the Royal Tank Corps. They served in both the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve and the Royal Navy. Three members of the defunct 114<sup>th</sup> Battalion served as pilots in the Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force.<sup>20</sup> One, Lieutenant [Oliver Milton Martin \(1893-1957\)](#), went on to serve in the Second World War, attaining the rank of brigadier general, the highest position ever attained in the Canadian Forces by a First Nations soldier. In total, at least seventeen First Nations men were commissioned officers in the CEF during the First World War. For the majority of men who served in the Great War, the camaraderie created by the horrors of trench warfare transcended race. From the historical record available, it appears that the age-old adage of relying on the man beside you in combat, and in turn fighting for him, held true for most men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

## Legacy

Canadian First Nations shared equally in the burdens of war, and they still remind the government of their sacrifices for king and country. First Nations casualty rates, however, cannot be precisely calculated, since military records generally did not record race. Based on nominal roles and soldier-specific details submitted by individual Indian agents (or reserves), it is known for certain that at least 4,000 status Indians served in the CEF and that they suffered roughly 1,200 casualties. These numbers exclude non-status Indians, Inuits, and Métis, and are based on the 1914 status-Indian population of 103,774, which increased only slightly during the war years (the 1917 population was 105,998). While the number of Canadian First Nations soldiers awarded honors is not officially known, Veterans Affairs Canada states that “at least fifty medals were awarded to aboriginal people in Canada for bravery and heroism.”<sup>21</sup> First Nations women also formed patriotic and [Red Cross](#) societies on their reserves. They made bandages, knitted various items of clothing, and raised funds by selling traditional crafts. The Canadian Red Cross Society stated that the articles made by First Nations women were the finest quality of knitting and sewing they received. By the end of the war, First Nations had donated<sup>22</sup> almost \$45,000 to war funds.

Nevertheless, significant First Nations participation in the war effort both on and off the battlefield did little to alter governmental policy. First Nations veteran Private [Daniel Pelletier \(1892\)](#) remarked, “The army treated us all right ... there was no discrimination ‘over there’ and we were treated good.”<sup>23</sup> This relative equality, however, was not manifest in government veteran programs and benefits, and First Nations men and women remained

wards of the state under the paternalistic *Indian Act*. First Nations veterans also did not receive equal consideration for pensions, disability, or War Veterans' Allowance, despite the promises. Following the war, with their service no longer required, First Nations soldiers returned to the position of unwanted peoples and did not receive equitable treatment as veterans.

The inclusion of First Nations in the CEF was a pragmatic decision; this inclusion was not intended to transcend contemporary social, political, or cultural norms within Canadian society. The elevated and unprecedented participation of First Nations during the First World War, however, was a potential catalyst to accelerate their attainment of equal rights. This did not happen. Paternalistic and authoritative policies prevailed, and the recognition of First Nations military contributions was fast forgotten.

In late 1917 [Arthur Meighen \(1874-1960\)](#), Minister of the Interior and Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, summarized the relationship between First Nations and Canada during the Great War:

It is an inspiring fact that these descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of a continent so recently appropriated by our own ancestors should voluntarily sacrifice their lives on European battlefields, side by side with men of our own race, for the preservation of the ideals of our civilization, and their staunch devotion forms an eloquent tribute to the beneficent character of British rule over a native people.<sup>24</sup>

No better statement represents the negligible impact First Nations participation in the war had on the broader social and political realities of First Nations within Canada. First Nations were willing, through the bonding experience of a common war, to enter into Canadian society as equals. Canada, as evidenced by Meighen's declaration, rejected this offer, refusing to acknowledge the shared experience of the First World War and, more importantly, the benefits that could have been derived from it. The sacrifices of First Nations soldiers and communities shaped the eras that followed. Although the Great War began over a century years ago, for the Indigenous peoples of Canada the war for cultural, territorial, and socio-economic equality and recognition is still being fought today.

## New Zealand Maori

Despite years of dispossession and disadvantage since the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi and the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s, Maori had more political influence than their counterparts in Canada, South Africa and Australia. There were four seats in New Zealand's Parliament reserved for Maori, and legally (though not always in practice) Maori were entitled to the same rights and privileges as Pākehā (or white) New Zealanders.

When Britain declared war on Germany, New Zealand Prime Minister [William Massey \(1856-1925\)](#) committed New Zealand to the Empire's war effort. In New Zealand the question about Indigenous participation was not about Maori (in)equality with Pākehā so much as over how Britain would react to Maori soldiers. Already in August 1914, several Maori chiefs were offering to send Maori men to the front. The five Maori MPs – the four reserved seats plus Maori MP Sir [James Carroll \(1857-1926\)](#) – asked the New Zealand Government to make accommodations for Maori enlistments. Initially the government indicated that it was against the wishes of Britain for non-Europeans to participate in conflicts between members of the white race. Very soon, though, the government became aware of First Nations troops stationed in Egypt. Prime Minister Massey announced on 16 September 1914 that the British had lifted the bar on non-white races joining up and acceded to requests for Maori to serve.

Theoretically, Maori could join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) the same as Pākehā New Zealanders, and approximately forty did. However, the War Office suggested the formation of two Maori forces of 250 members each: one to go to [Egypt](#) and the other to Samoa (which New Zealand forces had conquered from Germany without resistance in August). The Minister for Defence delegated responsibility for Maori recruitment to the Maori members of Parliament. Rather than considering the Maori Contingent to be a form of unequal segregation, the Maori Members of Parliament – and more widely the Maori iwi (tribes) who supported the war effort – considered a separate Maori unit to be an opportunity to keep Maori boys together and to showcase their abilities as warriors. The call for Maori enlistees went out through the Maori Gazette *Kahiti*, and with the support of most iwi chiefs they easily recruited the 500 men required for the Maori Contingent. Though the original plan was to send half to Samoa, officials privately expressed worries that there would be tensions between Samoans and Maori 'occupiers,' whom the Samoans considered an inferior race. Officials publicly cited the desires of the Maori MPs and iwi chiefs to keep the Maori together, and the plans changed to send the united Maori Contingent to Egypt. The Maori Contingent had been training at Avondale since October 1914, and on 14 February 1915 they set sail.

### **The Maori Contingent (1914-15)**

The Maori Contingent arrived in Egypt on 26 March 1915 and shortly thereafter was sent to Malta for training and garrison duty. It was never envisioned that the Maori Contingent would be an infantry combat force, primarily because of fears that there would not be enough reinforcements to maintain the unit. Instead, the Maori Contingent's envisioned role was to serve as Pioneers – infantry soldiers who did much of the non-combat physical labour required to support the frontlines: digging trenches, setting up [barbed wire](#), building roads, transporting munitions, food and water and performing other unskilled or semi-skilled labour. This did not mean that the Maori would be relegated to safe positions; rather, as an infantry

unit they would still undergo regular training and could be sent to the frontlines, but not as combat soldiers.

The plans for the Maori Contingent at Malta changed rapidly in light of the dire situation confronting the Anzacs after the Gallipoli landing on 25 April 1915. Given the heavy losses the NZEF suffered, commanders made the decision to send the Maori Contingent to support the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade. The Maori Contingent arrived at Gallipoli on 3 July 1915 and very quickly found themselves enduring the same hardships as the rest of the Anzacs, including heat, exhaustion, Turkish (Ottoman) [rifle](#) fire, disease, privation, flies and lice.<sup>25</sup>

As the Allied Commanders at Gallipoli planned the August Offensive, the role of the Maori Contingent shifted into active combat. From 6 August the Maori Contingent was broken up and members sent to reinforce the four New Zealand Mounted Rifle regiments, which were only operating at half-strength. Their mission was to seize the summits of Sari Bair. The attack began on the night of 6 August, and the Maori were front and centre in the assault. It is said that the Maori chanted a *haka* (war dance) each time they took a Turkish trench, cheering “*Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora, ka ora!* (We may die, we may die! We may live, we may live!” On 8 August the Maori took part in the brutal attack on Cunuk Bair, where the NZEF suffered heavy [losses](#) before withdrawing during the night of 9 August. During the short period of 6-10 August, out of 400 Maori men, there were seventeen killed, eighty-nine wounded and two missing.

For the remainder of the Gallipoli Campaign, the surviving Maori Contingent was broken up and its members attached to New Zealand’s four infantry battalions. They would still serve in distinctly Maori platoons, but the lack of a united Maori Contingent identity disheartened Maori on the battlefield and back in New Zealand. By the time the Anzacs withdrew from Gallipoli, on 14 December 1915, only two officers and 132 soldiers from the Maori Contingent remained. Despite the Maori earning a reputation as excellent soldiers, their reduced numbers meant the disbandment of the Maori Contingent.

### **The New Zealand Pioneer Battalion (1916-17)**

By 1916, more Maori had enlisted and had arrived in Egypt. Back in New Zealand there was Maori outcry over the Contingent’s disbandment, and Elders threatened to withdraw support for further recruitment. In response, General Sir [Alexander John Godley \(1867-1957\)](#), Commander of the NZEF, combined the remnants of the Maori Contingent, the newly arrived 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Maori Contingents and survivors of the Otago Mounted Rifles to form the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion. The Otago Mounted Rifles members were Pākehā, but the vast

majority of the Pioneer Battalion were Maori with a smattering of Niue Islanders and Rarotongans. Initially the company commanders were Pākehā, but by October 1917 almost all company commanders were Maori.

The New Zealand Pioneer Battalion was sent to the Western Front, arriving at Marseille on 9 April 1916 and very quickly put to work felling trees. By May, they were in the combat zone at Armentières, where they were teaching non-commissioned officers trench building and wire techniques. Some Pioneer Battalion members were working at the front lines and were among the casualties. On 9 July 1916, the Maori participated in one unsuccessful large-scale raid of the German trenches. Despite using the Maori language as a secret code, they were not able to pass the uncut wire and take the German trench. This was the only large-scale raid that included the Pioneer Battalion. Henceforth they would partake in some small raids, but generally they returned to their core labour duties (often still under fire) such as digging trenches, building roads and constructing bunkers.

In August 1916, the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion moved to the Somme Battlefield. The Pioneers were responsible for digging many of the communications trenches while under regular shelling and gassing. The British units were so impressed with the Pioneer Battalion that they referred to them as the “Digging Battalion.” Historian Christopher Pugsley argues that from this the nickname “Digger” emerged first to describe the Pioneer Battalion; the New Zealand Division came to adopt the term and eventually the term spread to the Australians as well (even today the term “Digger” is a popular reference to Australian service personnel).<sup>26</sup> The entire New Zealand Division, including the Pioneer Battalion, suffered heavy casualties on the [Somme](#) and regularly required reinforcements. By 1917, the Pioneer Battalion consisted of Maori in companies A, C and D, with the Pākehā in B Company. Commanders gave the forty known Maori soldiers who were serving in other sections of the NZEF the option of transferring into the Pioneer Battalion; only eight took up this offer.

The French public enjoyed Maori songs and *haka* performances. The Maori were also brought out to perform ceremonies such as the haka when dignitaries visited the New Zealand Division. Maori interacted with French farmers and also forged more intimate friendships with Pākehā than was often the case in New Zealand. Maori participated in rugby matches against French Army sides, opening with a haka as was tradition back in New Zealand. During the war there were few disciplinary problems, though on New Year’s Eve 1918-1919 after the war had ended there was a breakdown of discipline when one soldier shot and killed an officer, and two Maori soldiers were convicted of [rape](#).

## Enlistment vs. Conscription

Throughout the war, the majority of Maori iwi pledged support for the war effort. Many chiefs saw this as a duty of citizenship and also as a reciprocal obligation to honour the Treaty of Waitangi. Maori also expressed support through setting up organisations to raise money both for the general war effort and to support Maori returned servicemen. Maori women were particularly active in some of these associations.

The mass casualties the NZEF suffered both at Gallipoli and then on the Western Front strained the force's manpower. On 1 August 1916, the New Zealand Parliament passed the *Military Service Act*, introducing conscription to New Zealand. The authorities quickly announced that Maori would be exempted, but that there was scope to extend conscription to Maori. Recruitment of Maori had slowed through 1916, which was not dissimilar to Pākehā. On 26 June 1917, the Defence Department finally extended the application of the *Military Service Act* to Maori. Some chiefs whose iwi had regularly provided troops since the beginning of the war considered this move to be an insult, but government officials calmed them by indicating that the purpose of extending conscription was primarily to target those iwi whose members had not been enlisting.

The iwi which the New Zealand government – with the support of the Maori MPs – targeted for conscription were those from the Waikato-Maniapoto Land District. There the Tainui and Taranaki people had been the principal losers in the New Zealand Wars, and many were loyal to [Te Rata Mahuta, King of the Maori \(1877-1933\)](#). Since the beginning of the war Te Rata had proclaimed that he would not stand in the way of his people enlisting, but he also would not encourage it. The king's position reinforced sentiments among most Tainui and Taranaki people who did not wish to join up, and enlistment numbers from these iwi were negligible. The Maori MPs indicated that the main reason that these particular iwi were not enlisting was because of lingering resentment over the New Zealand Wars.<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding opposition and peaceful protests from the Waikato district, the government enforced conscription against them for the duration of the war. The first Maori draft occurred in February 1918, with over half of those selected failing to show up for their medicals. By the end of the war, 552 Maori registered in four ballots; of the 298 found fit, only seventy-four went into training, with eleven imprisoned with hard labour, 100 more were arrested, and arrest warrants had been issued, but not executed, for a further 100 defaulters when the armistice was declared. Of the seventy-four conscripted Maori, none were ever sent for overseas service.

## Maori as the Martial Race

Throughout the war, one theme that permeated military reports, personal correspondence and media was the construct of Maori as a martial race. The concept of martial races is the belief that particular racial or ethnic groups were biologically suited to [militarism](#).<sup>28</sup> Maori long held a reputation for their fighting prowess since their first encounters with Europeans. Maori culture did indeed esteem men who proved themselves in battle. Maori cultural notions of a “warrior” were not the same as European racial constructs, yet both Maori and Pākehā drew on ideas of the martial race during the First World War. The New Zealand media regularly deemed military service an opportunity for Maori to exercise their innate warrior abilities. While the intent of newspaper articles was to praise Maori service, the constant references to Maori with expressions such as “sons of noble ancestors,” “fighting race,” and having “warrior blood” merely reinforced the stereotype of the martial race.

Maori, too, adopted the martial race construct to suit their aims. The Maori MPs regularly asserted the warrior tradition when pushing their agenda to enlist Maori servicemen. Even after the war, prominent war-era Maori MP Sir [Maui Pomare \(18756-1930\)](#) asserted: “the galvanic current of battle stirred the warrior blood of ancestral chieftains in their veins, and they asked that they might be allowed to go to the firing line.”<sup>29</sup>

Maori soldiers also appropriated the martial race myth to suit their needs on and off the battlefield. While in Malta, Maori invoked their warrior heritage when arguing to join the Anzacs at Gallipoli. Maori letters home suggest that they considered success on the battlefield an opportunity to prove the worth of the Maori race to Europeans. At times, though, the martial race concept conflicted with individual Maori soldiers’ growing disillusionment or trauma. Sometimes invoking the martial race was a coping strategy for soldiers traumatised by the horrors of war or when they lost friends.

## The New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion (1917-18)

At the end of August 1917, the Pākehā B Company of the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion was broken up and its members transferred to other infantry units. There were now sufficient Maori reinforcements to fill all four companies, so now all members of the Pioneer Battalion were Maori or Pacific Islander. On 1 September 1917, the commanders rebadged it the New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion, which it would remain for the rest of the war. The Pioneers served at Passchendaele in October 1917, working to keep the roads open. After the loss there, the remaining Rarotongans left in January 1918 to join the Rarotongan Company in Palestine, further reinforcing the Pioneer Battalion’s identity as a Maori unit.

In the wake of the German Push, the Pioneers rushed back to the Somme in late March 1918, where they were responsible for laying barbed wire between French villages. The strength of the Battalion was still at 900 men, which was stronger than any other Dominion infantry battalion. The Pioneer Battalion was part of New Zealand Division's final victory capturing the town of Le Quesnoy on 4 November 1918.

After the armistice on 11 November, the New Zealand Division was sent to the German border in late December to occupy Cologne. At the last minute, while en route, the British government decreed that the Pioneer Battalion should not continue but instead was to return home. The British government recognised that the German authorities and civilian population would object to [occupation](#) by supposedly inferior races. As such, the British reinstated pre-war codes barring non-white races from participating in European wars. The New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion became a casualty of this policy, and the Maori members certainly resented it. The Pioneer Battalion departed England on 28 February 1919 and arrived back in New Zealand on 6 April.

### **Legacies of Maori service**

By the end of the First World War, 2,227 known Maori and 458 Pacific Islanders served overseas with the New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion or precursor Maori Contingent. There were 1,070 casualties (336 dead, 734 wounded). The total Maori enlistments and conscripts numbered 2,816, which was 5.3 percent of the Maori population.

Traditionally, historians have argued that Maori returned servicemen were excluded from repatriation schemes, most prominently soldier settlement opportunities set up under the *Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act 1915*. Revisionist histories, however, have revealed that Maori not only were indeed eligible for soldier settlement (unlike their counterparts in other Dominions), but at least sixty-one did reap the repatriation benefits including obtaining farm land, state-backed mortgage finance and urban housing loans. Likely reasons for the low numbers include the repatriation schemes not being advertised adequately in Maori communities, available land being away from traditional iwi lands and returned servicemen continuing to reside on communal lands which were not available for soldier settlement. Other problems that Maori communities confronted during and after the war were the continuing alienation of Maori land and growing assimilation policies. Even so, unlike Indigenous people in other Dominions, Maori did retain equal rights to Pākehā including the franchise and the four Maori seats in Parliament.

Maori once again answered the call to arms in the Second World War. In October 1939, the New Zealand Department of Defence commissioned the 28<sup>th</sup> (Maori) Battalion. Unlike its First

World War predecessor, the 28<sup>th</sup> (Maori) Battalion was an infantry combat unit that saw direct action in Greece, North Africa and Italy. The 28<sup>th</sup> (Maori) Battalion forms a significant part of New Zealand's national memory. The flipside to its strong position in New Zealand's national consciousness is that as a result, the First World War Pioneer Battalion has not held a prominent place in New Zealand's national memory.

In the 1990s, New Zealand historians and commemorations essentially "rediscovered" the Pioneer Battalion. At a ceremony in December 1993, the last surviving Maori Commanding Officer of the Second World War 28<sup>th</sup> (Maori) Battalion presented the King's Colour of the First World War New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion to the New Zealand Army. In 1995, the first monograph since 1926 about Maori participation in the First World War was published.

## Black South Africans

Unlike the other Dominions, European South Africans never attained demographic superiority, resulting in a relatively anomalous colonial and war experience. For the Dominions with European demographic superiority, the war was an instrument to assimilate indigenes, while for South Africa, where Blacks/Natives outnumbered Europeans, the war was used to experiment with policies of pre-apartheid segregation. At the creation of the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910, Natives outnumbered Europeans by a ratio of at least 4:1 and regulations matched the threat. For South Africa, policy was intended to subjugate and segregate the majority Black population so as to minimize the association of Blacks with whites, while safeguarding white interests.

Both Boer (Afrikaner) and British forces employed Blacks in large numbers (over 100,000 in total) during the Second Anglo-Boer War, which solidified British hegemony in South Africa. Former Boer general, [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#), became the first Prime Minister in 1910, and Minister of Native Affairs as of 1912, and held these posts until his death in 1919. He was succeeded as Prime Minister by fellow Boer veteran, [Jan Christiaan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#), who served as Botha's Minister of Defence from 1912 onward.

The *Union Defence Act* of 1912 made all European males aged seventeen to sixty liable for military service in times of war, and obliged those aged seventeen to twenty-five to undergo training.<sup>30</sup> In provisions echoing those of Australia's 1909 *Defence Act*, the *Union Defence Act* officially denied Natives armed service in the Union Defence Force (UDF).<sup>31</sup> The clause excluded non-Europeans from wartime service in a combatant capacity and from peacetime training. However, the clause could be changed by a majority vote in parliament and, more importantly, a qualifying condition safeguarded the opportunity for the clause to be repealed

summarily in times of war. Given the Black involvement on both sides during the Boer War, article 7 was carefully crafted to deny Blacks immediate combatant status, but enabled, if required, their services in any variety of non-combatant roles.

## War and Racial Concerns

Aware of the ethnic tensions in his country, and with war imminent, on 1 August 1914, Botha released an official statement regarding the hostilities in Europe and the Natives of South Africa:

There is, however, little probability at present of any trouble which need seriously affect the natives. The Government therefore trusts that the Natives will display their customary loyalty to His Majesty and of the Union of South Africa by going quietly about their daily work and paying no heed to idle rumours; resting assured that the Government...will carefully watch over their interests.<sup>32</sup>

There was no unanimous stance within the Black and Coloured populations concerning the war. The reaction of Black and Coloured leaders to the war, and to the coinciding Boer rebellion, however, was one of support and allegiance to the Union and the king with immediate offers of monetary and troop contributions. While the Union government accepted no official offers from Native political organizations, Blacks and Coloureds were active in both the German South-West Africa (GSWA) campaign and the short-lived Boer rebellion. The use of armed Blacks by both sides during the rebellion was similar to that during the Boer War. Given the short duration of the failed Boer insurrection, the employment of armed Blacks received scant attention outside official circles, aside from the usual public rumors circulating about the ever-present fear of Black revolt. In all, 33,546 Natives served in non-combatant roles as carriers, drivers and animal pack leaders with Union forces during the GSWA campaign, which ended on 9 July 1915.

During 1915 and 1916, Dominion forces expanded and became key components of the fighting strength of the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF) on the Western Front and at Gallipoli. The escalating overall strength of Allied armies was accompanied by the immediate need for service and support auxiliaries, such as labor battalions, forestry corps and pioneer battalions. On 8 October 1915, all governors-general and administrators of British Dominions and colonies received a confidential memorandum from the Canadian-born Colonial Secretary, Andrew Bonar Law, probing the creation of units of Dominion Indigenes. Ten days later on 18 October, Bonar Law issued a memorandum, solely to the five Dominions, specifically addressing the question of raising Native troops from South Africa for imperial service:

The Union of South Africa is the only one of the self-governing Dominions which need be considered in this connection...No proposal for training natives upon a large scale is likely to be acceptable to that Government or to the British or Dutch inhabitants of the Union, as the return, after peace, of a large body of trained and disciplined black men would create obvious difficulties, and might seriously menace the supremacy of the white ... It is conceivable, assuming the Union Government would consent, that a corps of, at most, a few thousand natives might be trained and sent to the Persian Gulf to relieve the First Nations troops now serving there.<sup>33</sup>

The use of Native South Africans outside of the Union's African campaigns was hastened by demands from the imperial government in late 1915 and 1916. In October 1915, the imperial government specifically addressed the issue of using Native labor in non-African theatres, via the aforementioned memorandum of 18 October. The memorandum also influenced the formation of South African Native units for East Africa.

### **The South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC)**

While the imperial government had contemplated raising Black South African units for European service since October 1915, any proposition forwarded by the War Council was futile without the consent of a wary Union government. In June 1916, Botha was propositioned regarding Black labor to be utilized in France. There was a serious labor shortage (estimated to be 60,000) in Allied forces, which had been heightened by the effects of the Somme offensive. It was thought that Black South Africans could add to the labor pool, as well as freeing European and white colonial laborers for combat.

Upon receipt of the proposal, the conclusion reached was that "war necessities are paramount, but this experiment, if given effect to, will require careful supervision and selected instruments. From the point of view of the Union, the sociology of the experiment is the important one." There are three primary reasons why Botha agreed to dispatch a contingent of Native laborers to France. First, Botha ensured that he had direct command and control of the unit through his position as Minister of Native Affairs, chiefly via the efforts of Native Affairs secretary [Edward Dower \(1874-1918\)](#) and chief clerk [Godfrey A. Godley \(1871-1934\)](#).<sup>34</sup> Given this fact, Botha agreed to the "experiment," without referring the matter to the House of Assembly, where opposition was bound to occur, stipulating however that Britain shoulder the complete cost of the contingent.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Botha was protecting South African interests. He was concerned that the imperial government could circumvent the Union by recruiting Blacks from its surrounding protectorates of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. Botha recognized that British

officers in command of local Natives, instead of the more racially attuned South Africans, could undermine South African influence in the region.<sup>36</sup> Lastly, a refusal to comply would, by extension, damage South African claims to the coveted GSWA during peace negotiations.

The force was to be composed of 10,000 Natives from across the Union, as well as Basutoland and Swaziland. The plan was for five battalions of 2,000 men each, including Europeans, with one European sergeant to sixty Natives. In total, each battalion had sixty Europeans in administrative and command positions. Despite the patriotic appeals and pressing recruitment drive, enlistment did not meet expectations. By January 1917, the initial 10,000 laborers had been recruited; however, during this same month the imperial government urgently asked the Union to furnish a total of 40,000 laborers for the SANLC. The Union response was simply that, although they “cannot at this stage guarantee a supply of 40,000 they will gladly do everything in their power to meet the request of the Army Council.”<sup>37</sup> During 1917, recruitment efforts and methods accelerated and broadened, with little success. There were multiple reasons for the lack of volunteers but, as Albert Grundlingh accurately points out, “all are traceable to one underlying theme: basic mistrust of the white man.”<sup>38</sup>

In addition to requests for labor, the imperial government asked for Native combatants for use on the Western Front. On 28 March 1917, South African Governor-General, Lord [Sydney Charles Buxton \(1853-1934\)](#), received a cable from the War Office, “desirous of replacing white personnel in certain Artillery Units in France by [18,300] Native personnel enlisted in South Africa or Indian ... for the duration of the war.” Buxton answered the Colonial Secretary, Walter Hume Long, without consulting Botha or Smuts. Buxton’s detailed response alluded to all racial, social, political and military realities current in South Africa.<sup>39</sup> The issue was given no further consideration and the War Office did not broach it again.

The first battalion of the SANLC arrived at Le Havre on 20 November 1916, followed by the second on 10 December. SANLC was housed at segregated camps in Le Havre, Rouen, Dieppe, and Abancourt. Segregated hospitals in Dieppe and Boulogne were also formed with Native orderlies. In March 1917, Colonel [S. M. Pritchard \(1886\)](#) issued all white officers and administrators with an *Appendix to Notes for Officers of Labour Companies (South African Native Labour)*. Members of the SANLC were not allowed to leave camp unless escorted by white personnel. They were not allowed in local shops, pubs, businesses or private dwellings without white escort, nor were they allowed to be in possession of [alcohol or “dagga” \(marijuana\)](#) within the camps (they had brought “dagga” with them from South Africa). Unauthorized personnel and locals were not allowed within the camps, and interaction with locals, especially women, and other labor units was to be minimized, “to avoid familiarity

between Europeans and Natives.”

The deployment of the SANLC did not last until the end of the war. Unlike all other South African soldiers and laborers, including Coloureds, original SANLC contracts were for a total of twelve months. It was rationally deduced in November 1917 that, “existing Labour only available for 9 months after deduction journey time...hence proposition for 12 months from landing in France.” By this time 3,432 members of the SANLC had already returned to the Union, having served out their twelve-month contracts. This short duration of service was an administrative and financial burden, and undermined the effectiveness of the actual labor force in France. Furthermore, recruiters, facing an existing lack of enthusiasm for the contingent, reported to Native Affairs that “Proposal of enlisting Natives for the duration of the war plus an additional 6 months [as was customary]...would practically terminate recruiting for the Contingent in South Africa.” Confusion over policy was evident on 3 December when Native Affairs issued an instruction to recruiters to change service to the norm of “duration of war plus six months thereafter.” However, a second memorandum instructed: “You are therefore requested to take immediate steps to stop recruiting...All persons, both European and Native, engaged in recruiting, should be immediately withdrawn from this duty.”<sup>40</sup>

On 15 December, Botha, after consultation with the senior members of Native Affairs, sent a circular to all magistrates and administrators of the SANLC:

Army Council concur that in view of difficulties of maintaining compound system...all recruiting should be stopped ... Although both Chinese and Egyptians are compounded the restrictions are not nearly so rigorously carried out as regards the former [SANLC], while the later are of negligible quantity.

All contracts were ordered to be cancelled, and men paid accordingly, before being sent home. On 4 January 1918, Botha issued the official statement, for widest distribution, of the termination of the SANLC.<sup>41</sup> At this time the strength of the SANLC in France was 11,349. In total, 25,048 Native men were recruited, of whom 20,205 served in France. All men of the SANLC were returned to the Union by September 1918.<sup>42</sup>

Although the Union of South Africa had serious concerns over the health of its Indigenes in a foreign environment, as did all Dominions, deaths within the SANLC during its active period were low, given that 607 men died in the 1917 *Mendi* sinking alone. In total, 1,107 men of the 25,048 who enlisted in the SANLC died.

Approximately 102,000 Blacks and Coloureds were mobilized during the war and almost

95,000 served in active theatres; however, numerous men served in more than one campaign. While numbers vary, the most accurate estimates conclude that between 80,000 and 85,000 individual Indigenous South Africans served. The official history states that 5,635 Blacks and Coloureds died, although the actual number was probably higher. The overall number of men wounded, or hospitalized with disease, was not tabulated.<sup>43</sup>

### Post-war mistreatment of Black veterans

All Dominion Indigenous soldiers were awarded the standard Imperial War and Victory Medals, save for Black South Africans. While South African Coloureds and Blacks from British Protectorates received the two decorations (although whites received the medals in silver and non-whites in bronze), Blacks from South Africa did not. Black veterans lodged complaints as late as 1971; however, a final decision to withhold the medals from Blacks was taken in 1925. Ironically, in December 1918, unaware that the Black members of the SANLC would not receive the imperial honors, Pritchard forwarded the names of ninety-two Blacks, "submitted with the recommendation that appropriate recognition of their services may be granted them." As a result, six Blacks were awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (MSM), their names being published in the *London Gazette* on 3 June 1919. Coloured South Africans of the Cape Corps were also awarded sixteen Distinguished Conduct Medals (DCM), eight Military Medals (MM) and thirty-four Mention in Dispatches (MID).<sup>44</sup> However, Grundlingh concludes that:

[T]here is no satisfactory evidence that ex-contingent [SANLC] members were in the vanguard of sustained and coherent black resistance to white domination. For example, no indication could be found that former members were involved in the black industrial unrest ... Nor does it appear, on a somewhat different level, that veterans acted as 'modernisers' in rural societies...Ultimately, then, military service was not a crucial variant in determining political behaviour.<sup>45</sup>

Governor-General Buxton declared in December 1918, that, "the war has proved to you that your loyalty was well placed; and I can assure you that it will not be forgotten." However, Black contributions to the war effort were quickly forgotten and policies of segregation were amplified. Veterans were denied access to all and any soldier/veteran programs, including education, adequate health care, and the customary monetary discharge stipend. The unequal treatment of Black veterans led [A.K. Xabanisa \(1898\)](#) to conclude tersely that, "I am just like a stone which after killing a bird, nobody bothers about, not cares to see where it falls." The South African Native National Congress - the forerunner to the African National Congress (ANC) - sent a delegation of five men to England in April 1919 to press their claims

for equal rights and to remind the imperial government of Black war service; the SANLC was the only sub-Saharan African unit to see service in Europe.<sup>46</sup> The delegation was a dismal failure. Following the Great War, the socio-economic and political conditions for Natives in South Africa deteriorated arguably to a greater extent than for Indigenes in other Dominions.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

The pragmatic realization of the need for manpower, allied with the October 1915 requests of the imperial government, provided for the military inclusion of Dominion Indigenes during the First World War. Many eagerly embraced the opportunity to serve as equals within Dominion forces, while demonstrating their loyalty to the empire and their home nations. As the war progressed, and Dominion forces expanded and accrued the horrific casualty rates of trench warfare on the Western Front and Gallipoli, official and unofficial Dominion exclusionist policies regarding Indigenous service were loosened or ignored (although not legally changed). Pragmatism dictated the inclusion of minorities as both combatants and non-combatants. The roles of Dominion Indigenes within these expanding forces differed, and were predicated upon immediate needs and contemporary racial policies and anxieties.

Category	Canada	Australia	New Zealand	South Africa	Newfoundland	Total	U.K.
Non-Indigenous Population, 1914	7,879,000	4,917,949	1,099,449	1,383,510	251,726	15,531,634	46,089,249
Mobilized	629,000	417,000	129,000	182,000	12,500	1,369,500	6,147,000
% Total Population	8.0	8.5	11.7	13.2	5.0	8.8	13.3
Served in Theatre	422,405	331,781	98,950	160,000	9,700	1,022,836	5,000,000
% Total Population	5.4	6.7	9.0	11.7	3.9	6.6	10.8
% Mobilized	67.2	79.6	76.7	87.9	77.6	74.7	81.3
Casualties (including dead)	241,000	216,000	59,000	21,000	3,800	540,800	2,556,014
% Mobilized	38.3	51.8	45.7	11.5	30.4	39.5	41.6
% in Theatre	57.1	65.1	59.6	13.1	39.2	52.9	51.1
Indigenous Population, 1914	103,774	80,000 est.	52,997	5,081,490	1,700 est.	5,319,961	

Mobilized			2,816	102,110			
% Total Population			5.3	2.0			
Served in Theatre	4,000 est.	1,000 est.	2,668	94,843	21	102,077	
% Total Population	3.9	1.3	5.0	1.9	1.2	1.9	
% Mobilized			94.7	92.9			
Casualties (including dead)	1,200 est.	Unknown (at least 225)	1,070	5,635 dead	8	8,138	
% Mobilized			38.0	5.5			
% in Theatre	30.0	Unknown	40.1	5.9	38.1	8.0	

Table 1: Dominion First World War Statistics (est. stands for estimated)<sup>48</sup>

Following the war, paternalistic and authoritative Dominion Indigenous policies prevailed, and recognition for their unprecedented military contributions were fast, if not conveniently, forgotten. Military participation, and home front contributions, did not hasten the attainment of equal rights or enfranchisement (for those other than Maori). The more recent pan-Indigenous politicization, revival and focus on war service demonstrate not only its continuing relevance, but also the lasting legacy of the failure of British settler societies to address enduring Indigenous injustices. An understanding of the participation of Indigenous peoples during the First World War places their contributions in a broader, transnational context, coupled to the sacrifices common to all citizens and soldiers. It also underscores elements of the war experience which were unique to them. The residual effects of this failed opportunity to promote Indigenous advancement after the war are evident in the current political and social environments of all former Dominions.

Noah Riseman, Australian Catholic University

Timothy C. Winegard, Colorado Mesa University

## Notes

1. This entry addresses Newfoundland with Canada even though it was not part of Canada at the time. [↑](#)
2. Torres Strait Islanders inhabit the islands in the Torres Strait separating mainland Australia from Papua New Guinea. Their culture is distinct from Aboriginal Australians, and they are Australia's other Indigenous people. There is only one identified Torres

Strait Islander who served in the First World War. As such, this section will primarily discuss Aboriginal Australians. ↑

3. The military recruiters' handbook explicitly stated "Aborigines and halfcastes [sic] are not to be enlisted. This restriction is to be interpreted as applying to all coloured men." See Winegard, Timothy C.: *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War*, Cambridge 2012, p. 87. See also Rod Pratt, *Queensland's Aborigines in the First Australian Imperial Force*. In: Mantle, Craig Leslie Lackenbauer (author), Whitney, P. / Sheffield R. Scott (eds): *Aboriginal Peoples and Military Participation: Canadian & International Perspectives*, Kingston 2007, pp. 221-222. ↑
4. See e.g., William Cooper, to the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, 31 March 1938, reproduced in Attwood, Bain / Markus, Andrew: *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League*. Canberra 2004, pp. 92-93. Cooper voices regret about the ingratitude towards Aborigines who enlisted in defence of the Empire. ↑
5. For instance, Arabana man Ben Murray (1893-1994) describes his arrival at Gallipoli: "When we got there, just like a tree standing, all along on the banks [cliffs]. I see one dropping down... 'Hello! Oh!,' I sing out to the others: 'Shoot the trees, that's where the bullet come from.' We told the sergeant major, 'Shoot at them trees!' 'No, no, that way the bullet come from' [he said]...He didn't even take notice. He got shot anyway, he was too smart. 'You'll get hit directly' [Ben said]...and he did... 'Yeah, I bet your time will come.' His time didn't waste time! His time come alright, drop him dead too, right on the bank! We start shooting at the trees then. You see the people dropping, 'trees' falling over. Blokes running away, Turks, Turks running away. We got into them properly then." Quoted in: Austin, Peter / Hercus, Luise / Jones, Philip: *Ben Murray (Parlku-nguyuthangkayiwarna)*, *Aboriginal History* 12, no. 2 (1988), 160-162. ↑
6. Paine, Michelle: *Tales of illegal heroes*, *The Mercury* (Hobart, Tasmania), 9 November 2012, p. 23. ↑
7. *Colour Line Again*, *The Mercury* (Hobart, Tasmania), 24 June 1929, p. 6. ↑
8. *Returned Soldier Victimised*, *The Australian Abo Call*, May 1938, p. 2. ↑
9. See Winegard, Timothy C.: *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War*, Cambridge 2011. In this study, Newfoundland-Labrador is treated as a distinct Dominion, apart from Canada, as was its legal position within the British Empire at the time. ↑
10. The Indian Act legally dictated all facets of First Nations existence, from pass laws, liquor laws, employment, education, civil rights (or lack of) and all government-First Nations dealings. ↑
11. According to a 1919 Indian Affairs report of the Great War: "it must be remembered, moreover, that there were undoubtedly cases of Indian enlistment which were not reported to the department". Duncan Campbell Scott, 1919 Report of the Deputy

- Superintendent General for Indian Affairs: The Indians and the Great War—House of Commons Sessional Paper No. 27, Ottawa 1920, p. 13. ↑
12. Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 10, volume 6767, File 452-17. Return of Indian Enlistments, 1917; LAC, RG 10, volume 6771, File 452-29. Return of Indian Enlistments, 1919; Duncan Campbell Scott, 1919 Report of the Deputy Superintendent General for Indian Affairs: The Indians and the Great War—House of Commons Sessional Paper No. 27. Ottawa 1920, 13. ↑
  13. Section X of the act stated: “All the male inhabitants of Canada of the age of eighteen years and upwards, and under sixty, not exempt or disqualified by law and being British subjects, shall be liable to service in the militia; provided that the Governor-General may require all the male inhabitants of Canada capable of bearing arms.” LAC, RG 24, C-1-a, volume 6564-Part I. Revision of the Militia Act, 1904. ↑
  14. LAC, RG 24-c-1-a, volume 1221, Part 1 HQ-593-1-7. Hodgins to Hughes, with Reply, 8 August 1914. ↑
  15. Morris echoed this sentiment to Cree chiefs at Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt, Saskatchewan, in August 1876 during consultations over Treaty 6A, see Dempsey, James: *Warriors of the King: Prairie Indians in World War I*. Regina 1999, pp. 38–39. ↑
  16. Cook, Tim: *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914–1916*, volume 1 (Toronto: Penguin Group Canada, 2007), pp. 28–30. ↑
  17. House of Lords Records Office/Parliamentary Archives (London, UK), Andrew Bonar Law Papers, BL/55/16. Memorandum Colonial Office to Governors General and Administrators of British Dominions, Colonies and Protectorates, 8 October 1915; Cabinet Memorandum to the Dominions: The Question of Raising Native Troops for Imperial Service, 18 October 1915 (also contained in Harcourt Papers-445). ↑
  18. LAC, RG 24-c-1-a, volume 1221, File HQ-593-1-7. Letter from Ministry of Militia to A.G. Chisholm (Lawyer, London, Ontario), 26 November 1917. ↑
  19. For example, these numbers appear in the *Ottawa Citizen*: *Red Men on the Firing Line*, 19 November 1916, and the *Regina Leader*, *Indians are doing their bit in the Great War*, 18 November 1916. ↑
  20. Campbell Scott, Duncan: 1919 Report of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Sessional Paper No. 27: *The Indians and the Great War*. Ottawa 1920, pp. 15, 27. ↑
  21. Veterans Affairs Canada, at <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/pdf/cr/pi-sheets/Aboriginal-pi-e.pdf>. ↑
  22. LAC, RG 10, volume 6762, File 452-3. *Native Contributions to War Funds*; Department of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the DIA, 1917*, Ottawa 1918, p. 18. ↑
  23. LAC, RG 10, volume 3211, File 527, 787. *Various Correspondence on Loft and the League of Indians of Canada, 1919–1935*. ↑

24. Department of Indian Affairs, Annual Report of the DIA, 1917. Ottawa 1918, p. 17. [↑](#)
25. Compare the diary records of Maori Contingent member Carkeek, Rikihana: Home Little Maori Home: A Memoir of the Maori Contingent, Wellington 2003, pp. 64-65. [↑](#)
26. Pugsley, Christopher: Te Hokowhitu a Tu: The Maori Pioneer Battalion in the First World War, Auckland 1995. [↑](#)
27. "In the iwi's defence, Te Puea Herangi (1883-1952), a Tainui princess who was one of the leaders of the anti-conscription cause, decreed that after the New Zealand Wars her grandfather King Tawhiao (1825-1894): 'made an oath that never again would he raise arms or countenance warfare of any kind among his people to the end of the world. [...] these sayings of my grandfather are very sacred as far as the Waikato people are concerned, especially the elders, and they never forget to remind the people of them.'" Report of Conference between the Prime Minister and Te Puea Herangi, O.B.E., and other leaders of the Waikato people with reference to the Maori War Effort (13 July 1942). Quoted in O'Connor, P.S.: 'The Recruitment of Maori Soldiers, 1914-18,' Political Science 19 (1967), p. 77. [↑](#)
28. Enloe, Cynthia H.: Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in a Divided Society. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom 1980. [↑](#)
29. The Honourable Sir Maui Pomare, MP, Preface to Cowan, James: The Maoris in the Great War: A History of the New Zealand Contingent and Pioneer Battalion, Auckland 1926, p. x. [↑](#)
30. Perry, F. W.: The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organization in Two World Wars. Manchester 1988, pp. 187-188. [↑](#)
31. See Chapter 1, Article 7 of the act, drafted by Smuts: National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Pretoria Repository (SAB), Union of South Africa, Statutes, 1912, Act No. 13, Clause 7. [↑](#)
32. NASA, KAB, 1BIZ, volume 6/2. Botha to Natives, 1 August 1914; Memorandum: Botha to all Magistrates, 15 August 1914. [↑](#)
33. Andrew Bonar Law Papers-BL/55/16. Cabinet Memorandum to the Dominions: The Question of Raising Native Troops for Imperial Service, 18 October 1915. (Also contained in Harcourt Papers-445). Italics are original. [↑](#)
34. NASA, SAB, GNLB, 254/369/16. Botha to all Ministries, 7 September 1916; Memorandum SANLC Recruiting, October 1916. [↑](#)
35. See Grundlingh, Albert: Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War. Johannesburg 1987, pp. 42-43. [↑](#)
36. The association of Natives "side by side with British soldiers who have not been accustomed to deal with them, is regarded as dangerous from the South African point of view." Grundlingh, Fighting Their Own War 1987, pp. 42-43. [↑](#)
37. NASA, SAB, GG, volume 670, 9/93/56-9/93/63. War Office and Buxton, 18 January 1917,

- 7 February 1917. ↑
38. Grundlingh, *Fighting their Own War* 1987, p. 72. ↑
39. NASA, SAB, GG, volume 673/9/93/112-9/93/135. War Office to Buxton 28 March 1917 and Reply, 3 April 1917. ↑
40. NASA, SAB, NTS, volume 9107/16/363. Memorandums of 3 November 1917, 3 December 1917; SAB, GG, volume 670/ 9/93/56-9/93/63. List: Natives Repatriated as of 21 November 1917; Recruitment Memorandum 3 November 1917. ↑
41. NASA, SAB, NTS, volume 9107/16/363. Memorandum to all Chiefs, Headsmen and People, 4 January 1918. ↑
42. NASA, SAB NTS, volume 9107/11/363. Strengths of the SANLC; NA, WO-107/37. After Action Report: Work of Labour Force during the War, November 1919. Secondary sources all list that 20,887 Natives served in France. This is incorrect. This was the number of men who left South Africa. The reduced number of 20,205 accounts for the losses on the Mendi, deaths at sea and those left on stops due to sickness before reaching France. ↑
43. NASA, SAB, NTS, volume 9107/9/363. G.A. Godley to Smuts, 15 January 1919; NA, WO-107/37. After Action Report Work of Labour Force during the War, November 1919. ↑
44. Clothier, Norman: *Black Valour: the South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916-1918, and the Sinking of the Mendi*. Pietermaritzburg 1987, pp. 165-6. ↑
45. Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War* 1987, pp. 132, 152, 169. ↑
46. Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War* 1987, pp. 129, 134-135. ↑
47. Compare General Smuts' speech on 22 May 1917 at the Savoy Hotel in London, outlining his perceptions of Natives, the war and the future of South Africa. In his biography written by his son: Smuts, J. C.: *Jan Christian Smuts*. London 1952, pp. 194-195. ↑
48. Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* 2012, p. 235. A record of sources would be too lengthy to list. Numbers listed are either exact or based on a compilation of all sources available and listed as the most reasonable (up-to-date) statistics. Statistics are only provided where they can be accurately determined. South African statistics skew Dominion totals (usually decreasing). For example, excluding South Africa, the Dominion in theatre casualty percentages would be 37.4 percent for Indigenes and 60.2 percent for non-Indigenes. Academic arguments relating to casualty rates are common in war historiography, especially when dealing with the Dominions, both compared with each other, and when tallied against those of the UK. For example, Dominion forces suffered greater casualty rates than those of the UK because they were used as cannon fodder by British high command; or that Canada suffered a lower percentage of casualties than Australia or New Zealand due to the

ability of General Sir Arthur William Currie (1875-1933) and the combat prowess of Canadian soldiers (despite the acknowledged brilliance of General Sir John Monash (1865-1931) and the record of Anzac soldiers). See the works of Gary Sheffield, John Terraine and Robin Neillands for an analysis of these arguments. Most academic works, however, do promote and laud the fighting qualities of the Dominion forces and the Scottish Highland battalions. ↑

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