

AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES — INDIGENOUS SERVICE

Statement

HON MICHAEL MISCHIN (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.08 pm]: I simply wish to continue and conclude the remarks I commenced last week, on 11 November, in relation to Indigenous servicemen. At the end of my time last week I had commenced a story of one light-skinned Aboriginal man who was married to a darker-skinned Aboriginal woman near Geraldton, but was informed by the authorities at the time—this was at the time of the Second World War—that he and his wife could not live in town because his wife was too coloured. Accordingly, they had to find a place between the native part outside town and the town itself because he was too light skinned to live on land assigned to natives. That was part of the difficulties that were faced by Aboriginal people at the time and part of the difficulties that were being faced by those who were keen to serve their country during that war at that time of peril.

Many such stories are contained in Ms James' book, which is entitled *Forever Warriors*. The book is a very worthy one that has taken her quite some time to research. It contains hundreds of small biographies of Aboriginal servicemen from the earliest time that she could trace them to the present day and many photographs of those service men and women, including photographs of them not only in civilian dress, but also wearing proudly the Australian military uniforms of the day. It also contains some text that reveals some very little known areas of our history. There is a chapter, for example, on the Aboriginal labour corps set up during the Second World War. There is a chapter on the attempts to convert Aboriginal people and inspire them towards communism during the Second World War. There is also a chapter on the question that arose in 1942 about whether Aboriginal people might actually side with the enemy in the light of the treatment that they had received in Australia by European governments.

I have a copy of the book. I have also purchased a copy that I will now proudly donate to the Parliamentary Library. These people, not so much now of course but certainly until relatively recent times, were not treated with the respect that they deserved as service men and women who were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of their country. At a time when Australia and its people were in need, they answered the call. But when they returned from active service, they found that all too often Australia and its people were blind and deaf to them and their needs.

As Mr Schnaars says on his Honouring Indigenous War Graves website —

“I have to try to right a small wrong from many years ago that happened to these veterans. I believe it was the veterans who went away to war then, who had no rights in this country to vote or anything, and that it was those men and women, the few women that went away, that changed the course of history on the way Australia felt towards Aborigines.”

“In my view, they were the people who led the change of history in Australia, towards Aboriginals being able to vote and have rights. It's for that reason, I think, that we owe them a lot...”

I concur with that view. Members can make some small contribution to recognising these men and women who have not been recognised adequately to date by perhaps picking up the book from time to time, looking at some of the chapters in that book, leafing through some of the biographies and remembering the people who so selflessly served their country but did not receive the acknowledgement or respect that they deserved.