

AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES — INDIGENOUS SERVICE

Statement

HON MICHAEL MISCHIN (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.36 pm]: I am sorry to persist with the theme of reflective topics that we have heard so far today. Today is Remembrance Day, the ninety-second anniversary of Armistice Day in 1918, the day that the guns fell silent on the Western Front at least and marked the end of official hostilities during the First World War, probably the most destructive war in history up until that time. It seems to me an appropriate occasion to mention and give some recognition to a little-known fact of Australian history and to a group of service men and women who, until relatively recently, have not been appropriately recognised for their contribution to this country's safety and security. I am speaking of Aboriginal service men and women. Indigenous people have had a long and largely unappreciated history of fighting for this country for its protection and preservation. Theirs is a little known and, in my mind, insufficiently acknowledged contribution to our military and social history. Despite the legal and social impediments that were in their way, over 100 Aboriginals served in the first and second Boer Wars on behalf of what were then the Australian colonies. Some served as horse handlers while many served as trackers to follow guerilla bands through South Africa. Their names were often not recorded on shipping manifests. I understand there to be evidence that a number were simply left behind when the Boer Wars concluded and Australian troops returned to their homeland.

It is estimated that up to 500 Indigenous soldiers served in the First World War, of whom 428 have been identified. Among them was one Aboriginal nurse who, sadly, died in transit on board the ship that was returning her to Australia at the end of hostilities. Some 5 000 Aboriginals served in World War II. The exact number will never be known. Many hid their identities or pretended to be Maori or Indian in order to be accepted into our armed services. More were rejected when they applied to join our armed services and were sent back to their communities. Often they were arrested for breaking the laws in place at the time that prohibited them from leaving their reservations and places to which they were confined and controlling native movements because they had left their areas without permission.

Many more Aboriginals have seen active service during the Malay conflict, the Korean War and the Vietnam Wars and, of course, Indigenous soldiers have continued to serve in peacekeeping roles around the world since then on behalf of Australia. Those who did serve and who were prepared to put their lives on the line for Australia, risk death and injury and endure hardship and who sought acceptance, notwithstanding the prejudices of time towards them, did not come home to acclaim and honours as did their comrades in arms. They did not enjoy the welcomes accorded their comrades in arms of European descent. For example, following the Second World War a parade was to be held in Quairading to welcome back returning servicemen. Aboriginal servicemen were not welcome and their children, gathering to greet their fathers returning sometimes from imprisonment and certainly from active service, were chased out of town. The servicemen themselves were shunned or ignored. They were not eligible for soldier resettlement schemes available to Caucasian service personnel or allowed to have a drink with their comrades. Those physically or mentally scarred by their experiences received none of the support available to their white brothers in arms. Until 1967 they were not even regarded as citizens of the country in which they were born and chose to serve, and they were not entitled to vote for the government whose authority they acknowledged and whose orders they followed. It is ironic, and to my mind a source of legitimate shame to right-thinking people, that these men and women who chose to serve our country were the subject of intolerance, prejudice and worse, and were treated little better by their homeland than they could expect to be treated by those who sought to destroy it. Fortunately, this wrong is now slowly being redressed. In this regard I make mention of one organisation and two people in particular. The organisation is called Honouring Indigenous War Graves Incorporated—HIWG. One of the people to whom I am referring is its president, Mr John Schnaars. HIWG was established by a group of ex-veterans in Bruce Rock in June 2005 to acknowledge the service of Indigenous veterans throughout Australia. Many Indigenous families have loved ones and ancestors who participated in Australia's various conflicts over the years and who have now died without ever having their efforts for their country acknowledged, recognised or commemorated. The final resting places of many of these servicemen and women remain unknown to the authorities. HIWG believes it is important for younger generations, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to learn the truth about these people and for their descendants to learn the truth about the involvement of their elders in the protection of our country and the sacrifices they made so that their descendants can enjoy the freedoms they now have. I have a longstanding interest in military history generally and I agree with and am proud to be a member of HIWG. I applied for membership and was accepted. I have been to one of its annual general meetings, which I will say something about in just a moment.

Once the group identifies the resting place of an Indigenous veteran who has not been honoured for his or her service, HIWG works with the person's family and local community to decide whether a headstone and a commemorative service would be acceptable to them. HIWG also liaises with established groups of Korean and Vietnam veterans, the military, the Kelmscott–Pinjarra 10th Light Horse Memorial Troop, the Salvation Army

and other veterans in order to recognise and bring closure to the memory of these servicemen and women. HIWG funds the headstone, the ceremony and the associated printing of programs and so forth for the commemoration. To date, it has funded and erected more than 100 headstones at the resting places of fallen Indigenous service personnel. Mr Schnaars is an ex-national serviceman who saw active service in 1968 in Vietnam. He has been tireless in his promotion of HIWG and its aims. I had the pleasure of meeting him for the first time while representing the state government at the Remembering Indigenous Service ceremony at the Kings Park War Memorial on 2 June this year. It was then that I first learned of HIWG and its work and I have tried to assist the organisation since then. Many of the organisation's members are ex-servicemen and former comrades of Mr Schnaars, and are both Aboriginal and Caucasian. There may be some significance that a large proportion of them are ex-Vietnam veterans who, perhaps more than any other group of servicemen in our community, would identify with the pain of returning from active service and being shunned for their contribution and their sacrifice and not being properly acknowledged.

The second person I would like to acknowledge is the Northam-based historian Jan James, who is known to her Indigenous friends as Kabarli. She has written a book dedicated to the memory of our Western Australian Indigenous service personnel. The book contains the names and details of 645 Indigenous veterans so far identified through her many years of research on the subject. The Quairading story that I mentioned is a story that was related to her by the child in Quairading who was there to greet his father and was chased out of town. The story had a sad ending, in as much as the father, who came back from the war a broken man, went to the local pub to have a drink with his mates. The local publican refused to serve him, he saw red, and he punched the publican, who fell down some stairs and died. So this returned veteran ended up spending 15 years in prison.

Another story that was related and very much moved me at the Remembering Indigenous Service ceremony was that of a serviceman who was light skinned.

I will continue my remarks on another occasion.