

PARTICIPATION IN WAR EFFORT BY AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

Captain F.R. Morris

Editorial Introduction: On 20 July 1945, F.M. Forde, the Minister for the Army, received a request from A.G. Cameron MP, on behalf of Dr A. Grenfell-Price. Grenfell-Price sought data 'of an authentic character', concerning the role Aborigines played during the Second World War, for a proposed book. Forde directed the request to Northern Territory Army Headquarters. With surprising expedition, a report was completed by 8 September 1945. It was written by Captain F.R. Morris, Controller of Native Personnel, Northern Territory Force. Until his enlistment in 1942, Morris was a member of the Northern Territory Native Affairs Branch (Australian Archives Victoria, accession no. MP 742/1, Department of Defence, File 164/1/209).

It is reproduced here with minor omissions irrelevant to the context indicated and the plethora of full stops deleted. Unfortunately, the report was limited to the Northern Territory, whereas Grenfell-Price had sought information from across the continent.

D.J. Mulvaney

Participation in War Effort by Australian Aborigines.

The contributions, as far as the aboriginals of the Northern Territory are concerned, towards the War Effort have been many and varied, and to write the complete authentic story would entail much arduous research work.... The following is an outline of the part played by the Northern Territory Aborigines housed in Army Settlements:-

LABOUR: An average of 500 male and 50 female aboriginals have been employed by the Army since March 1942 on the undermentioned tasks:

1. *Butchery:* Aborigines have been employed at all Army Butcheries on a large scale. At present only one is operating at Katherine where 20 aboriginals are employed at various tasks. Whilst the butchery was operating at Adelaide River, where upwards to 30 were employed, some were actually performing slaughtermens' duties as well as the salting, folding and stacking of hides.
2. *Hygiene, Malaria Control and Sanitation:*
 - (a) Hygiene: Aborigines have been employed on this work at all Area Headquarters and many other Army Camps throughout the Northern Territory, under the supervision of white NCO's and have in all instances carried out the job successfully.
 - (b) Sanitation of Darwin: Twenty aboriginals efficiently performed the whole of the sanitation of Darwin from the first bombing until recently when burner type latrines were installed in most camps.
 - (c) Malaria Control: In the malarious and potentially malarious areas, the aboriginals have performed duties such as spraying waterholes, creeks etc., in the vicinity of camps, and disposal of rubbish dumps consisting of tins, bottles and other containers which by holding stagnant water provide excellent mosquito breeding grounds. At Koolpinyah Native Settlement 6 aboriginals were recently employed on similar duties and in addition were using DDT.
3. *Army Farms:* Many varied tasks have been performed efficiently despite the fact that the aboriginals of the Northern Territory are purely hunters and not agriculturalists.

ABORIGINES' CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIA'S WAR EFFORT

4. *Mechanical and Technical Work:*

(a) Mataranka Workshops: During 1942/43 aborigines were employed dismantling car and truck engines and in some cases worked on the assembly lines of such engines.

(b) 10 Aust Base Workshops: At the present time 20 aborigines are working in the mechanical shop. Of these 9 are undergoing a special course. (Note:- Lt-Col Gurnett, CO, 10 Aust Base Workshops, is so impressed with their ability that he has made representations for another 30 or 40 aborigines.)

(c) RSD [Returned Stores Depot] and Salvage: Aborigines are engaged on work of a semi-skilled nature such as sorting tools and stores into two classes - those which are U/S and those fit for reconditioning. They are also used in the actual reconditioning of tools and stores.

(d) Saw Benches and Firewood Camps: Throughout the war a considerable number of aborigines have been engaged in getting firewood and milling it for bakeries, hospitals and other units.

(e) MT [Motor Transport] Drivers: Several are the holders of Army Licences.

5. *Ammunition:* As mentioned in a previous report, all ammunition passing through Mataranka during the early part of 1942 was handled by a gang of 60 and in cases of emergency would handle three tons per man per hour.

6. *Hospitals:* At the various hospitals a number are employed as Orderlies and Wardsmen in the Aboriginal Wards.

7. *FSD [Field Stores Depot] Pine Creek:* At Pine Creek aborigines loaded and unloaded practically all freights to and from trains. When this area closed a considerable quantity of petrol drums etc, (full and empty) were loaded entirely by them.

8. *Female Workers:* Women are employed as under:

69 AWAS [Aust Women's Army Service] Barracks	9
AWAS Hostel	3
107 Aust General Hospital	5
74 Aust Camp Hospital	2
RAAF Hospital	2
AWAS Barracks (Alice Springs)	4
AAMWS [Aust Army Medical Women's Service] Barracks (Alice Springs)	2

At hospitals duties include (a) Orderlies; (b) personal maids to Matrons; (c) domestic duties. At AWAS, AAMWS, Barracks and Hostel duties include (a) Washing and Ironing; (b) Household and domestic duties.

LABOUR GENERAL: From time to time working parties are supplied for all kinds of miscellaneous work, such as:

(a) Camp demolition in the Adelaide River Area.

(b) Clearing fire breaks at Mataranka Ammunition Depot.

(c) Grave digging and general maintenance at War Cemetery Adelaide River.

(d) Bulk Canteens.

(e) Cordial Factories.

(f) Bakeries.

(g) 8 AOD working parties, average 50 per day.

(h) Manufacture of concrete floor blocks (11 Wks and Pks).

ABORIGINALS EMPLOYED BY AUST PORT CRAFT COY: During March 1944, some 80 aboriginals were voluntarily recruited from Bathurst and Melville Islands to perform certain duties: pilots; deckhands; Shipwrights' assistants; Technical Storemens' assistants; boss boys; runners; hygiene; Officers' Mess Stewards; cooks and kitchen orderlies; general duties.

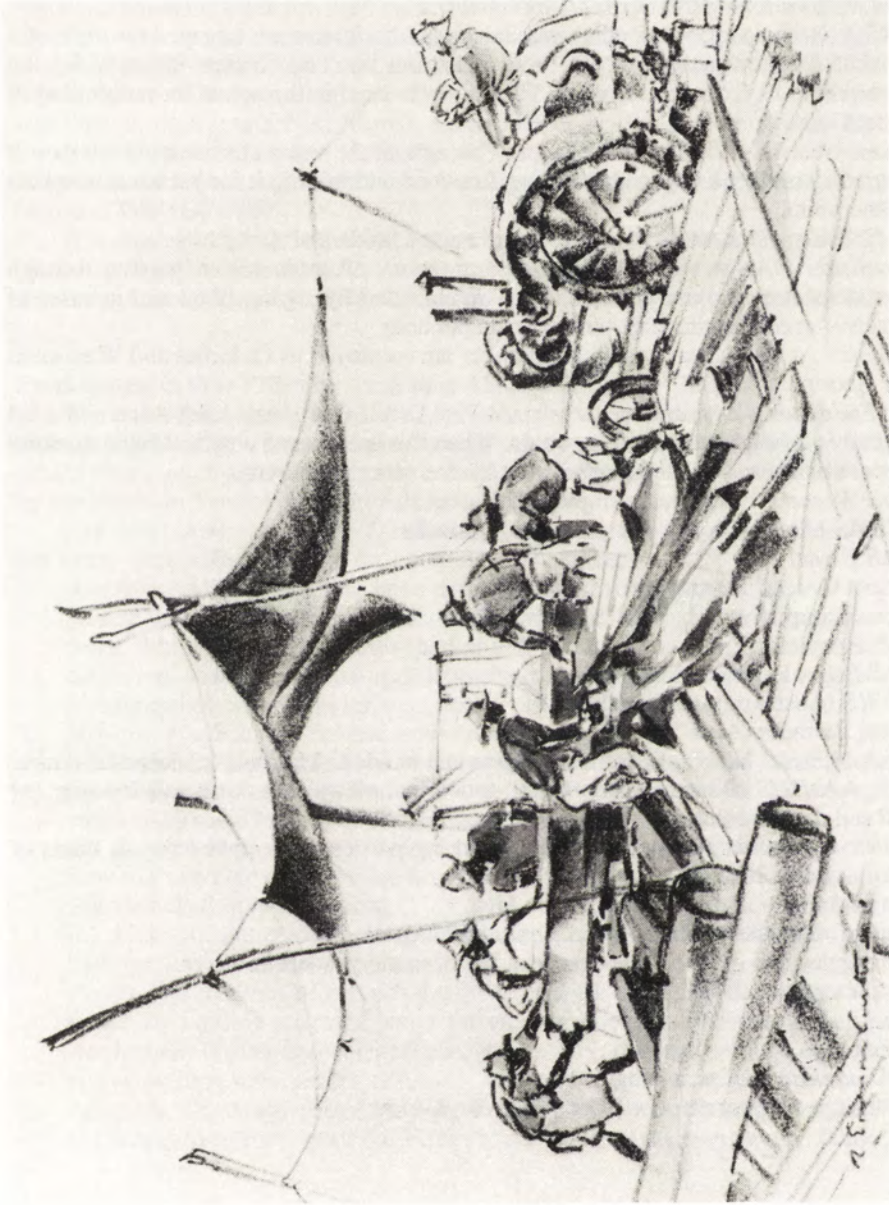


Plate 1. R. Emerson Curtis, *Gunnawurra Aborigines, North Queensland*. Five Aboriginal stockmen milling cypress pine for cattle yards construction, Gunnawurra station, 1945 (Australian War Memorial (AWM), watercolour and lithographic crayon, heightened with white, 27.6 x 37.3 cm; 255601).



Plate 2. R. Emerson Curtis, *The chaff cutters, Gunnawurra*, 1945 (AWM, watercolour and lithographic crayon with pencil, 30.4 x 35.7 cm; 25608).



Plate 3. R. Emerson Curtis, *D. Day, Aboriginal stockman, Gunnawurra cattle station, 1945* (AWM, lithographic crayon over pencil, 46.2 x 36.4 cm; 25611).



Plate 4. R. Emerson Curtis, *Joseph Glover, Aboriginal benchman, Ryan's shipyard*, 1945 (AWM, lithographic crayon, 36.8 x 26.4 cm; 25580). Glover was a champion axeman in north eastern NSW before the war.



Plate 5. Roy Hodgkinson, *Pilots and Aborigines, Darwin 1942* (AWM, gouache with crayon, 51.6 x 65.8 cm, 22732). USA pilot Johnson was brought in by Aborigines after six days in the bush.

ABORIGINES' CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIA'S WAR EFFORT

Unfortunately these people were not permitted to have their families with them as in the case of other Army Settlements. The reason for this being that they were quartered in the same camp as white troops. They worked very well under the circumstances until April 1945, when the OC of the Coy granted all of them one weeks leave at Bathurst Island, in appreciation of the good work they had performed. The majority of them remained on the Island and repeated efforts to get them back failed. This state of affairs can be attributed to the following facts:

- (a) Separation from their families;
- (b) Over twelve months in the one environment.

However at present 27 aborigines, which include many former employees, are engaged on the same work.

GENERAL REMARKS: The aggregation of Aborigines [*sic*] into large communities has afforded an opportunity for establishment of schools. At some centres Mission educated aborigines have conducted schools for the children with some degree of success. These schools indicate that with suitable supervision much can be done by the aborigines for themselves in the way of education.

Furthermore these communities have shown the aborigines are capable of performing welfare services for one another. At various centres women are employed as welfare workers and dressmakers. These people do a particularly good job in respect of the care and cleanliness of the children.

In considering the part played by the aborigines in the war it is important to note that they have been responsible under supervision of 2 white NCO's at each centre for the establishment, construction and running of their own settlements. There are many aborigines who have proved that with a few tools, some of which have been improvised, that they are quite efficient as 'bush' carpenters and cement workers.

In order to work, the aboriginal and his dependents must be fed. All food is prepared and cooked by aboriginal cooks, the meals being varied and tasty.

Women have shown themselves to be very capable in domestic duties. As mentioned previously, Army Settlement staffs consist of 2 white NCO's whose time is fully occupied with Administrative work and general supervision, therefore, these women are required to carry out duties which include cooking, laundry and house work.

Finally an interesting fact is that aborigines not only have released Army personnel for other duties, but in many instances, where the leave position was acute have made it possible for a certain amount of leave to be granted which otherwise would have been impossible.

PATROL, RESCUE AND RECOVERY WORK - Voluntary and supervised: ... it would be of great assistance to Dr Grenfell-Price to contact the following persons who, no doubt, would be only too pleased to supply authentic information concerning:

- (a) Rescue of Allied airmen and seamen.
- (b) Capture of Japanese airmen.
- (c) Locating and salvaging crashed aircraft.
- (d) Reporting presence of enemy mines etc.

The addresses of these persons and some of the particular events are enumerated hereunder:

Lt J.B.W. Gribble, C/- HMAS *Leeuwin*, Fremantle, WA.

- 1 Capture on Melville Island, by aboriginal Mathias, of first enemy pilot shot down on Australian soil.

2. Aboriginals finding and caring for 11 survivors of *SS M Florence*.
3. Rescue by aboriginals of American pilot who had bailed out of burning plane with one leg badly burned, caring for him and taking him to help.
4. Walking 119 miles to rescue American pilot Lt J. Martin who had been shot down in flames. (This pilot was later shot down over Bynoe Harbour and was again rescued by Aboriginals. See under Supt Murray.)
5. Finding of two crashed Kittyhawks.
6. Piloting rescue and security patrol ships.
7. Searching for and locating several Jap mines etc.
8. Rescuing five Dutch pilots and carrying one with a broken leg many miles.

Supt E.J. Murray, Civil Native Settlement, Katherine, NT.

1. Rescue of Lt Johnson under very dramatic conditions.
2. Rescue of Lt J. Martin who had been shot down (Second rescue - see also Lt Gribble).
3. Locating of numerous crashed aircraft, both Allied and enemy.
4. Patrol work of aboriginals under supervision of Supt Murray did many excellent jobs in locating un-exploded bombs.

Patrol Officer Harney, Civil Native Settlement, Katherine, NT.

1. This officer could give details of work done by aboriginals at Mission Stations where over 200 were employed by RAAF.
2. Officer Harney in conjunction with Professor Elkin of Sydney University has already written a book entitled *The Native and War* which is ready for publication [Editor: presumably *Taboo*, Sydney, 1944].

Petty Officer Jensen, C/- HMAS *Melville*, Darwin, NT.

1. Petty Officer Jensen can give the complete story of the sinking of the *Patricia Cam* off Wessel Island by an enemy float plane. The aboriginals did fine rescue work on this occasion.

Revd Father McGrath, Bathurst Island Catholic Mission.

1. Father McGrath can give many instances of the valuable work performed by aboriginals of both Bathurst and Melville Islands.
2. Louie, an aboriginal of this Mission captured 5 Japanese airmen who had been shot down on Melville Island.

Others are Revds Ellemore and Shepherdson of Methodist Mission, Millingimbi, Revd Father Doherty of Port Keats Catholic Mission and the Revd Harris of Church Mission Society, Groote Island.