Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this thesis may contain images of deceased people.

“My own darling laddie”.

In Search of George Wenham: an Aboriginal Anzac and the History of Denial.

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Thesis submitted to the School of Humanities and Social Science, the Faculty of Education and Arts, The University of Newcastle in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

November 2015
Declaration

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(signed) ......................................................
This thesis contains references to Indigenous people who are now deceased, and may cause distress to some Indigenous Peoples.
Dedication

This research is dedicated to my grandfather, George Wenham (1888-1928) and to all Indigenous men who served in the First Australian Imperial Force during the Great War.
Acknowledgements

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Enabling my thesis to use a range of use of images I thank the generosity of organisations and their representatives who hold their copyright. Firstly the National Archives of Australia for permission to publish from their B2455 series of WWI files and the assistance of Cara Downes of the NAA’s Access Examination & Copyright section. To the Australian War Memorial, particularly Stuart Bennington, Curator of Official Records and Cameron Atkinson, Information Services for their assistance in facilitating my use of images from the AWM’s “Honours and Awards” and the “Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau” files. The State Records Authority of New South Wales and the role of Gail Davis, Senior Archivist Research and Publications in allowing the use of NRS 8058, Returned Soldiers’ Settlement loan files. George Wenham, File 8186,[ 12/7291]. To Robert Pike of “Ancre Great War” in generously providing me images of the grave at Baby 700, Gallipoli, of John Miller, likely the first Indigenous man to die in action in the Great War. To Julie Reece of “Connecting Sprits” for providing photographs of Cyril and Rufus Rigney, and the Aboriginal ceremony held at the grave of Rufus Rigney at Harlebeke New British Cemetery in 2006. I thank Pierre Vandervelden of “INMEMORy” for his permission allowing the use of a photograph of Indigenous hero William Irwin.

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CONTENTS

Declaration ii
Warning iii
Dedication iv
Acknowledgements v
Contents vi
List of Figures ix
Abstract xv
Introduction xvi
Chapter 1 Prelude to World War One 1
   Race and the Indigenous ANZAC: the case of Mick King 3
   Denying Aboriginal ANZACs 9
   Dispossession 12
   'A cult of forgetfulness' 15
   The enlistment of Indigenous men in the AIF 19
Chapter 2 The Indigenous soldiers of World War One – An overview 26
   The effects of the 1909 amendments to the Defence Act: the case of
   Thomas Talbot 27
   Who were the Indigenous members of the First AIF: the contribution
   of Philippa Scarlett 30
   Key geographical locations for Indigenous members of the First AIF 31
   Black ANZACS of 1914: the case of John Miller 34
   Black diggers and enlistment post 1914 39
   Insights for Indigenous members provided by their service records: age,
   physical attributes, occupations, theatres of service, religious
   denomination and casualty details 45
Chapter 3 Indigenous soldiers and their units 61
   Infantry 63
   Light Horse 74
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous military heroes: the case of William Irwin</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Indigenous winners of the DCM</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous winners of the Military Medal</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The case of Ewan Rose and the Croix de Guerre</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous men Mentioned in Despatches</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7  “Do you know to whom you’re speaking”</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and a citizen army.</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field punishment and the case of Frank Owen</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard labour – the case of George Aitken</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Conduct to the Prejudice”</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desertion</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning the Anzac myth</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venereal disease</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The case of Arthur Andrews</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8  George Wenham</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry and Mary Wenham</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Wenham and the AIF</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George and Madeleine Wenham post war</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1:</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2:</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3: Abbreviations</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

CHAPTER 2. The Indigenous soldiers of World War One – an overview
Figure 1. The application form for the AIF. 28
Figure 2. The first page of Talbott’s attestation where his enlistment has been cancelled because he was “Not of European Origin”. 29
Figure 3. Place of birth for Indigenous soldiers in World War One given on enlistment. 32
Figure 4. Numbers of Indigenous enlistments by State based on POB. 32
Figure 5. Indigenous recruits for 1914. POB and place of enlistment. 36
Figure 6. Baby 700 Cemetery, courtesy R E PIKE. 39
Figure 7. Grave of John Miller, likely first Indigenous man killed in the Great War, Baby 700 Cemetery, courtesy R E PIKE. 39
Figure 8. Enlistment of Indigenous soldiers for each year of the war as a percentage. 40
Figure 9. Indigenous enlistment for 1915 showing POB and place of enlistment. 41
Figure 10. Indigenous enlistment for 1916 showing POB and increased places where a man could enlist. 42
Figure 11. Indigenous enlistment for 1917 showing POB and place of enlistment. A noticeable decline in numbers compared with 1916. 43
Figure 12. Indigenous enlistment for 1918 showing POB and place of enlistment. An even greater decline in numbers. 44
Figure 13. The age of Indigenous Recruits to the AIF, 1914-1918. 48
Figure 14. The will of Martin Coohey – defying the stereotype. 52
Figure 15. Religious denomination of Indigenous recruits as recorded on attestation paper. 57

CHAPTER 3. Indigenous Soldiers and their units
Figure 1. AWM Collection: P00889.004. Harry C Murray, 11th LH 76
Figure 2. Venereal disease case-card for Thomas Rine. 84
Figure 3. Treatment for VD administered to Thomas Rine. 84
Figure 4. Correspondence from Office of Army Records to RSL Dunedoo confirming Rine’s service in the AIF. 86
Figure 5. Occupations of Indigenous recruits. 87
Figure 6. Items issued to new recruits of the AIF from the file of Walter Coe. 104
Figure 7. Walter Coe’s “summary page”. 105
Figure 8. AWM Collection; E05465 which possibly shows Walter Coe as a member of the Australian Graves Detachment. 106

CHAPTER 4. “An Aboriginal too full blooded for AIF”
Figure 1. First page of George Cain’s attestation papers. 120
Figure 2. The records of John Clarke demonstrating the initial training. 125
Figure 3. The records of John Clarke demonstrating the initial training recruits for the AIF received. 126
Figure 4. Possible recruits from Barambah from the file of Harry Baker. 134
Figure 5. The first page of Harry Baker’s attestation where his family name was originally recorded as “Dago” 137
Figure 6. The medical records for Edmund Coochey where he has been rejected because of his race. 140
Figure 7. The first page of Edmund Bilney’s attestation papers where he has been described as “Halfcaste”. 143
Figure 8. Edmund Bilney’s medical file where he is rejected for being “Too full blood for AIF”. 144
Figure 9. Robert Bond’s medical files where he is discharged for being “Not substantially of European origin”. 145
Figure 10. Correspondence couched in racist language which led to the discharge of Abby Delaney. 149
Figure 11. William Chatfield’s original enlistment resulting in his discharge for “Unsuitable Physique (Colour)” 150
Figure 12. AWM Collection; PO 246,001. Wedding portrait of William Wallace Chatfield and his bride, Mary Jane Cain. Coonabarabran. 151

CHAPTER 5 Indigenous Sacrifice 1914-19
Figure 1. AWM Canberra: The tomb of the Unknown Soldier, May 2014. 154
Figure 2. AWM: 100793 - Canberra, ACT. 4 July, 1945. An aerial photograph of the Australian War Memorial. 155
Figure 3. AWM Canberra: Roll of Honour for World War One, May 2014. 156
Figure 4. AWM: Roll of Honour for George Aitken, one of 124 Indigenous men who died in the Great War. 157
Figure 5. Deaths per year 1915-1919 for Indigenous diggers. 158
Figure 6. Casualties and enlistments for the AIF as a percentage during World War One. 158
Figure 7. Age at death of Indigenous members of AIF. 159
Figure 8. Anzac Cove - July, 2012. 169
Figure 9. The writer, as did many diggers, swimming at Anzac Cove. July, 2012 169
Figure 10. Lone Pine Memorial, July 2012. 174
Figure 11. The grave of Arthur Homer at Shell Green Military Cemetery (July 2012). 175
Figure 12. Shell Green Military Cemetery (July 2012). 176
Figure 13. Lone Pine Memorial: 15th Battalion (July 2012) 181
Figure 14. Lone Pine Memorial: Edward Maynard (July 2012) 181
Figure 15. Map showing prominent battle sites associated with Indigenous
casualties in France and Flanders.

Figure 16. AWM Collection: J00146. Map of Pozière and Mouquet Farm.

Figure 17. "2444 Wallie Johnson" Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau files, 1914-18 War 1DRL/0428.

Figure 18. "2444 Wallie Johnson" Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau files, 1914-18 War 1DRL/0428.

Figure 19. Cyril Rigney - kind permission of "Connecting Spirits"

Figure 20. Rufus Rigney - kind permission of "Connecting Spirits"

Figure 21. NAA: B2455 RIGNEY RUFUS GORDON - German death certificate

Figure 22. Aboriginal ceremony at the grave of Rufus Rigney - Harlebeke New British Cemetery 2006- kind permission of "Connecting Spirits"

Figure 23. Locations in the Middle East where the two Indigenous troopers died.

Figure 24. International Wargraves Photography Project (#46770518) "Trooper Ernest James Firth". Find A Grave. (19 June, 2013)

Figure 25. Official correspondence sent to George Lavender’s mother of his death. It tells her it was from a self-inflicted gunshot.

CHAPTER 6. The Good and the Great

Figure 1. AWM Collection: H15655. Portrait of Captain Albert Jacka, winner of Australia’s first VC in the war.

Figure 2. AWM Collection: P09300.001. 202 Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick in Shrapnel Gully at Anzac Cove.

Figure 3. Shrapnel Valley - July, 2012.

Figure 4. The statue of Simpson and his donkey at the AWM. May 2014.

Figure 5. AWM: P02939.043, Informal outdoors portrait of Private George Cartwright VC, 33rd Battalion.

Figure 6. AWM 281/171: Pte George Cartwright, 726, 33rd Bn – recommendation for VC.

Figure 7. AWM 281/171: Pte William Irwin, 792, 33rd Bn – recommendation for DCM.

Figure 8. William Irwin, 792, 33rd Bn. Permission of Pierre Vandervelden.

Figure 9. NAA: B2455 IRWIN WILLIAM ALLAN details of injuries received.

Figure 10. Geographical locations for Indigenous gallantry.

Figure 11. AWM 28 1/4: T/Cpl Albert Knight, 5709, 43rd Bn – recommendation for DCM.

Figure 12. AWM 28 1/171: Sergeant James Stanton, 3265, 7th Bn – recommendation for DCM.

Figure 13. AWM 28 1/4: L/Cpl Frederick Prentice, 2597 1st Pioneer Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 14. AWM 28 1/180: Pte Maitland Madge, 3483, 15th Bn –
recommendation for MM.

Figure 15. AWM Collection: J00187. Aerial view of Mouquet Farm, after shelling by British artillery, showing the ruins of the farm and destroyed trenches.


Figure 17. Statutory declaration from Frederick Briggs where he claims Maori descent.

Figure 18. AWM28 1/47: Pte James Couley, 2978, 1st Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 19. AWM28 2/77: Pte Arthur Byrne, 718, 33rd Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 20. AWM28 1/268: Pte Charles Goldspink, 5019, 54th Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 21. Australian War Memorial: PO1695.002 5459 Corporal Harry Thorpe MM

Figure 22. AWM 28 1/34: L/Cpl Harry Thorpe, 5459, 7th Bn – recommendation for DCM.

Figure 23. AWM28 1/47: Dvr Charles Hearps, 207, 40th Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 24. AWM Collection: P01695.001 Studio portrait of 3603 Private William Reginald Rawlings MM.

Figure 25. 1DRL/0428: William Rawlings, 3603, 29th Bn.

Figure 26. 1DRL/0428: William Rawlings, 3603, 29th Bn.

Figure 27. Medical file for John Ferguson.

Figure 28. AWM 28 1/47: Pte (L/Cpl) John Ferguson, 2405, 34th Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 29. AWM28 1/115: Pte William John Gray, 4428, 26th Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 30. Raymond Runga’s attestation paper where his race is recorded.

Figure 31. AWM28 1/47: Pte Raymond Runga, 5476, 6th Bn – recommendation for MM.

Figure 32. AWM28 2/94: L/Cpl James Phillips, 1643, 53rd Bn – recommendation for DCM.

Figure 33 AWM28 2/96: Pte Ewan Rose, 3132, 14 Australian LTMB - Recommendation.

Figure 34. AWM28 1/255: Pte Ewan Rose, 3132, 14 Australian LTMB - Recommendation - MID.

Figure 35. AWM28 2/96: Pte Ewan Rose, 3132, 14 Australian LTMB - Recommendation – Belgian Croix de Guerre.
CHAPTER 7 “Do you know to whom you're speaking”

Figure 1. Occupations of Indigenous recruits. 293
Figure 2. Occupations for AIF as a whole 293
Figure 3. Frank Owen's records showing he stowed away to Gallipoli. 294
Figure 4. The will of George Aitken. 298
Figure 5. Codford military camp 1917 300
Figure 6. The quagmire that was the front at Ypres October, 1917. 304
Figure 7. 10 unidentified Australian deserters. 320
Figure 8. Précis of the service of George Lavender. 323
Figure 9. Document showing Louis Lacey at Salvation Army shelter. 332
Figure 10. Précis of the service of Louis Lacey 334
Figure 11. Document detailing issues of Arthur Andrew’s ill-discipline. 351

CHAPTER 8 George Wenham

Figure 1. The bounty ship Maitland. 358
Figure 2. Geographical locations central to my family's early history in NSW. 361
Figure 3. Birth certificate of George Wenham. 368
Figure 4. George Wenham's application to join AIF. 369
Figure 5. Colour patch for the 30th Battalion AIF. 371
Figure 6. George Wenham, 3663, B Company 30th Battalion, 8th Brigade, 5th Australian Division. 371
Figure 7. My grandmother’s annotation of my grandfather’s photograph. 372
Figure 8. The troopship, Ballarat, sinking in 1917. It had earlier taken my grandfather to the UK. 374
Figure 9. Troops of the 30th Battalion enter Bapaume, 1917. 377
Figure 10. Prominent locations for George Wenham in WW1. 378
Abstract

George Wenham, 3663, 30th Battalion, First Australian Imperial Force was a Gamilaroi man. He was my grandfather. Despite the celebrations surrounding the centenary of the Great War I knew little about him. This thesis addresses the previous denial by my family of its Indigenous heritage and until quite recently the history of Indigenous members of the AIF. Using the digital records held by the National Archives of Australia, the Australian War Memorial and the large body of literature written on Australia’s participation in the war, an interrogation of the stories of 834 Indigenous soldiers has resulted firstly in an act of historical recovery and secondly a reinterpretation of the ANZAC myth. Rather than being a white myth, it can now expand to become more inclusive of the reality of our national story whereby it recognises in a postcolonial manner the dispossession at the basis of the national story and the contribution of Indigenous men and their families to the nation. Through the use of silhouette biography and oral history, my grandfather can be found located in the context of the themes established by the thesis. This thesis is part of a growing body of research on Indigenous perspectives and the Australian Defence Force. In using a largely untapped source of Australian archival history, oral histories with Australia’s First people, this thesis will contribute to future research. It has also resulted in my family’s celebration of our Aboriginality.