

Black and white: warriors from two very different Australias

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On the morning of April 25, I gathered with a group of fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander serving and former serving men and women on Anzac Parade, Canberra, in front of a truly special place: the Australian War Memorial. It was the first time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Diggers were granted the honour of leading the national parade.

For some this gesture was viewed as hollow symbolism that ignored the service and sacrifice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander warriors who fought and died in defence of their ancient land long before they ever stood in the shadow of the Union Jack.

To myself and others, however, the recognition meant so much more. It meant that the black Diggers were no longer lost, forgotten or hidden out of sight once the battle was over. They finally were being treated like their white mates — like the national treasures they all are. Many of these Diggers were the children and grandchildren of black Diggers who served in World War II, World War I, even the Boer War. And while the story of military service spanning multiple generations of Australian families is well known, the common narrative of these black Diggers is less so.

The stories of their treatment were overwhelmingly negative.

Australian War Memorial director Brendan Nelson points out that these Diggers enlisted despite unfair treatment: “Only four or five generations after the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, living in a desperately unequal Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enlisted to fight for the young nation that has taken so much from them, often denying their heritage to do so.”

Nelson’s words made me reflect on my own family and how the story of Australia is so accurately mirrored in the stories of my two grandfathers. One was a blackfella, the other a whitefella. Both served during World War II.

George Scott Milling was born in Inglewood, Western Australia, in 1920 to Irish-Australian parents. His family migrated to Australia in the 1890s seeking new opportunities in a seemingly young country.

The Millings were entrepreneurial. They took chances, worked hard and managed to create good lives for their families. They were good to Australia and, in turn, Australia was good to them.

During World War II, George joined the Royal Australian Air Force and spent much of his time in northern Australia working in aircraft maintenance and recoveries. Like most servicemen of that time, following the war George was acknowledged for his service to his country, received his medals and was supported by the RSL to access a range of benefits including a returned serviceman's home loan.

The medals were symbolic recognition, and symbolism is important. The financial assistance was practical recognition, and this proved to be even more important.

George wisely used this benefit to purchase a modest house in Dee Why on Sydney's northern beaches, where he raised his family. For the rest of his life he made a career as an exploration driller, and as Sydney's house prices rose over the following decades it created a pool of wealth that benefited the next generation of Millings.

Conversely, Bernard Robert Bray was born in Wowan, Queensland, in 1918 to Aboriginal parents. His family had lived on their traditional lands in the Dawson Valley region of central Queensland since time immemorial, until the arrival of European squatters in the mid-1800s. He was a Yiman man and made a living as a stockman and ring barker. He worked hard but his success was limited by the colour of his skin. What followed for Bernard's family was dispossession from their land, destruction of language, customs and culture, frontier violence, stolen wages, and exclusion from mainstream society and economy over the next century.

Bernard was born under the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897, which handed the chief protector enormous control over almost all aspects of the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. The act meant Bernard was not afforded the social, economic and cultural freedoms that George Milling enjoyed.

Despite all this, when World War II came to Australia's doorstep, Bernard answered his country's call and joined the army. Soon after he found himself in New Guinea, repelling the advance of the Japanese forces.

However, when he returned home he was never recognised for his service to his country. He never received his medals. He was never allowed into the RSLs, let alone supported by them. He received neither his due symbolic recognition nor due practical recognition. He was not even formally counted as a citizen until the referendum in 1967.

Bernard died a broken man, feeling that Australia did not want him or his family to succeed. Unlike my white grandfather, who was able to hand down the profits of his serviceman's home loan to his descendants, my black grandfather had little to bequeath. The difference in wealth and opportunity has carried on intergenerationally. The white part of my family is better educated, wealthier and healthier. The black side still struggles to achieve the same outcomes in education, wealth, life expectancy and employment — the ubiquitous gap.

These men were only two years apart in age but they grew up in two very different Australias, and so did their families. Both men were worthy of respect and recognition — symbolic and practical. Both were worthy of gratitude, freedom, opportunity and support to carve out a good life in the lucky country. But only one was afforded it. The

story of my two grandfathers demonstrates the way in which past injustice has intergenerational impact.

The fact is parliament could make those unfair laws and policies because it was authorised to do so under a Constitution that did not, and still does not, recognise or protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests or guarantee them fair treatment.

Meaningful constitutional reform must fix this. It is important for symbolic and practical reasons. Symbolically, constitutional reform must recognise the rightful place of the first nations of Australia. Practically, it must ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are treated more fairly than in the past.

I think of the struggles of those black Diggers, the sacrifices they made and the lack of recognition they received, and I hope we can make things right and fair. I also hope Australia can muster the collective courage and maturity to deal with the ghosts of our nation's past and empower the first nations to take their rightful place in a fairer future.

We are all worthy, and as a nation we are ready.

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