

SLIDE 01

TITLE

Aboriginals in the First AIF: a secret history

‘The A.I.F. judged a man not by his colour, but by his worth’¹

SLIDE 02

DEFENCE ACT 1903

Private Robert Bond

Robert Bond joined the AIF in July 1917 at Maryborough, Queensland, and was pronounced medically fit. But on the 21st of July when at the Receiver Depot, No. 1 Depot Company, he was recommended for discharge as being ‘Not substantially of European origin’. The board that assessed him described his pathological condition present at the time of examination as ‘Not half-caste. Father half-caste Mother full blood. Bond is very dark and is of aboriginal type’. His disability was listed as ‘a question of parentage’.

Private Edmund Bilney

Edmund Bilney joined the AIF in June 1917 and he was noted on his attestation papers as being a half-caste. Bilney was attached to B Company, Mitcham AIF Camp, South Australia for training but was discharged after serving 16 days in the AIF. The opinion of the medical board was ‘deficient physique, half cast Aboriginal, too full blood for the A.I.F.’.

SLIDE 03

POSTER

Recruitment 1914–1918

At the outbreak of the war large numbers of Australians enlisted and Aboriginals also answered the call. By the end of 1915 it became harder for Aboriginals to enlist and some were rejected because of their race. This did not deter others, some travelling hundreds of miles to do so after being denied the chance at recruiting centres closer to their communities. Some even though passed by the recruiter were rejected while under training in the camps.

Why did they join?

To date it is known that about 1,000 Indigenous Australians fought in the First World War (though the number is probably higher) from an estimated population of 93,000 in 1901². The Australian Army did not, or rarely noted, on the soldier’s attestation papers that he was an Aboriginal—just a description: dark complexion, dark hair, brown eyes. They did, however, note his Aboriginality if he was discharged as unfit for service because of it.

It is not known what motivated Aboriginals to join the AIF, but loyalty and patriotism would have played a part.

There was also the incentive of a wage (Indigenous soldiers being paid the same as non-Indigenous soldiers).

There may have also been the thought that having served would provide some equality after the war.

Indigenous Australians have a deep and spiritual connection to the land, so the thought that by serving they were protecting their land and community may have been another motivation to join.

1 ‘A Digger Diary’, *Western Mail*, Thursday 27 August 1931.

2 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Australia in Brief: Ancient heritage, modern society*.

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RICHARD MARTIN

The Question of Aboriginality

Those who were not physically recognisable as having Aboriginal heritage or could pass for another ethnic group did not declare their Aboriginality. Why was it necessary for some Indigenous Australians to lie about their heritage to join the AIF?

Many Tasmanian volunteers with Aboriginal heritage (third or fourth generation) had no problem in joining the AIF.

Private Richard Martin

Richard Martin joined the AIF in December 1914, and declared on his attestation papers that he was born in Dunedin, New Zealand.

In fact he was born on Stradbroke Island in Queensland.

He was taken on the strength of the 15th Battalion on 9 May 1915 on Gallipoli.

He was wounded three times in France and Belgium, and was killed in action on the 28 March 1918.

There is no known grave.

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CHARLES BLACKMAN

Private Charles T Blackman

Charles T Blackman did not try to hide his Aboriginality.

Charles T Blackman 9th Battalion. Joined August 1915.

First World War Embarkation Roll: Charles Tednee Blackman

Service number: 2584

Rank: Private

Roll title: 25 Infantry Battalion – 1 to 8 Reinforcements (June 1915–January 1916)

Conflict: First World War, 1914–1918

Date of embarkation: 21 October 1915

Place of embarkation: Brisbane

Ship embarked on: HMAS Seang Bee

Ship number: A48

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In 1916 instructions for the 'guidance of enlisting officers at approved military recruiting depots' states 'Aboriginals, half-casts, or men with Asiatic blood are not to be enlisted—This applies to all coloured men'.

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WILLIAM PUNCH joined against the regulation.

Private William Joseph Punch, 1st Battalion

William Joseph Punch embarked for overseas in April 1916.

Punch managed to join the AIF in Goulburn, New South Wales at a time when recruiters were instructed not to accept 'Aboriginals, half-casts, or men with Asiatic blood'.

He was twice wounded in action before dying of disease (aged 37) after being evacuated to England.

Punch was adopted as a youngster by Mr W Siggs of Woodhouselee, between Goulburn and Crookwell. He was well-educated and employed as a stockman and station hand until he enlisted. It was said that he was also an accomplished musician.

'Bill Punch of Goulburn, who was admired by all his comrades, and regarded as a "Dinkum Digger"'.³

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GEORGE and BENJAMIN COMBO joined against the regulation.

Private George Combo

George Combo, service number 4259, was from Mogil Mogil near Collarenebri and enlisted on 21 May 1916. He originally joined the Light Horse, but transferred to the 29th Battalion, embarking on 15 March 1917 on HMAT *Afric*. He was wounded in action on 1 October 1917 and repatriated to England. He re-joined his unit on 5 December only to be wounded again on 1 August 1918.

Private Benjamin Combo

Benjamin Combo was born in Dalby, Queensland and enlisted in December 1915 at Bendigo, Victoria.

The commanding officer of the AIF Camp Bendigo was unsure of what to do with his Aboriginal recruit, and sent a request to DHQOS Victoria Barracks stating:

A recruit Benjamin Combo a Queensland half cast has been sent to this camp from Bendigo recruiting Depot. He is very black for a half cast. Is it correct to enlist him?

He was discharged and 'Not being of direct European descent' was duly noted on his documents. He had served for 19 days.

This setback did not deter Combo, who enlisted again in October 1916 at Albury, New South Wales. This time he was accepted and shipped overseas. While in transit, he contracted pneumonia and died. He was buried at sea on 29 December 1916.

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Instructions for Enlisting and Recruiting Officers: December 1916.

Half-casts may be enlisted when, in the opinion of the District Commandant, they are suitable. Half-castes are usually of two classes – those who have mixed all their lives with white people and copied their ways, and those who have lived with their full-blood brothers; the former class might be suitable for enlistment, but the latter is not eligible, and is not to be enlisted.

As a guide in this matter it is to be borne in mind that these men will be required to live with white men and share their accommodation, and their selection is to be judged from this standpoint and whether their inclusion will cause irritation to the men with whom they will serve. The final decision as to the acceptance of these men is to be left to the discretion of the District Commandant.

3 *Reveille*, August 31, 1931. 'A.I.F. Aborigines: How Many?'

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Private Alfred Jackson Coombs

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Australian Imperial Force, Military Order 200 of 1917.

(2) Enlistment of Half Casts.

Half-casts may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin.

Note,-All previous instructions on this subject are cancelled.

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PRIVATE DOUGLAS GRANT

Private Douglas Grant, 13th Battalion

Grant first enlisted in the AIF in 1916, but was discharged because of his Aboriginality.

He successfully re-enlisted and while serving with the 13th Battalion was captured at Bullecourt, France, in April 1917.

During his time as a prisoner of war in Germany, Grant, a talented artist, was of great interest to German scientists and anthropologists. One German scientist described Grant as 'an unmistakable figure', who was appointed by his fellow prisoners to take charge of relief parcels because of 'his honesty, his quick mind, and because he was so aggressively Australian'. Grant returned to Australia on 10 April 1919. He died in 1951.

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REGINALD HAWKINS

Private Reginald Francis Hawkins

Reginald Hawkins, 42nd Battalion, from Jericho, Queensland enlisted in October 1915.

He was hit by a shell in the left leg and right side of the head and captured at Armentieres, France in February 1917.

Family

Private Hawkins is the brother of Trooper Harry Hawkins, 2nd Remount Unit.

It is interesting to note that in Harry's documents, his religion is listed as Aboriginal.

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JEROME LOCKE

The Locke Family

Private Jerome Locke

Jerome Locke had a chequered career, in that he was a member of the New South Wales Infantry before Federation, and of the St Marys Rifle Club, prior to his joining the AIF in January 1916, having understated his age and any previous military service.

He was to serve overseas until 12 May 1917 when he was sent back to Australia and discharged on 11 June 1917 due to being over age. He had spent in the vicinity of seventeen months in the AIF, most of which was overseas.

He re-enlisted, understating his age again, on 11 June 1919 as an escort for the repatriation of German deportees in the Special Service Unit AIF.

Private Olga Locke

Olga Cecil Locke joined the AIF on 22 January 1916, having had prior military experience in the 41st Infantry.

Father and son sailed together in May 1916, and both served in the 36th Battalion.

He saw service in the Somme valley and was hospitalised for exhaustion and appendicitis. He then took part in the Flanders offensive from the middle of 1917, and was wounded in the right hand on 25 September in the lead up to Polygon Wood.

He was wounded again in the right arm in March 1918 near Villers Bretonnaux. This wound was to see him returned to Australia and discharged medically on 12 May 1919.

Private Leslie Locke

Leslie John Locke enlisted on 27 May 1918. He left Australia as one of the 18th Reinforcements for the 3rd Battalion on 4 September, arriving in England on 14 November, three days after the Armistice.

OTHER FAMILY GROUPS.

The Coes from Cowra, NSW

Private Cecil Coe, 4th Battalion, service number 6130, wounded

First World War Embarkation Roll: Cecil Coe

Service number: 6130

Rank: Private

Roll title: 4 Infantry Battalion – 13 to 23 Reinforcements (December 1915–November 1916)

Conflict: First World War, 1914–1918

Date of embarkation: 22 August 1916

Place of embarkation: Sydney

Ship embarked on: HMAT Wiltshire

Ship number: A18

Private Elijah Joseph Coe, 54th Battalion, service number 3360, wounded

First World War Embarkation Roll: Elijah Joseph Coe

Service number: 3360

Rank: Private

Roll title: 54 Infantry Battalion – 6 to 9 Reinforcements (October 1916–January 1917)

Conflict: First World War, 1914–1918

Date of embarkation: 24 January 1917

Place of embarkation: Sydney

Ship embarked on: HMAT Anchises

Ship number: A68

Private John Augustus Coe, 17th Battalion, service number 5331

First World War Embarkation Roll: John Augustus Coe

Service number: 5331

Rank: Private

Roll title: 17 Infantry Battalion – 14 to 17 Reinforcements (August–October 1916)

Conflict: First World War, 1914–1918

Date of embarkation: 22 August 1916

Place of embarkation: Sydney

Ship embarked on: HMAT Wiltshire

Ship number: A18

Private John Henry Coe, service number 2391, killed in action

First World War Embarkation Roll: John Henry Alfred Coe

Service number: 2391

Rank: Private

Roll title: 53 Infantry Battalion – 2 to 5 Reinforcements (April–September 1916)

Conflict: First World War, 1914–1918

Date of embarkation: 14 September 1916

Place of embarkation: Sydney

Ship embarked on: HMAT Mashobra

Ship number: A47

Roll of Honour: John Henry Alfred Coe

Service number: 2391

Rank: Private

Unit: 53rd Battalion (Infantry)

Service: Australian Army

Conflict: 1914–1918

Date of death: 29 March 1917

Place of death: France

Cemetery or memorial details: Villers-Bretonneux Memorial, France

Source: AWM145 Roll of Honour cards, 1914-1918 War, Army

Private Leslie Coe 13th Reinforcement, 17th Battalion

Leslie Coe was discharged after only 11 days in uniform: 'unlikely to become an efficient soldier'.

Private/Trooper Walter (Joseph?) Coe, service numbers 66304

This soldier had an unusual carrier in the AIF in that he had enlisted several times. The first time was in January 1916 at Cowra, NSW in the 13th Reinforcements for the 17th Battalion, along with his brother Leslie. He was discharged as 'undesirable character for service in the A.I.F.' in March.

He joined again in May 1917 at Orange, NSW, with documents having him in June at Liverpool, NSW as a trooper in the 6th Light Horse Regiment. He then became a private in A Company Composite Battalion, 10th GSR (n) embarking for overseas on HMAT Zealandia for the UK. He was then transferred to the 57th Battalion and then the AAMC (Details) for service with war graves, being discharged on 7 May 1920. While in the UK in October of 1919, he married Fanny Challenger of 9 Union Street, Sutton Veny, Bath.

The Dickerson Brothers

Trooper James Dickerson, serial number 392, died of wounds, Gallipoli

10 LHR [Light Horse Regiment] (February 1915)

Private Harry Dickerson, serial number 1561

10 LHR [Light Horse Regiment] – 1 to 14 Reinforcements (February 1915–February 1916)

The Rigney Brothers

Cyril Spurgeon Rigney

43rd Battalion (Infantry)

Rufus Gordon Rigney

48th Battalion (Infantry)

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ANZAC COVE

The Anzac Legend

There is no photographic evidence found as yet depicting Aboriginal soldiers on Gallipoli.

At present it is known that about 50 Aboriginal men served there, many being killed or dying of wounds received on Gallipoli. Others who served on the Peninsula went on to France, Belgium or Palestine. Some of them were later killed.

John William Miller, killed in action on 25 April 1915

John William Miller, private in the 12th Battalion, service number 1227, was killed in action at the landing on 25 April 1915, and is buried in Baby 700 Cemetery, Gallipoli. Miller left behind a wife and four children.

Born at Peppermint Bay, Tasmania on 23 August 1889, he was Indigenous on his mother's side. Miller was originally reported wounded and missing in action, but this was later changed to killed in action on 25 April 1915.

His wife Ida wrote to the AIF on 7 October 1915, as she had not heard anything of her husband, only that a letter had been returned to her. She stated in her letter that she was very anxious to hear from him. She also thought he had been transferred to the 4th Battalion. The Army wrote back to her saying there was no record of this transfer, but said nothing about him being missing or killed.

On 15 June 1922 a notification was sent to Ida forwarding an identity disc found on his body, the notification stating:-

... This and similar effects, while of little intrinsic value and considerably impaired by long exposure, may possibly be prized on account of their intimate association with the late members of the Australian Imperial Force and for this reason are being distributed to next of kin.

A notification was sent on 24 October 1922 that he was buried in Baby 700 Cemetery.

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ARTHUR WALKER

Private Arthur Thomas Walker

Arthur Walker, serial number 2466, enlisted when he was 32 years old, and was part of the 7th reinforcements of the 10th Battalion. He landed on Gallipoli on 18 September 1915 and remained there until the evacuation, when he was sent to Egypt for six months. He then transferred to the 50th Battalion,

serving in France from June 1916. He took part in the battle of Mouquet Farm and was listed missing in action at Pozieres.

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ALFRED HEARPS

2nd Lieutenant Alfred John Hearps

Alfred John Hearps, Sergeant, 12th Battalion, service number 409. He was later promoted to 2nd Lieutenant and reported missing then killed in action on 22 August 1916 at Mouquet Farm, France.

He was the son of Alfred Hearps and Eva Alice Russell, the Indigenous connection on his father's side.⁴ He enlisted on 20 August 1914 aged 19 years, and prior to enlistment he had served in the senior cadets. He was described as having a dark complexion, brown eyes and black hair. He served on Gallipoli as a sergeant, then on arriving in France was promoted to CQMS on 1 March 1916 and then 2nd Lieutenant on 5 August 1916.

On 19 August 1916 the 12th Battalion were going over the top, about 50 yards beyond Mouquet Farm. Lieutenant Hearps was hit in the back of the neck by a piece of shell, paralysing him. His batman stayed with him for half an hour, then returned to get help, but was told by Lieutenant Roper that Mouquet Farm was now in the hands of the Germans and that it was impossible to send others to find him.

Alfred Hearps's promotion to officer to date makes him the first Aboriginal to be commissioned in the Australian Army. This claim could however be seen as contentious:

- Did he see himself as Indigenous Australian at the time?
- And if so, did he identify?

SLIDE 17

Richard Kirby DCM

Distinguished Conduct Medal

Private William A Irwin, 33rd Battalion

Corporal Albert Knight, 43rd Battalion

Lance Corporal Richard Norman Kirby, 20 Infantry Battalion. Died of wounds on 20 August 1918, having been shot in the head 12 August. Two brothers also served—George Kirby and Robert Kirby.

Military Medal

Sergeant Vivian Augustus Andrews, 3rd Machine Gun Battalion

Private Frederick J Briggs, 33rd Battalion

Corporal Augustus P Farmer, 16th Battalion

Charles Hearps, 40th Battalion

Private James Hickey, 9th Battalion

Jack Roy Johnson, ** Battalion

Lance Corporal William A Knight, 43rd Battalion

Private Maitland Madge, 15th Battalion

Private William Reginald Rawlings, 29th Battalion

Private John Pearce, 23rd Battalion

⁴ Andrea Gerrard, 'Tasmanian born soldiers with Indigenous heritage who enlisted in the First AIF', Private research document.

Lance Corporal Frederick Prentice, 1st Pioneer Battalion

Private Raymond C Runga, 6th Battalion

Corporal Harry Thorpe, 7th Battalion

Mentioned in Despatches

Corporal William J Jonas, 34th Battalion, 1914–18.

Private Frank Stewart, 5th Pioneer Battalion, 1914–18.

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THORPE & RAWLINGS

Corporal Harry Thorpe MM

Harry Thorpe was born at the Lake Tyers Mission Station, near Lakes Entrance, Victoria.

He joined the 7th Battalion in France in July 1916.

He was wounded in action at Pozieres in 1916 and at Bullecourt in 1917. In January 1917 he was promoted to Lance Corporal.

On the night of 4–5 October 1917, Lance Corporal Thorpe was conspicuous for his courage and leadership during operations at Broodseinde, near Ypres, in Belgium. For his 'splendid example' he was promoted to Corporal and awarded the Military Medal, although the original recommendation was for the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

During the advance on 9 August 1918 at Lihons Wood, south-west of Vauvillers, France, a stretcher bearer found Thorpe shot in the stomach. He died shortly after and is buried in the Heath Cemetery, Harbonnieres, France, near his friend William Rawlings, another Aboriginal Military Medal winner, who was killed on the same day.

Harry Thorpe

Private William Reginald Rawlings MM

William Rawlings was born at the Aboriginal Station of Framlingham, in the western district of Victoria.

Rawlings enlisted at Warrnambool in March 1916.

He joined the 29th Battalion in France. He was awarded the Military Medal for bravery during the heavy fighting along the Morlancourt Ridge on the night of 28–29 July 1918.

Private Rawlings was killed in action on 9 August 1918, during the capture of Vauvillers, France.

Reginald Rawlings was the uncle of Reginald Saunders, Aboriginal officer in the Australian Army during World War Two and Korea.

SLIDE 19

HORACE DALTON & FRANK FISHER

The 11th Light Horse Regiment

The 11th Light Horse Regiment is said to have had over 30 Aboriginals in its make-up. This makes the 11th Light Horse Regiment unique in the First AIF as having the most Indigenous Australians serving in one unit.

A reinforcement of 26 Aborigines, mostly from some of the mission Stations in Queensland, I believe, joined up with the 11th Light Horse Regiment in the early part of 1918. Some of them were in the Squadron of which I commanded in May, 1918, when the mounted troops, Australian and New Zealanders, charged through the Turkish line in the Jordan valley and rode about eight miles to their rear to cut the communication lines. I remember seeing some of the Aborigines well out in the frontline of the advance,

and know at least one of them was wounded at the time when the Turks over-ran us, for my brother and another sergeant brought him in badly wounded before the Turks could capture him. Being badly wounded myself in the engagement; I do not know much more of their work with the regiment.⁵

The Very Best of Mates

Private George Robert Aitken

George Aitken, serial number 2367—his father was Richard Aitken and his mother an Aboriginal woman called Princess.

He was raised by Thomas and Mary Hampson, and grew up with their daughter Lily and her three brothers Newton, Thomas, and Dennis (Dan), and an elder half-sister to the family.

Newton, the eldest son, joined the AIF on 19 September 1916 and was killed in action on 8 August 1918.

Thomas joined on 29 January 1916 and was wounded in action (gassed) on 26 May 1918.

George and Dan joined up together as reinforcements for the 52nd Battalion on 5 April 1916 at Cloncurry.

Dan proceeded overseas on 15 February 1917 and was taken on the strength of the 47th Battalion.

He was wounded in action and after recovering in the UK was sent back to the 47th Battalion, only to be taken prisoner on 13 August. It was on this day that his mother died (his father having died sometime previously).

It was in the UK that things did not go well for George. He did not get to go overseas with his mate Dan.

On 13 January in Codford village, Wiltshire he was ordered to leave the village by a Sergeant of the Anzac Provost Corps, and when placed in the custody of a Lance Corporal of the Military Police, did punch the Lance Corporal in the face.

Reading between the lines, it's probable that the Lance Corporal had been a civilian policeman in Australia, and knowing the relationship between the police and Aboriginal communities, there would have been no love lost between the two.

George was arrested and court-martialled for disobeying a lawful command and striking the Lance Corporal. He pleaded not guilty to both counts.

He was given a sentence of two years imprisonment with hard labour and forfeited 377 days' pay (check courts Martial file Series number A471, barcode 7877639).

The sentence was confirmed by Brigadier-General Sir Newton J Mobre, who commuted the sentence to one year, and George was credited back £58.

On 21 June the unexpired portion of 232 days was remitted as from 6 June, and George was on his way to France to join his battalion.

It seems someone was looking after him. He had only done about 6 months of his sentence.

On 19 October 1917 George was killed in action in Belgium.

On 17 July 1917 he had made out a will. It was typed on a military form, a standard fill in the blanks document, giving his personal estate to Mrs Hampson. It was not signed by him.

This will was not the only one George made.

On 10 February 1917 he had dictated another will, and it was taken down in his own words.

Just a little story of our friendship, well Dan I can safely say that we are the only true mates there are in the world, that's a big word to say. Well Dan if I gets knocked you can have anything you find on me that is any

5 Major C. A. R. Munro, 11th Light Horse Regiment, *Reveille*, 30 September 1931, page 6.

used to you, and my allotted money to be left to Mrs T. Hampson. Show this to one of the heads, don't forget.

Good by old man and good luck to you, wishing all sort of luck to pull through this war. We have been the very best of mates, and only thing I wish, that we meet over other side of the world if there's any such place, is that I don't think I will ever forget you Dan, I will think of you when I am dead. Never need to say much to you when we used to nocked about together. I was very funny like that, anybody I liked, never say much to. Good bye, and old man good luck.⁶

On returning to Australia

Even though Indigenous Australians had been able to join the AIF in opposition to the Defence Act and the prejudices of some in the military hierarchy, and in the majority had been treated as equals when in uniform, they did not enjoy the same rights and freedoms on return to Australia.

In a letter to the Acting Prime Minister dated 12 March 1919, the head Office of the Western Australian Branch of the Returned Sailors, Soldiers and Nurses Association of Western Australia stated the following in relation to the White Australia Policy:

Dear Sir,

I have been instructed by my Executive to forward the following resolution:-

That this branch of the R.S.A. insists upon the retention of the "White Australia" Policy and that we emphatically protest against any suggested amendments of our Commonwealth Immigration restriction Act so vitally necessary for the future welfare of Australia. Remembering that over fifty thousand of our comrades have voluntarily made the supreme sacrifice for their country's liberty and race purity.

Yours faithfully,

General Secretary⁷

It seems that the RSA of WA either forgot, or thought it necessary not to remember, the service of the Indigenous Australians who served in the AIF and made the supreme sacrifice for their country's liberty and so called 'race purity'.

The Defence Act 1903-1953
Being
The Defence Act 1903 (no. 20 of 1903).
As amended by
The Defence Act 1953, (no.20 of 1953).

6. Spelling unchanged; punctuation by G Oakley.

7 National Archive of Australia file, Commonwealth of Australia, Home and Territories Department, Series A1, control symbol 1919/4097, barcode 37481.

61. The following shall be exempt from service in time of war, so long as the employment, condition, or status on which the exemption is based continues :—

Persons exempt
from service.
Substituted by
No 37, 1910,
s. 7.

- (a) Persons reported by the prescribed medical authorities as unfit for any naval or military service whatever ; and
- (b) Members and officers of the Parliament of the Commonwealth or of a State ; and
- (c) Judges of Federal or State Courts, and police, stipendiary or special magistrates of the Commonwealth or of a State ; and
- (d) Ministers of Religion ; and
- (e) Persons employed in the police or prison services of the Commonwealth or of a State ; and
- (f) Persons employed in lighthouses ; and
- (g) Persons employed as medical practitioners or nurses in public hospitals ; and
- (h) Persons who are not substantially of European origin or descent, of which the medical authorities appointed under the Regulations shall be the judges ; and
- (i) Persons who satisfy the prescribed authority that their conscientious beliefs do not allow them to bear arms ; and
- (j) Persons engaged in any employment specified by the Regulations or by Proclamation :

Provided that, as regards the persons described in paragraphs (g), (h), and (i) of this section, the exemption shall not extend to duties of a non-combatant nature :