

Army values and Indigenous culture

By Corporal Scott Trenham

As the Indigenous mentor at Recruit Development Wing, Army Recruit Training Centre, the question what are the similarities between Army values and Indigenous culture has been raised a number of times by Indigenous Recruits, to which I have given the following explanation.

An Army Recruit is akin to a child, they gain some basic knowledge through osmosis but ultimately require guidance and nurturing for them to readily accept and adopt life-long skills in order to grow into a fully functioning and independent adult; or in the Army's case, a competent and confident soldier.

To make this transition from child to adult (or Trainee to Private) they need to prove themselves worthy of the responsibility both mentally and physically before they can make this can happen. This is usually observed through the conduct of an 'Initiation Ceremony' or a 'March Out Parade' for Army. Both are important occasions that observe the personal and group sacrifices made in their respective journeys. Further, similarities of the two cultures is through the core values of **Service, Integrity, Courage, Excellence and Respect.**

Service is prominent in both cultures and has been displayed by people like Vivian Bullwinkel AO, MBE, ARRC, ED who volunteered for the Australian Army Nursing Service and went on to become a Prisoner of War. She also worked and would later become president of the Australian College of Nursing. This is also prevalent with indigenous people like Lowitja O'Donoghue CBE AO the first woman to be a regional director of a federal department.

Excellence is to strive each day to be the best you can be, both personally and professionally. In both cultures, the pursuit of improvement not only develops the individual but also the culture and values of the larger group.

Courage has been on show in the Army from the Boer War to Afghanistan, but to me the act of courage that stands out is that of Jim Darlington who was a Prisoner of War. He was beaten almost senseless while trying to protect his mates in Sandakan and was subjected to torture for this act of courage. Courage has also been on show in indigenous culture throughout, such as Tarenorerer. She was a rebel leader against the British colonists in Tasmania during the Frontier War and Charles Perkins who led The Freedom Ride of 1965 was a significant event in the history of civil rights for Indigenous Australians.

Respect and Integrity are important values of the Australian Army and is a pillar within indigenous culture. These two values honour the behaviours that hold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and cultures together. In the same way,

it holds the Army values and culture together, and the integrity of these values are monitored by custodians of their customs and traditions.

A Senior Elder, like a Warrant Officer Class One, is the custodian of knowledge and the understanding of the protocols for the different types of ceremony of their respective culture. For example, 'Rite of Passage' or a 'Smoking Ceremony' in indigenous culture to a 'March Out Parade' or a 'Catafalque Party' for the Australian Army. Additionally the understanding and meaning of sacred places such as Uluru or a Parade Ground.

Culturally our background may be different but in reality, we are one – Australians!

Our Indigenous Military History – We served together ...

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born Kathleen Ruska in 1920 on North Stradbroke Island.

Kath enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service in 1942 after her two brothers were captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore. Her service in the Army gave her access to training and educational opportunities. Kath trained as an Army signaller in Brisbane and was promoted to Corporal. She made many friends, including non-indigenous Australians and African-American soldiers, who were serving in segregated units stationed in the area.

Kath left the Army in December 1942 because of a persistent middle ear infection which made her unable to perform her job. After leaving the Army, her previous positive experiences highlighted the discrimination she then faced as a civilian. This led Kath to become a fervent advocate for Aboriginal rights.

The bicentenary of white settlement in Australia in 1988 frustrated Kath because of the slow progress of Aboriginal rights. She returned the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) she received in 1970 for services to Aboriginal people and changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal in recognition of her Noonuccal ancestors.

