

## **Chief of Navy Address at Cairns NAIDOC Week Ceremony**

6 July 2017

*HMAS Cairns*

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Good Morning. I am honoured to be here today to represent the Chief of the Defence Force who is regrettably unable to attend today's ceremony.

I wish to first acknowledge and pay respects to all Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country and the waterways across Australia.

I also pay respect to past and present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have served, to those who served in an auxiliary capacity for the Australian Defence Forces, and to those who gave their lives.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served Australia in war and peacekeeping from the Boer War to the present.

They joined the Australian Defence Force, and continue to do so, for many of the same reasons as non-Indigenous Australians.

They wanted to serve and 'Protect Country'. They sought adventure alongside their friends and in the process made new ones.

They wanted the opportunity to earn money, independence and education.

In addition, enlistment provided many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the opportunity to prove themselves equal to non-Indigenous Australians and to experience positive relationships with, and treatment comparable to, non-Indigenous Australians for the first time.

The readiness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enlist beside other Australians to fight is all the more noteworthy when viewed against their lack of citizenship rights for much of the Commonwealth's history and policies that discouraged their enlistment.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, service in the defence forces has been an experience for which they were well suited.

They have combined modern military skills and knowledge with their indigenous knowledge and skills to fulfil their role of defending and protecting Australia as members of the defence forces.

A great deal of their indigenous knowledge and skills has been passed from generation to generation through story and song in unique indigenous languages.

This is just one of the reasons that preserving and revitalising these unique languages and the knowledge embedded in them is important not only for our indigenous peoples but for everyone.

As well as enlisting in the defence forces, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made significant contributions on the home front during wartime.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were employed in a wide range of occupations: as butchers, as truck and car mechanics, on construction and farm work, as drivers, stevedores and many other occupations for which Australia desperately needed as a result workforce shortages.

These contributions, along with those of enlisted servicemen and women, not only helped Australia and her allies during war time but also contributed to not only changes in the way many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perceived themselves, but also the way that majority of the non-Indigenous Australians saw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Today, more than 1700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now serve with distinction in the Australian Defence Force across all three services, in the permanent and reserve forces.

Our sailors, soldiers and airmen and women recognise that our success is dependent on creating an inclusive Defence Force that reflects the diversity of the Australian community and utilises the talents of each member in achieving our mission to defend Australian and her national interests.

For this reason we are committed to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the Defence Force, and supporting and developing our indigenous members from before they join the Defence Force right throughout their careers.

We offer a range of support programs, formal and informal networking, supportive conditions of service for Indigenous members, and indigenous-specific training opportunities including the Defence Indigenous Development Program.

Indeed this afternoon I have the pleasure of being the reviewing officer at the Defence Indigenous Development Program graduation ceremony. I am enormously proud of their achievements.

I am also enormously proud of being part of an Australian Defence Force that reflects so positively on the contributions that indigenous Australians have made, and continue to make, to our country and its defence force.

Thank you.