

Researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service

Please note:

When researching using the Memorial's collections you may find that records and items contain names, images, and film footage of deceased people. They may also include historically and culturally sensitive images, film and sound recordings, words, terms, or descriptions; such material does not reflect the Memorial's viewpoint but rather the social attitudes and circumstances of the period or place in which it was created.

Where to begin

To research a person who has served in the Australian Defence Force you will need to know the name under which they enlisted. It is possible this will not be a birth name or the name by which that person was commonly known. This may have occurred for a number of reasons: the person recording these details may have made a mistake, or the enlistee may have travelled to another place after being rejected from enlisting in their home district, and re-applied there under a different name.

Sources that may help you find the name under which someone served:

- **Military documents or memorabilia**
Does someone in your family or community have military documents or memorabilia such as discharge certificates, pay books, or medals that belonged to the person you are researching? These items will record the individual's service number and the name they served under.
- **Guide to Indigenous service**
[www.awm.gov.au/webgroups/indigenous_service]
The Memorial's guide to Indigenous service aims to identify those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who served in Australia's armed forces, and to display records and collection material related to their individual service. The guide draws on research undertaken by a variety of sources, including the Memorial, individuals, and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Names continue to be added as they are identified and confirmed. The guide was initially put in place to identify those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who served Australia during the First World War, coinciding with the centenary period 2014–18. In the future the guide will be expanded to encompass those who served in all conflicts and operations.
- **Finding your family**
[aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family]
The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) has resources and guides for researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families, communities, and places. The guide About names [aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/before-you-start/indigenous-names] may help with establishing the name used by an individual at the time they enlisted.
- **Bringing Them Home name index**
[www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs175.aspx]
The Bringing Them Home name index at the National Archives of Australia (NAA) is a list of names of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose names appear in government files.
- **Researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander defence force service by Dr Chris Clark**
[www.awm.gov.au/indigenous-service/researching/]
This paper outlines sources that can be used for researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service, and may provide answers to problems found within the archival sources.

Once you know the name under which an individual served, the Memorial's research guides [www.awm.gov.au/collection/understanding-the-memorials-collection/researching-a-person] can be used to guide you through researching the details of their military service.

Civilian or military service?

During the Second World War many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were employed by the army in a civilian capacity and were not formally enlisted members of the service. As part of this employment they performed a range of necessary support tasks, were issued items of army clothing and accommodation, and were rationed and paid by the army. However, detailed records for those employed in this capacity were not maintained. If you know what unit the individual you are researching was attached to then the records of that unit can be searched for reference to its movements and activities. It is unlikely that these records will mention individuals by name.

Further sources

- Indigenous service in Australia's armed forces in peace and war – overview by Dr Chris Clark [www.awm.gov.au/articles/indigenous-service/report-executive-summary/]
This paper provides an overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service in Australia's armed forces from Colonial times to today.
- Finding records relating to an Indigenous person, National Archives of Australia – fact sheet 264 [www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs264.aspx]
The NAA holds records created by the Commonwealth government since 1901. If the person you are researching interacted with the Commonwealth during this period, the NAA may hold records pertinent to that person. Included is a step-by-step guide to help you find records relating to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person within the NAA's collection.
- AIATSIS Family History Kit [aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/family-history-kit]
This kit offers downloadable versions of all of the information on the AIATSIS Finding your family website [aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family].