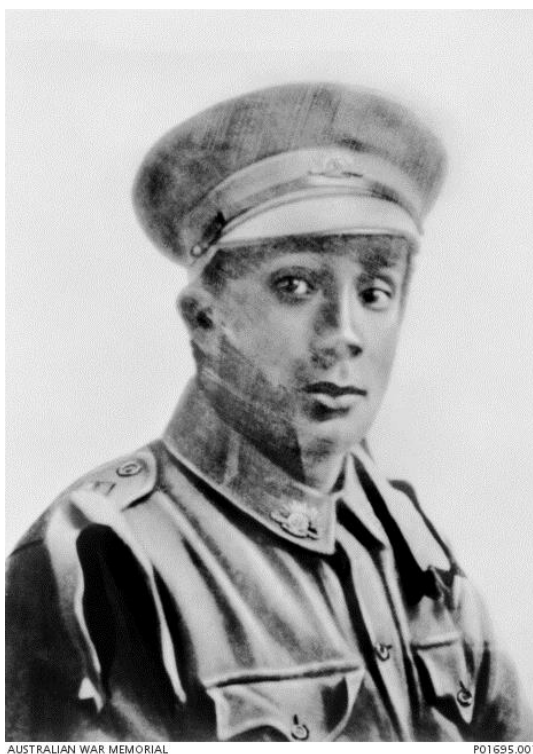


### *Memorial Box 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wartime Service*

#### *Private William Rawlings MM*



*Private William Rawlings, c. 1916*

Born in 1890 in Purnim, Victoria, William Reginald Rawlings was the only son of William and Bessie Rawlings. The Rawlings' were well-known and respected members of the Framlingham Aboriginal community, and Bill, as he was known, was working as a horse-breaker when war erupted in 1914. By 1916 the restrictions that had been imposed on Indigenous Australians hoping to enlist for service overseas had begun to ease. Rawlings was accepted into the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and arrived on the Western Front in time for Europe's coldest winter in 36 years.

Severe frost and snow followed the almost continuous rain of October and November, turning the trenches into a near-impassable quagmire, and within a few short weeks Rawlings was admitted to hospital with trench foot. This painful ailment was caused by prolonged exposure to damp, unsanitary, and cold conditions.

Rawlings returned to France in late 1917. In July the following year he was awarded the Military Medal for his part in an attack on a communication trench at Morlancourt.

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During this action he cleared a path for the bombers in his team, and it was declared that “his irresistible dash and courage set a wonderful example” to the men.

A month later Rawlings' battalion took part in the capture of Vauvillers. This was one of the first in a series of allied victories that eventually brought an end to the First World War. But Rawlings would not live to see the Armistice; he was killed in action on 9 August 1918.

Rawlings was buried in the nearby Heath Cemetery, near fellow Indigenous Australian and Military Medal recipient Harry Thorpe, who was fatally wounded on the same day.

*Activities for research and classroom discussion*

1. Why do you think the number of volunteers had begun to decline by 1916?
2. Painted by George Bell in 1923, this painting shows the devastation Rawlings experienced firsthand on the Western Front. The soldiers are carrying wooden constructions known as “duckboards”. What was their purpose? In the left-hand corner Bell has painted a tin hat resting on an upturned rifle. What do you think this might symbolise?



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART03592

George Bell, “Laying the duckboards”, c. 1923, oil on canvas, 92.2 x 118 x 10.5 cm

3. Read the citation for Rawlings’ recommendation for the Military Medal: <https://www.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1068169--58-.pdf>. What does this award suggest about the kind of soldier he was?
4. Read Rawlings’ Red Cross Wounded and Missing File: <https://www.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1056710--1-.pdf>. Do you think these reports are reliable sources of information? Why or why not?
5. Watch the Last Post Ceremony commemorating Rawlings’ service: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/PAFU/831.01>. Design your own commemorative service. Who would you like to remember? How will you remember them?

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