

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

#### *Lance Corporal Richard Kirby DCM*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P11678.002

*Lance Corporal Richard Kirby, c. 1915*

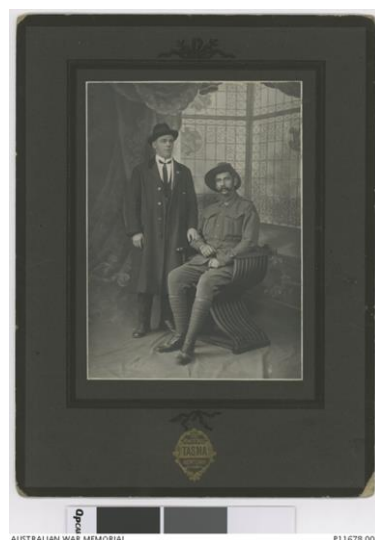
Richard Kirby was born in 1891 near Dubbo, New South Wales, to Englishman Samuel Kirby and his Indigenous wife, Catherine. Samuel was one of the earliest settlers in the region and worked as a station manager to support his large family. Richard was the first of Samuel's sons to enlist, and set sail for Gallipoli in late September 1915.

By the time Kirby arrived on the peninsula, aged 25, the campaign was drawing to an end. After eight months on Gallipoli the allies began preparing to withdraw, and Kirby, along with other members of his battalion, was assigned to help defend the feature known as Russell's Top until the final evacuation on 20 December.

For the first six months of 1916 Kirby was in hospital recovering from several bouts of both enteric and typhoid fever, but in August he returned to his battalion fit and well. By this stage his two older brothers, Robert and George, had also enlisted and begun their preparations for the long journey to the front.

A newspaper described the three soldier sons as "the most representative trio that could be picked from their neighbourhood ... they are bushmen of the very best type". Robert and George Kirby hoped to serve alongside their younger brother, but neither saw action for long. Both were repeatedly hospitalised for illness and severe wounds, and were eventually returned to Australia and discharged on medical grounds.

Richard Kirby remained at the front, and was



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P11678.006

*Private Robert Kirby, and an unidentified civilian, c. 1918*

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promoted to lance corporal following his involvement in the Second Battle of Bullecourt in May 1917. Described as “one of the best-liked men in the battalion”, Kirby proved to be a natural leader, but in the last year of the war he was badly wounded by a gunshot to his neck. He recovered quickly and returned to the Western Front for the Allies’ final push towards Amiens.

On 8 August 1918 the allies attacked with infantry, tanks, and aircraft, and captured more than 12 kilometres of ground. However, on 11 August, three days later, while trying to protect their brigade’s advance, the 20th Battalion came under heavy machine-gun fire.

With casualties mounting, Kirby took it upon himself to run towards a machine-gun post, where he single-handedly seized two weapons and captured 14 German soldiers. It was later reported that he had “set a fine example of bravery and coolness to the remainder of his section”, and for this action he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Later that day, as Kirby prepared his rifle to fire at the enemy over the top of the trenches, he was struck in the head by a piece of shrapnel. He was immediately carried away by a stretcher and transferred to hospital, but died of his wounds nine days later. Nearly a year after his death, Kirby’s sister wrote to the army to express her grief and gratitude:

*Allow me to thank you in my mother’s name as well as my own for your kind letter ... describing my dear brother’s bravery. He always showed signs of courage even as a little child, and was a noble son and brother. His D.C. medal shall always be a treasure to us.*

*Activities for research and classroom discussion*

1. Read the following newspaper article:  
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/121348260>. How is the Kirby family described? What other imagery has been used? What does this suggest about the purpose of this article?
2. Read Kirby's Red Cross Wounded and Missing File:  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1048853--1-.pdf>. How is Kirby described in the reports? What does this suggest about the kind of person he was?
3. In an article published in the Western Mail in 1931 it was said: "The AIF judged a man not by his colour, but by his worth." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
4. The AIF took this photograph of Kirby's grave in 1919 and sent it home to his loved ones. Why do you think they did this? How do you think Kirby's family may have felt about receiving it?



*Lance Corporal Richard Kirby's grave, c. 1919*

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5. It is impossible to determine the exact number of Aboriginal people who served in the First World War. Why do you think this is so? You may find this link useful:  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/indigenous>.

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