Lance-Corporal David Cook is an Aboriginal man born in Ebor, near Armidale New South Wales, in 1945. Around the time of Dave's tenth birthday, he and his four siblings were forcibly removed from their parents. Dave was placed in Kineela Boys Home for three years before being fostered. At the age of 17, he enlisted in the Army, seeking a life away from his daily troubles. Dave served in Papua New Guinea, Borneo and Malaya before being sent off to Vietnam. Throughout his service he proved to be a successful soldier and was well-liked by his peers. He served two tours in Vietnam to be a successful soldier and was well-liked by his peers. He served two tours in Vietnam before being discharged in 1968.

When Dave returned to New South Wales, his life rapidly spiralled out of control. Cycles of violence, imprisonment and racism threatened to turn him into another Aboriginal statistic. However, Dave managed to reconnect with his siblings, who helped him get his life back on track through emotional support, stability and employment. Now retired, Dave does volunteer work in Cambodia, applying his Army engineering knowledge in a landmine clearance program. Dave Cook's story is just one of thousands of hidden histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders served.

Yet Indigenous people continued to serve in the armed forces in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as during peacekeeping missions. Linda McIndoe-Yuke’s father served in World War II, and her brother was in the Royal Australian Navy for more than 30 years. It is estimated that between 500 and 800 Indigenous people enlisted during the First World War, and in the Second World War, more than 3,000 Aboriginal people and 850 Torres Strait Islanders served. After both conflicts, returned servicemen and women continued to confront racial discrimination in the law, and prejudice in their daily interactions with non-Indigenous Australians. Yet Indigenous people continued to serve in the armed forces in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as during peacekeeping missions.

Members of a ROKI Squatision including two Indigenous elders in 1998 prepare armed using American 'C' rations

The histories recorded so far have been both confronting and inspiring, but there is still a long way to go. It is tough to find interview participants because until the early 1990s, the Australian Defence Force did not identify members’ racial background. Another striking point is that many of them have gone on to become leaders in their local Aboriginal communities. Vietnam veteran George Bostock became a playwright and is now a respected Elder on the Murrindindgi. Victoria. Vietnam veteran Bob Blair founded the Dreamtime Culture Centre in Rockhampton in 1988, and Gulf War veteran Neil MacDonald became one of the co-chairs of the ACT branch of Reconciliation Australia in the late 1990s.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable stories is that of Sue Gordon, who was a member of the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps from 1961-64. She later served as the first Aboriginal magistrate of the Western Australia Children’s Court. An advocate for children’s rights, particularly in Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, Sue also oversaw the first year of the Northern Territory Intervention.

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