Indigenous Australians at war

Indigenous Australians who served
- Estimates for the number of Indigenous Australians who served in the First and Second World Wars vary greatly. As ethnicity was not noted on enlistment documents an accurate figure is very difficult to obtain but it appears that more than 3,500 Indigenous Australians served in these conflicts.

Major Units
- 2/1st North Australia Observation Unit
- Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion

Specific Medals
- Very few Indigenous Australians were recognised for their service, however some were decorated for bravery.
- To take some examples; in the First World War, Corporal Albert Knight, 43rd Battalion and Private William Irwin, 33rd Battalion, were each awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Private William Rawlings, 29th Battalion was awarded a Military Medal.
- Examples from the Second World War include, Private Timothy Hughes, 2/10th Battalion and Trooper Clive Upright, 2/7th Commando Squadron who were awarded Military Medals.

Memorials
- Mt Ainslie Aboriginal Memorial, Canberra

More information
www.awm.gov.au
www.dva.gov.au

Indigenous Australians have served in almost every conflict and peace operation in which Australia has been involved in since the Boer War.

Boer War
Some 70 Indigenous Australians participated in the Boer War.

First World War
More than 500 Indigenous Australians enlisted and served during the First World War.

Indigenous Australians were present in almost every Australian campaign of the War, however the exact number who volunteered is not known because ethnicity was not recorded on personnel files.

After the First World War, Indigenous veterans found their war service did not bring an end to discrimination. Only one Indigenous person is known to have received land under the post-war “soldier settlement scheme”.

Second World War
When World War Two began, Indigenous Australians were allowed to enlist and many did so. Some fought in the Mediterranean campaigns of 1940-41 and when Japan entered the war in 1942 many more Indigenous Australians found themselves on the frontline.

An estimated 3,000 Indigenous Australians enlisted in for service during the Second World War. Some served in specially raised Indigenous units. Around 745 Indigenous Australians joined the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion formed specifically to defend the strategically-important Torres Strait.

The Northern Australian Observation Unit was formed to patrol coastal areas and repel any Japanese landings. The unit’s operations were scaled back from July 1943 when the threat of invasion had receded, and it was disbanded in March 1945.

Post Second World War
Indigenous Australians went on to serve in Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam in the years after the Second World War. In the post Vietnam era Indigenous Australians have served with the Australian Defence Force in conflicts and other operations around the world.

Notable Indigenous veterans
Reg Saunders was the first Australian Aboriginal commissioned in the Australian Army and remains one of the best known Indigenous servicemen. His father fought in the First World War, as did his uncle, Reg Rawlings, who was awarded the Military Medal and later killed in action. Reg served in Crete, New Guinea and Korea while his brother Harry was killed on the Kokoda Track. In 1969 Reg was selected to be among the first Aboriginal Liaison Officers for the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, which became the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Other Indigenous Australians, such as Flight Sergeant Len Waters served in other branches of the service. He flew operations in the Pacific in the latter years of the Second World War having previously served as a RAAF mechanic.

More information
For more information about Indigenous Australians at war and DVA services visit the DVA website
www.dva.gov.au/benefitsandservices/ind...