Aboriginal Servicemen from the Moreton Bay Region

It is difficult to calculate how many indigenous Australians fought in World War I. At first, the Defence Act 1903 prohibited them from enlisting, as they were not recognised as citizens. Some went to extraordinary lengths to enlist – travelling from state to state until they found an amenable attesting officer. Some pretended to be from a different background and enlisted that way.

After devastating losses on the Western Front, the law was relaxed regarding enlistment. More indigenous people were allowed to join. In the AIF, indigenous soldiers enjoyed, by and large, an equality they did not experience in normal Australian society. For example, they earned the same amount as other soldiers, shared the same quarters and so on. However, when the war ended, they returned to the same sorts of discrimination they had endured before the war.

So far, two Aboriginal soldiers have been identified as living in, or associated with, the present day Moreton Bay Region.

CAIRNCROSS, James 3610

James Cairncross was born about 1877. A labourer and fisherman, Jimmy spent his early years on North Stradbroke Island. He was single and living at Woody Point when he enlisted in 1917 at age 40, listing his next of kin as Margaret Rollands (Brown), also known as Granny Mibu. Jimmy served with the 25th Battalion in France where he received a gunshot wound to the head in August 1918. After being hospitalized in England he returned to Australia on the Orsova where he was discharged in March 1919 receiving a war gratuity payment of £52/4/-.

Calling himself Jimmy Cooterman he appears to have made a living as a fisherman moving from place to place along the coast. He died 19 September 1945 and was buried with military honours at Woombye soldier’s cemetery. His descendants are still closely associated with their traditional lands on Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island and still continue to live on country.

FORD, Curtis 4784

Curtis Ford is acknowledged as having family connections in the Caboolture/Bribie area where he visited relatives on many occasions. Curtis was born at Southport in 1888 and his parents were Arthur Ford and Julia Sandy. He was working as a stockman when he enlisted August 1915 aged 27 years. Before leaving Brisbane with the 15th Battalion, Curtis contracted Pneumonia at the Enoggera Camp in Brisbane which left him with a cough and a pain in his side. On arriving in Egypt in May 1916 with the Battalion he was diagnosed with Bronchitis and admitted to No. 2 Australian General Hospital at Alexandria. He was then admitted to the Ras-el-tin Convalescent Hospital at Alexandria in June with suspected Tuberculosis. He returned to Australia where he was discharged in October 1916. Curtis died in June 1919 and is buried at Gayndah Cemetery.
References:

- Pratt, Rod, A Biographic register of Queensland Aborigines who served in the Great War of 1914 to 1918.
- National Archives of Australia
- The Courier Mail, Brisbane