Black Diggers

Directed by Wesley Enoch, and featuring an all male, all Indigenous cast of 10, Black Diggers presents a perspective on the War that changed Australia that until now had been all but unheard.

Brief Synopsis

One hundred years ago, about a thousand Indigenous Australians took up arms to fight in World War I. For them, battle on a Gallipoli beach was an escape from the shackles of racism at home. Black Diggers draws from interviews with the families of 15 men who heard the call – men who now step from the blank pages of history to share their stories.

Longer Synopsis

One hundred years ago, in 1914, a bullet from an assassin’s gun in Sarajevo sparked a war that ignited the globe. Patriotic young men all over the world lined up to join the fight – including hundreds of Indigenous Australians. Shunned and downtrodden in their own country – and in fact banned by their own government from serving in the military – Aboriginal men had to hide their heritage to enlist. Undaunted, these bold souls took up arms to defend the free world in its time of greatest need. For them, facing the horror of war on a Gallipoli beach was an escape from the shackles of racism at home, at a time when Aboriginal people stood by, segregated, unable to vote, unable to act as their children were ripped from them. When the survivors came back from the war, there was no heroes’ welcome – just a shrug, and a return to drudgery and oppression. Black Diggers is the story of these men – a story of honour and sacrifice that has been covered up and almost forgotten. Directed by Wesley Enoch and written by Tom Wright, Black Diggers is the culmination of painstaking research into the lives and deaths of the thousand or so Indigenous soldiers who fought for the British Commonwealth in World War I. Grand in scale and scope, it draws from in-depth interviews with the families of black diggers who heard the call to arms from all over Australia, as well as conversations with veterans, historians and academics. Young men will step from the blank pages of history to share their compelling stories – and after the curtain falls, we will finally remember them.

Resources

Timeline: Australia in the first World War, 1914-1918 | Australian War Memorial


When the First World War broke out in 1914, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not considered citizens of Australia, but were rather the wards of the local “Protector of Aborigines”. They were paid low wages, were often forced to live on reserves and mission stations, could not enter a public bar, vote, marry non-Aboriginal partners or buy property. They were actively discriminated against – and yet when war was declared, many Indigenous men wanted to join up and fight for Australia.

Research: Rights of Indigenous Australians –
Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were very enthusiastic about enlisting in the AIF and fighting for country, despite the fact that White Australia refused to acknowledge them as citizens.