Top: A new kind of equality in the Northern Territory (AWM 67982).
Bottom: Accommodation provided by the Army for Aboriginal labourers at a camp near Katherine, N.T. (AWM 68025).

Photographs courtesy of Australian War Memorial.

ABORIGINES, THE ARMY AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA*

Robert Hall

The Australian Military Forces until early 1939 comprised a small permanent force and the citizen forces. The citizen forces were maintained by voluntary enlistment, by compulsory training under the provisions of Part XII of the *Defence Act*, or by a combination of these. Any force required for service outside Australia had to be voluntarily enlisted.¹

Two documents laid down the criteria for enlistment into the Australian Army. These were the *Defence Act* and the Army publication *Australian Military Regulations and Orders*.² The *Defence Act* placed no limitations upon the racial origins of voluntary enlistees but did require that all personnel take an oath of allegiance, thereby restricting enlistment to British subjects. Aborigines, being British subjects, were therefore not excluded from voluntary enlistment. Persons 'not substantially of European origin or descent' were, however, exempted from call-up for war service under section 61(1) (h) of the *Defence Act*, and from compulsory training under section 138(1) (b).

Contrary to the *Defence Act*, *Australian Military Regulations and Orders* no.177 stated that only persons who were 'substantially of European origin or descent' were to be enlisted voluntarily. This was only an Army order, did not affect the legal predominance of the *Defence Act*, and could be varied or waived to suit the requirements of Land Headquarters, the headquarters of the Australian Army.

As early as September 1939, small numbers of Aborigines had begun to be enlisted into the Army. The then Minister for Defence, Mr G.A. Street, had authorised the Commandant 7th Military District (the Northern Territory) to begin enlistment of a limited number of selected 'part-Aborigines' into units stationed in the Northern Territory.³ The

* This paper is based on a more detailed account of Army/Aboriginal relations in Hall (1979). I would like to acknowledge the assistance given to me through letters and interviews by T. Assan, E. Billy, L. Bon, Dr D. Devanesen, E.L. Gela, J. Hunt, W.A. Long, J. Luffman, J. Mooka, F.R. Morris, P. O'Driscoll, Rev. B. Pilot, and H.A. Stanton. Copies of letters and transcripts of interviews with the above are held by the Library, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

1 *The Army War Effort*; Australian Military Forces publication dated 31 August 1945; copy in Australian War Memorial, Canberra. For Aboriginal involvement in the First AIF see Clark 1973; Coulthard-Clark 1978.

2 *Australian Military Regulations and Orders* was a collection of regulations and orders of a long standing nature governing the administration of the Army.

3 Australian Archives, Accession MP431, item 849/3/1644.

Darwin Infantry Battalion, a regular Army unit based at Darwin, also had its own small contingent of Aboriginal servicemen, nicknamed the 'Black Watch' ostensibly after the famous British regiment.⁴ But despite these and other isolated cases, it was clear that in the first year of the war, while hostilities remained centred in Europe, the Army remained reluctant to enlist Aboriginal volunteers.⁵

In response to an increasing number of requests by 'part-Aborigines' and 'fullbloods' to enlist, and confusion created by the fact that some Aborigines were already serving contrary to the previous orders, military commands sought clarification of the policy on enlistment of Aborigines and other non-Europeans. On 6 May 1940 a Military Board Memo was issued stating that the enlistment of persons of non-European origin or descent was 'neither necessary nor desirable'.⁶ It also drew attention to the extant orders and requested compliance. As Aborigines began to be turned away from recruiting offices throughout Australia, various agencies such as the Queensland Department of Native Affairs and the Aborigines Uplift Society took up the issue of Aboriginal enlistment. Their grievances centred round the inconsistency of Army policy.

As a result of pressure applied by these agencies, the matter of Aboriginal enlistment was reconsidered by the Military Board but its decision, promulgated on 13 August 1940, was that the provisions of the *Defence Act* and Military Regulation no.177 must continue to be adhered to. Medical Officers were, however, entrusted with the responsibility of determining if persons with 'some Aboriginal blood' were or were not substantially of European origin or descent. They were to be guided in this decision by the applicant's 'general suitability' and by the laws and practices of the State or Territory in which the enlistment would take place.⁷

While the Army required a means of excluding unsuitable applicants for enlistment, the use of the applicant's race as a means of exclusion was insensitive and shortsighted. Trouble was bound to arise when Aborigines excluded for reasons not associated with their race, such as medical disability or inadequate education, believed their exclusion to be the result of racist policy. Similarly, the discharge from Army service of Aborigines already serving would also cause trouble. Though race was inappropriate as a means of exclusion and numerous other selection criteria existed by which undesirable would-be recruits could be excluded, the Military Board decision did possess flexibility.⁸ The

4 Johnston 1942:8.

5 Biskup 1973:208.

6 Australian Archives, Accession MP508, Item 275/750/1310. The Military Board was the highest policy authority in the Army.

7 As above.

8 As above.

Army could adjust the acceptability of Aboriginal recruits to meet changes in the demand for manpower and in this regard the Military Board decision represented an improvement over the earlier complete exclusion of Aborigines.

Aboriginal welfare organizations such as the Aborigines Uplift Society, the National Missionary Council of Australia and the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship were nevertheless quick to protest. They claimed, erroneously, that Aborigines enlisted before the decision were now being discharged from the Army simply because of their race. Protest climaxed when on 4 January 1942 a Sydney newspaper published an article concerning an Aboriginal from Murwillumbah who attempted to join the AIF and was passed medically fit at the Murwillumbah recruiting centre. He and two other Aborigines from Grafton were sent to Sydney, but on arrival were immediately returned without explanation. As a result, private citizens, Aboriginal welfare organizations, and other interested groups criticised the existing Army policy and urged that enlistment of Aborigines be made easier.

By early 1942 however, the Japanese advance and the dwindling supply of manpower were beginning to force the Army to modify its attitudes. On 19 February 1942, Darwin was bombed and a Japanese invasion of the Australian mainland was feared. By March, the demand for additional manpower to meet the threat of invasion had become so acute that the remaining classes of men, those of only marginal military value, were called up.⁹ Consequently, the Army began to relax its attitude to the enlistment of Aborigines and although the wording of the orders did not change, Aborigines began to be enlisted in relatively large numbers.

Despite the discriminatory nature of recruiting policy, those Aborigines who succeeded in becoming enlisted members of the Army, and who served in conventional Army units, enjoyed an equality many had seldom experienced in the pre-war civilian environment. Pay and conditions were identical with those enjoyed by other soldiers, and opportunities for advancement existed for Aborigines possessing leadership qualities. An interesting effect of this Army equality is that no accurate record exists of how many Aboriginal soldiers served. Army records did not specify a soldier's race.

Although up to this time the Army had used the orders to restrict the entry of 'part-Aborigines' into most parts of the Australian Army, it had simultaneously been raising unconventional units manned almost entirely by persons of non-European origin or descent. The

⁹ *The Army War Effort*. These were married men aged 35-45 and single men or widowers without children aged 45-60.

Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit was an example of this inconsistency. This unit was raised to perform a particular task in a closely defined geographic area and its task was one that could not be performed by conventionally recruited units.

It had been recognised early in the war that Darwin would be particularly vulnerable to attack if Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies fell into Japanese hands. Darwin lay completely isolated on the north coast, closer to potential Japanese air bases in Sumatra and Java than to Sydney or Melbourne. Because of the relatively small size of the military force which could be allocated to the defence of Darwin, it was imperative that the effectiveness of the force be maximised by providing early warning of any Japanese attack.¹⁰ The Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit was therefore raised in 1941 to perform three tasks. The first was to provide flank protection to Darwin by organizing the Aborigines of the coastline to form an efficient coastwatching service based on their traditional local organization, which would report to a central base by radio. The Unit aimed to organize the Aborigines into a potential mobile patrol, again utilizing their existing local grouping, so as to carry out guerilla warfare against any Japanese landings. The Unit also aimed at gathering together a small unit of Aborigines with special prowess in hunting, craftsmanship, bushcraft, guerilla warfare and ambush, and to use these Aborigines for the instruction of members of the Independent (Commando) Companies in tropical bushcraft and in living on the resources of the country.¹¹

Squadron Leader Donald Thomson¹² was seconded to the Army from the RAAF for the purpose of raising and commanding the unit.

10 The Japanese Army had shown a preference for landing some distance from their eventual objective, then moving overland to it. The Japanese invasion of Malaya, culminating in the capture of Singapore was typical of this technique. Without an early warning system, such a tactic may have gone unnoticed for some time in more remote parts of the coast of northern Australia.

11 Australian War Memorial, CRS A2663, Item 741/5/9. Report on the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit by Squadron Leader Donald F. Thomson, RAAF, 1941-43.

12 Donald F. Thomson (1901-1970) was an anthropologist from Melbourne University. Before the war he had been engaged on extensive field work amongst the Aborigines of Cape York and Arnhem Land. His involvement in Arnhem Land began with the Tuckiar murder case which raised the question of the place of Aboriginal cultural imperatives in law. In 1935, Thomson was invited to go to Arnhem Land by the Minister for the Interior, to establish friendly relations with the Aborigines there, impress upon them the seriousness of major offences and report on ceremonial and other cultural aspects. Thomson spent twenty-six months amongst these people and found them to be far different from the popular image of treacherous savagery. It was because of his prior experience and friendly relationship with these people that he was made responsible for raising and commanding the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit.

In a patrol of Arnhem Land he recruited about fifty Aborigines, mainly from known fighting groups. Many were renowned for their prowess as spear fighters and before the war some had killed Japanese pearlers (and had served gaol sentences as a result).¹³ Recruits were given regimental numbers engraved on brass discs to be hung round their necks as a sign of their enlistment. 'Pay' consisted of a weekly issue of three sticks of tobacco, and the soldiers' equipment included tomahawks, knives, fishing lines and hooks, issued in the belief that a more efficient means of obtaining food would enable the soldiers to spend more time training and fighting the Japanese.

The fifty Aborigines of the unit represented only the nucleus of the force, as each soldier's task, should the Japanese invade, was to organize and lead other Aborigines in guerilla attacks against the Japanese. In such attacks these soldiers were to use their traditional weapons, the spear and spearthrower.¹⁴ Thomson felt that the issue of firearms and, indeed, any other type of military stores, would indicate to the Japanese that these Aborigines were in fact an organized military unit and that this would lead to severe Japanese retaliation against all Aborigines, whether fighting the Japanese or not.

The Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance unit was treated as an exception to the general Army policy of excluding Aborigines, due to the nature of the unit's tasks. Its tasks were essential to the security of Darwin and could not have been performed by other soldiers. Thomson stated that no European soldiers, however well trained, could match his Aboriginal soldiers in guerilla warfare, and it would obviously have been impossible for European troops to mobilize the other Aborigines in Arnhem Land as effectively as Thomson's Aboriginal soldiers. In addition, the unit's activities were restricted to a closely defined, remote locality where there was minimal chance that the unit would fight alongside conventional units or otherwise attract public attention. There was also no possibility that the unit would be deployed outside its defined area of operations.¹⁵

Other units in which Aborigines predominated were sanctioned for similar reasons. Coastal Aborigines in both Cape York and Arnhem Land for example, were sought for enlistment into Army Water Transport units because their intimate knowledge of coastal waters was indispensable to small craft operations. The Army obviously desired

13 Australian War Memorial, CRS A2663, Item 741/5/9.

14 *ibid.* The only concession to technology was that the soldiers were taught how to make and use Molotov cocktails so that they could destroy aircraft on the ground and fuel and ammunition dumps.

15 *ibid.* See also Willey 1962. It was proposed that individuals from the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit be sent on 'commando' missions to Timor and Malaya but apparently this did not occur. The unit did not deploy as a formed body outside Arnhem Land.

the recruitment of Aborigines for these special tasks despite its stated rejection of Aboriginal recruits for more conventional units. This manipulation of policy was clearly discriminatory or exploitative.

Just as limited numbers of Aborigines had served as enlisted soldiers long before the war, so too had the Army employed civilian Aborigines on routine labouring work. These Aborigines were employed throughout Australia but Army units in the Northern Territory employed more Aboriginal labourers than other Army establishments. The Darwin garrison had employed six Aborigines as early as 1933 on tasks such as cleaning, clearing ground of undergrowth, sanitation, fatigue work and as mess orderlies, batmen and waiters. As the strength of the garrison increased, the demand for Aboriginal labour grew also. By late 1934 the number of Aborigines employed had doubled and by 1939, with the arrival of the Darwin Mobile Force, had risen to thirty.

In contrast with the official Army attitude regarding the recruitment of Aborigines in the first years of the war, which was characterized by refusal to consider 'fullbloods' and a reluctance to enlist 'part-Aborigines', the employment of Aborigines in a civilian capacity in Darwin in the early and mid-1930s was limited to 'fullbloods'. The Garrison Commander of Darwin stated that it was undesirable to employ 'part-Aborigines' under conditions prevailing in the Northern Territory at that time.¹⁶ This attitude reflected that of the civilian community: that the growing 'part-Aboriginal' population represented a threat to white Australia.¹⁷ The Army garrison in Darwin at that time was particularly conscious of local attitudes in this matter, being a permanent establishment, and had adopted these local attitudes as its own.

The rationale for the employment of Aborigines, and their conditions of employment in this period were strongly influenced by racism. Duties assigned to the Army's Aboriginal labourers included 'those which are normally carried out in all tropical countries by cheap labour, [the duties] not being assigned to Europeans for climatic and racial reasons'. Though labourers received rations from the Army, these were at half the scale of those for a European soldier and were supplemented by kitchen scraps. Officers of the garrison would allow no Aborigines other than their 'domestics' to enter their houses 'in view of the dangers to health from Aborigines even being close to places where food is kept or prepared'.¹⁸ Such racist attitudes towards the Army's Aboriginal employees were to continue until late 1941

16 Australian Archives, Accession MP508, Item 82/710/2.

17 Franklin 1976:81.

18 Australian Archives, Accession MP508, Item 82/710/2.

when the huge influx of servicemen into Darwin, brought about by the threat of invasion, was to cause dramatic changes.

Japan entered the war on 7-8 December 1941 and on 9 December, after the formal declaration of war, Australian Army units began to move to their pre-selected battle stations to begin work on defences. The size of the force at Darwin grew rapidly, particularly after 19 February 1942 when the first Japanese air raid on Darwin underlined the threat of invasion. By late 1942 the combined strength of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Civil Construction Corps throughout the Northern Territory had reached over 100,000.¹⁹ Most of this force was stationed near Darwin, though some, particularly those units lending support to the fighting troops, were stationed at various centres along the length of the Stuart Highway. By 1943, military strength alone between Darwin and Mataranka was fifty thousand.²⁰ By contrast, most of the white civilian population had been evacuated after the first Japanese raid and would have numbered no more than about one thousand²¹ in the Darwin-Mataranka area by early 1942.

As for the Aboriginal population, a census conducted in 1941 found that on 30 June the total Aboriginal and 'part-Aboriginal' population for the Northern Territory was 14,488.²² Though some 'part-Aboriginal' children were evacuated,²³ most of the Aboriginal and 'part-Aboriginal' population remained in the Northern Territory.

These figures reveal three things. Firstly, the pre-war ratio of Aborigines to whites in the Northern Territory had been suddenly reversed; whites for the first time outnumbered Aborigines by about 6:1. Secondly, the huge influx of white servicemen resulted in thousands of men from the cities of south-eastern Australia having contact with Aborigines for the first time. They brought with them new attitudes which were a mixture of the more liberal if uninterested approach to Aborigines common in south-east Australia, a general ignorance of pre-war racial attitudes and conditions in the north, and the egalitarian influences of the Army society. This peculiarly Army approach to Aborigines replaced pre-war attitudes in the Northern Territory because the Army, due to its size, became the dominant social group in the north, while at the same time civilian influence

19 Abbott 1950:102.

20 Lockwood 1968:260.

21 Censuses conducted in 1933 and 1947 show Darwin's non-Aboriginal population to have been 1,566 and 2,538 respectively (*Commonwealth Year Books* nos. 34 and 37). No figure is given for 1942 but it is reasonable to assume that had it not been for evacuation, it would have been somewhere between the 1933 and 1947 figures, or about 2,000. A reasonable estimate, taking evacuation into account, is about 1,000.

22 *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no.35, 1942-43.

23 McKenzie 1976:118.

declined due to evacuation. Thirdly, the problem of supporting this huge influx of 100,000 servicemen in an area in which the industrial infrastructure had been designed for about two thousand Europeans, meant that many jobs were created to which Aborigines, representing the largest pool of available labour remaining in the Northern Territory, would inevitably be attracted.

As a result of the threat of a Japanese attack on Darwin, Aborigines were evacuated just prior to the bombing of Darwin from coastal areas to settlements established further inland. Both the Army and the Native Affairs Branch thought the evacuation necessary to ensure the Aborigines' safety in the event of further bombings or a Japanese landing; to prevent the Aborigines' assisting the Japanese; to ease the rationing situation, since many Aborigines previously employed by white civilians now required rations; to prevent contact with the troops; and lastly, to prevent the 'dissemination of contagious diseases'.²⁴ As a result of this policy, new settlements were established at Mataranka Siding, Delissaville (Cox's Peninsula), 81 Mile (Adelaide River), Rock Hole Bore (Katherine), Graceville (Katherine), Marranboy (Beswick Creek), Larrimah (Nutwood Station) and Miligibidi (Snake Bay, Melville Island).

An unforeseen result was that some of these settlements came to be located near Army units whose task was to support the fighting units located nearer to the coast. These were the support units such as bakeries, hospitals, workshops, stores depots and the like, which required local labour. On 5 April 1942, officers of the Native Affairs Branch asked the Commanding Officer of an Army workshop located at Mataranka if Aborigines could be employed there.²⁵ He agreed, and so began large scale Army employment of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. Work performed by the Aborigines at Mataranka included cement work, carting and shovelling sand and gravel, timber cutting, and cartage and stacking of ammunition. The Aborigines worked a ten hour day and in the opinion of their supervisors worked harder than either soldiers or civilian labour units in the Middle East.²⁶

This initial experiment was so successful from the Army's point of view that twenty more Aborigines and a part-Aboriginal were sought for enlistment into the Army as supervisors of Aboriginal labour gangs which the Army anticipated would be formed. These additional labour organizations were requested on 26 July 1942 and resulted in the establishment of a new labour settlement at Springvale Station, about four miles from Katherine. Shortly afterwards, similar labour settlements were also set up at Koolpinyah and Adelaide River in 1942 and

24 Australian Archives, Accession A431, Item 46/915.

25 Morris 1965:2.

26 Australian Archives, accession A431, Item 46/915.

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at Cullen in early 1943. Aborigines from existing settlements at Barrow Creek, Banka Banka and Elliott were also employed.

The figures in Table 1 show the extent of Army employment of Aborigines from May 1943.

Table 1: *Sample figures showing the extent of Army employment of Aborigines and part-Aborigines from May 1943*²⁷

	Men	Women	Total
<i>May 1943</i>			
Darwin-Larrimah Area	497	33	530
Alice Springs-Elliott Area	<u>190</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>194</u>
	687	37	724
<i>February 1944</i>			
Darwin-Larrimah Area	489	25	514
Alice Springs-Elliott Area	<u>176</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>180</u>
	665	29	694
<i>August 1944</i>			
Darwin-Larrimah Area	459	51	510
Alice Springs-Elliott Area	<u>200</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>209</u>
	659	60	719
<i>April 1945</i>			
Darwin-Larrimah Area	433	64	497
Alice Springs-Elliott Area	<u>133</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>141</u>
	566	72	638
<i>September 1945</i>			
Darwin-Larrimah Area	414	53	467
Alice Springs-Banka Banka Area	<u>76</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>83</u>
	490	60	550
<i>January 1946</i>			
Darwin-Larrimah Area	420	62	482
Alice Springs-Banka Banka Area	<u>42</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>48</u>
	462	68	530
<i>February 1946</i>			
Darwin-Mataranka Area	330	39	369
Alice Springs Area	<u>21</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>27</u>
	351	45	396

For each man or woman employed the Army provided food, housing and clothing for his or her dependants. Thus the number of Aborigines brought into direct contact with the Army as a result of Army employment was considerably higher than the figures shown. By mid-1944 the Army was employing one-fifth of all Aborigines or 'part-Aborigines' in employment in the Northern Territory and was the largest single employer of Aborigines. The growing Aboriginal labour force was utilized on increasingly more diverse jobs. Semi-skilled work

²⁷ Morris 1965:9-10.

such as assembly and cleaning of carburettors and gearboxes, driving, slaughtering, timber cutting, and sorting and reconditioning of tools and stores was performed by Aborigines as well as the general labouring tasks mentioned above. Female Aborigines performed gardening, hygiene, and maintenance tasks around settlements, and were employed in hospitals as orderlies and personal maids to matrons as well as providing staff for washing, ironing, and other household duties. Similar work was performed in Australian Women's Army Service barracks, hostels and messes.²⁸

Both the scale and nature of Army employment of Aborigines was to have important consequences not only amongst Aborigines, but also amongst civilian employers. Although many of the tasks performed by Aboriginal labourers were mundane, some such as driving and stripping and assembling of vehicle parts represented a departure from the usual pre-war form of Aboriginal employment in the north, that of stock work. The conditions of employment which the Army offered its Aboriginal employees were generally better than those provided by pastoral employers.²⁹ Aborigines employed by the Army were paid at the rate of five shillings per week and were provided with free clothing and medical treatment, with full rations for themselves and for two dependants each.³⁰ Rations were similar to those of soldiers except that the native ration placed a greater emphasis on meat.³¹ The ration also included vegetables grown in Army gardens maintained by Aborigines. Army style messes and hygiene facilities, including showers, were provided. At Tennant Creek the Army established an Aboriginal hospital which gave free hospitalization to Aboriginal patients whether or not employed by the Army³² and to reduce unscheduled absenteeism, Aborigines were given a 'walk-about' period on full pay and rations after each period of twelve months work. This practice met with good results.³³ It was inevitable that some elements of Army discipline were applied to the conduct of labour settlements. Morning hut inspections and mess parades were common, and the dependants of Aboriginal labourers were often engaged in cleaning the camps under the supervision of Army non-commissioned officers.

Throughout the period that it employed Aborigines, the Army had remained largely unconcerned about its own impact on the traditional culture of its employees. Though the Army attempted to maintain the authority of tribal elders, encouraged cultural events such as 'corroborees' and consented to the practice of traditional medicine,

28 Morris 1965:7.

29 See for example, Berndt and Berndt 1948:11.

30 Australian Archives, Accession MP742, Item 275/1/123.

31 Australian War Memorial, CRS A2663, file 422/7/8.

32 W.A. Long, personal communication, 3 June 1978.

33 Australian Archives, CRS A431, Item 46/915.

the act of establishing the labour settlements, and moving the Aborigines away from the coast to areas further inland, overwhelmed even the best attempts to protect the cultural groups. Aborigines from different areas were thrown together in the settlements. Warramunga and Aranda from central Australia were taken to Katherine, where after an initial period of fright and wariness, they lived and worked successfully (from the Army's point of view) with largely 'detribalized' Wagait,³⁴ while in the Tennant Creek hospital, the only common language amongst the Aboriginal patients was English.³⁵

An even greater shock was provided by the white servicemen. Though the labour settlements were sited so as to avoid contact with servicemen, were declared out of bounds to them, and were policed by the Aborigines and European supervisors, European servicemen still came in search of women and often brought alcohol with them to bribe Aboriginal men. The resultant inter-racial trouble was particularly prevalent at Koolpinyah which was located close to several Army units only eighteen miles from Darwin.³⁶

The breakdown of cultural barriers was in danger of being exacerbated further in early 1943 when the continuing demand for Aboriginal labour prompted a proposal to 'gather together' all Aborigines throughout Australia, whether 'detribalized' or not, to provide a massive labour pool. At a meeting held on 8 January 1943 called by the Army Inspector General of Administration to discuss Aboriginal employment, W.E.H. Stanner stated that an Aboriginal labour force of some thousands could be created and could be economically worthwhile.³⁷ This meeting also proposed that Aborigines be withdrawn from Cape York for employment as labourers in the Northern Territory. Neither proposal was adopted, but they illustrate the disregard for the effect upon Aboriginal culture brought about by the pressing demand for labour, and by the increased powers vested in bureaucracies during wartime.

Despite these problems, the establishment of labour settlements did have some 'positive' effects for Aborigines. Many Aborigines enjoyed better living conditions and higher wages than they had previously, but other less tangible benefits such as 'self-discipline', 'cleanliness', 'motivation to work', and generally raised self-esteem, were also noted amongst Aborigines in Army settlements.³⁸ In 1942, after Army employment of Aborigines had begun, there were only seven Aborigines

34 F.R. Morris, personal communication, 14 March 1978; see also Abbott 1950: 145.

35 W.A. Long, personal communication, 3 June 1978.

36 F.R. Morris, personal communication, 14 March 1978.

37 Australian Archives, CRS A431, Item 46/915; D.F. Thomson was also at this meeting.

38 As above.

in Alice Springs gaol compared with an average of over twenty in previous years, and the sheriff estimated that offences committed by Aborigines had dropped by 75 per cent. C.L.A. Abbott, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, regarded the steady and constant employment of Aborigines by the Army as being the main reason for this, and stated that this employment was the best thing to have happened to Aborigines since he had been in the territory.³⁹ With the exception of those Aboriginal labourers from central Australia the majority of Aborigines employed had already begun the process of adjustment to white society before the war. Their experience of the labour camps assisted this process of adjustment, so that they could become more employable after the war, and have a better understanding of the cash economy.

Further improvements to the conditions of employment were proposed by the Army in November 1943. These were initiated by Brigadier E.M. Dollery, Commander Northern Territory Line of Communications Area, who was ultimately responsible for the recruitment and conditions of service for Aboriginal labourers. He proposed the raising of an 'Aboriginal Employment Company'⁴⁰ and a 'Native Affairs Section' for the better administration of the various Aboriginal labour camps controlled by headquarters. The Native Affairs Section proposal, which was adopted, consisted of European soldiers, male and female, who were located at each labour settlement. Their task was to conduct education and health training amongst the labourers and their dependants.⁴¹

Both proposals indicate a changed perception of the Army's role relative to the Aborigines they employed. Since both proposals were formulated in late 1943, they can be attributed in part to the changing war situation. By that time the crisis of invasion was past and the end of the war in sight. The proposals also reflect Brigadier Dollery's far-sighted consideration of the problems likely to face Aborigines in the post-war environment. The transition from the relative benefits of Army employment back to pastoral work (for those Aborigines who could get it) would be an unsettling process and the future development of the Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory within the framework of the economic, political and social environment

³⁹ As above.

⁴⁰ Australian Archives, Accession MP742, Item 92/1/302; the 'Aboriginal Employment Company' was intended to provide an incentive to Aborigines to increase their wages, work skills and improve their English. Enlistment was to be restricted to those who fulfilled basic requirements and recruits were to receive the pay and conditions of other troops. Proposed first in November 1943, the scheme languished in the Departments of Army and Interior until June 1945 when it was abandoned due to the reduction of Army personnel in the Northern Territory at the end of the war.

⁴¹ Australian Archives, CRS A431, Item 46/915.

would demand Aboriginal leaders. These were not likely to emerge from the Army labour camps because few opportunities existed for Aborigines there to exercise leadership, and they received no formal training in it. The proposals, had both been implemented, would have provided greater opportunity for leadership development. Though several of today's leaders in the Aboriginal community developed their leadership skills while serving in the Army, many more might have had such opportunities had the Employment Company proposal been adopted.

Rejection of Dollery's proposal by Land Headquarters in Melbourne resulted in the adoption of a course guaranteed to preserve the status quo in the Northern Territory after the war. The decision was exactly what local pastoral interests wanted, as they were already upset that Aborigines were being so well treated by the Army and it would be 'impossible' for station owners to provide similar working conditions for Aborigines after the war. Pastoralists felt that Aborigines would return to the stations in a 'pampered', 'arrogant' and 'insolent' mood. They decried the fact that control of natives had been handed over to the Army who, they asserted, knew nothing about the 'native question', and whose interest in the Aborigines would cease as soon as the military situation improved and the Army withdrew from the Northern Territory.⁴²

The wartime Army presence was so pervasive that it affected Aborigines who were neither soldiers nor civilian labourers. One of the earliest aspects of this type of contact was an increase in real or imagined inter-racial sexual liaisons. These were inevitable due to the movement of large numbers of soldiers to remote areas of Australia where the largest concentrations of Aborigines existed, but where few, if any, European women remained. The first cries of sexual scandal occurred during the development by the Army of the Stuart Highway between Birdum and Tennant Creek. Women's organizations in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide stated that the construction of the road would attract Aborigines to Army construction sites with 'disastrous consequences'. To combat this possibility, the president of the Feminist Club proposed that the Government should organise patrols of mature white women to safeguard the interests of Aboriginal women. To discourage the soldiers they recommended police patrols and health lecturers to warn of the risks of disease.⁴³

These allegations caused concern to both the Army and the Department of the Interior and further incidents in Darwin led to the matter being considered by both departmental secretaries. The Department of the Interior concluded that the conduct of a small minority of soldiers

⁴² As above.

⁴³ Australian Archives, Accession MP508, Item 256/701/90.

was to be deplored.⁴⁴ As a solution, the Department proposed reducing leave privileges for soldiers, increasing the strength of town disciplinary patrols, the placement of these patrols under the command of an officer, and lastly the introduction of a Military Police unit. These measures, and the involvement of departmental heads, testify to the seriousness with which the problem was regarded. A further outburst of concern for the welfare of Aboriginal women came in late 1942 after 3,500 Negro troops of the United States Army were stationed at Mt. Isa.⁴⁵

By December 1942, the closely related problem of venereal diseases⁴⁶ began to have an effect on relations between the Army and Aborigines. While operating near the mouth of the Roper River, 48 per cent of a commando unit of about 120 men suffered venereal diseases allegedly as a result of intercourse with Aboriginal women in that area, and similar rates were experienced by the Negro units stationed in Cape York. Surprisingly, there was no evidence of venereal disease amongst Australian Army personnel also stationed in Cape York.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, venereal disease was evidently capable of posing unacceptable limitations on unit efficiency and administrative support, and was considered a serious problem by the Army. The Director General of Medical Services suggested that the problem may have been created by soldiers in the first place, but this was never confirmed.⁴⁸ An Army officer was appointed to investigate the problem. He reported that although many Aboriginal women showed no signs of venereal disease, white men who cohabited with them invariably contracted it! He recommended the immediate removal of all female Aborigines and their married consorts from settlements close to troop concentrations, to more isolated mission stations. His recommendations were translated at a higher headquarters into an even more drastic response; the complete removal of as many Aborigines as possible from the Peninsula and their subsequent use elsewhere as labourers.⁴⁹

As the Aboriginal population of Cape York was more than two thousand the scale of action required meant that this plan was never implemented. Queensland's Director of Native Affairs opposed it on the basis of the difficulty and expense of the task, and the possible damage to the Cape York cattle industry in which many Aborigines were employed as stockmen. He suggested the more reasonable and

44 Australian Archives, Accession MP508, Item 5/701/47.

45 McIntyre 1976.

46 There is no evidence as to the exact form of venereal disease.

47 Australian Archives, Accession MP729/6, Item 16/402/111.

48 Australian Archives, CRS A373, Item 3950.

49 Australian Archives, Accession MP729/6, Item 16/402/111.

practical alternative of evacuating and treating individual Aborigines shown by medical examination to be suffering from venereal diseases. This proposal met with some initial opposition from the Army's Adjutant General (who believed that the periodical medical examinations would confer official approval on the behaviour of the troops) but this solution was eventually adopted. An added refinement was that the opportunity for contact between native women and soldiers was to be limited as far as possible by siting Army camps away from mission stations.

Only one attempt was made to solve the venereal disease problem by evacuating the Aboriginal population concerned. It ended in failure and as a result no further use of evacuation was contemplated. When Aboriginal women were reported to be having intercourse with Negro soldiers of a unit newly arrived in the vicinity of Cowal Creek Mission it was decided to move the Aboriginal settlement sixty miles away, despite the fact that medical examinations had revealed no disease. After a short interval however, some Aboriginal women had made their way back to the area of the Negro camp. When these troops moved on, it was decided to allow the Aborigines to officially re-occupy Cowal Creek. White troops remained nearby but there is no evidence that they had sexual relations with the women.

Encounters between Negro soldiers and Aborigines reveal a closer social relationship than was present between white troops and Aborigines. The common experience of racist discrimination was the key to this.⁵⁰ Many Aborigines discovered for the first time that they were not alone in being the recipients of prejudice. Negroes also provided a new model of the 'typical black' for the benefit of both Aborigines and other Australians. These black men who had money, who were mechanics and operated bulldozers, caused Australians to alter their perception of Aborigines.⁵¹ A change in attitudes was also encouraged by wartime propaganda. But although this propaganda attempted to unite Australians against the threat of invasion and to deny the existence of any 'master race', numerous accusations of disloyalty came to be levelled at Aborigines, particularly those in north Australia, as the threat of invasion increased. There is no evidence of these accusations until early 1942, which suggests that the phenomenon was closely related to the threat of Japanese invasion. Typical of the more hysterical letters to newspapers concerning Aboriginal disloyalty was one which claimed that Japanese could pass themselves off as Aborigines by adorning their faces with burnt cork, and that Aborigines using

50 Berndt and Berndt 1951:266-267. Racism was a major topic of conversation amongst Aborigines and Negroes in Adelaide.

51 Watson 1974.

smoke signals could give information to Japanese reconnaissance planes '60 to 100 miles off the coast of Broome'.⁵²

An element of truth lay behind some of these accusations. The pre-war pearling industry had involved continuous contact between Japanese pearlers and Aborigines, and while some contacts between Japanese and Aborigines had been marked by brutality and exploitation of the Aborigines, in other instances the Japanese appear to have taken great pains to foster good relations. In addition, Japanese naval officers had sometimes visited the north coast of Australia as crewmen on pearling luggers, for intelligence gathering purposes.⁵³ Suspicion of Japanese intentions in their relations with Aborigines led inevitably to suspicion of Aborigines. This became so indiscriminately applied that in the minds of those responsible for security all Aborigines living in the north, whether they had been in contact with the Japanese pearlers or not, were suspect.

Suspicion of Aboriginal loyalty was not lessened by the Aborigines' reaction to events up to early 1942. In the first year of the war there had been an increase of interest in and sympathy towards Aborigines as a result of wartime propaganda and the realisation of the value of Aboriginal labour. Some Aborigines became frustrated when this trend did not continue, and expressed their dissatisfaction by opposing minor government decisions and verbally supporting a Japanese victory over Australia. The deliberate Japanese policy of attacking the prestige of colonial powers in the South West Pacific area and the fostering of indigenous populations, helped to exacerbate Aborigines' frustration with whites. At the same time it posed an implied threat to white Australians. Minor restrictions imposed by the government due to wartime conditions became contentious issues and precipitated some of the outbursts of anti-government feelings by Aborigines. By early 1942 numerous reports had reached Army Intelligence suggesting apparently disloyal attitudes amongst Aborigines. Several instances of Aborigines in the north of Western Australia making pro-Japanese statements were reported,⁵⁴ while in the Mount Magnet-Meekatharra area, Aborigines openly spoke of being 'boss' when the Japanese arrived. At Hope Vale Lutheran Mission in Queensland Aborigines allegedly stated that after their victory the Japanese would return Australia to the Aborigines, the rightful owners. At Cooktown similar trouble erupted during a tobacco shortage.⁵⁵ These statements were taken to indicate a sympathy for the Japanese rather than frustration with the status quo.

⁵² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1942.

⁵³ Haultain 1971:200.

⁵⁴ Biskup 1973:210.

⁵⁵ Australian Archives, Accession MP 729/6, Item 29/401/626.

The seriousness with which the problem was regarded is indicated by the personal intervention of the Prime Minister, John Curtin, on 24 July 1942. He urged F.M. Forde, the Minister for the Army, to have Army officers discuss the matter of Aboriginal loyalty with State government authorities in Perth to ascertain the true attitude of the Aborigines.⁵⁶ The Army, however, had already done this and had formulated plans for the control of Aborigines in the coastal area from Geraldton in the north to Trigg Island in the south. As early as June 1942, a Special Mobile Force stationed at Moora had begun to implement these plans by rounding up all unemployed Aborigines from the Midlands for internment in the Moore River settlement. Those Aborigines in employment were not permitted to leave their place of residence without permission, and the Deputy Director of Security for Western Australia requested the State government to compile a register of Aborigines so that they could be kept under observation. His justification was that Aborigines, who were now described as 'potential enemies', might become 'subversive' in the event of invasion.

In August 1942 the Army issued a further order extending these controls to the mouth of the Murchison River and by January 1943 sought further extension to 'areas of Western Australia. Opposition from the government and police, and the diminishing threat of invasion by that time, led to the abandonment of the idea.⁵⁷ Up to this time, the measures adopted by the Army had resulted in the treatment of Aborigines in Western Australia along lines similar to that of enemy aliens. These policies and the harsh methods employed in their execution (often including physical force) led to considerable discontent amongst Aborigines, leaving them potentially receptive to infiltration by the Communist Party. Aborigines' protests against the Army in Western Australia were said to be organized by the Communist Party as part of its overall policy of wooing Aborigines.⁵⁸ Although Communist Party involvement with Aborigines remained largely ineffectual to the end of the war such reports tended to confirm the Army's suspicions that Aborigines should be subject to strict security measures.

In Cape York, the Army conducted an investigation into the security situation and sought the opinion of superintendents of mission stations as far south as Aurukun. These superintendents (all but one of whom were European) believed that not one per cent of more than one thousand Aborigines in their control could be relied upon to be loyal.⁵⁹ These findings were of course more an indicator of white perceptions of the security risk than of any 'real' disloyalty on the

⁵⁶ As above.

⁵⁷ Biskup 1973:210.

⁵⁸ Biskup 1973:211.

⁵⁹ Australian Archives, CRS A373, Item 3950.

part of Aborigines. But by April 1943 the disloyalty of Aborigines in Cape York Peninsula had been accepted as fact by some elements of the Army, particularly the higher headquarters. A Headquarters Queensland Line of Communications Intelligence Report for the week ending 16 April 1943 stated that fullblood and part-Aborigines who had been travelling stock routes throughout the gulf country would be of 'inestimable value to the enemy' in an overland drive, being largely influenced by communist propaganda and easily swayed by agitators. Many of them, it concluded, would willingly help the Japanese.⁶⁰ On 25 May 1943 the Army recommended that active measures be taken to improve the perceived security situation and proposed that patrols should endeavour to contact Aborigines with the aim of building up a better feeling amongst them towards Europeans. By displaying uniforms and arms, and giving Aborigines flour, sugar and tobacco in return for work, it was hoped to make a favourable impression.⁶¹ But few Aborigines could have missed the implied bribe and threat.

So far only official Army policies towards Aborigines have been examined. These policies originated in major headquarters such as Land Headquarters or Headquarters Northern Territory Force and tended to display a lack of uniformity in response to the questions of Aboriginal enlistment and employment. The more senior the headquarters, the more the policies initiated tended to reflect political constraints and hence the prevailing white racist attitudes. The response to Aborigines in operational units and junior headquarters was not only different from that of senior headquarters, but also less diverse. This is evident in the different approach taken to the formulation of policy by Headquarters Northern Territory Force, a relatively junior headquarters, as compared with that of Land Headquarters.

Headquarters Northern Territory Force became responsible for civil and military administration of the Northern Territory north of Alice Springs on 9 March 1942.⁶² At that time most decisions regarding the employment of Aborigines by the Army were made by this Headquarters located in the Northern Territory, which had seconded to it many members of the pre-war Native Affairs Branch of the Department of the Interior. Policies developed by this headquarters were therefore not only developed within the military system, but were developed from intimate knowledge of the situation and were executed by men relatively skilled and experienced in Aboriginal affairs. In contrast, Land Headquarters located in Melbourne had little inti-

60 Australian Archives, CRS A373, Item 5903. It is interesting that this information found its way to the United States, where it was apparently attributed to Western Australian Aborigines. See the *National Times*, 30 January-4 February 1978.

61 As above.

62 McCarthy 1959:72.

mate knowledge of the situation regarding Army use of Aboriginal labourers and had few experienced advisers.

Although authors of policies adopted by Headquarters Northern Territory Force were often unaware of the changes they were to inflict on Aboriginal cultures these did result in an improvement on pre-war conditions. In any case in military eyes they were formulated against the background of the war when security considerations clearly overshadowed concerns with the maintenance of Aboriginal cultures. Overall, Headquarters Northern Territory Force must be considered as having adopted comparatively progressive Aboriginal policies during its period of executing the administration of the Northern Territory. Some questions of Aboriginal policy, however, required the direction of Land Headquarters in Melbourne. This headquarters, because of its isolation from the problems involved, its assumption of white civilian attitudes and its concern with the realities of politics and finance, maintained a more jaundiced view of Aborigines and their capabilities as labourers despite assurances to the contrary from Headquarters Northern Territory Force and others. The effect of the different determinants operating upon these headquarters is exemplified in the proposal to raise an Aboriginal Employment Company in the Northern Territory and the subsequent quashing of the idea by Land Headquarters after inordinate delays.

In contrast personal relations between white and Aboriginal servicemen in operational units seem to have been less racist than relations between Aborigines and the Army as expressed in official Army policy. This was due to the nature of the Army and its effect on the individuals within it. The Army was a distinct social group which was separate from, yet at the same time part of, the society within which it existed. The recruit began a process of separation from civilian society at the moment of enlistment. Regardless of race, recruits were attested, issued with uniform, given military-style haircuts and identifying numbers. All recruits were subject to an additional code of military law, adopted military jargon and assumed a clearly defined place within the military hierarchy where their relations with superiors, subordinates, and peers were clearly defined and regulated through military discipline and peer group pressures. Military society was sharply stratified so that equality amongst members of the same rank was emphasised. These factors strengthened the identity of the separate Army society and thereby emphasised its difference from the civilian community. The recruit was forced to form friendships within his working group: rifle section, tank crew, transport platoon or whatever. Under combat conditions where there was a sense of common danger, common obligation, a need for unity and teamwork and a consciousness of sharing an intensely emotional experience, even

greater cohesive forces were present.⁶³ This cohesiveness and interdependence within the group was sufficient to overcome the divisive effects of racism where the group was composed of European and Aboriginal soldiers.

Accounts of interracial relationships under combat conditions support his view. One Infantry section Commander described the relationship between European and Aboriginal soldiers of his section in terms of 'love', 'dependence', and 'brotherhood'. There was no place for racism in his small group.⁶⁴ Other accounts recall Aboriginal soldiers who had developed firm friendships with European soldiers that they had seen action with, but these friendships gradually dissolved when the soldiers came home after the war, left the Army and assumed the ideals and roles of the civilian community once again.⁶⁵ Ex-servicemen's recollections of their Aboriginal comrades nevertheless reveal a remarkable sense of equality and affection even today.⁶⁶

Aboriginal accounts of the type of relationships they experienced though scarce, tend to confirm those above. Reg Saunders noted after the war that white soldiers he had met were not racist⁶⁷ while another Aboriginal ex-soldier recalled that one of the memorable features of his service was the way in which both whites and Aborigines could combine in friendship.⁶⁸ Racist incidents which did occur, such as Reg Saunders' occasional brawls with white soldiers, were rare and of a relatively benign type. Characteristically, interracial personal relationships were marked by a degree of co-operation and friendship seldom found in the contemporary civilian life.

Close interracial relationships also developed between Aboriginal labourers and white supervisors of labour camps in the Northern Territory but less scope existed for close relations between Aboriginal labourers and the soldiers. Labourers were not enlisted soldiers and their contact with whites was limited to those who supervised their work and to casual contacts. Their separateness from European soldiers was emphasised through careful siting of the labour camps away from these soldiers, and by declaring these camps out of bounds to all but the Aborigines and their white supervisors. Despite these difficulties, even fleeting relations were beneficial to the perception each had of the other. European servicemen revised their preconceived notions of

63 Mandelbaum 1952:107.

64 Gordon 1962:47.

65 Watson 1974:5.

66 Various ex-servicemen's letters to the author.

67 Gordon 1962:137.

68 Read and Read 1978.

Aborigines when they saw them for the first time while some Aborigines regarded soldiers as a 'new kind of white man'.⁶⁹ Not even missionaries, according to many Northern Territory Aborigines, wanted or were able to achieve the same kind of relationships based upon equality, as were achieved by many soldiers.⁷⁰

By its involvement in employment of Aborigines through enlistment and as civilian labourers, the Army, or at least the lower level headquarters and individuals, demonstrated a sense of equality and a willingness to try new approaches to the 'Aboriginal question'. This pattern persisted from early 1942 to the end of the war. But the relationship expressed in official Army policy varied through the duration of the war and from one locality to another. Changes over time were linked to the threat of invasion and the consequent demand for manpower. The hasty discharge of the 'camping type' Aborigines after the war⁷¹ and the refusal of the Army to accept Aboriginal volunteers for service in the Japan occupation forces⁷² demonstrate the extent to which the demand for manpower at the height of the invasion threat forced the Army unwillingly to accept the recruitment of Aborigines.

Geographical variation in Army attitudes to Aborigines can be explained in terms of the strategic importance of various parts of Australia. The recruitment of Aborigines in north Australia when official Army policy denied entry to persons not substantially of European origin or descent can only be accounted for in this light. Aborigines could be recruited contrary to official policy so long as they remained out of the public eye and so long as they contributed to the defence of a strategically important area where other manpower was scarce.

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69 Brown 1976:89.

70 Read and Read 1978.

71 Biskup 1973:209.

72 Gordon 1962:135.

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