

**CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**HONOURING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT  
ISLANDER MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVED THEIR  
COUNTRY**

**Name:** John Staines

**Date:** 25 April 2014

**Place:** (?)

**Interviewer:** Fabri Blacklock

**TRANSCRIPT**

- 0.00 **FB:** This is an interview with John Staines on the 25th of April 2014.
- So, could you please tell me your name and where your mob comes from, please?**
- JS:** Yes, my name's John Norman Staines. My mob come from the Wiradjuri and they come from Molong, Cowra and also Wellington.
- FB:** And today we're going to be talking about your grandfather and your uncle. So first I think we're going to talk about your

**grandfather, Harold John Keegan, so could you just tell me a little bit about your grandfather, when he joined the armed forces?**

JS: Yes. He joined the armed forces, I think it was about 1941. He served in the Australian Army. He enlisted at Paddington New South Wales and he went to Cairo on two occasions, overseas, and he was in the regiment where there was a number of Aboriginal soldiers.

**FB: So he was deployed to Cairo. Do you know what the Australian forces were doing in Cairo?**

JS: They were doing, I believe, exercises over there and training and I'm not too sure about what other role they were going to play but I believe it was going to be sufficient enough if they needed to be deployed elsewhere that they were ready to go.

**FB: So they were training and preparing for something that might eventuate?**

JS: Yes, yes, exactly.

**FB: So do you know if your grandfather ever experienced racism in the army?**

2.00 JS: He experienced it in the army. On one occasion he came up against an English officer and I believe the words were "You black bastard, get your arse into gear", something like that and my uncle actually hit the officer and was going to be court martialled and only because he said it in front of numerous witnesses that he wasn't court martialled. And when he came back from overseas there was one occasion where he was going to the local hotel in Glebe – I believe it was the Friend in Hand Hotel – and they told him to get out because no Aboriginals could go into the pub and there was a number of white Australian soldiers there as well and they said to the publican "If you don't let him in we're not coming in either and we'll find a pub that will let him in" and the publican changed his mind and let him. And also when he applied for jobs when he came back from overseas he was knocked back, couldn't find work, and after that became a very heavy drinker, an alcoholic, and more or less drank himself to death.

**FB: That's not good.**

JS: No.

**FB: So do you know when he returned from Cairo, what year that might have been?**

JS: 1944.

**FB: And then he left the army after that?**

JS: He left the army after that, yes, and it was a shame to see a proud Aboriginal person deteriorate after what he's seen overseas and the way he was treated when he came back; it was hard to live with. He couldn't understand why that a black person that went and fought alongside white people for the same thing and to protect Australia and those back in Australia that he was thought of as a second class citizen when he came back.

4.19 **FB: Very sad. So do you know if he received a pension like all the other servicemen when he returned?**

JS: I'm not too sure, I'm not really sure. I think he must have got something, I think, to support his drinking because I know money was very scarce for us when he came back and things like that and a few of us had to leave school early and find jobs to help make ends meet because all the money he received went on alcohol.

**FB: That's not good. And you were just telling me a little bit before that you started work at, was it thirteen?**

JS: Thirteen, yes.

**FB: At the wool - - -**

JS: Woolstores, yes.

**FB: Could you just tell me a little bit about that?**

JS: Yes. Well, money was short and so being the oldest of six children I had to leave school early and I got a job in the woolstores at Winchcombe & Carson's over there at Ultimo and when the boss laid eyes on me, a scrawny, skinny kid he couldn't believe it and the other blokes there said to him "Look, this is the situation he's in. Alcoholism is in the family. He needs to work, otherwise the other kids don't get fed" so the boss over there said "If you do a day's work as a man you'll get a day's pay as a man". So I was there for about three years till I left and went to another job. So it was pretty good because there was a few other Aboriginal people working at the woolstores which made life easier for me and we got along very good. Most of the blokes over there, a few of them were returned soldiers, and they knew the family and they supported me and helped me along the way, so it was good.

6.07 **FB: So I'll just ask you about your uncle. So your uncle's name's Ronald Hoad or his real name was Peter Keegan but he enlisted under the name Ronald Hoad.**

JS: Yes.

**FB: Do you want to tell us a little bit about him?**

JS: Well, he went to enlist in the army as well but they for some reason knocked him back so then he went and enlisted under the name of Ronald Hoad at a different place and they took him in. So he served in the army for I think it was a couple of years longer than my grandfather and he was a bridge builder because his father was a bridge builder as well and he was in the Australian Army and worked as a bridge builder overseas and he was captured overseas and spent eleven months in a prison of war in Changi Prison and seen a number of executions over there. The Japanese actually when he was there didn't execute any of the Aboriginal soldiers because they were treated badly by a lot of their superior officers. So he did see a few beheadings over there of certain officers of high rank but he found that very hard to live with because they were virtually starved to them in those prison of war camps there. Food was very, very scarce and if you got sick over there you died most of the time.

**FB: Yes, it would have been a very traumatic experience.**

7.54 JS: It was for him, yes. But he did get a bravery award over there. I believe a Japanese soldier was going to stick a bayonet in one of his mates and he put himself in front of his mate and got recognised as bravery somewhere there and got an award there for doing that. But the Japanese soldier luckily didn't kill my uncle and therefore go and kill the bloke he was going to kill.

**FB: That's very lucky.**

JS: And he was in the same position as my grandfather. When he came back he couldn't find any work and they were very close and they were virtually just outcast from a lot of their friends when they come back. They couldn't work out why but just very sad to see two grown men that were prepared to put their lives on the line for Australia and come back and weren't recognised as Australians, just recognised as Aboriginal soldiers, second class, and he followed the same steps as my grandfather and virtually drank himself to death. These were two men that were roughly about six foot plus tall, fourteen stone and when they died they were about eleven stone, just not eating, just drinking, and it was sad to see them deteriorate over a period of time. But life goes on. I think it just makes the next generation stronger and more keener to get an education and prove to people that we're not second class citizens, we're firstly Aboriginal people and Australians on top of that.

10.03 **FB: It would have been very devastating for your family to watch them deteriorate like that.**

JS: Well, it was. It was very devastating because in the family along with my two uncles being alcoholics another family member committed suicide around about the same time and that was very hard to deal with. He was also driven as a second class citizen and couldn't cope with it. So he thought he was taking the easy way out but that didn't help his family or anybody taking his own life. Unfortunately, I'm sure that there's a lot of Aboriginal people out there with similar stories to this one and hopefully the powers to be will see that they suffered as much as any white Australian.

**FB: So do you know how long he was a POW at Changi for?**

JS: He was in there for, I believe, just over eleven months, so nearly a year and he did see beheadings over there, he's seen people dying of sicknesses, diarrhoea and other sicknesses that come along with it; starvation was a big thing. And they found that when they come back they couldn't sleep in beds, they had to sleep on the floor, just yelling out things late at night in their sleep, like people being tortured and all that sort of stuff. You know, just very scary and frightening to young children, wanting to know why these things happen. Very sad, actually, very sad. They found it very hard to have a relationship with people and, you know, just changed men: they weren't the same men that went away that came back. It was very sad.

12.09 **FB: Because it affects them for the rest of their life.**

JS: It does.

**FB: And their families.**

JS: And their families. And the families just couldn't work out why that loving people went away come back different people, empty, drained of any emotions and things that they couldn't seem to cope because there was no help for them; they couldn't get any help. They had sicknesses, they had different things that they just pushed them to one side and they couldn't get any help from anybody so they just turned to the drink. It was very sad for them and very sad and hard for the families to cope with what they've become. Just hope it never, ever happens again.

**FB: So how old were they when they passed away? Can you remember the years?**

JS: Late fifties, early sixties. They didn't live long lives; short lives, actually. Like I said, big strong men when they went away and when they came

back they were a shadow of their self. Very, very sad, very, very sad. And you'd see my grandmother cry herself to sleep a lot of nights and other family members as well had to move out, move away because they couldn't put up with the screams of a night, nightmares. So it's very, very sad that other family members couldn't put up with it and had to move away. They tried to offer their support but the only comfort they seemed to have got was out of a bottle.

14.06 **FB: Very sad. So what does ANZAC Day mean to you?**

JS: Well, ANZAC Day reminds me of my grandfather and uncle and the sacrifices they put up just as much as any white Australian and they went away and fought for the same purpose, to protect the ones they loved at home but never did they think that they would be treated the way they were treated when they were away and when they came back. But, yes, they were very proud of what they did as far as serve the country and try and protect their loved ones but, like I said, when they come back they got no support whatsoever, nothing, nothing. It was very hard to deal with. They should have been able to get medical support but that just fell on deaf ears and as far as looking for work, well, no one wanted to know them. You'd think that someone that went and fought for their country and when they come back if they went and applied for a job and there was a job there that they'd be in line for that job, not because of their colour pushed aside and the white Australians got the jobs. They couldn't deal with that.

**FB: So do you know what inspired them to join the army?**

JS: Well, they thought that if they went and done what white Australians were doing that they would become an equal and wanted to be treated as an equal to show to them that they love this country as much as they did and this was their country and they fought for their people as well. They wanted to protect white and black Australians from what happened but it just didn't occur.

16.10 They were shattered when they found out the way they were going to be treated. Like uncle said "If I knew what was going to happen when I come back" he said "I would have been better off being killed over there" because the drink did kill them when they come back here. They drank themselves to death. They were drinking flagons of wine. It was just terrible to see people go like that. They just weren't recognised as Australians.

**FB: So how important do you think it is that we recognise our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service Men and Women?**

JS: Well, like I said, they suffered as much as any white Australian. My uncle was a prisoner of war. The guy that he stuck up for was a white Australian. The Japanese was going to stick a bayonet in the white Australian and he put his own body in front of him to save a white Australian and they went overseas to protect white Australian and black Australians and that was very important to them.

**FB: The stories that you're sharing and other Aboriginal people's stories, why do you think this is important for, I guess, wider Australian community to know about?**

JS: Well, I think they should realise that if a black Australian was prepared to go over there and protect white and black Australians, the least the white Australians can do is to recognise these people, that they suffered as much as their grandfather, uncles, brothers, sisters, if not more so because the way they were treated when they come back was just unspeakable; they were treated like they didn't exist.

18.04 White Australians, the ones that I knew of, got medical help and they got jobs. I'm sure there was a few that had the same problem as my uncle's and turned to the drink and hardship stories like that but I think mainly it reflected on the colour of their skin. They loved this country, they loved the white people as well, but they just wanted to be known as equal, not second rate citizens, not because the colour of your skin's different to those that share this country, beautiful country. And you just had to listen to the screams and the nightmares to understand it fully what they went through.

**FB: Would have been very traumatic.**

JS: It was very traumatic, especially for my grandmother and mother and it just pulled families apart. There was no winner in them wars. If anything when they come back the war was like a second war beginning back at home. They had to fight for equality, fight to get a job, to be recognised. The war was never over for them. They mightn't have got killed overseas but when they come back they got killed, majority of them. I knew a lot. My grandfather and uncle, they weren't the only ones that turned to the drink. I know of other families, Aboriginal families, their parents, uncles and aunties went through the same thing. There's a terrible amount of people that thought the only cure they could get was in the bottle. Very sad, very, very sad.

20.07 **FB: And today's ANZAC Day and today we've got the Black Diggers March that's going to be coming through Redfern. Why do you think that's important?**

JS: It's important to my family and to myself and my children to know that our ancestors, that we recognise them as heroes for what they did, not only for the Aboriginal people but for Australia itself, to go away and overcome all these mountains that were put in front of them, to sacrifice their lives so we could have a better life back home. And to know that I'm marching for them makes me very, very proud as an Aboriginal person and an Australian person, to know that we might be only making small steps in Australia as far as the white Australians are concerned but we're going to continue to make giant steps in the future, go forward and just hope that we'll be accepted as equal and not as second class citizens. And I've always said to my children that the only way you're going to make a difference is get an education, strive to be better in every way, don't settle for anything that's second rate. Whether it's in relationships or jobs, just keep striving to move forward and remember that although you might be an Aboriginal person that you're just as equal as any Australian and we will make a difference.

22.02 And I feel very, very, very proud when I put the medals on that belonged to my grandfather and uncle, the old Australian saying "Lest we forget" and I'll never, ever forget; I'll always remember what sacrifices they did. Very proud.

**FB: Thank you, John, so much for your time.**

JS: O.K.

**FB: Is there anything else you wanted to say?**

JS: No. I just think that everyone should remember the Black Diggers and remember that what they did for us is because they loved us and they wanted to make a difference in Australia and there's a lot of Aboriginal soldiers still in the Australian Army and they want to make a difference and we will make a difference.

**FB: Excellent, thank you.**

JS: Thank you.

**Interview ends**