Transcript Part 4 of 7
'Walking in Two Worlds: The WWI story of Ngarrindjeri Anzacs Cyril & Rufus Rigney'
Episode 03 of the Schools Program podcast series for the
Virtual War Memorial Australia

Part 04 (duration 34:19)

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised that this podcast contains references to and the names and voices of people who have passed away.*

[SOUNDS OF MILITARY MARCHING BAND]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *"Aboriginal men from every state and Territory served in WWI," writes author Paul Byrnes in his book, 'Lost Boys'. Like the Ngarrindjeri soldiers, many came from the missions, stations and reserves around Australia, at the time.*

In the foreword to 'Ngarrindjeri Anzacs', historan Professor Bill Gammage, writes that the 21 Ngarrindjeri men who enlisted in the years 1914 to '16 represented approximatley 20% of the district's Aboriginal men. The number might seem small but "proportionately it was large".

This was a community of just over 200 people.

Five of the 21 Ngarrindjeri soldiers died - four on overseas battlefields, including Rufus and Cyril. Bill Gammage says that the men "offered their lives for their own reasons and that their gift deserves respect today".

Listening to their story, you might be asking yourself, why did Rufus and Cyril decide to enlist in the war in the first place? Why would they choose to fight for a country that didn't even consider them equal citizens? And were their reasons for fighting very different from non-Indigenous soldiers?

I talked to some of Rufus and Cyril's relatives and a historian about the various reasons these young men might have had for going to war. Different people have different ideas.

So let's return now to Ngarrindjeri/Kaurna elder, Uncle Frank Lampard. He was born at Raukkan too, when it was called Point McLeay. And he went on to do his own military service during the time of Vietnam War, posted to Melbourne with the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps. Uncle Frank's related to Cyril and Rufus Rigney, on his mum's side.

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: Yeah, that's correct. In fact, my grandfather - my mother's father - and their father: they were brothers. My grandfather was Edward [Rigney] and their father was Ben [Rigney]. And of course, they being children of brothers, my mother and those boys were first cousins.

Naturally, of course – culturally - I've always been respectful and refer to them as "Uncles" which is one of the protocols within our culture.

MEGAN SPENCER: *After his family moved away from Point McLeay, as a boy, Uncle Frank would often come back to visit.*

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: My mother came from a very large family. And that meant that we were staying sometimes with the grandparents, sometimes with the uncles and aunties. And at some of those families of my mother's sisters, we used to see photos! They were on mantle pieces pieces or on cupboards. And, and you couldn't help but ask, "Who's that?!"

So, you know, you quickly came to learn that these fellas had actually been in our defence forces.

I mean, I feel very proud about that too, because there's a long history of, you know, that Rigney family, as well as from the Lampard side. And where we've always stepped up to serve our country, either in peacetime or at war.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Uncle Frank thinks Rufus and Cyril might have had a few different motives for enlisting.*

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: Well, we're talking about young men that were 16 going on 17, and 19 going on 20.

I don't think that you [would] have to dig too much deeper than, the fact that, young people in that era who were captured in a traditional context - Country - that had oodles of land available to its particular Traditional Owner...

And we're being managed under laws and policy in this little 'nest' almost, you know, causing us to trip over each other!

And, some of the men have the 'luxury' of leaving the mission with the "endorsement, approval and authority" of the legislation at the time. And they went out and shore sheep - helped round up sheep - helped to act as shepherds... They would have rounded up cattle, they would have worked with horses, and all those sorts of things.

And just that, that limited exposure would have captured their mind about, *"Oh, there's terrible things happening somewhere else... But you know what, it might give me a perfect opportunity to leave this area, to get an opportunity to - wow! - go overseas! Do something different to what the rest of us are doing?!"*

Probably never imagined the impact and effect that it was going to have on their lives! As you know, both of them deceased as a result of that activity, and sadly, because of the idea of going.

But you know, at the same time, the people who - the missionaries - who were in charge at the time, would have encouraged them to possibly make this commitment and the trip with all fanciful promotion of it.

[AUDIO OF MENIN GATE BUGLERS]

MEGAN SPENCER: *It's worth noting here that Cyril enlisted on April 26, 1916 – a year after the ANZAC landings at Gallipoli and the day after the first official ANZAC Day, in 1916.*

Enlistments ebbed and flowed across the four years of WWI and this was during one of the 'peak periods'.

Being offered equal pay for the first time ever might have also had something to do with the Cyril and his brother's decisions to volunteer. It was also a chance to support their parents and families while they were away.

Uncle Frank thinks that some more fundamental reasons closer to home would also have contributed to their decisions to enlist.

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: But at the end of the day, I think there were so many things that would have encouraged them to participate in this activity. And certainly, it would have been because of this inert love of Country.

And, you know, if it's at stakeand people have got to defend it, "*Well, why shouldn't I be there", and you know, "[Be] meeting the challenge?"*

MEGAN SPENCER: So less about the 'empire', 'Great Britain' – that 'mother country' - But more about what's at stake at home? Is that part of it?

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: Oh, definitely. Definitely. Yes

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *It's also worth remembering here that there was no conscription: all Australian soldiers who went to WWI were volunteers, including Cyril and Rufus. Here's Aunty Verna Koolmatrie again.*

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: You know, it makes you very proud that, you know, they weren't forced to serve. They enlisted, along with the 19 other men, from our community.

And, you know, I was asked about this once, *"If they weren't regarded as equal citizens in Australia, why would they have wanted to fight?"* And, at the end of the day, it's their Country! You know? It's no different to what anyone else would fight for: you fight for your family, your fight for your your Country.

And the fact that someone tells you it's not your Country, doesn't change the fact that it *is* your Country.

Even as things changed right around us - even until today - we still know our stories. We still know our history, we still know our family generational stories that have been handed down! And they are things that we love to sit and talk about, you know?

We remember when our grandparents said this, or our grandparents told us that their grandparents told them. It still resonates. And it still means just as much as it did then.

And so I think it would have been the combination of wanting to defend their Country, their families, and at the same time, maybe the free spirit in them would have wanted to see 'what's out there'.

MEGAN SPENCER: *I also asked Uncle Major Moogy Sumner why he thinks these young men went to fight this war so far away...*

UNCLE MAJOR 'MOOGY' SUMNER: As young men, they both signed up to go to the war! I think they just wanted to get away, have a look around. Have a look around, you know, other than looking at Raukkan! Looking at this country here - they wanted to go overseas and look at different places - and that's what happened! They went over there and they, you know, they didn't come back.

So, going from Raukkan to England, France, different parts of the world where they had to fight… And I strongly understand about the battles, the about the fighting. But I don't think them two boys knew what they was fighting for.

They went over there to get away from what they were - all the stuff [restrictions] they was under here. They went there to see the rest of the world. They went there to - and like a lot of other people - they went there to get away from what was here.

When you look at them: they'd never really seen in life! They went over there as young men from Raukkan - they weren't allowed to go off of Raukkan until they went to the war!

So them two young men - and a lot of other young Aboriginal people - they went to war to get away from that. That's my honest opinion, the way I think.

They wanted to go over there and see - and be respected as men.

[SFX SHIP'S WHISTLE]

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: I've often thought about how uncle Cyril and Uncle Rufus would have, you know, would have coped was leaving Australia, and being in a different country.

And they definitely - being young Aboriginal men - I can imagine them taking note of the actual Country, you know? Of the trees that they have [over in Europe], and the landscapes that they have... And I can imagine them during that, you know? Regardless of what was going on around them? They still would have noted those things...

Things like whatever waterways they had, would have appealed to them - and they would have made their comparisons I guess.

But I'm sure there would have been that yearning for home too.

I don't think that Army life itself would have been daunting, because I think that these were young men who were used to toughing it out. You know, they didn't have it - it wasn't easy for them.

So hard work wouldn't have been a problem. Fighting, you know, to defend what they love, wouldn't have been a problem...

[SOUNDS OF THE COORONG]

UNCLE GARY OAKLEY: It's everything you are, that's it! It's everything you are - everything comes from the country.

MEGAN SPENCER: *'Country' has a profound, abiding and deeply spiritual meaning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as Gundungurra man Squadron Leader Uncle Gary Oakley, once explained to me. He's a Vietnam veteran and Indigenous Historical Custodian for the Royal Australian Airforce.*

UNCLE GARY OAKLEY: Everything you know, everything you learn, everything - it's part of you! It's, it's, it's not a 'piece of ground'. It's not 'rocks and dirt and soil'. It's every fibre of your person - it's what your whole life is all about. It's part of you!

You know, that piece - where I come from made who I am and who my people are.

And it's my *duty* to look after that place, to look after that Country. You know, because it, it keeps me alive. It's in a sense, like a living being.

It's, yeah - it's not 'rocks' - it's not 'property' - because you don't own it! It's just part of you. It's everything that you are. Yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Ngarrindjeri/Kaurna elder and Army veteran Uncle Frank Lampard adds his deep perspective to defending Country.*

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: And so as it relates to, whenever there was a call up of any kind, such as happened on several occasions of Australia's participation in any peacekeeping missions of any kind - and sometimes war - Ngarrindjeri people, I think, related to how significant and important it was to help defend the Country.

Because, that's what we did *culturally*! It was an important part of our *existence*, our *heritage*. To look after our land - our Mother!

UNCLE VICTOR WILSON: And part of our culture, for thousands of years, was to look after people who were coming through your Country? That was always there, to look after people. To protect people, feed them - and fight for them too if they got in trouble.

To look after their Country and make sure - when everyone would go out and they'd come back with a heap of food - you had to share that. Make sure everyone was looked after: the elderly, the young...

It was – you know, it was just a *given*, that everyone, everyone accepted it?

MEGAN SPENCER: And that's the Cyril was? And that's who Rufus was?

UNCLE VICTOR WILSON: Yeah. Yeah.

[MUSIC & SOUNDS OF THE COORONG]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *That's Ngarrindjeri man, Uncle Victor Wilson. He's a grandson of Private Cyril Rigney. His mother is Aileen, Cyril Rigney's only child.*

As you heard him say, Uncle Victor also believes that caring for Country – and defending Country – would have been top of the Rigney brothers' minds when they chose to enlist.

He also tells me that the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs were fighting for a better deal and a better life at home on their own Country when they came back.

For equality and change.

UNCLE VICTOR WILSON: There's all sorts of stories that people have said, but I believe they were open to get changes for the better for our people. That the government would recognize, you know, our people.

You know, we look after the land. We have for thousands of years - have looked after the Country. And there was no recognition, no, no respect. Nothing.

The Protector had all the say. And if you didn't, they'd ring the police and they'd ring - you'd be arrested and taken away.

And I think in their hearts, there was the hope that, ah - you know there was other stories, *"Oh, they wanted to get away, and they wanted to earn money"* -

MEGAN SPENCER: - Adventure and all that sort of stuff?

UNCLE VICTOR WILSON: - "Adventure". But I think in their hearts, you know, they thought the government would recognise what they're doing, and say, *"No look, we're going to make things better for everybody!"*

We're saying that, Sitting Bull and all them were war heroes, theyr were freedom fighters. Like a lot of our people here, In Queensland and that, you know? In the Territory, Western Australia...

They were standing up to protect their Country.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you reckon Uncle Cyril was a freedom fighter?

UNCLE VICTOR WILSON: Oh, yeah! Yeah, all of them! Yeah, all of them that went away. They were fighting for freedom for us.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *This is really powerful. I ask Aunty Verna Koolmatrie what she thinks about this idea.*

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: I'm sure that, you know, in the back of their minds that they thought that enlisting and fighting in the Army would change things for them, and not just for them but for their family at home.

There's, there's no doubt that they knew that things were not the way they should be. And that they wanted things to change.

They knew that they weren't equal citizens and they knew that their families were were basically trying to survive!

And so you know, you think about it and - and the 'opportunity to go to war to fight for your Country' - but at the same time: if you think that that maybe that will change things for the better, for your family, for everyone!

And that maybe for the first time in their life they might be regarded as as equal to anyone else.

[AUDIO OF THE LAST POST BUGLE AND "LEST WE FORGET"]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *While it is changing, "after decades of silence" as Joan Beaumont and Allison Cadzow write in the book, 'Serving Our Country', shamefully, in our "national histories and narratives of war", the story and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service has been neglected, marginalised, overlooked and sometimes even left out all together.*

As Uncle Gary Oakley says in the book 'For Country, For Nation', "We have served Country and Nation in uniform from as early as the 1860s, when Aboriginals represented the Colonial Navy of Victoria and the New South Wales Infantry".

That's way before Boer War and World War One.

But in more recent times – thanks largely to the efforts of First Nations researchers like Aunty Doreen Kartinyeri and the families of First Nations service people – historians across the board are gaining a much better understanding of the scale and significance of Indigenous service in Australia's defence forces.

RACHEL CAINES: Hi, my name is Rachel Caines. And I'm a historian. I'm currently undertaking my Ph.D, and we're currently at my house in North Adelaide on beautiful Kaurna country. I'm 27 years old.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Rachel Caines describes herself as a "cultural historian of the British Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". She has a particular interest in Indigenous military service in the First World War and expressly acknowledging the part of First Nations people in our ANZAC history.*

RACHEL CAINES: And just fell in love with this history and its importance.

I've always been fascinated by the way we construct identity. And how we do that through the process of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion', and who and what we choose to include and exclude.

In the case of Australia and New Zealand, ANZAC is kind of the obvious point to look at. It's still such a huge part of our national mythology. And it's been that way since 1915 - almost immediately.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Much of Rachel's research centres around the immediate aftermath of the First World War in the 1920s and 1930s - and also Interwar Indigenous activism in Australia. She says that Aboriginal activists of that time "frequently drew upon service in the First World War in their attempts to secure citizenship, equal rights, the national franchise and other economic, political and social freedoms".*

Rachel's spent a lot of time looking through archives, reading old newspapers, letters and historic interviews with Indigenous veterans from that time.

I asked Rachel what she found in her research to support why young First Nations men went to fight in the First World War.

RACHEL CAINES: The main thing that both surprised me - and didn't at all surprise me - was that there's no one reason.

And, some of these men did enlist because of an expressed sense of loyalty to Country. This is most often the reason that's recorded in newspaper articles of the time, particularly those that were directed at a mainstream - in inverted commas - "white audience", was this idea of 'loyalty to country, loyalty to Crown', wanting to defend 'King and Country'.

And talking to Community and reading oral transcripts of interviews that were done with First World War veterans before they passed away, there's also, what emerges this sense of the deeper connections that a lot of Indigenous people feel to their country and 'to Country', as a capital, a 'thing', an entity... Is that, that was a big draw for going.

And a lot of Indigenous men who enlisted felt that they actually had more reason to defend 'Country' than white Australians –

MEGAN SPENCER: - Than “the” country? The preposition I guess changes the meaning of “country”?

RACHEL CAINES: Yes. Yeah, it's this big... This idea of, their relationship with what they were defending was very different to a white Australian's relationship.

A lot of men also enlisted because of the same reason all other young men enlisted – freedom! Money! You could earn a lot more money as a soldier than most Aboriginal men were able to earn at the time. That money very rarely actually went straight to the Indigenous men or their families, particularly in Queensland: wages from First World War soldiers and payments that should have been made to their families formed a massive part of the Stolen Wages Lawsuit.

But, there was an opportunity to earn more money, see the world, engage in a profession - all the kinds of the reasons that we know - "a sense of adventure".

But there was this subset of men – and there was this idea of resistance. And this is expressed in the research I found. And I will say a lot of my research has dealt with mainstream documentary sources - newspapers, letters to the editor - as a form of protest.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Yeah, weaving together these all of these ideas around protest and freedom; the words chosen for Rufus’s headstone in Belgium, “he died to keep us free”; Uncle Victor’s grandfather Cyril being a “freedom fighter”...*

With all this in mind, I ask Rachel - from what she’s found in her research - if she thinks too that First Nations men joining up to fight in World War One could also be seen as a form of resistance?

A ‘pushing back’?

RACHEL CAINES: It’s hard not to! Particularly given the hindsight that we have and the understanding of all of the systems that were oppressing these men. Not only the broader systems, but also the legislation not allowing them to enlist.

It's really hard not to view First Nations men going to a recruiting station - sometimes going to two or three, or changing their names or coming back the next year, to try and enlist - it's hard not to view that as an act of resistance.

But at the same time, I think it's important: I don't want to put words and ideas and ideologies in the minds and the actions of people who can no longer speak for themselves?

So while I think it's easy to view that as an act of resistance now - and for some people, it was definitely an explicit act of resistance - I would be wary to say that ‘all’ men who enlisted were deliberately engaging in a form of resistance.

MEGAN SPENCER: *As Uncle Victor and Aunty Verna suggested, Rachel says there is broader evidence to show that some First Nations men did hope that participating in the war would improve their lives back home after they got back.*

RACHEL CAINES: And so particularly after the war, this idea of service as 'fighting for freedoms', 'fighting for increased rights'; the idea of well, *"We fought in your war. So now, why, why why can't we be citizens? Why can't we have the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to decide who we marry, the right to live our lives out of this sort of oppressive, ‘Protector’ yoke".*

And there is, you know, speaking to Community - reading, oral histories - there is evidence that at the time of enlistment, there were some young men who viewed their fighting overseas, in part, as an expression of their sovereignty and their ability to make a decision and to do something.

And so, there was this sense of, not only fighting for Country, and a sense of adventure, a bit more money, but also this sense of having some autonomy and exercising some personal sovereignty by making the decision. And a lot of the Indigenous men who enlisted - particularly in places like Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland - did come from those big mission stations.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *I feel this is a powerful idea to reflect upon, especially when you take into account the Indigenous activism that took place after the war which Rachel researches – people like Yorta Yorta man, Uncle William Cooper, the founder of NAIDOC Week, who spoke about the war service of his own son killed in World War One, in his campaign for equal rights.*

RACHEL CAINES: And so I think, even if we can never definitively prove that the Rigneys enlisted as a form of resistance, and that Rufus's gravestone was engraved as a form of resistance... If Indigenous communities - whether that be Ngarrindjeri, you know, Rufus's family, or broader groups? If when they look at that headstone and what they read from that is a sense of sovereignty and resistance, I think that that's equally as important and that's not something any of us anyone has the right to "disprove", or to set out to find a 'paper trail' for.

Because I think, without putting words in their mouths, that message is important. And that message is something that so many people believed in, and obviously continue to believe in.

So, I don't see why there couldn't be another added layer.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Plus, as Uncle Victor reminded us, there's a long and proud tradition of First Nations peoples fighting to protect their Country and their people, that goes way back before the First World War.*

"For Indigenous Australians the concept of protecting Country did not stop with the arrival of European settlement. We have been protecting Country for generations", to quote again Uncle Gary Oakley, national President of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans Association.

Echoing this, in a 2013 interview for the national Yarn Up project, Uncle Frank Lampard says, "People forget that even the invasion was challenged by our people… We've always had a warrior instinct and understood the importance and significance of the protection of our families and our Country."

Historian Rachel Caines thinks improving our understanding of this tradition can help us better understand the role of First Nations service, too.

RACHEL CAINES: So I think part of reclaiming this idea of First Nations service in the First World War, and this idea of it being resistance and autonomy and sovereignty, also feeds into that idea of it: it's part of a millennia old warrior tradition, and a really key integral, proud part of First Nations history. And I think - I think that's so important and it's really powerful.

We should be proud that members of that community chose to serve alongside other Australians in our 20th and 21st century conflicts, despite what they experienced. That is something that we should feel should feel grateful for and proud for.

Because that is such a gift that we were given, even if these men didn't view it that way.

To me, looking back, I just think what, what a gift: that despite everything these men still had a reason to fight. And they are part of this story that our nation has decided is so important.

We owe it to them to include every part of that story. And to include their communities and their cultures and their languages in this ANZAC Day Service. Because, you know, these men did - they died for -

MEGAN SPENCER: - Us!

RACHEL CAINES: Us!

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *It is possible that the Rigney brothers enlisted for the same reasons many non-Indigenous men chose to: for regular pay, for adventure, for love of Country.*

But each of those reasons might have carried a special significance for Cyril and Rufus because they were Aboriginal men in colonial Australia.

Regular pay might seem especially attractive when you're living on rations. So might 'adventure' is when you're not allowed to leave your own town without permission.

And love of and connection to Country has a specific and profound meaning when your own people have lived on it and cared for it for more than 40,000 years.

When you belong to it.

Rufus and Cyril served for their own reasons; we may never know exactly what they were.

What we do know is that they paid the ultimate sacrifice. To echo the words of Professor Bill Gammage again, "their gift deserves respect today."

End of Part 04 of transcript. Please go to Part 05.