



CEW Bean Prize Citation - 2009

Dr Noah Riseman

'Colonising Yolngu Defence: Arnhem Land in the Second World War and the Transnational Uses of Indigenous People in the Second World War'

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Up until World War Two, government policy restricted enlistment into the armed services to persons of predominantly European descent. Although there were many exceptions to this rule, the Australian Army was defined as a white force defending a white Australia. By 1941, the Allied forces were on the retreat in Europe and the Pacific. There were fears that the Japanese might invade Australia's northern frontier and in February 1942 hundreds of lives were lost in the bombing of Darwin. It was in this context that the Australian Army established indigenous fighting units to help defend Northern Australia.

Noah Riseman's PhD thesis charts the changing use of Aboriginal people by the military and their partial and sometimes uneasy integration into the armed services. Initially, Aboriginal people were recruited as a labour force; they were never paid as much as whites but in a dramatic departure from contemporary practice were entitled to similar accommodation, rations and clothing. As the war progressed, Yolngu people were recruited as black scouts, trackers and irregular fighting units. The Army sought to harness longstanding resentment of Japanese incursions onto traditional Aboriginal land, to enlist Yolngu to provide logistical support and essential intelligence for white troops in the bush and help wage a guerrilla war against any

invasion. Noah Riseman charts the creation of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit and the Northern Australian Observation Unit, comparing these to equivalent indigenous units in Papua New Guinea and overseas. His history highlights paradox and contradiction in the way Aboriginal people were viewed by the Armed Services. Alongside colonial attitudes of white superiority and disregard for the abilities of Yolngu people, was a growing recognition of the value of Aboriginal labour, skills and knowledge.

The thesis is based on extensive archival research and an equally ambitious oral history. The latter restores Aboriginal voices to the narrative of war and reminds us of Aboriginal agency even at a time of widespread racial inequalities. His analysis of the way the Australian Army utilised anthropologists in the campaign against the Japanese indicates that the Army demonstrated flexibility and resourcefulness in a time of unprecedented crisis and (in some extraordinary cases) a nascent appreciation of the complexity of Indigenous cultures.

Noah Riseman's thesis broaches new topics in Australian military history and demonstrates continuities as well as ruptures in the history of Australian race relations. It is an instance of how military history can improve our understanding of wider social issues. On the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War Two, this thesis offers fresh insight into the way the Australian Army fought that conflict and defended Northern Australia from the perceived threat of invasion. It is a worthy recipient of the CEW Bean Prize.