

Using the story of a fallen South Australian World War I serviceman/woman on the Western Front, describe what the ANZAC spirit means to you.

By Amber Joy Tomlinson

A hero is born. Medals gleaming, voices screaming, soldiers marching, boots stomping, shells ricocheting through the smoke, deeply embedded into their persona, the horrors of the war, yet the Anzac Spirit lives on. Rigid, stinking, unshaven, sleepless, tunics rotten with other men's blood and partly splattered with a dead man's brains, yet the Anzac spirit shines through.¹ Looking to the future, remembering lives lost.

Each soldier's memories are varied and unique, but the friendships created out in No Man's Land, in the trenches give each soldier an unbreakable bond. The sacrifices made by our soldiers and those from other countries are something that should never be forgotten. It is important that the Anzac spirit lives on in each and every one of us, and the freedoms that we now have are never taken for granted. There were many brave and courageous soldiers, fighting for our country during WWI, each one of them having different experiences. I wanted to research all of the soldiers, to find out more, but I had to choose one and Rufus Gordon Rigney stood out.

Rufus Gordon Rigney, a Ngarrindjeri boy was born on the 29th November 1899 in Pt McLeay, parents Ben and Rachael Rigney.² Rufus was 5' 5 3/4" tall, he had a dark complexion, brown eyes and black hair, and weighed 135lbs.³ Rufus became a soldier, at the age of sixteen years old and nine months when he enlisted on the 9th of August 1916, although on his enlistment forms he lied, saying he was nineteen years old and one month.⁴ Due to his Aboriginal heritage, permission needed to be sought from the Chief Protector of Aborigines. Had he been of European descent he would have only needed permission from his parents.⁵

The Ngarrindjeri people came from the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Lower Murray region of South Australia. Rufus Gordon Rigney was one of the 21 Ngarrindjeri soldiers who left the mission to go to war. Rufus never returned home, neither did three other Ngarrindjeri people. Tragically he is the only one with one known grave. His brother Cyril Spurgeon Rigney died in battle as well but he only has his name on 'The Menin gate' a memorial in Ieper.⁶ '... These names are not just names on graves anymore they are people who, lived, had feelings, fought, had a life, and had plans for life...' ⁷ this is true, Rufus to me is not just a name on a grave: he's a person who fought and died for the freedom we have today.

Rufus's journey started when he embarked for England from Sydney in a boat called 'Commonwealth' on the 19th September, 1916, as a member of the 9th Reinforcement of the 32nd Battalion. On the 14th November he disembarked at Plymouth,⁸ but unfortunately he got the mumps for Christmas.⁹ Then he proceeded to France on the 16th January, 1917 aboard the 'Princess Victoria'. He was taken back on strength by the 32nd Battalion on the 21st January.¹⁰ He was wounded in action with shrapnel in his back, right shoulder and arm on the 4th March 1917, near Trones Wood. For treatment Rufus was sent back to

¹ ABC, 2000, Australians at war pt 3 [Video].

² [http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY RUFUS GORDON](http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY%20RUFUS%20GORDON) (Enlistment page)

³ Ibid, (Medical Examination) page 1

⁴ [on-line] <http://connectingspirits.com.au/pages/soldiers/ngarrindjeri-soldiers/rufus-rigney.php>

⁵ <http://mapping.etc.op.cit> (Aborigines Department)

⁶ [on-line] <http://connectingspirits.com.au/pages/soldiers/ngarrindjeri-soldiers.php>

⁷ ABC Television, 1999 "Australian story: less we forget". [Video]

⁸ <http://mapping.etc.op.cit> (written casualty forms page7)

⁹ Ibid, typed casualty forms page50

¹⁰ Ibid, written casualty forms page7

England.¹¹ After recovery, he returned to France where he was transferred to the 48th Battalion on the 27th June 1917.¹²

On the 12th October, 1917, Rufus was once again wounded in action and reported missing during the 1st Battle of Passchendaele. He received a gunshot wound to the lungs. He was captured and treated by the Germans but he died of his wounds four days later on the 16th October,¹³ at the age of seventeen and eleven months.¹⁴ He was buried in the Iseghem Military Cemetery.¹⁵ Although when the war had ended in 1924, his body was exhumed and re-buried in Harlebeke New British Cemetery.¹⁶ Rufus's older brother died in July at the age of 20 only a few months before Rufus himself died.¹⁷ His mother lost two sons, brave, young lives to fight for all free men. Their name liveth for evermore.¹⁸

I had many questions before I started my research. For instance; why would an aboriginal man want to fight for a country where he wasn't recognized as a citizen. What motivated him? Did he want to go to war to prove he was brave, strong and an equal, like the other men? But most of all I wanted to know how he was treated. As I got further into my research I discovered that before the war indigenous Australians were mostly paid in rations, but once the war started they got offered money for them and their family.¹⁹ Maybe they felt that they had to go to war to make life better for their family.

I have watched many videos, read books and been on websites, every thing I have seen has inspired me. I have been shocked and saddened at many of the things I have seen too, but it's not just me that has been inspired by the Ngarrindjeri people. Eric Bogle a song writer, who swore never to write another war song again, felt inspired when he heard about the Ngarrindjeri people, through my school's project "Connecting Spirits." He wrote a song called 'Lost Soul'.²⁰ This song has very strong words in it and when I heard it for the first time, I knew that he had written the song just as it was, with no lies or making things sound good but said the truth, '... you owed them nothing, yet your life you freely gave, the mark of a warrior, not a servant or a slave...'²¹ Eric Bogle is saying that even though the British took over Australia, and took all of indigenous people's rights, they still wanted to help their country, even though they owed the British nothing.

From some of the videos, of war veterans talking about their experiences, I've heard some very confronting things. Before they went to war they were strong and brave and full of courage, but when they got on to the battle fields, they felt fear, their knees buckled as they heard their own guns going off in the trenches for the first time.²² Some men as they stood up in the trenches were killed instantly; others went crazy from shell shock and cried like little children.²³ It scared people, even though it was their guns.²⁴ One of the Commanders commented, 'They all huddled up together and there was nothing I could do to separate them.'²⁵

¹¹ Ibid, typed casualty forms page 50

¹² Ibid, written casualty forms page 7

¹³ Ibid, typed casualty forms page 51

¹⁴ [on-line] <http://connectingspirits> etc. op.cit

¹⁵ <http://mapping> etc op.cit; typed casualty forms page 51

¹⁶ <http://connectingspirits> etc .op.cit

¹⁷ Loc.cit.

¹⁸ Paul Sinkinson, 2009, "Connecting Spirits: A journey of remembrance." [DVD]

¹⁹ ABC Television, Nov 9 2007, "Stateline"[DVD]

²⁰ Reece.J Oborn.C, 2007 Connecting Spirits book, Julie Reece, Birdwood High School, Shannon Street, Birdwood. Pg 167

²¹ Loc.cit

²² Australian Story , etc, op.cit

²³ Ch.9 2000, "'Pozieres'" [Television]

²⁴ DVA/ABC television, 2000, "Australians at War"[Video]

²⁵ Australian story etc op.cit

War strips away humanity takes people back to their primeval instincts of plight or fight. The noise of war was deafening,²⁶ it had putrid smells, but still the soldiers continued to fight, with friends and comrades' bodies surrounding them, yet they carried on.²⁷ No one at war could see the end; they just had to keep fighting for that night, the next night, and the next week and the next month, all for their country and for their families.²⁸ People who went to war died so young, around their twenties, they missed out on life, and left their families mourning their lives lost, their lives shattered.

I think that war is a terrible, and dreadful thing. Soldiers would want us to always remember them, as the people who gave us the liberties and freedoms we have today.

My life began when I was born, where as in one way Rufus's life began at war, where he was treated as an equal, where they all fought together as one and they died as one. War brought indigenous and non indigenous Australians together, there was just mateship. The Anzac spirit stripped away the prejudice there were no white men and no black men there were just men, Australians proud to be Australians, and men willing to put themselves forward for their country. However, on these brave men's return to civilian life they were transported back to racism and hate, an unfair life, and not even allowed to march in the Anzac parade. The Anzac Spirit is important and should ring out in all of us with no prejudice.

After learning and researching, our brave Australian soldiers it makes me feel proud to be able to stand up and call myself Australian. The courage, compassion and loyalty shown by our soldiers. The mateship, selflessness, and even larrikinism endeavoured to become known as the Anzac spirit. The Anzac spirit is not just in our history it's in our hearts. These soldiers, who fought in the war, did not just fight for us, but for our many freedoms today. We have overcome many obstacles to build our nation. Generations of Australians endure daily struggles in a harsh terrain and in our remarkable country; the Anzac Spirit still stands out when we are constantly tested by bushfires and floods. It will live on while we remember Rufus Rigney and men like him who fought with pride and created the Anzac spirit. This is what the Anzac Spirit means to me.

Soldiers stand silent as the bugle rang out.

²⁶ Ch.9 etc op.cit

²⁷ Chris Masters, 1988, "Four Corners: fatal shore," ABC television. [Video]

²⁸ DVA etc op.cit

Pictures



Rufus Gordon Rigney



Victor Koolmatrie, Rufus's great, great nephew commemorating Rufus.



Rufus's grave



Cyril Spurgeon Rigney
Rufus's brother



Cyril's name on the memorial at Menin Gate in Ieper

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. ABC television, Nov9, 2007, "Stateline" [Video]

In this DVD, I discovered that Aborigines were paid in rations, and were offered money to go to war.

2. ABC television, 1999, "Australian Story: less we forget." [Video]

This video helped me understand what the soldiers felt when they first entered the battle field; I also used a saying from the video.

3. ABC Television, 2000 "Australians at War," Part 3[Video]

I used two sayings from this video, one about the conditions and another saying that no one could see the end.

4. Chris Masters, 1988 "Four corners: fatal shore" ABC television [Video]

From this video I started to get an understanding of the smell and friendships involved in war.

5. Ch.9, 2000 "Pozieres." [Video]

This video gave me an understanding of the noise.

6. <http://connectingspirits.com.au/pages/soldiers/ngarrindjeri-soldiers/csrigney.php>

This source gave me information on Rufus's brother "Cyril."

7. <http://connectingspirits.com.au/pages/soldiers/ngarrindjeri-soldiers/rufus-rigney.php>

On this website I discovered that when Rufus's age and when he enlisted for war, also the age when he died and where he was reburied.

8. <http://connectingspirits.com.au/pages/soldiers/ngarrindjeri-soldiers.php>

This website helped me learn about Ngarrindjeri people and where in South Australia they came from. It also helped me learn about Rufus's family.

9. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (Aboriginies Department) pg 5

From this website I discovered that because Rufus was an indigenous person he needed permission to go to war.

10. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (Enlistment page) Pg 1

On this website I learnt his parent's names and where he was born.

11. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (Medical Examination) pg 6

This website gave me a DISCRIPTION OF Rufus, Height, weight, complexion, eyes, hair, and weight.

12. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (typed casualty forms) pg50

This website helped me track the movements and casualties of Rufus.

13. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (typed casualty forms) pg 51

This website helped me track the movements and casualties of Rufus.

14. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (written casualty forms) pg 7

This website helped me track the movements and casualties of Rufus.

15. <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/file-view.html?b=11605045&s=B2455&c=RIGNEY>
RUFUS GORDON (written casualty forms) pg19

This website helped me track the movements and casualties of Rufus.

16. Paul Sinkinson, 2009, "Connecting Spirits: A journey of remembrance." [DVD]

In this movie I got a line from a grave stone.

17. Oborn.C Reece.J, 2007 Connecting Spirits2006: A journey of Reconciliation and Commemoration, Howden Printing, Adelaide Pg 167

In this book I found a poem called "lost soul" which was written for Ngarrindjeri people.