

## 2018 ANZAC Spirit School Prize Essay - Raymond Charles (Charlie) Runga



Private Raymond Charles Runga

The experiences of the Australian men and women who served in the First World War can be defined as challenging and traumatic. These service men and women deserve to be acknowledged every day for their bravery and the spirit of their mateship. From 1914 when the war began to 1918 when it finally came to an end, Australian men and women represented the ANZAC spirit and performed acts of gallantry. Indigenous Australian servicemen, like Charlie Runga, were not recognized as Australian citizens during this time but still fought for the country showing courage and loyalty to their country even when their country disregarded them. Many of them performed selfless acts for the comrades and for their country. Some were rewarded for their bravery but others were neglected. When the soldiers returned home they were still treated with disrespect and as if nothing had changed over the many years they were fighting for their countries had changed over the many years they were fighting for their countries

Charlie Runga's enlistment paper

The allies in WW1 included Belgium, France, Great Britain, the British Empire (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Newfoundland and South Africa), Portugal and the United States (from April 1918)<sup>1</sup>. These countries fought against the Central Powers which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria.<sup>2</sup> Raymond Charles (Charlie) Runga was a South Australian service man who fought on the Western Front. The Western Front was a 700km series of trenches that zig zagged all the way along the Belgian coast to the Swiss Border.<sup>3</sup> They were muddy, littered with boxes, cart wheels and wire. These trenches were reserved for the soldiers to rest in, eat, store resources such as ammunition, food and mail. The trenches contained command posts, forward supply dumps, first-aid stations, kitchens, and latrines.<sup>4</sup> They were far away enough from the battle field so that the soldiers could get what little sleep they could. Bodies of the dead and dying were scattered across the battle field and in and around the trenches. Even in the depths of the night the screams of dying soldiers lying in the 'no mans' land could be heard from the trenches. As the Anzacs arrived at the battle front they were taken aback by the constant shaking of the earth. Soldiers could only describe it as a

constant 'boom boom'. They felt it while they watched wounded soldiers being taken to the rear where they were lined up, waiting to be treated. Their tired bodies lay in

the trenches in effort to receive what small amounts of rest they could before continuing on with the fighting. The Anzacs arrived at the Western Front during one of the worst winters on record and as a repercussion the casualties nearly doubled<sup>5</sup>. In the trenches, the mud turned into icy water, their drinks were served to them in icicles, their feet swelled up to twice the size and when they woke up their eye lids were frozen shut; many suffered from frostbite and trench foot. It is hard for us, now, to imagine how difficult it would have been to survive in those circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Raymond Charles (Charlie) Runga was born on September 21, 1889 in Naracoorte, SA. He came from a working-class family that included his two brothers, Arthur Runga, who died during infancy and Fredrick Runga. His father Charles Runga was 44 when he married Charlie's mother Eliza. Charles was a high esteemed railway ganger and ploughman. He

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/battles/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://aenet.esuhsd.org/citizenship\\_lessons/connie/ww1\\_q.html](http://aenet.esuhsd.org/citizenship_lessons/connie/ww1_q.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://anzacday.org.au/ww1-the-western-front>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/trench-warfare>

<sup>5</sup> <http://main.anzacday.org.au/ww1-the-western-front>

<sup>6</sup> <https://anzacday.org.au/ww1-the-western-front>

was the first Aboriginal man to have competed in a ploughing match at Mt Barker Springs.<sup>7</sup> Charles worked on the railway line from Naracoorte to Kingston SE on the years before Raymond's birth. Eliza and Charles moved their family to Victoria several years after Raymond's birth. Runga worked as a farm labourer in Hopetoun in the Wimmera region of Victoria. On March 25, 1916 Runga enlisted in Ouyen, Mildura thus embarking on his adventure with the 17th reinforcements to the 6th Battalion. It is important to understand that when colonised by Europeans in 1788, Australia was declared 'no man's land'; there were no formally binding treaties made with Indigenous Australians which means their rights were not recognised<sup>8</sup>. Indigenous people were not considered to be Australian citizens, they were not included in the national census nor mentioned in the Australian constitution. When WW1 broke out an estimated number of 1,000 indigenous Australians enlisted. In 1915 many Indigenous men's enlistment were rejected, but this did not stop them, many indigenous men travelled 100's of kilometres to enlist.<sup>9</sup>

When Runga joined the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion in France they had already fought in the Gallipoli campaign and many other battles across the Western Front. Charlie joined the war in the middle of winter and fell ill only a few months after arrival. He then spent a small amount of time in hospital before returning to his unit. On October 26, 1917 shortly after returning to the battle front in the Battle of Passchendaele, Runga was severely injured once again. He had been shot in both of his arms and one of his hands; he was then evacuated from the battle field to England for medical treatment. Runga was treated there for 6 months before returning to the front line with his unit in May of 1918.

A little over a week after re-joining his unit, Runga performed several acts of gallantry at Herleville Wood, a battle field in France, where he repeatedly risked his life whilst under close fire by the enemy. These acts resulted in Runga being awarded the Military Medal. The citation for this award notes:



**When the left portion of his company came under exceptionally heavy machine gun fire from a wood in front, Pte Runga, taking charge of a small party, dashed to the wood and succeeded in capturing two hostile machine guns and their crew of 16 men. On another occasion he rushed forward alone over 70 yards of ground without cover and despite point-blank machine gun fire, succeeded in bombing the enemy from the communication trench ... this latter feat was a heroic example of utter disregard for personal safety and the desire, at all costs, to worst the enemy, any of whom with one shot calmly aimed could have killed him.**<sup>10</sup>

**The letter sent to Charlie's mother, Eliza Runga, stating that he was receiving the Military Medal**

Just three days after, Runga was wounded again, this time in a gas attack.

After initial treatment in France he was once more evacuated to a hospital in England. On November 11, 1918, when WW1 finally came to an end, the Anzac troops were anxious to get home and be reunited with their loved ones. After a long-awaited journey back to his homeland Runga was repatriated and arrived in Melbourne on September 2, 1919. When Runga stepped onto Australian soil he was sadly greeted by the exact same society that he had left behind in 1915. Even through the Aboriginal soldiers were paid and lived in the same conditions as the non-Aboriginal soldiers during the war, they were expected to live as they had before their service in the war.

<sup>7</sup> <http://aboriginalww1veteransofsouthaustralia.blogspot.com.au/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service>

<sup>10</sup> National Archives of Australia, Official Records: Citation page

### SOLDIER'S MEDAL DISAPPEARS.

Having been presented on Saturday with the Military Medal, which he won in France on August 10, 1918, for gallantry in the field, Raymond C. Runga, of Ouyen, a private in the 6th Battalion, was passing it round for inspection later in the day among a group of four or five men in Swanston street near Flinders street. The medal was not returned to its owner, to whom all the other men, with the exception of one, were strangers. The aid of detectives has been sought.

**An article in the paper talking about Runga's medal being stolen**

In January 1920, Private Raymond Charles Runga was awarded the Military Medal at Government house in Melbourne for his selfless acts of bravery and gallantry as described in the citation above. After Runga was awarded his medal he was passing it around and it was mysteriously stolen. Runga lived out the rest of his life in New South Wales with his wife Emily Glass. He then died in Leeton, NSW on March 21, 1956 at the age of 66.<sup>11</sup>

Runga died before he got to see the 1967 referendum that saw a significant change in Australian history. Indigenous Australians were awarded rights like being included in the census and to allow the Commonwealth government to make laws for Aboriginal people. Indigenous men and women were already given the right to vote in 1962 but this referendum made for a safer Australian for the indigenous men and women seeing as

there were laws put in place for them.<sup>12</sup>

[63 & 64 VICT.] Commonwealth of Australia [Ct. 12.]  
Constitution Act.

(xxvi.) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State, A.D. 1900.  
for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws:  
(xxvii.) Immigration and emigration:  
(xxviii.) The influx of criminals:  
(xxix.) External affairs:  
(xxx.) The relations of the Commonwealth with the islands of the Pacific:  
(xxxi.) The acquisition of property on just terms from any State or Territory.

**Constitution, section 51, clause 26, prior to the 1967 referendum**

### 2018 ANZAC Spirit School Prize Essay – Part B

The ANZAC spirit is comprised of several characteristics that describe the values of the ANZAC soldiers. Courage, perseverance, mateship and resourcefulness relates to every one of the ANZAC soldiers that participated in World War 1. Charlie Runga represented all of the values that make up the ANZAC spirit but he specifically expressed perseverance and courage in his years as an ANZAC soldier.

Perseverance was a valuable characteristic to have in the war. It meant that the soldiers could overcome challenges and had determination to do their job no matter what. The WW1 soldiers had to face difficulties every day, the trenches they lived in, constant warfare, home sickness and not knowing if they'd live to see another day.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous soldiers enlisted in WW1 despite their situation at home. They were willing to risk their lives for a country that was resentful and disrespectful towards them. This act shows great amounts of courage and perseverance because throughout all of the hate they still felt it was their duty to protect and defend their country. Runga was a great example of this. Runga went through the war and sustained many injuries but despite being knocked back by the enemy Runga stayed in the war until the very end. He performed great acts of gallantry and bravery and was eventually rewarded for it by being awarded a Military Medal in 1918.



**Pastor Bobby Peters in front of the Bag Church**

Runga was formally awarded the Military Medal at Government House when he eventually returned home in 1920. He lived out his post war life in the NSW Riverina and eventually settled at Darlington Point on the Murrumbidgee. He lived in the community of Wiradjuri Aboriginal people that were displaced by the closing of the Warangesda mission which was nearby. Despite living in a country that resented him Runga continued to show great courage and perseverance until his death. He became a leader in his community and instigated the building and maintaining of churches at Cowra and at Moonahcullah mission near Deniliquin. The church was built for the people to worship, under the auspices of the Aborigines Inland Mission or AIM.

<sup>11</sup> <https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/297889>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australian-1967-referendum>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service>

Runga married Emily Kennedy, she had previously been married to Jack Glass who she had some children to but she and Runga had none. Runga then lived until the age of 66 and then died in 1956. Runga did not live to have the right to vote in 1962 or see the 1967 referendum take place. Throughout his life Runga put his country first and his community first. The Anzac spirit was present in all of Runga's life and he should be remembered for what a thoughtful and courageous man he was.