Defending Whose Country? Yolngu and the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit in the Second World War

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This article questions to what extent – if at all – Yolngu participation in the Second World War represented a rupture of settler colonialism in Arnhem Land. The article examines the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU) as a case study to demonstrate the continuity of colonial structures before, during, and after the war. The limited writings on the NTSRU focus on it as an example of indigenous people working in harmony with white Australia for a common goal. This article contextualises the force in the settler colonial framework prevalent in Arnhem Land since first contact with Europeans. The paper first briefly outlines the main characteristics of settler colonialism, and then delineates how settler colonialism manifested in Arnhem Land leading up to the war. Scrutiny of the force’s orders and patrols demonstrates that participation in World War II did not rupture the colonial relationship, nor did it lead to recognition of indigenous rights. Rather, the NTSRU example demonstrates continuing disregard for indigenous knowledge, skills, and vitality.

The situation for Australia was grim on New Year’s Day 1942. The nation had been at war in Europe and Africa for over two years, but a new enemy had emerged a month earlier in the Pacific. Japan’s attacks on the South Pacific threatened white Australia with invasion for the first time in history. On 15 February 1942 the Singapore Fortress, the bastion of the British Empire’s defence in the Asia-Pacific region, surrendered to Japan. On 19 February 1942 Japanese bombers initiated the first of many bombardments of the northern port of Darwin. The situation was desperate, and the extenuating conditions necessitated any possible defence networks in north Australia.

Meanwhile, east of Darwin in Arnhem Land, Yolngu continued life isolated from the global happenings described above. Unlike white Australia, Yolngu had not only already witnessed foreign invasion, but they had coped with multiple incursions. Macassans from present-day Indonesia had visited Arnhem Land since at least the 1600s to fish for trepang – sea slugs or sea cucumbers – and had developed mostly peaceful relations with Yolngu. English travellers arrived when Matthew Flinders sailed along the north coast of Australia in 1803. Flinders described Yolngu as an aggressive and confident people with an inclination to steal, and these attitudes significantly underpinned white Australian opinions of Yolngu through the mid-twentieth century. By the early 1900s, missionaries had arrived and formed permanent settlements. Finally, Japanese fishermen began to visit the waters off Arnhem Land in the early twentieth century – their presence peaking in the 1930s. Despite these persistent foreign incursions into Yolngu territory, the majority of Yolngu lived relatively ‘traditional’ lifestyles.

These two contexts depict the gap between white and indigenous Australia in the north as the Second World War came home to Australia. Despite the vast differences between the two communities, by early 1942 a group of fifty Yolngu would be working under the Australian Army as the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU). The purpose of the force was to defend Arnhem Land from potential Japanese invasion through intense scouting and guerrilla warfare. The existence of an indigenous defense network using Yolngu bush tactics raises multitudinous
questions, particularly given the technological nature of World War II and the racist indigenous policies of white Australia. Yolngu participation in the Second World War ostensibly poses a paradox given the poor relations between Yolngu and white Australians from first contact through the 1930s. Although now white Australia can point to the NTSRU’s mere existence as a positive example of non-indigenous and Aboriginal people working together, the wider social and historical context points to a general distrust of indigenous people and disregard for their culture and abilities. The NTSRU did not represent a rupture with the structures of settler colonialism characteristic of white Australia, nor did it reflect a sudden appreciation for Yolngu skills. Analysis of the military’s orders, regulations, and the unit’s relations with non-indigenous residents of Arnhem Land demonstrates that the force’s overall purpose was a cheap coloured defence of white Australia without consideration for the war’s impact on Yolngu. The NTSRU exemplar highlights that indigenous participation in World War II did not usher a change in attitudes, but rather echoed continuing structures of settler colonialism.

To date the only material written specifically about the NTSRU derives either in part or in whole from the organiser Donald Thomson’s official report. All secondary sources focus the NTSRU primarily in the context of indigenous participation in World War II rather than in the wider history of Yolngu-settler relations in Arnhem Land. The most notable scholarly research into the NTSRU is by Robert Hall as part of his book The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War. Hall relates the NTSRU to the wider policies governing indigenous participation in the war. He argues that as a de facto force, the NTSRU managed to circumvent the army’s regulations against enlisting persons not substantially of European origin or descent. Hall concedes that de facto forces such as the NTSRU did not receive adequate compensation or recognition for their war efforts. Nonetheless, Hall asserts that indigenous participation in the Second World War – including de facto forces – wholly provided new economic opportunities that would lead to the empowerment of indigenous people in the post-war epoch. Concrete gains would include changes to voting rights, increasing non-indigenous support for integration, higher wages for Aboriginal labour in the Northern Territory, and increased funding for indigenous affairs. The NTSRU also receives attention in Geoffrey Gray’s recent article ‘The Army requires anthropologists: Australian anthropologists at War, 1939-1946’ and in Kay Saunders’ article ‘Inequalities of Sacrifice: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour in Northern Australia During the Second World War’. Gray contextualises the NTSRU as one example of anthropologists serving as advisors during the Second World War. He contends that the military used anthropological knowledge during the war to ensure indigenous loyalty and assistance in northern Australia and in Papua and New Guinea. Consequently, after the war the discipline of anthropology had significantly increased authority over indigenous policy in northern Australia and the reconstruction of Papua and New Guinea. Saunders discusses the NTSRU in the context of other indigenous labour in the north during the war, such as work camps in the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait Islander Battalion. Saunders succinctly summarises her argument about Aboriginal labour during the war thus:

World War II did establish an agenda for wider future possibilities and a distant promise of more equitable treatment, however desperately the old order attempted to re-establish its previous unchallenged dominance.

These three scholars effectively position the NTSRU – and more widely all Aboriginal participation in the war effort – as a precursor to reform in government-indigenous relations, the role of anthropology in colonial governance, or the dynamics of Aboriginal labour in the north.

This article instead contextualises the NTSRU in Arnhem Land’s wider history as a continuation of the colonial relationship between settler and indigene. In order to delineate the continuity of colonialism in Arnhem Land through the Second World War, this article will first highlight the key features of settler colonialism. It will then briefly explore the history of settler-indigenous relations in Arnhem Land from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. The article then segues to the Second World War and explores how the NTSRU’s mission and development continued to highlight the disregard for indigenous vitality that characterised settler colonialism. Finally, the paper explores how the end of World War II did not mark a drastic change for Yolngu, but rather entailed
continuing subservience to white policies designed as part of the ‘logic of elimination’ typical of settler colonialism. Contextualising the NTSRU in the wider history of settler colonialism repositions the NTSRU as a case of continuing exploitation rather than as a harbinger of change or reconciliation.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{The Northern Territory as a Settler State}

Settler colonialism applies to territories where the main purpose of colonisation was to transplant persons from the home country into a new territory. As historian Patrick Wolfe writes, in settler colonies the colonizers came to stay, expropriating the native owners of the soil, which they [the colonisers] typically develop by means of a subordinated labor force (slaves, indentures, convicts) whom they import from elsewhere.\textsuperscript{13}

The eventual outcomes of settler colonialism are ‘societies in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogeneous society has developed in class, ethnic and racial terms.’\textsuperscript{14} The Northern Territory represents a settler colony because, from its inception, it was a small extension of the British Empire that relied on foreign capital and trade. The new colonists introduced their own foreign crops and livestock into the environment. The colonisers also organised institutional structures according to social status to mirror the home government.\textsuperscript{15} The expansion of settlement of the Northern Territory in the latter end of the nineteenth century reflects Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher’s point that settler societies ‘had the supreme virtue of being self-propelling. The impetus to expansion was soon coming, not so much from the Metropolis as from the colonial communities themselves.’\textsuperscript{16} The fact that the Northern Territory circa World War II was a \textit{young} settler colony was most prevalent by the large population ratio of indigenous to non-indigenous people. However, the indigenous population would prove a fundamental obstacle to colonisation of the Northern Territory.

In contrast to franchise colonial states – where the aim of colonisation was to exploit indigenous labour – in settler states indigenous people en masse were generally worthless to the coloniser.\textsuperscript{17} Donald Denoon alludes to an innate incompatibility between settlers and indigenous peoples because ‘[t]he coexistence of commercial farming and nomadism was impossible everywhere in the long run’.\textsuperscript{18} Denoon’s assessment of the irreconcilability of indigenous presence and settler expansion hints at a more fundamental characteristic of settler colonialism. Wolfe accurately summarises the relationship between settlers and indigenes as a cultural logic which is organic to a negative articulation [which] is one of elimination. In its purest form, as in the case of the Guanches (indigenous Canary Islanders), Tainos, Caribs, etc., the logic of elimination seeks to replace indigenous society with that imported by the colonisers.\textsuperscript{19}

The various instruments connected to the ‘logic of elimination’ – massacre, biological absorption, and cultural assimilation, to name a few – operated in various settler states at different overlapping times. In most places the prospect of eliminating indigenous presence was not a stated doctrine, although there were some exceptions.\textsuperscript{20} Instead, as a cultural ‘logic’, any government policies – even those espoused allegedly to help indigenous people – still had underpinnings to preserve the settler states’ interests over indigenous vitality. Both Wolfe and A. Grenfell Price describe three successive overlapping phases of contact/relations between indigenous peoples and settler states, which Wolfe calls confrontation, carceration, and assimilation. Confrontation is characterised by invasion, disease, massacre, and tribal warfare; carceration entails ‘protection’, or segregation of indigenous people onto reservations where government and missionaries attempt to train them in Christianity and agriculture; finally, assimilation emerges, emphasising ‘practical education’, adequate reserves, and policy guided by anthropologists.\textsuperscript{21} From the late nineteenth century through until the Second World War, most of Australia partook in indigenous policies representative of carceration and, beginning in the 1930s, assimilation. The Northern Territory, however, lagged in settlement and thus witnessed the confrontation and carceration phases of settler colonialism from the late nineteenth century to World War II.
The Colonial Context: Settlers in Arnhem Land through 1940

By 1881 the whole of Arnhem Land was, according to British/South Australian law, under the jurisdiction of eleven pastoral leases. Historian Keith Cole describes continuing frontier violence in the 1880s-1910 that impeded cattle stations. Richard Trudgen points out, though, that Aboriginal violence was in response to the station owners poisoning meat or engaging in widespread massacres.

The new Commonwealth administration of the Northern Territory in 1911 corresponded with the implementation of protection policy. Northern Territory Chief Protector of Aborigines (1911-1912) W. Baldwin Spencer announced:

> it is of primary importance that the reserves should be retained for the use of the natives with the idea of isolating them and preventing them from coming into contact with other people.

By 1927, local police and the Northern Territory Chief Medical Officer, who doubled as the Chief Protector of Aborigines, were the main ‘enforcers’ of protection. Historians Suzanne Parry and Tony Austin highlight that ‘[o]nly spasmodic attempts were made to enforce the provisions by police protectors, who had other priorities’.

Arnhem Land continued to be a special case because of its relative isolation and small non-indigenous population. In April 1931, the Commonwealth formalised the Arnhem Land Reserve over 79 900 square kilometres, restricting non-indigenous entrance into the region. While these actions superficially indicate a desire to preserve Yolngu vitality, in reality the government had determined that the terrain of Arnhem Land was unsuitable for pastoral purposes. By the 1930s, missionaries were the majority of non-indigenous settlers in Arnhem Land. The other non-indigenous residents included the owner at Urapunga Station near the Roper River and the accompanying police station. Officially, it was the job of the Roper River police to investigate all crimes and perpetrators – indigenous and non-indigenous. Due to the enormity of the region, but more significantly because of indifference towards violence against Yolngu, police rarely patrolled to protect Yolngu. The few times police investigated crimes against Yolngu was usually to benefit the non-indigenous residents.

Popular Northern Territory opinion continuously depicted Yolngu as savages. Victor Hall, a Northern Territory police constable, described one Yolngu clan, as ‘killers – raiders and rapers of the other tribes of Arnhem Land’. C.L.A. Abbott, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, described the Aboriginal individual as ‘a childlike person’. Reverend Alfred Dyer wrote, ‘the coastal tribes of the Gulf [of Carpentaria] were still in a “wild” condition at the time of this story [1933-1934]’.

One government report assessed Yolngu as ‘malicious by nature’ in contrast to Aboriginal people of Queensland. The common theme prevalent among Territorian attitudes towards Yolngu in the period preceding World War II is denigration for Yolngu civilisation, whose existence contravened the interests of white Australia.

Arnhem Land reached the national spotlight in 1932 when a group of Yolngu murdered several Japanese fishermen at Caledon Bay. The Australian government sent a police expedition to investigate, ending when the Yolngu Dhakiyarr speared Police Constable Albert Stuart McColl. Amidst fears of a full-scale war between Yolngu and whites, a missionary peace expedition travelled to Arnhem Land and convinced Dhakiyarr and the killers of Japanese to stand trial in Darwin. All were convicted of murder, but humanitarian outcry in southern Australia culminated in the High Court overturning Dhakiyarr’s conviction. Upon his release, Dhakiyarr mysteriously disappeared, and there is still no conclusive evidence as to his fate. In the context of the escalating tensions, the anthropologist Dr Donald Thomson travelled to Arnhem Land as a peace emissary on two expeditions between 1935-1937. Thomson met with Yolngu leaders and studied Yolngu culture while concomitantly advocating peaceful relations among whites, Yolngu, and Japanese. When assessing the relationship between Yolngu and the Commonwealth, Thomson noted:

> these natives believe that they are still living under their own laws, and that they have no reason to recognise the fact that a new regime has taken over their affairs, except that they know vaguely
that there is, somewhere, an individual or a power, called the “Gub’ment” that sometimes visits vengeance upon them.\textsuperscript{37}

Thomson’s expeditions curbed the brewing hostilities in Arnhem Land, but his remarks indicate there was no resolution to conflicting perceptions of sovereignty, leaving a tenuous peace leading up to the Second World War.

Conceiving the NTSRU

Donald Thomson enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force at the outbreak of World War II in 1939.\textsuperscript{38} In June 1941 Thomson delivered a speech entitled ‘Arnhem Land and the Native Tribes who inhabit that area’. Lieutenant-Colonel W.J.R. Scott afterwards approached Thomson with the idea of forming a squad of Yolngu guerrillas to defend Arnhem Land from potential Japanese attack. Thomson endorsed Scott’s idea and adopted the project as his own, insisting that the NTSRU should use traditional war methods of spearing and scouting.\textsuperscript{39} Scott had a different perspective of the force: ‘It is proposed that the natives shall erect, in selected areas, native huts which could house members of Independent Companies’.\textsuperscript{40} Scott’s proposal thus principally demarcated the NTSRU as supporting white forces rather than as an independent unit. This aligns with Kay Saunders’ assertion that ‘[l]abour for the Army in the Northern Territory was maintained only in auxiliary capacities’.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, Scott’s plan was in a wider set of documents discussing flank protection of Darwin. The concerns were not for the impact of Japanese invasion on Arnhem Land itself, but rather how Japanese in Arnhem Land might affect settlers in Darwin. There were no discussions about Yolngu – the very people at the frontline of such an invasion.

From July 1941 Scott essentially granted Thomson independent control over the NTSRU.\textsuperscript{42} Nonetheless, both Scott and Thomson faced significant opposition to the idea of an indigenous defence force. One military memo dated 17 July 1941 disregarded the value of Yolngu, stating instead that:

local white stockmen would probably have more value than organization of the natives, for the stockmen would be more important as fighting men and for providing guides (either themselves or from their native stockmen) in the event of guerrilla operations by our forces facing an invader.\textsuperscript{43}

These ideas continued to preference settlers over indigenes despite their more intimate knowledge of the terrain and fighting skills. The handwritten insert about indigenous stockmen also represents the unequal power relations where the settler must control indigenous knowledge in order for it to prove valuable. A major reason Scott’s superiors eventually agreed to commission the NTSRU, though, was the benefits of cheap coloured labour. Payment for the NTSRU would consist of trade tobacco, fishhooks, wire for fish spears, tomahawks and pipes.\textsuperscript{44} While the trade goods may have benefitted individual Yolngu, such compensation clearly reflected the continuing exploitative frontier mentality that the Australian Army was using in its relations with the NTSRU.

Recruiting and Training the NTSRU

Rather than analyse the actual patrols of the NTSRU, scrutiny of the unit’s orders is more beneficial to understand the purpose of the force. Thomson aimed to form a nucleus of Yolngu fighters to defend Arnhem Land from Japanese invasion. The manner of defence would entail regular patrols, amassing supply depots, sabotage of enemy camps and equipment.\textsuperscript{45} The immediacy of the Japanese threat to Australia in February 1942 made the formation of the NTSRU more urgent because there were no other defence patrols through Arnhem Land.\textsuperscript{46} Thomson, Scott, and other superiors worried that Japanese may land aircraft, paratroopers, small submarines or ships, or occupy aerodromes at Groote Eylandt or Milingimbi for strategic access to Darwin.\textsuperscript{47} The concerns constantly imply that the NTSRU served to defend Darwin and, more widely, white Australia. Based on Thomson’s close relationship and admiration for Yolngu since the 1930s, there is no doubt he personally worried
about how Japanese attack may adversely affect Yolngu society. Consequently, he saw the force as a
defence for Yolngu land by the people themselves. Additionally, Thomson’s personal efforts to limit
contact between Yolngu and other non-indigenous persons – whether soldiers or other residents in
Arnhem Land – attest to his desire to preserve Yolngu from the corrupting vices of settler society.\(^48\) In
Canberra, there were no concerns about Yolngu. Rather, their sole purpose was to act as a ‘coloured’
human buffer between the ‘yellow peril’ and white Australia.

From February to March 1942 Thomson recruited and trained fifty-one Yolngu as members of the
NTSRU. Robert Hall attributes Thomson’s decision to recruit a small core group because ‘it limited
the number of Aboriginal warriors who would be exposed to the stress and cultural shock of military
training adapted to white Australian needs’.\(^49\) While Hall’s point has some merit, it is more likely
that Thomson’s decision to maintain a small force was a pragmatic choice. A smaller force would be
easier to train and deploy, and Thomson trusted that in the event of Japanese invasion the NTSRU
members could recruit from their local clans. One significant issue Thomson confronted when
selecting members of the NTSRU was that he had to reverse the government stance he promoted
during his expeditions of the 1930s. He wrote:

> it took some time to convince these people that they could really kill Japanese who landed in
this territory, without incurring the ire of the Government, and being visited with yet another
punitive expedition.\(^50\)

Yolngu hesitancy to kill Japanese did not reflect new attitudes towards Japanese, nor did it
indicate that Yolngu suddenly supported the white Australian government. Rather, it highlights
the continuities of colonialism during the Second World War in Arnhem Land. Yolngu did not
automatically trust white Australia as an ally through a common enemy because for several hundred
years the experience with the government had been punitive.

By 19 March 1942, Thomson had recruited the fifty Yolngu who would form the NTSRU.\(^51\)
Thomson wrote:

> It was not intended to attempt, in training these nomadic people, to attempt to turn them into
orthodox soldiers or train them in parade ground tactics, although they were drilled with the
[Aroetta] crew, but merely to instil [sic] into them the elements of discipline, so that they would
be capable of carrying out scouting work in conjunction with regular formations.\(^52\)

Thomson only taught basic formal military movements of dress, turns, and attention. Kay Saunders
argues that Thomson preferred Yolngu fighting rituals and manoeuvres because they would be ‘the
most effective method for guerilla tactics’.\(^53\) Thomson insisted that rather than use ‘modern’ weapons
such as rifles, Yolngu should use strictly ‘traditional’ weapons such as spears and spear throwers.\(^54\)
Robert Hall argues that Thomson did not issue rifles and other modern weapons so that the Japanese
would not recognise the group as an organised force and retaliate against other Aboriginal people.
Hall considers that Thomson ‘may also have been motivated by his desire to limit the impact of the war
upon the Aborigines’.\(^55\) Thomson’s one exception to his rule against modern technology was training
Yolngu to make Molotov cocktails to attack targets such as parked aircraft or storage.\(^56\) The introduction
of such devices demonstrates that Thomson still understood that fundamentally the NTSRU must
serve to protect white Australia. Hence the interests of white Australia superseded Thomson’s
anthropological ideas of preventing the infiltration of modern technology into Yolngu society.

**Continuing Tensions with Settlers**

From March to September 1942, the force embarked on detailed land and coastal patrols of Arnhem
Land. Despite working in defence of white Australia, encounters with white residents of Arnhem
Land perpetuated the colonial disregard of the indigenous defence network. In May 1942 the owner
of Urapunga Station reported a theft to police at Roper Bar, and without evidence he accused Caledon
Bay members of the NTSRU. Thomson wrote:
When the Police took the unwarranted action of visiting the ship in my absence the natives whose previous experience of the Police was when they came to their territory and shot up the area, became uneasy, and a few days later slipped away off overland for Caledon Bay.57

The desertion incident resolved when further investigation revealed station hands to be the true culprits.58 Nonetheless, this entire incident is informative about the manner in which colonial relationships continued to manifest during the Second World War in Arnhem Land. Both the station owner and police discounted the indigenous defenders based on flimsy information and preconceived constructs of indigenous people as thieves. Moreover, the Yolngu fear of police advances the point that one cannot separate the World War II indigenous experience from the ongoing structures of colonialism. Rather than see each other as allies in a common struggle, Yolngu continued to fear settler violence while settlers continued to demean, distrust, and disparage Yolngu.

These continued tensions were also very apparent during another incident in October 1942. Thomson had left Arnhem Land for Townsville in September, placing the NTSRU under the command of Sergeant T.H. Elkington. In the log at Caledon Bay, Elkington wrote, ‘Slippery [Bindjarumpa] very peeved because some one wants to pinch his wife; bullets are the only things these people understand; they need a good swift kick in the crotch’.59 A series of thefts ended in near-hostilities between Elkington and a faction of the NTSRU. Thomson returned to Arnhem Land and defused the situation, but the importance lies in Elkington’s attitudes and approach towards Yolngu. His behaviour did not follow military protocols and instead very strongly reflected racist frontier relations of a supposedly bygone era. Hence the NTSRU did not represent a change in the relationship between indigenes and settlers in Arnhem Land; quite the contrary, it perpetuated unequal power relations and violent structures of settler colonialism.

The End of the NTSRU

By January 1943, strained from his work and with war matters lessening the threat to Australia, Thomson suggested that the NTSRU reduce to strictly coastwatching capacity.60 As Geoffrey Gray highlights, the NTSRU ‘was seen only as a holding unit until the Independent Companies, and later the North Australia Observation Unit (NAOU), were trained to take over’.61 The NAOU had a similar mission to the NTSRU – the aim was to scout and monitor for any enemy activity along the entire north coast. In contrast to the NTSRU, though, the members of the NAOU were non-indigenous men. They were regular enlistees in the Army and received equitable pay and rations. Orders still encouraged NAOU members to employ Aboriginal trackers informally.62 The implications of the NAOU replacing the NTSRU perpetuate the point that the NTSRU did not maintain a position of respect in the Australian military. Firstly, the new accessibility of the NAOU proved a desirable replacement for the Yolngu fighters because the soldiers were non-indigenous. Additionally, the NAOU itself continued the unequal relationship between whites and indigenes because Aboriginal trackers, performing the same duties as NAOU soldiers, did not receive wages or rations. The NAOU as replacement for the NTSRU also disproves the possibility that the government aimed to protect Yolngu by limiting the presence of non-indigenous soldiers in Arnhem Land.63

In April 1943 the NTSRU disbanded as Donald Thomson sailed the Aroetta back to Darwin.64 Yolngu participants received significant praise from Thomson in his report. He wrote:

Freely, and without complaint, they submitted to the rigorous discipline, and without pay, without any guarantee of reward, with only the most primitive equipment, and without arms or weapons, they gave their best in loyalty, unrelenting hard work and sweat, in the stronghold of the people from whom they had known neither justice nor understanding.65

Despite Thomson’s commendations, NTSRU members received little recognition for their service. For instance, the Department of Native Affairs would not allow Raiwalla, Thomson’s right-hand man in the NTSRU, to attend the 1949 ANZAC Day March in Darwin. A telegram from the Department of the Interior asserted:
Administrators of Northern Territory and Director of Native Affairs are opposed to the Proposal. Raiwalla is just recovering from two Broken Ribs and is run down in health as result of his arduous trip across Arnhem Land.66

The telegram implies that the government was looking out for Raiwalla’s interests, but the decision still came from a government department rather than from Raiwalla and thus negated his personal agency. Moreover, government policy and settler attitudes towards indigenous people continued to perpetuate the ‘logic of elimination’. Police patrols continued as early as 1946 to stop Yolngu ‘interference’ with cattle operations at Mainoru Station.67 The 1950s and 1960s marked the implementation of assimilation policies, aiming to resettle Yolngu in towns like Maningrida and Galiwinku. Assimilation in Arnhem Land led to overcrowding, unemployment, and substance abuse.68 The Yolngu role in the Second World War did not lead to government consideration for self-determination, nor did it empower Yolngu because they continued to face isolation and exclusion from white Australia. It was not until missionaries began to champion self-determination and land rights that Yolngu found settler allies against colonialism.69 The federal government continued its refusal to recognise Yolngu land rights in the landmark Nabalco case (1971). It was not until 1977, under the new Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, that the Australian government recognised Yolngu custody of Arnhem Land. Thus paternalistic power relations with no consideration for individual or collective indigenous decision-making continued through the war. Participation in the NTSRU did not garner government recognition of Yolngu sovereignty or the value of Yolngu culture. Settler colonialism continued in Arnhem Land – and in fact the new mining industries hastened the dispossession, dislocation, and assimilation of Yolngu. Australia had either forgotten or disregarded Yolngu’s integral role in the defence of Arnhem Land.

Conclusion: Continuity and Historiography’s Shortcomings

As this article has shown, the NTSRU did not signify a change to white-Yolngu relations in Arnhem Land. An underlying ‘logic of elimination’ characteristic of settler colonialism had tainted cross-cultural relations in the entire Northern Territory since first contact. Government policies had manifested in the form of massacres, segregation on reserves, and by the 1930s missionaries were actively espousing cultural assimilation. The onset of the Second World War did not change the sentiments of settlers in Arnhem Land. The NTSRU consistently existed to serve the interests of white Australia as auxiliary defence and source of cheap coloured labour. With the exception of the force’s organiser Donald Thomson, there were no concerns as to how Japanese invasion may impact Yolngu. They were expendable as people and as soldiers serving to protect the settler nation. This is not to say that their work was unimportant – quite the contrary, as the patrols of Arnhem Land were extremely significant in the event of Japanese landing. However, the dubious motivations behind the governmental and military decisions to form the NTSRU and the eagerness to replace it with a unit composed of white soldiers demonstrates that the government never saw its existence as integral, but rather as a holding unit. The end of the war highlighted the continuing structures of inequality and accelerated assimilation policies typical of settler colonialism.

The matter of defence of the north coast is still relevant, and in 1981 the Australian Army once again turned to Aboriginal knowledge for defence with the proposed formation of NORFORCE. NORFORCE’s mission is to scout and defend northern Australia, particularly finding areas susceptible to potential invasion.70 A 1996 article in The Australian Magazine praised the success of NORFORCE: ‘Army recruitment officers, working closely with tribal elders on the settlements, find no shortage of suitable applicants.’71 Even with the successful deployment of NORFORCE since the mid-1980s, it was not until 1992 that the Australian government finally awarded medals and back-pay to surviving NTSRU veterans and families.72 The fifty years of forgetting exemplifies how the NTSRU represents the manipulative nature of employment in the Second World War. For a brief period of conflict indigenous knowledge and experience became important for defence of the settler nation, but the end of conflict signified continuing inequality, subservience, and second-class status.
Notes

1The author wishes to acknowledge financial assistance provided by the Northern Territory History Grant. The author would also like to thank Francoise Barr of the Northern Territory Archives Service for her assistance in accessing records and oral history testimonies.

2Whenever possible I use the specific name of the indigenous inhabitants of a region. Yolngu are the indigenous inhabitants of Arnhem Land. I use ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘indigenous’ in more general terms to refer to the First Australians. I avoid words with patronising or racist terms such as ‘native’ or ‘half-caste,’ but as many sources are from a period marked by racism they do contain these and other outdated words.


5In the context of this article, I generally refer to World War II as the period from 1939 to 1945, and in the Pacific context from December 1941 to 1945. However, I do not want to downplay the fact that Japanese aggression began with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and escalated in 1937 with full-scale war in China.


7Robert Hall discusses the NTSRU in chapter five of The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War (1989), Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997. The general regulations regarding indigenous enlistment throughout Australia stated: ‘That the admission of aliens or of British subjects of non-European origin or descent to the Australian Defence Forces is undesirable in principle, but that a departure from this principle is justified in order to provide for the special needs of any of the Services during the war.’ See Prime Minister Robert G. Menzies, to Secretary, Departments of the Army and Navy, 25 February 1940, in National Archives of Australia (hereafter cited NAA) Canberra, series A2671, item 45/1940: Enlistment in Defence Forces of aliens and persons of non-European descent, contents date range 18 January 1940-27 June 1940.


9Hall, pp.189-194.


Udo Krautschwurtz highlights that the definitions of both franchise colonialism and settler colonialism are quite fluid depending upon the scholar using the terms, because the terms always define in relation to each other. See Udo Krautschwurtz, ‘What is Settler Colonialism? An Anthropological Meditation on Frantz Fanon’s “Concerning Violence”’, *History and Anthropology* vol. 14, no. 1, 2003, pp.55-72. For the purposes of this article, I accept Patrick Wolfe’s analysis of settler and franchise colonies as fundamentally linked to the relationship between coloniser and indigene. The rest of this section of the article will delineate Wolfe’s argument.

Denoon, 26.


By the mid-nineteenth century United States policymakers and military commanders openly stated their goal was complete extermination of Native Americans who resisted dispossession and assimilation. See Lenore A. Stiffirm with Phil Lane, Jr., ‘The Demography of Native North America: A Question of American Indian Survival’, in M. Annette Jaimes (ed.), *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, South End Press, Boston, 1992, p.34.


W. Baldwin Spencer, NAA Canberra, series A1734/15, item NT1970/1409: Appointment of Professor Baldwin Spencer as Special Commissioner for the Aborigines in the Northern Territory, contents date range 1970, p.26. The phrase ‘and preventing them’ was a handwritten insert that replaced the crossed out phrase ‘as far as possible.’

Northern Territory Archives Service (hereafter cited NTAS), Cook, Dr C.E. (Mick), NTRS 226, oral history interview, TS 179, interviewer: H. Giese, Brisbane, 2 March and 4 May 1981, pp.5-6.


Mickey Dewar, *The ‘Black War’ in Arnhem Land: Missionaries and the Yolnu* 1908-1940, Australia National University, Northern Territory Research Unit, Darwin, 1992, p.3. In 1940, the Arnhem Land Reserve border extended to include the Roper River.

For secondary information about missionaries in Arnhem Land and their assimilation efforts see Tony Austin, ‘Training the Yolngu: Methodists, Race, and Schooling in Arnhem Land 1916-1939’, in Austin and Parry (eds), pp.223-251; See also Dewar; Cole, From Mission to Church; Harold Thornell, as told to Estelle Thompson, A Bridge Over Time: Living in Arnhemland with the Aborigines 1938-1944, J.M. Dent Pty Limited, Melbourne 1986; John Harris, One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope, Albatross Books Pty Ltd, Sutherland, NSW, 1990. Indigenous accounts of missionaries, including brutality, are available from Read and Read (eds) and Lamianti, p.213.

For example, in 1943 station owners issued several complaints of Aboriginal women being held against their will. However, because the women themselves would not substantiate these claims, the police assumed the reports were fabricated to pit station owners against each other. There is no discussion or consideration in the documents that perhaps Yolngu women were too afraid to come forward. Constable E.G. Sell, Roper River Police Station, to Superintendent of Police, Alice Springs, 18 February 1943, in NTAS, Commissioner of Police, NTRS F 77. Correspondence files, annual single number series, contents date range 1935-1959, file 5/43: Roper River.

The events of the 1930s in Arnhem Land have been widely documented. The most comprehensive non-indigenous study is Ted Egan, Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodall Island Killings 1932-1933, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996. For the Yolngu account of the Dhakiyarr story, see Dhakiyarr vs the King, (dirs Tom Murray and Allan Collins, prod. Graeme Isaac), Australia, 2003. A firsthand account of McColl’s death is available in Victor C. Hall, Dreamtime Justice. Hall was a member of the Police Expedition in which McColl died, but his narrative is highly biased and speculative. Secondary information about the Peace Expedition is available from Dewar. Participants of the Peace Expedition also published firsthand accounts. See Alfred J. Dyer, Unarmed Combat: An Australian Missionary Adventure, Edgar Bragg & Sons Pty Ltd Printers, Sydney, c1954, p.2.

The formal title of Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit did not emerge until April 1942, but for convenience I will refer to the force as such when discussing its conception and development.

Donald Thomson’s importance as the leader of the NTSRU was even more pronounced by February 1942 as the sole director of the force’s operations. Lieutenant-Colonel W.J.R. Scott became Chief Officer of Gull Force in January 1942 and was captured on 2 February 1942 at Ambon. Scott would be a Prisoner of War for the duration of the war and was not released until 8 October 1945. During his time at Hainan Island he witnessed Japanese brutality and cruel treatment of POWs. More information about his time as a POW is available in AWM, series 54, item 1010/4/127. [War Crimes and Trials – Affidavits and Sworn Statements: Statements by NX28381 C Schofield; QX10886 Pte L Schuurs; NX76397 Pte JC Scott; VX37326 Pte JH Scott; SX9820 Sgt LL Scott; NX29377 Cpl NO Scott; VX71997 Lt-Col WJR Scott; QX9505 Cpl HJ Searle Rev Father C Seiller, contents date range 1945-1945. See also NAA Canberra, series B883, item VX71997: SCOTT WILLIAM JOHN RENDEL : Service Number – VX71997 : Date of birth – 21 Jun 1888 : Place of birth – BINGARA NSW : Place of enlistment – CAULFIELD VIC : Next of Kin – STREET G, contents date range 1939-1948. Interestingly, after the war there were questions as to Scott’s loyalty towards Australia because of alleged Japanese business relations in the 1930s. See Robert Darroch, ‘The Man Behind Australia’s Secret Army’, Bulletin: An Australian Journal of Comment and Opinion, 20 May 1980, pp.58-70.

Comments on Reconnaissance and protection Plan in 7th Military District,” 14 July 1941, in NAA Melbourne, series MP729/1, item 299/4/703: A.K. “Aroetta” [Special NT Recce. Unit] –General Files, contents date range 1941-1943. The portion in parentheses was a handwritten insert into the typed document.

Thomson, AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, pp.8-11.

The Aroetta departed Darwin for Arnhem Land on 12 February 1942, just one week before the first Japanese bombardment of Darwin.


Thomson’s recommendations based on his expeditions in Arnhem Land in the 1930s had called for the complete segregation of Yolngu to preserve their culture. For more information see NAA Canberra, series A52, item 572/994 THO, p.45. Thomson’s ideas came into practice during the NTSRU when, for instance, at one stage Thomson specifically moved the NTSRU camp away from Katherine after he determined that interactions with white soldiers were harming NTSRU discipline. See Thomson, AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.28.

Hall, p.92.


AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.27. The deck log of the Aroetta in May – June 1942 points out that they still had to refuse some volunteers who wanted to join the NTSRU. See Lieutenant A.E. Palmer, ‘Deck Log…’, in AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.18 of log. Kay Saunders notes that Thomson had so many volunteers that he could ‘choose an elite force.’ See Saunders, p.136.

AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.48.

Saunders, p.136.

The one exception to the exclusion of rifles was Raiwalla. As the only formally enlisted Yolngu, Raiwalla received rifle training. This also attests to Thomson’s confidence that Raiwalla could bridge the Yolngu and settler cultures without falling prey to the vices of non-indigenous civilisation that he feared would befall other Yolngu.

Hall, p.97.

AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, pp.30, 49. See also Robert A. Hall, 97.

AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.51.

AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.50.


Thomson, AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.64.

Geoffrey Gray, 169.


Thomson, AWM, series 54, item 741/5/9 Part 1, p.52.

Telegram CS 379 from Secretary, Department of Interior, to Secretary, Department of Army, 25 March 1949, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item R/1/3617: D. 178 Raiwalla George – Anzac Day March, contents date range 1949-1949.

Evans, p.2.

See The Dreamers of Arnhem Land, (dir. Christopher Walker), Australia, 2005. See also Trudgen. For more information about assimilation policy throughout Australia see Marcus, Governing Savages.

See Nancy Williams, The Yolngu and Their Land: A System of Land Tenure and the Fight for its Recognition, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986. See also Trudgen, and Harris.


Michael Christie, Steve Fox and Nawunggurr Yunupingu, foreword to NTSRU 1941-1943: Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit, by Donald Thomson, Yirrkala Literature Production Centre, Yirrkala, NT, 1992 p.4.
The Northern Territory is a dream destination for history buffs. Those after an archeology fix will appreciate Kakadu’s ancient rock art and stone tools, others will be keen to learn about life as a late 1800s Chinese goldminer in Darwin and most will appreciate the heroes of Aboriginal Australia demanding land rights in Yirrkala, north-east Arnhem Land, and in Kalkarindji on the Buntine Highway. Cyclone Tracy exhibit at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin. The bombing of Darwin during the second world war was the first and largest foreign attack on Australian soil in the country’s modern history. Second World War. Hundreds of Indigenous Australians served in the 2nd AIF and the militia. Many were killed fighting and at least a dozen died as prisoners of war. Nevertheless, Indigenous Australians who fought for their country came back to much the same discrimination as before. For example, many were barred from Returned and Services League clubs, except on Anzac Day. Many of them were not given the right to vote for another 17 years. In 1941 he set up and led the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit, an irregular army unit consisting of 51 Indigenous Australians, five whites, and a number of Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders. Three of the men had been to gaol for killing the crews of two Japanese pearling luggers in 1932. The Country Liberal Party CLP was established in the Northern Territory in 1974 by supporters of the Liberal and Country Parties of Australia living in the Territory; thereafter it enjoyed considerable electoral success. The Party has contested general elections in the Territory since 1974 and saw unbroken electoral success from 1974 until 2001 when it lost office to the Australian Labor. Party. Clare Martin won a surprise victory at the 2001 territory election, becoming the first Labor Party, and first female Chief Minister The ALP member for Arafura Marion Scrymgour, became the Labor Party.