



## **THE RETURNED & SERVICES LEAGUE OF AUSTRALIA WA BRANCH INCORPORATED (RSLWA)**

### **COMMEMORATION POLICY - CULTURAL**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Commemoration is an important part of RSLWA's role in supporting Veterans while maintaining and growing its relevance among the broad community of Western Australia.

Commemoration supports our core business of providing all Veterans the opportunity to gather to reflect and to do so in the knowledge that the community values their service and sacrifices.

RSLWA believes commemoration is fundamental to Veterans' wellbeing and mental health through social connectivity and community support.

The importance of commemoration has been emphasized both in academic studies and contemporary commentary. According to DVA Mental Health Adviser, Dr. Stephanie Hodson, all cultures use rituals of remembrance to deal with the impact of trauma. Research into the impact of military trauma and loss has highlighted the fundamental importance of connection to family and community. Further, Victoria Cross recipient, Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG, has observed that it is vital that contemporary Veterans and their families understand they have the support of the wider community and organisations like the RSL.

#### **DIVERSITY**

RSLWA recognises that Australia is one of the most successful multicultural countries in the world. This is also reflected in its armed forces.

Veterans and communities come together each year to pay their respects, notably on ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day. In Western Australia there are numerous other commemorative events and ceremonies that are of significance to Ex-Service Organisations and community groups including cultural and ethnic entities.

On days like ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, Australians – irrespective of ethnicity, race or cultural background – come together to share what binds them. They gather, united in the commemoration of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice and those prepared to do so in the defence of the nation.

#### **CULTURE**

In recent years that has been a trend among sectors of the Australian community to seek to include specific cultural and ethnic elements into major commemorative events - ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day in particular.

While it is important to recognize cultural and ethnic contributions to the defence of Australia, it is also important to maintain ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day as occasions to express unity, a time when all Australians – irrespective of race, culture or religion – come together to remember and reflect.

The Australian War Memorial observes that Anzac Day is one of Australia's most important national occasions. It was with the Gallipoli landing that there began to emerge the tradition of ANZAC with the ideals of mateship and sacrifice that distinguish and unite all Australians, whatever their origins.

## **CULTURAL HISTORY**

Cultural diversity in the ADF had its beginnings in the First World War. While most of the more than 420,000 men who volunteered were of Anglo-Saxon origin, others of different cultures and races also volunteered – not least Indigenous Australians. After initial recruiting restrictions, indigenous men were accepted into the AIF and, in 1917, the rules preventing them from enlisting were relaxed as the need for reinforcements became acute.

Thousands of Indigenous Australians enlisted and many found themselves, for the first time in their lives, being free from the discrimination that attended their everyday civilian lives.

Also banned from enlisting for not being of substantially European origin or descent were Asian Australians. The country had been home to Chinese people since the gold rushes of the mid-nineteenth century and more than 500 Australians of Chinese heritage, perhaps many more, served in the AIF during the war alongside other Australian diggers of Japanese, Italian, Russian, Danish, German and Polish descent.

Ensuing wars saw a significant increase in the cultural mix of those who served in our armed forces including Sikhs, other Indian Subcontinent cultures, Americans, Southern Pacific peoples, Africans and many more.

Since the origins of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) the men and women who have served, and still serve, come from a wide range of cultures. Today the ADF reflects the rich multicultural diversity of Australia itself. It has proactive policies in place to attain greater representation from among Australia's indigenous communities and other races and cultures.

The ADF does not discriminate in terms of what is required of all individuals and to work as a team, irrespective of race, culture or religion. When current Governor General of Australia, the Honourable David John Hurley AC DSC (Retd), was Chief of the Defence Force he noted that teamwork requires ADF personnel to think about how they relate to one another, respect one another, recognise the value of each other's contribution and work collaboratively toward achieving the best results.

In contemporary Australia, the use of Welcome to Country and/or Acknowledgment of Country in community-based and government events and gatherings is commonplace. It is considered an important way of giving back to Aboriginal people their place in society and paying respect in a formal sense. Although the practice of acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of land and seeking their permission to enter their territory has only recently begun to re-emerge in modern Australia, it is an ancient custom of significance to many Indigenous people. Such acknowledgements have been included in a range of Veteran commemorations.

## **RSLWA APPROACH**

RSLWA's approach to the form and conduct of commemoration is to commemorate in a way that respects all who served, and still serve, no matter their background. This means that our major commemorations of ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day do not serve to divide, but to unite. This includes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the Order of Service and its content to reflect broad community expectations as well as grow unity among Veterans.

It is important to ensure that RSLWA, in close liaison with relevant government authorities (such as the Botanic Gardens & Parks Authority and Local Government Authorities) supports and helps facilitate commemoration for a wide range of community organisations. On an annual basis, numerous special commemorations are conducted at the State War Memorial or at the Court of Contemplation at Kings Park, including:

- Indigenous Veteran Service Day
- National Day of Greece
- Sikh Association Remembrance Service
- Commemorative Service for the Russian Fallen
- US Memorial Day
- Battle of the Coral Sea
- Commemoration of the Anniversary of Korean Armistice
- Commemorative Service in Remembrance of Invasion of Cyprus
- Commemoration for the Serbian Fallen
- Commemoration for the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
- Merdeka Day (Malaya Borneo Veterans)
- Commemoration for Freedom of Macedonia
- Commemorative Service for the Rhodesian Fallen
- Commemoration of Wartime Defence of Malta

It is appropriate that each of these events can include specific mention of cultural and ethnic connections and, in the case of specific Australian Indigenous commemoration, the option of flying of the Australian Aboriginal Flag as an official flag proclaimed in the *Flags Act 1953*.

## **RSLWA POSITION STATEMENTS**

1. RSLWA observes that, for more than 100 years, men and women from a wide range of race and cultural backgrounds have fought for, and defended, the freedom that Australia enjoys today.
2. RSLWA recognises that all those who served, and continue to serve, in the AIF and the ADF fought, or were prepared to fight, for Australia. For the country she was and the country she is; regardless of their cultural backgrounds and heritage.
3. RSLWA recognises the flying of the Australian National Flag, the national flag of New Zealand and the state flag of Western Australia for ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day.
4. RSLWA policy for ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day is to have all content, including *The Ode*, read and/or sung in English, save the New Zealand National Anthem.
5. RSLWA highly values and respects all cultural and religious backgrounds of Veterans and serving ADF personnel.

6. RSLWA recognises that, while Indigenous Australians in the First World War served on equal terms, they were subjected to discrimination after the war in areas such as education, employment and civil liberties. RSLWA remains appalled at such treatment.
7. RSLWA recognises the generosity of spirit and patriotism of Indigenous Australians who have served Australia and all Australians well.
8. RSLWA celebrates the reforms that have taken place over time and proudly supports the Australian Defence Force's commitment to diversity and recognising the dedication and courage of service men and women irrespective of gender, race, ethnic origin or cultural background.
9. To ensure ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day are commemorated in a truly inclusive manner, RSLWA is committed to working with multicultural organisations in a respectful manner and in a way that does not detract from the conduct of key elements of such commemorations.
10. RSLWA remains supportive of aligned commemoration on ANZAC Day such as that which has been conducted for a number of years where a special Aboriginal-Maori commemoration in the form of combined Corroboree-Haka performance has been conducted at Kings Park immediately following the Dawn Service.
11. RSLWA notes a recent decision of the Alice Springs Town Council to have the Aboriginal flag flown year-round on Anzac Hill with the exception of Anzac Day, when the New Zealand flag is flown alongside the Australian flag. RSLWA supports this observance of ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day. RSLWA also respects the decision that the Aboriginal Flag is flown at ANZAC Hill on days of significance to Aboriginal people such as National Sorry Day, National Reconciliation week and NAIDOC week.
12. RSLWA notes the annual event conducted in Canberra by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association. With the support of the Australian War Memorial, an informal indigenous service conducted immediately following the AWM Dawn Service is held at "The Rock" on the side of Mount Ainslie overlooking Canberra.
13. RSLWA respects the inclusion of Welcome to Country and/or Acknowledgement of Country in contemporary Australia but does not support its use at specific commemorative sites that honour the fallen. These sites and locations have deep meaning to all Australians who mourn the loss of life during war – losses that did not discriminate on the grounds of race, ethnicity or religion. While having utmost respect for the traditional owners of land upon which such sites and memorials are located, RSLWA does not view it appropriate that a Welcome to Country is used at sites that were specifically established to pay homage to those who died and who came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.
14. RSLWA will not include Welcome to Country and/or Acknowledgement of Country in RSLWA-conducted commemorations on ANZAC Day or Remembrance Day but respects the right of others to do so.
15. RSLWA respects the inclusion of the Welcome to Country and/or Acknowledgement of Country and the flying of the Australian Aboriginal Flag at commemorative events such as commemoration on Indigenous Veteran Service Day, National Sorry Day, National Reconciliation week and NAIDOC week.

16. RSLWA respects the right to use the Acknowledgement of Country by Regal, Vice-Regal and Government representatives at ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, yet is opposed to such use at the Dawn Service or services that are held at recognised war memorials.
17. RSLWA acknowledges that the inclusion of Welcome to Country and/or Acknowledgement of Country by Government and Local Government at commemorations conducted by such entities on their own land is a matter for their own judgement. Any formal commemorative agreements between such entities and RSLWA would need to clearly outline each party's intent.

## **REFERENCES**

This position paper has been informed by: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section Parliamentary Library Canberra; Australian War Memorial; Australia Defence Force Diversity Strategy; Department of Veterans Affairs; Australian Flags Act 1953; Alice Springs Town Council; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association (<https://atsivsa.com/>), Australian Together (<https://australianstogether.org.au>).