

Under a different sun; Australian Aboriginal prisoners of war in Singapore 1942–1945

Public talk by Garth O'Connell and Jackie Huggins

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National Museum of Singapore's Gallery Theatre
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TALK



Three mates (left to right): Private Henry Wells, Private Sydney Williams, and Private Thomas Hatch at Ingleburn training camp, 1940. All three became prisoners of war at the fall of Singapore. Wells did not survive captivity. AWM C1292897

During the Second World War 15,000 Australians became prisoners of war after Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Among the Australians captured on the island were more than 50 Aboriginal and Pacific Islander soldiers. A further 13 captured elsewhere in the region were later moved to camps in Singapore. During the following three and a half years of captivity these men suffered extreme hardships, including starvation, illness, forced labour, and brutal treatment from camp guards, some of whom were confused by the presence of these dark-skinned Australians.

With their non-Indigenous brothers in arms most were forced into labour on the infamous Burma–Thailand Railway, and on other islands such as Borneo and mainland Japan. More than 20 never returned to Australia, and several were buried and commemorated at the Kranji War Memorial in Singapore.

The daughter of one of these Aboriginal prisoners of war is the respected Aboriginal Elder Jackie Huggins AM, who will offer her personal insights as part of this presentation.



Garth O'Connell is a curator in the Military Heraldry and Technology section at the Australian War Memorial. He is of both Aboriginal (Gomeri nation) and Irish descent. Within his family he is a fourth-generation army veteran, and among his many interests is the wartime history of Singapore and military service of other Indigenous Australians.

Jackie Huggins AM is a preeminent historian and highly respected leader in the Aboriginal community. She is of the Bidjara/Pitjara (Central Queensland) and Biri/Birri Gubba Juru (North Queensland) peoples. Her father, John "Jack" Huggins, was a soldier in the Australian Army who was captured in Singapore.



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