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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INDEPENDENCE

media release

NEW SOUTH WALES ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL

March to commemorate Aboriginal veterans welcomed

13 May, 2010

The holding of a march and commemorative service to recognize the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women has been welcomed by the Chairwoman of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, Bev Manton

“It is appropriate to recognise the distinguished service of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander war veterans,” Chairwoman Manton added.

“They have not received the recognition they deserve. All too often they are the forgotten veterans”.

The march and commemorative service is being sponsored by the North Coast chapter of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association in Coffs Harbour on Sunday, June 13 – with the full backing and support of the Coffs Harbour RSL Branch.

NSW State President of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association, David Williams, said that few Australians were aware that Aboriginal people had served in every war Australia has fought in since the Boer War.

“This contribution is not widely recognized, nor is the fact that until the early 1940’s Aboriginal volunteers were often rejected on the basis of race. Yet still they applied – denying their culture where necessary.”

Mr Williams, himself a veteran of both Borneo and Malaysia – and Vietnam - said Aboriginal ex-serviceman Trevor Wilson, from Coffs Harbour, had pushed to have the march and commemorative service in Coffs Harbour.

“Aboriginal ex-service men and women will be coming from many parts of the State – not just from Coffs Harbour and nearby towns but as far afield as Grafton, Moree, Newcastle and Canberra,” Mr Wilson said.

But he emphasized the service and march, from near the RSL Club to the RSL Cenotaph, was not just restricted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans.

“All diggers can participate. That’s the way we want it,” Mr Wilson said.

“We served together, we can march together – although a lot of our blokes didn’t really get a fair go when they returned,” he said.

He also said family members who wanted to march to represent deceased ex-servicemen and women were also welcome.

Chairwoman Manton called on the Rudd Government to speed up the process of establishing Australia’s first official registrar of Aboriginal servicemen and service women.

“There are still no accurate figures on how many Aboriginal people served. We do know they fought in every campaign with possibly as many as 1,000 Aboriginal men and women serving in the First World War and up to 4,000 in the Second World War.

“However, because they were not allowed to serve if they listed themselves as Aboriginal, most put down that they were Maoris or Pacific Islanders.

“Others just stated that they were Australian.”

Mr Williams said his Association, a national body, appreciated the support of the Coffs Harbour RSL Branch.

“They have got right behind this event,” he said.

Ms Manton said she hoped Aboriginal service men and women would attend the service and march in strong numbers.

“I want to encourage them all to step forward. They should recognize themselves as heroes, and accept recognition for their service.

“This country’s debt to these men and women is long overdue.”

The march, on Sunday June 13, begins at 10 am with the commemorative service beginning half an hour later.

Further information Trevor Wilson 0411 065 011, David Williams 0450 361 418 or Peter Windsor (for Bev Manton) on 0400 554 603