Lest We Forget? Remembering the Colonial British Army

Thank you, as mentioned I am Juliana Byers, and I'm a current but *almost* former research student at Victoria University. I'll be submitting my thesis on masculinity and militarism in the British Army at Ballarat in 1854 in just over a month, all going to plan. I've had an interest in Australian military history for many years now, and especially since coming back from a tour of the Western Front of WW1 in 2018 I've been drawn to the stories of people and groups I consider 'forgotten' soldiers. I'm interested in whose stories get told in the aftermath of a fight and *why*.

Speaking of forgotten soldiers, I think it is important to recognise that, when talking about Australian military history, there continues to be resistance to recognising and acknowledging the martial history of the first Australians, both prior to and following the arrival of Europeans. While they did not organise armies or professional militaries in a way Europeans understood, they were able and capable combatants, who kept their lands and this continent safe for millennia. They remain the first and only Australian combatants to have engaged with a hostile invading force, and many first Australians continue to serve proudly with our armed forces today. The *YININMADYEMI Thou Didst Let Fall* memorial by Indigenous artist Tony Albert honours and recognises their service and sacrifice.

And now, I would like to begin my presentation proper by presenting you with… a blank page! Ta da! Jokes aside, this blank page is important, because I want you to populate it in your mind. If you feel comfortable, you can close your eyes, but if not, you can borrow the digital mind's eye I have up on the screen for you. What image first comes to mind when you hear the term 'Australian soldier'? Just sit with that for a minute. Who are they? Where are they? What uniform are they wearing? What are they doing? What period of time are they from? This last question is particularly important, because Australia was rather late to the party when it came to maintaining a professional standing army. As noted by eminent Australian military historian Joan Beaumont, Australia did not have a recognisably professional army until 1947, although the modern Australian Defence Force insists on tracing their origins back to the outbreak of world war one, and the infamous landing at Gallipoli by the Australia New Zealand Army Corps a year later. This is hardly a surprise; given how much of our nation's general history we hang (perhaps erroneously) on the ANZACs, for the ADF not to demand a slice of the pie would make no sense. They are, after all, the organisation with the greatest similarity to the one which gave us the ANZACs: that, of course, being the British Army.

Have you got your soldier? If you do, have a look up on the screen now and I suspect you might see him there. Unless you've got a relative who is a current or former member of the armed forces, the terms 'Australian soldier' and 'ANZAC' have become nearly inseparable in the public imagination. It's been more than 100 years since Gallipoli, yet the average Australian could certainly tell you more about that conflict and these soldiers, than any other in our nation's history. I personally find this a little ironic; despite our love of them, and our determination to make them our very own, the men of the Australia New Zealand Army Corps were British soldiers, fighting for Britian's territorial and political interests. They were proud of it too – the Australia they loved and understood did not exist outside the framework of the British Empire and the protective embrace of the Mother Country. I would argue that this has been true for every professional soldier who originated from or fought in this country

up until the end of WW2. Australia as a nation separate from the British Empire, with different needs, interests and security considerations, did not exist in the minds of early military professionals.

This is the first hurdle remembrance culture has to cross when constructing an Australian soldier worth remembering. There haven't been 'Australian soldiers' for very long: most of them were or considered themselves to be British, or, at the very least, part of the British Empire. Those from 1870 onwards become easy to 'Australianise' (although they may have had something to say about it!), but as we move further and further into the colonial past, full of professional soldiers who were British through and though, candidates for the position of 'Australian soldier' become harder to find. I would argue this is because we're looking in the wrong place. Modern Australia is strangely hostile to our British roots, and we seek to populate our history with anti-British characters: ANZAC is one example, but so is the focus of my current research, the Eureka Stockade. This is odd, given that it was only a very, very small proportion of stockaders who were interested in separating from Britian: the majority of them were very attached the British law and order, and wanted to maintain it. They wanted an end to police corruption, government overreach, and more of a say in the laws which were governing them. The irony is that all things were coming – the Victorian constitution was in London and being ratified, and contained provisions for all of those things – but they got completed carried away. Once they ejected the moral force men and descended into violence, they were put on a collision course with the only security force available: the British Army.

Led by radical Irish firebrand Peter Lalor, the stockaders collected weapons, arranged themselves into companies, appointed officers, practiced and drilled with their arms, and built a fortified position from which they could either launch an attack or defend themselves. They even swore an oath to fight and created a symbol to differentiate themselves from the *Government forces* on the other side of the diggings. They then started behaving like the very worst armies of their day and looted stores in Ballarat, assaulted shopkeepers, stole horses, abducted at least one official, press-ganged able-bodied men to their cause, and refused to let civilians trapped within their barricade leave without a password, which was only known by the stockaders. This aspect of their movement has been treated as a mildly embarrassing side-show to the more palatable actions of swearing allegiance to the Southern Cross or burning gold licences, and it is something we see repeated in every conflict 'Australian soldiers' have fought in. Australians are supposed to be *the good guys* – as if war is or was as simple as super-hero comic. When our combatants, or those combatants we claim as our own, like the Eureka stockaders, do things which make us uncomfortable, or ugly aspects of war rear their heads and demand our attention, we tend to look away. *Our* soldiers don't do things like that. *We* always do the right thing.

But if there is a 'good guy' then he must face off against a 'bad guy,' and the British Army has become the ultimate 'bad guy' in colonial history. Because the focus of my presentation today is the Eureka Stockade, I will zoom in on the 12th and 40th Regiments of Foot, who stormed the stockade on the morning of 3rd December 1854. Popular history generally portrays them as violent, sadistic, drunken thugs, the very antithesis of the righteous Australian. While it is true that they were not the cream of society, they weren't the mindless beasts of mythology either. The regular men, for the most part, joined the army not out of a desire to serve, but because they wanted access to steady wages, and guaranteed shelter, food and medical care. And whatever else they were, British soldiers were the first professional

army to serve here. They didn't think of Australia as we do, and the lines between the colonies were much more rigid then than they are between the states today, but they were still *here*. They fought for this country as they understood it, and some of them died in these fights, including the seven men who fell at Eureka. These seven men form the backbone of my current research, and I cannot help but wonder if they would have been so ready to storm the barricade at Eureka, had they known they'd end up buried far from home and everything they knew. Of course, this is a counter-factual, but in my work uncovering these seven soldiers as men, and stripping back the pejorative title of 'redcoat,' I've found myself re-evaluating the historical status they have been given of 'British soldiers.' Almost certainly, they thought of themselves this way, but can we honestly say they were fighting for Britian, rather than a developing Anglo-Australia?

In the face of the stockaders' increasingly violent behaviour towards the civilian population – the majority of whom did not take up arms and were not pleased to see a whacking-great barricade built in the middle of their goldfield – the soldiers had a moral *and* legal duty to restore order. British law at the time required the army to step in, with or without the permission of civil authorities, in circumstances where there was a severe threat to life or property. Remember also, as previously mentioned, that the stockaders were behaving like a military force, and were very vocally talking about the possibility of storming Government Camp, the administrative enclave where the police and military lived, and driving the authorities off the goldfields. The soldiers who lived in Government Camp did not just have themselves and their comrades to think about, but many of them were accompanied by their families as well: wives and young children for the most part. The military men could not have been expected to sit on their hands and wait for the stockaders to be ready for a fight when their lives and loved ones were at stake!

This is perhaps the most contentious issue around Eureka, and directly relates to how we define Australian soldiers. The attack on the Eureka Stockade was a decidedly bloody affair, in which a large number of people were killed in a confined area, within a very short space of time. It would have been terribly traumatic for the witnesses, especially those civilians who were trapped inside the stockade when the fighting started. They found themselves obliged to defend themselves against professional soldiers, who had no way to knowing who was a stockader and who was a civilian in the early morning darkness. Attacking in the early morning, when the stockaders weren't ready and many of them had left the barricade, was portrayed as an underhand act by the military: something dishonourable. But, in the circumstances, what else did they expect? Professional militaries, then and now, are not in the business of fighting fair and being honourable: they're in the business of winning, and that requires them to act when the situation is in their favour. The stockaders, caught up in their political fantasies, failed to assess the situation from a military perspective.

They were not a well-organised force on 3 December when they were routed and their stockade was destroyed, but they had the *potential* to be if given time, and during the day there could be as many as 1500 stockaders in and around the barricade. The military present numbered slightly over 500, so the odds were decidedly against them. At night, however, most of the stockaders drifted back to their own tents and their numbers were reduced to 150; this allowed the commanding officer, Captain Thomas, to leave the majority of his men in Government Camp, as the safety of the administrative enclave was the military's primary responsibility, and attack the stockaders when they were most vulnerable, and at a time when

there was reduced risk to him and his men. This doesn't seem cowardly or underhand to me: it seems like good tactics.

So why do the insurgents get to be Australian soldiers, and the professional army doesn't? Unlike the stockaders, the soldiers went into the fight to protect the citizens of the colony from a band of increasingly violent men who were actively subverting the law and shouting loudly to anyone who would listen that they would start a revolution if they could! Yes, there was violence and, yes, innocent people got caught up in the crossfire, but is that really cause to forget the men of the12th and 40th Regiments? Isn't that something that happens *everywhere*, in *every conflict*, *all the time*?! With this in mind, I think the men of the 12th and 40th Regiments have a much more robust claim than the stockaders to the title of 'Australian soldiers' but I'll leave that with you to consider.

To conclude, I'm not up here suggesting that the British army in colonial Australia were always on the right side of history (but, then again, what group ever is?), but rather that conflict is complex. It's not a comic book, and there is no single definition of an 'Australian soldier' than can be applied to past, present and future conflicts. The redcoats deserve to be remembered as they were, by the standards of their own time, for the contributions they made to this nation. We don't have to venerate them – in my opinion we really shouldn't be venerating any combat personnel, remembering is enough – but we should not be going out of our way to forget them either. Men like the Eureka Seven gave their lives for this country just as surely as the ANZACs, and we cannot continue to treat them as an embarrassing stain on our history.

Authors Note: Since this presentation, my research has revealed there were only six soldiers who were definitively killed at or as a result of Eureka.