

STANDING ASTRIDE TWO WORLDS

The Native Police Corps of colonial New South Wales 1837- 1859

by
David Aspland

The relationship between the Aboriginal people of New South Wales and the New South Wales Police Force has often been strained. There were hard and brutal encounters that left many people dead or injured, mostly Aboriginal people. Yet, over time a significant number of Aboriginal people have joined the New South Wales Police Force from the earliest days of the colony, and the recruitment of Indigenous people is positively encouraged in the twenty-first century.

The involvement of Aboriginal people in policing in New South Wales, especially in the colonial period, involves many contradictions and dichotomies. The common perception of Aboriginal policing in New South Wales is that of 'black trackers' or 'policing aides' [8]. Indeed, Alexander Riley was the first Aboriginal man to be promoted to the rank of Sergeant in the NSW Police Force in 1941.

He had joined the NSW Police Force as a tracker in 1911 and performed many great feats of tracking. He was also awarded the Kings Police and Fire Services Medal for distinguished service in 1943 (*London Gazette* 1 January 1943 p54, described as Sergeant Tracker - *Editor*) before retiring in 1950. When he died at Dubbo in 1970, the local police formed a Guard of Honour at his funeral [16].

Another famous Aboriginal tracker, Bill Robinson, retired from the NSW Police Force in 1961 after forty-seven years service. In 1914 he took over the role his father held for thirty years prior as police tracker in the Casino/Grafton area.

But the role of Indigenous people in policing in New South Wales is much more complex than that. There is evidence of a strong and committed involvement by many Aboriginal people in providing effective policing in many areas since the earliest Colonial times.

However, there is also a dark side to this story with the brutal depredations of the 'Native Police' in early New South Wales, especially in the area of the Northern Districts that was to become Queensland in 1859, being well documented. Native Police troopers, under the command of white officers and NCOs, are known to have taken part in a number of massacres of Aboriginal people. These massacres may not have been able to be successfully carried out without the bush skills of the Native Police [4].

This part of the saga is a sad tale of the classic 'divide and conquer' approach with Aboriginals from one area being used by colonial police forces to hunt down and eliminate Aboriginals in another area [13]. The fragmented nature of Aboriginal tribal life meant that no unified response was able to be made to the white man's encroachments and little was able to be gained in the way of concessions to their way of life.

The story of Aboriginal involvement in policing begins in another area of New South Wales in the late 1830s. This was the Port Phillip District that was later to

become Victoria in 1853. Fels [5] describes this venture into formal policing by a number of Aboriginals as a positive act of cooperation on their part, and paints a picture somewhat different to the conventional view of these men being traitors or turncoats to their race.

She notes that there was a lack of hostility between the Native Police and members of their families and that there were signs of positive interaction between them and their white officers. Indeed, the Aboriginal members of the Corps appeared to relish the status, influence and power that membership of the Corps brought them and their families [12].

The idea of raising a Native Police Corps seems to have been the brainchild of the British penal reformer and former Governor of Norfolk Island, Alexander Maconochie who foresaw the use of Aboriginal men as native troops and police along the lines of Indian sepoy. There were also the other aspects of 'civilizing' the Aboriginal troopers by virtue of their contact with white Officers and NCOs and the possibility of introducing them to Christianity. Apparently the latter aspect was singularly unsuccessful with the Aboriginals treating the white

Christian missionaries with good humoured cynicism [12].

About the same time as Maconochie was making his proposal to Governor Bourke, a young man from Cape Colony named Christiaan de Villiers, who had military experience with native troops in South Africa, was making a similar proposal to



Captain William Lonsdale who was the Magistrate in the Port Phillip area.

Tensions between the local Aboriginal people and the white settlers had risen after some white settlers had been killed by local Aboriginals. This action had been provoked by the depredations of a number of white convicts acting as shepherds and sealers. Also squatters were demanding some form of police action against Aboriginal people who were taking food, as the squatter's cattle and sheep destroyed the balanced ecology that was their food source.

The Aboriginal people could not understand why the land they had occupied for thousands of years was suddenly fenced off and they were 'trespassers'. Lonsdale was looking for a solution before the situation deteriorated.

In mid-1837, permission was given by Governor Bourke in Sydney for the raising of the Corps in the Port Phillip District as a way of reducing these tensions. De Villiers was made the first Commandant of the Corps and its headquarters was sited at Nerre Nerre Warren (on the site of the present day Dandenong Police Station and Court House) near Melbourne.

Troopers were recruited from three local tribal groups, the Boongerongs, the Waverongs and the Dangerongs. Initially the Corps did not receive arms or appointments.

This Corps of 1837 failed because of interference of local landowners and the Christian missionaries, and for a short period was placed under the control of local missionaries. However, with the support of the new Governor, Gipps, the

Corps was reconstituted in 1838 and this time it was armed and started to receive uniforms and training.

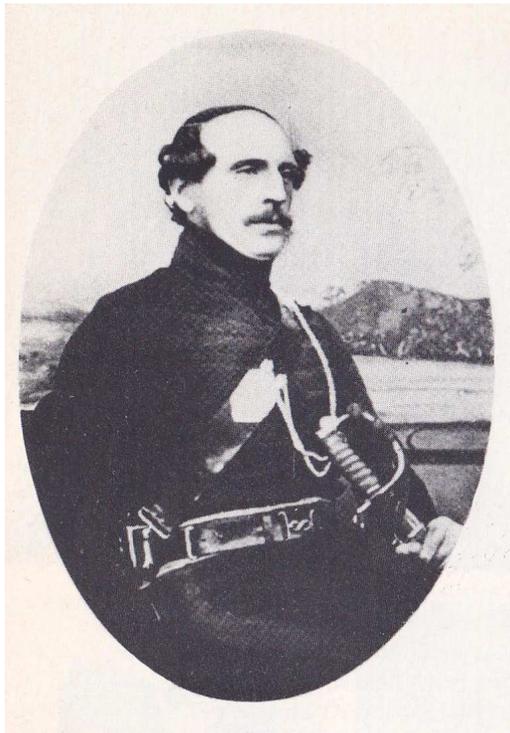
The arms were initially a mixture of obsolescent flintlocks, together with swords, and the uniforms were military surplus from stores in Sydney, but the troopers soon turned them into a smart dark green uniform with red facings.

On patrol, the troopers tended to wear civilian clothes more suited to the rigours of the bush to preserve their hard to replace, dress uniforms. Also the woollen European style uniforms caused great discomfort for people not used to wearing them.

There were some successful expeditions into the Goulburn River area following the murder of a shepherd and spearing of sheep by local Aboriginal people, and this gained credibility for the Corps. But it was soon apparent that the Aboriginal troopers were more loyal to their clans and tribes than they were to the white man's idea of policing. In the eyes of the white community this hampered the effectiveness of the Corps and so this Corps of 1838 also failed.

During 1839 there were attempts to enlist Aboriginal men into the police but not as a separate Corps. This had limited success and was widely viewed by the Aboriginal people as an attempt to control the tribal groups. There was some success in this recruitment but the Port Phillip District remained subject to bouts of lawlessness with the Border and Mounted Police contingents not being seen as effectual.

In late 1841, a group of local Aboriginal men, including a number of former members of the Native Police Corps volunteered to help capture a group of Tasmanian Aboriginals who had been involved in the murder of some whalers. At the same time a man with some military training and a vaguely aristocrat background, Henry Dana, emerged to command the new Corps.



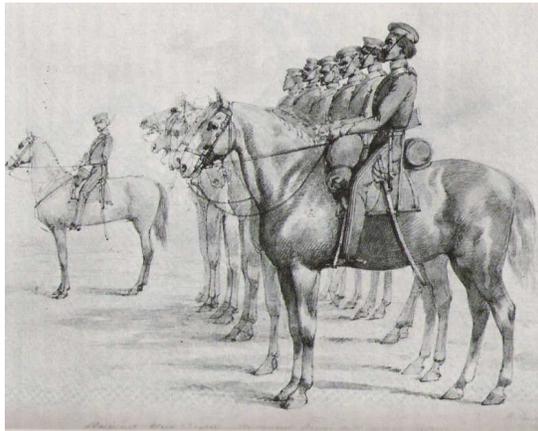
Dana came to the Port Phillip District from England, via Van Diemens Land, and acquired the title 'Captain' en route. Dana had lobbied the local authorities and had been given command of the new Corps with the rank of Commandant of Native Police.

In February of 1842 Dana proceeded to swear in and equip his twenty-three Aboriginal troopers at Nerre Nerre Warren. He was astute enough to gain the approval of the local Aboriginal Chief, Billibolarly, who agreed that his men could serve, but outside his country. Thus Aboriginal men were not going to be used to police their own people, although this limited their ability to carry out protracted patrols, as the troopers often got homesick for their own country. Ironically, Billibolarly was later to become an ardent opponent of the Native Police Corps when he saw the effects of drink and other vices on his troopers and people.

Dana was also astute enough to recognize that a different style of discipline would be needed for his new Corps, so he tended to be very easy going by European standards, but he suited the discipline to cultural understandings of his men. He provided for the families of his troopers in his scale of rations, allowed them to use their service firearms for hunting and tolerated their unauthorized absences to a large degree [12].

In another tacit recognition of their status, the Native Police Corps was a mounted unit with the troopers acquiring riding skills over time and being recognized for the exceptional care they took of their animals. The provision of uniforms and horses gave the troopers significant social status in the nineteenth century colonial world of Port Phillip (although this social status did not extend to inclusion into white society).

Any idea of equality also did not extend to pay. Initially the troopers were not paid except in the form of gratuities for good performance. Later only Aboriginal NCOs were paid [12].



The Native Police *were* paid in the end, but in 1853, when the Port Phillip Corps disbanded, a white Police Constable was receiving 2s 9d per day whereas a Native Police trooper received 3d per day [11/23].

In January 1854 the pay of a trooper in the Northern Districts (now Queensland) Corps was raised to 5d per day and in August 1858 to 8d per day. [17]

However Dana was able to mould a very effective body of police over the coming years [1;2;6]. It did have one unforeseen effect though.

Henry Dana died of pneumonia in November 1852 after a patrol pursuing bushrangers. Shortly after his death the Corps had largely dissolved. There were several reasons for this: the rapid decline of the Aboriginal population in the Port Phillip District; the formation of the Victoria Police in 1851; the gold rush, and Dana's troopers' loyalty was to the man, and not to the police [1;2]. But it was a sign of his standing with his current and former troopers that over forty of them attended his funeral in December 1852.

The effectiveness of the Native Police Corps was well noted at the time with the Corps' performance being seen as superior to many white units in general policing as well as bush craft [1;6;14]. They were noted for their dependability, integrity, loyalty and intelligence.

Also, when gold fever depleted the ranks of the white police forces in the early 1850s it was the Native Police Corps which was one of the first to carry out duties on the goldfield [7;11].

It was not popular in this role, as it involved collecting licence fees from white miners, which led to a lot of tension with Aboriginal troopers trying to impose government policy on white miners [2]. They found themselves being referred to a

'Satanic Battalion of Black Guards' and were soon withdrawn to be replaced by white police [12/49].

As well as carrying out duty on the goldfields, the Corps was employed in a range of policing tasks including gold and mail escorts, exploring stock routes into the Snowy Mountains from Port Phillip, tracking down escaped convicts, providing guards for the new Pentridge stockade, at times acting as Escort to the Lieutenant Governor and providing ceremonial contingents at a number of public occasions, such as the opening of the Prince's Bridge, Melbourne in 1848. There are a significant number of contemporary artworks that show Aboriginal troopers carrying out a range of policing duties, including escorting white prisoners [1;2].



Over 140 Aboriginal men served in the Port Phillip Corps over its ten year history, leaving a very enviable record of service in very difficult times and circumstances (14).

Yet this record has been largely overshadowed by the record of another Native Police Corps raised in the Northern Districts of New South Wales in the late 1840s. This Corps continued its existence

in what became Queensland after 1859 and acquired a totally different reputation to the Port Phillip Corps.

Following on from the success of the Port Phillip Corps, this Corps was raised for service in northern New South Wales in 1849 after the disbandment of the Border Police in 1846. The Border Police had been raised largely from military convicts in 1839 following the Myall Creek massacre. It was largely ineffective.

In the years between 1846 and 1849 the policing system was based on local constables attached to local courts. This was not regarded as particularly successful, with local white settlers pressuring the colonial administration for more protection from Aboriginal people trying to protect their land from encroachment.

The clash of cultures led to deaths on both sides, and the white settlers actually withdrew from some areas. But as they returned to the disputed territories, things were about to tip very much in the white settlers' favour, leading to a vast number of deaths being inflicted on Aboriginal people.

There was very little connection between the Port Phillip Native Police Corps and the new Northern Districts Corps. The Commandant appointed was Frederick Walker and he recruited fourteen troopers in early 1849 from Aboriginal tribes in the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Edward Rivers of southern New South Wales.

After a period of training Walker led his men up the Darling River toward the Macintyre River in, what is now, the Darling Downs area of southern Queensland. He then proceeded to the Condamine area arriving in June 1849, which was 'disturbed'. The Bigambul people had been conducting a thirteen year fight against white encroachment on their lands, attacking shepherds' huts, killing a number of shepherds and 'rushing' and spearing stock. The white settlers in the area had retaliated with reprisals leading to more deaths [3;15].

With the arrival of the Native Police, within a short space of time there had a number of 'collisions' with local Aboriginal tribes, principally the Bigambul and Kamilaroi, resulting in an increasing number of Aboriginal deaths because of the superior firepower of the police weaponry.

By July 1849, the area was being noted as being 'pacified' with a large number of Bigambul people killed. The experiment was deemed 'highly successful' and 'the usefulness of the black troopers in preserving order was undoubted' [7/370].

Walker established the headquarters of the Native Police at Callandoon [3;17]. Local settler satisfaction with the actions of the Native Police was such that by early 1850 approval was given for the expansion of the Corps by another thirty-two troopers [17]. These Aboriginal troopers were again recruited from the area of what is now southern New South Wales around the Murray River.

Over the next few years, the expanded Northern Districts Corps began operating in areas other than the Darling Downs. By the end of the 1850s the area of operations of the Corps was spread over the majority of what is now south eastern Queensland and spreading up the coast to Maryborough and Wide Bay.

In 1856 the roles and duties of the Native police were defined as 'the protection of the white population on the extreme limits of the frontier districts' [17/43]. It now seems ironic that Aboriginal police were being used to protect white settlers encroaching on Aboriginal land from the Aboriginal tribes that lived there.

At its peak in 1854 the Northern Districts Corps had 136 members (119 Native troopers and seventeen white Officers and NCOs). By 1859, when the Colony of Queensland separated from New South Wales there were ninety-nine members (seventy-four Native troopers and twenty-five white Officers and NCOs).

Walker was dismissed from the Force in 1855 for irregularities regarding rations, pay and equipment, together with alcohol abuse. Although seen as a hard disciplinarian regarding his troopers and the local Aboriginal population, there were perceptions that the standard of the Native Police deteriorated after this time [17]. With this deterioration came an increasing death toll in the Aboriginal populations policed by the Corps.

At times the Aboriginal people struck back, such as the massacre of the Fraser family at Hornet Bank in October 1857, by the Yeeman people, in which eleven white men, women and children died. This provoked a violent reaction from the local white population and police, which led to many



more indiscriminate Aboriginal deaths with the Yeeman people practically being wiped out in the aftermath, in what seemed a common reaction to Aboriginal aggression towards white settlers [4;17].



During this time the Native Police were known for their ruthless pursuit of Aboriginal people in their areas of operations with their white Officers and NCOs providing little in the way of control, or actually participating in the massacre [7]. The Aboriginals were regarded as warlike and treacherous and their subjugation by force of arms was regarded as imperative [7].

The protection provided by the deep bush for the local Aboriginal people was no longer there. During these pursuits, Native Police troopers were known to slip out of their uniforms and taking nothing but their rifles, cartridge belts, knives and tomahawks, they would surround and attack Aboriginal campsites indiscriminately, killing men, women and children in a colonial war of extermination on the frontier far from the control of the Police Administration in Sydney, but tacitly approved of by the white community around them. This was evidenced on a number of occasions and particularly in the attack on Fraser Island in December 1851 in which about 100 Aboriginal people died [4].

Ironically, the reaction of the Sydney administration in severely applying British justice to those responsible for the Myall Creek massacre in 1838 (when seven men had been hanged as an example for a particularly savage massacre of about forty Aboriginal men, women and children) had simply convinced the frontier settlers and police to carry on as before, by simply making sure that things were kept very quiet and out of sight [4]. Euphemisms such as 'collision' and 'dispersal' were used to signify massacre. Everyone shot was 'resisting arrest, armed or attempting to escape' [4;19].

On Monday 6 June 1859, Queensland became a separate colony from New South Wales and under the terms of separation, in December 1859, all members of the Native Police serving within the boundaries of the new colony were taken into the service of Queensland. As most of the original troopers had already returned to their own country, to be replaced by local recruits (which had only served to exacerbate local tribal enmities), this was not a great issue for the personnel.

The Native Police continued to serve in Queensland into the twentieth century with at least one detachment at Coen providing policing services to the Cape York Peninsular as late as 1913 [9]. A new chapter in the history of the Native Police had begun.

With the Native Police being taken into the service of Queensland, the formal employment of Native Police units in New South Wales ceased, as the 'frontier', for which the Native Police Corps model of policing was designed and suited, was now part of another colony. With that a pioneering part of New South Wales Police history closed. New South Wales did continue to employ Aboriginal trackers from time to time but never again were specific units of Aboriginal police raised.

In the final assessment, the Native Police showed great promise at the time, as was evidenced by the performance of the Port Phillip Corps, which showed that a cooperative venture in policing could be achieved, albeit within the strictures of a colonial environment. The performance of this Corps was not perfect and there were questions raised as to how effective it was, but contemporary assessments often rated the performance and standards of the Port Phillip Corps higher than many contemporary white police units in the area.

Certainly, there was an absence of the widespread killings and hostility that were commonplace in the Queensland area [4;11]. Much of this now seems to have been 'airbrushed' out of more modern historical accounts, and forgotten.

However, what is also graphically shown is just how brutal and pragmatic colonial policing could be, as was evidenced by the Northern Districts Corps that was deployed in what is now Queensland. The excesses and depredations of this Corps are what is now remembered when the phrase 'Native Police' is used, and it is the behaviour of this Corps that is most often cited in the historical accounts and remembered by Indigenous people today [3;13;15;17;18].

Even a century ago, the behaviour of this Corps towards the Aboriginal people of the Northern Districts was regarded as a 'dark blot' on the pages of history with the policy 'to kill and, if possible, exterminate the natives' being a policy followed for many years. [7/371].

In the twenty-first century, there are specific recruitment incentives and assistance for Indigenous people who wish to join the New South Wales Police Force, and these people are deployed as part of the police force as a whole. There are also specific initiatives aimed at improving the cooperation between the New South Wales Police Force and local Indigenous communities, such as Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs) who are Indigenous persons whose role is to facilitate lines of communication between the New South Wales Police and the Aboriginal community.

There is much historical baggage, such as the role of police in enacting government policy in the 'Stolen Generations' that has made the relationship between police and Indigenous people difficult. In June, 1998 the then Commissioner of the New South Wales Police Service, Mr Peter Ryan QPM, offered an apology for the past actions of the New South Wales Police Force in regards to Indigenous people, as part of an overall move toward Reconciliation. The past needs to be remembered so that the same mistakes are not made in the future.

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WHO WAS THE YOUNGEST CHIEF CONSTABLE?

It was always thought that the youngest Chief Constable ever appointed to a British police force was

Frank Gallimore Ward. He was baptised on Sunday 29 November 1857 in Cambridge. The 1881 Census records him as being a Detective Sergeant of the Leeds City Police, and in 1884, he was appointed as the Chief Constable of Lancaster Borough Police. This would thus make him a Chief Constable in his twenty-sixth year. He retired in 1902, and died in February 1938 in Leeds.



However, further research brings up the name of **Richard Reader Harris**. He was an Inspector in the Metropolitan Police, and was appointed as Chief Constable of Worcestershire, taking his Oath of Office on Monday 16 December 1839. Richard Harris was baptised on Sunday 6 March 1814 in Streatham, thus making him twenty-five and nine months approximately (assuming he was baptised a few days after his birth, as was the custom in those days) on his appointment as Chief Constable. He died in January 1892 in Bournemouth.

This is how research stands at the moment, unless, of course, any member knows differently.

