



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Torres Strait soldiers stage stay-at-home strikes to demand full pay and an end to discrimination in the army, 1943

Time period notes: World War II - 23 December 1943

1943

to: 1943

Country: Australia

Location City/State/Province: Horn Island

Goals:

- Equal Pay

- Access to Alcohol

- Allowances

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

Methods in 4th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

Methods in 5th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

Methods in 6th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

Notes on Methods:

This occurred over one day and only one method was used

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

No explicit leaders but Corporal Anu was the individual responsible for having the initial dialogue with Lieutenant Linklater about pay concerns. When the issue was not resolved, the sit-down strike began.

Partners:

N/A

External allies:

N/A

Involvement of social elites:

N/A

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- B and C
- Companies A

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 4 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Australian Army

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

N/A

Campaigner violence:

N/A

Repressive Violence:

N/A

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

While they ended having their pay doubled, it wasn't until 1980 where the full payment reparations were made.

South of Papua New Guinea (PNG) lies the Torres Strait. The strait consists of 274 islands, 14 of which are inhabited by a predominantly Melanesian population. Based on the 2016 census, the total population of the Torres Strait is 4,514 compared to an estimated size of 1,800 in 1943. Torres Strait Islanders are an ethnic minority in Australia and, historically, have been discriminated against by the Australian government. This is important to note because from the turn of the 20th century, a civil rights movement began in the Australian military to ensure Torres Strait Islanders received fair treatment as soldiers and citizens. Nearly 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders served in World War I leading to a sharp divide between activists over whether indigenous people should serve in the military.



Torres Strait Soldiers on Horn Island ([Wikimedia Commons](#) [3])

Photo credit: See page for author [Public domain]

William Cooper, a prominent Aboriginal activist, stood against indigenous people joining the military as he staunchly believed that serving with the oppressors would not aid aboriginals in gaining equal rights. Aboriginal and indigenous peoples pushed to enlist in the army and serve, hoping that, by showing the dedication to serve their country, they would be treated as equals and subsequently aid the civil rights effort.

Up until 1940, only people of European descent qualified to join the military. Before this, minorities who served had secretly entered into service. By the start of World War II, due to increasing fears of Japanese invasion, the government eased restrictions on the enlistment of indigenous peoples, and nearly 3,000 people enlisted. The government estimates that every single eligible Torres Strait Islander joined the military after the restrictions were lifted. Their pay, however, was a fraction of their white

compatriots'. Using Kay Saunders' book, *Inequalities of Sacrifice: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour in Northern Australia during the Second World War*, a table on page 139 provides a comparison of wages for different ranks and races. For example, a Torres Straits Corporal earned 15 pounds per month compared to a Papuan corporal earning 30 pounds per month.

This difference in pay contributed to three companies of Torres Strait soldiers initiating a two-day protest on 23 December 1943 on Horn Island in order to gain equal pay compared to white soldiers. While only earning one-third pay compared to whites, Torres Strait Islanders were compensated at a higher rate than Aboriginal soldiers. The army viewed Torres Strait soldiers equals in combat with white soldiers, while they considered aboriginal soldiers liabilities.

"These Islanders are a fit, strong looking lot of men. They look fine and savage in uniform. They are as keen as mustard and can give us lessons in drilling and marching. I would rather fight with them than against them. They are very quiet mannered, seem quite content to work all day. If any trouble starts I should like to have a few of the "boys" handy."

Key concerns of the Torres Strait soldiers related to lower pay, lack of access to alcohol and allowances for basic housing and food that their Malay and white colleagues received. Concerns over pay existed before, even though the Australian government had approved allowances for Torres Strait soldiers, they were never given. In a letter to the Prime Minister, Premier Smith argued:

"It is considered that if these allowances were granted, voluntary enlistment of Thursday Island men would be encouraged if it be decided to proceed with further enlistments. A large percentage of them has a dependent mother, father or some other relative and it is characteristic of this race that they consistently support their dependents."

On 23 December 1943, on a patrol into Japanese territory, Torres Strait soldiers and white soldiers sustained casualties from a skirmish with Japanese soldiers. Upon returning to Horn Island, Corporal Anu spoke to the platoon commander, Lieutenant Linklater, about his concerns of not receiving more pay for the same service as their peers. This concern was sent up the chain of command to Captain Godschalk, the commanding officer of D company. While Captain Godschalk wrote and submitted a report, he said that nothing could be done.

Influenced by the nonviolent maritime protests used in 1939 by Torres Strait Islanders utilized similar methods during the military sit-in. On 30 December 1943, two companies of Torres Light Infantry Battalion engaged in a stay-at-home strike and the third company joined them after. The protest consisted of the soldiers remaining in their quarters and not doing anything that was asked of them as soldiers by their commanding officers.

The protest ended the next day after Major Swain spoke to the soldiers about passing their request further up the chain of command. At this point, the army considered the actions of the three companies to be mutiny but did not charge any of the company members.

On 1 February 1944, a conference came together to discuss the context of the pay-raise request. It was decided that non-white enlisted men should receive the same pay. However, because of concerns related to cost, the council decided to raise pay to two-thirds of what white soldiers earned. The army believed anything higher would lead white soldiers to file grievances. The council also granted the Torres Strait soldiers access to alcohol.

The Australian government made full repatriations to the families of Torres Strait soldiers who had served in World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars throughout the 1980s. While the stay-at-home strike was limited in scope, it resulted in some concessions being granted and laid a foundation from which Torres Strait soldiers could gain further recognition for serving their country.

Research Notes

Influences:

1939 Maritime Strike by Torres Strait Islanders

Sources:

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Khan B. Shairani 24/02/2019

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Links:

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-indigenous-participants>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>

[3] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TSLI_\(AWM_119169\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TSLI_(AWM_119169).jpg)