

NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP

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Part 1 of Australian Frontier Wars Traditional Aboriginal Warfare

According to the historian John Connor, traditional Aboriginal warfare should be examined on its own terms and not by definitions of war derived from other societies. Aboriginal people did not have distinct ideas of war and peace, and traditional warfare was common, taking place between groups on an ongoing basis, with great rivalries being maintained over extended periods of time. The aims and methods of traditional Aboriginal warfare arose from their small autonomous social groupings. The fighting of a war to conquer enemy territory was not only beyond the resources of any of these Aboriginal groupings, it was contrary to a culture that was based on



Aboriginal Warrior

spiritual connections to a specific territory. Consequently, conquering another group's territory may have been seen to be of little benefit. Ultimately, traditional Aboriginal warfare was aimed at continually asserting the superiority of one's own group over its neighbours, rather than conquering, destroying or displacing neighbouring groups. As the explorer Edward John Eyre observed in 1845, whilst Aboriginal culture was "so varied in detail", it was "similar in general outline and character", and Connor observes that there were sufficient similarities in weapons and warfare of these groups to allow generalisations about traditional Aboriginal warfare to be made.

In 1840, the American-Canadian ethnologist Horatio Hale identified four types of Australian Aboriginal traditional warfare; formal battles, ritual trials, raids for women, and revenge attacks. Formal battles involved fighting between two groups of warriors, which ended after a few warriors had been killed or wounded, due to the need to ensure the ongoing survival of the groups. Such battles were usually fought to settle grievances between groups and could take some time to prepare. Ritual trials involved the application of customary law to one or more members of a group who had committed a crime such as murder or assault. Weapons were used to inflict injury, and the criminal was expected to stand their ground and accept the punishment. Some Aboriginal men had effective property rights over women and raids for women were essentially about transferring property from one group to another to ensure the survival of a group through women's food-gathering and childbearing roles. The final type of Aboriginal traditional warfare described by Hale was the revenge attack, undertaken by one group against another to punish the group for the actions of one of its members,

such as a murder. In some cases, these involved sneaking into the opposition camp at night and silently killing one or more members of the group.

Connor describes traditional Aboriginal warfare as both limited and universal. It was limited in terms of:

- the number of members of each group, which restricted the number of warriors in any given engagement;
- the fact that their non-hierarchical social order militated against one leader combining many groups into a single force; and
- duration, due to social groups needing to regularly hunt and forage for food.

Traditional Aboriginal warfare was also universal, as the entire community participated in warfare, boys learnt to fight by playing with toy melee, (*melee pointed weapons, which cover spears, pikes and almost all pole weapons they typically have a sharp point*), and missile weapons, and every initiated male became a warrior. Women were sometimes participants in warfare as warriors and as encouragers on the sidelines of formal battles, but more often as victims.

While the selection and design of weapons varied from group to group, Aboriginal warriors used a combination of melee and missile weapons in traditional warfare. Spears, clubs and shields were commonly used in hand-to-hand fighting, with different types of shields favoured during exchanges of missiles and in close combat, and spears (often used in conjunction with spear throwers), boomerangs and stones used as missile weapons.

Available weapons had a significant influence over the tactics used during traditional Aboriginal warfare. The limitations of spears and clubs meant that surprise was paramount during raids for women and revenge attacks and encouraged ambushing and night attacks. These tactics were offset by countermeasures such as regularly changing campsites, being prepared to extinguish camp-fires at short notice, and posting parties of warriors to cover the escape of raiders.

General History

First settlement

Initial peaceful relations between Indigenous Australians and Europeans began to be strained several months after the First Fleet established Sydney on 26 January 1788. The local Indigenous people became suspicious when the British began to clear land and catch fish, and in May 1788 five convicts were killed and an Indigenous man was wounded. The British grew increasingly concerned when groups of up to three hundred Indigenous people were sighted at the outskirts of the settlement in June. Despite this, Phillip attempted to avoid conflict, and forbade reprisals after being speared in 1790. He did, however, authorise two punitive expeditions in December 1790 after his huntsman was killed by an Indigenous warrior named Pemulwuy, but neither was successful.



Detail of an artwork by the Port Jackson Painter that shows the spearing of Arthur Phillip, 1790

Coastal and Inland Expansion

During the 1790s and early 19th century the British established small settlements along the Australian coastline. These settlements initially occupied small amounts of land, and there was little conflict between the settlers and Indigenous peoples. Fighting broke out when the settlements expanded, however, disrupting traditional Indigenous food-gathering activities, and subsequently followed the pattern of European settlement in Australia for the next 150 years. Whilst the reactions of the Aboriginal inhabitants to the sudden arrival of British settlers were varied, they became inevitably hostile when their presence led to competition over resources, and to the occupation of their lands. Eu-

ropean diseases decimated Indigenous populations, and the occupation or destruction of lands and food resources sometimes led to starvation. By and large neither the Europeans nor the Indigenous peoples approached the conflict in an organised sense, with the conflict more one between groups of settlers and individual tribes rather than systematic warfare, even if at times it did involve British soldiers and later formed mounted police units. Not all Indigenous Australians resisted white encroachment on their lands either, whilst many also served in mounted police units and were involved in attacks on other tribes. Settlers in turn often reacted with violence, resulting in a number of indiscriminate massacres. European activities provoking significant conflict included pastoral squatting and gold rushes.

Unequal Weaponry

Opinions differ on whether to depict the conflict as one-sided and mainly perpetrated by Europeans on Indigenous Australians or not. Although tens of thousands more Indigenous Australians died than Europeans, some cases of mass killing were not massacres but quasi-military defeats, and the higher death toll was also caused by the technological and logistic advantages enjoyed by Europeans. Indigenous tactics varied, but were mainly based on pre-existing hunting and fighting practices—utilising spears, clubs and other simple weapons. Unlike the indigenous peoples of New Zealand and North America, in the main they failed to adapt to meet the challenge of the Europeans, and although there were some instances of individuals and groups acquiring and using firearms, this was not widespread. In reality the Indigenous peoples were never a serious military threat, regardless of how much the settlers may have feared them. On occasions large groups attacked Europeans in open

terrain and a conventional battle ensued, during which the Aboriginal residents would attempt to use superior numbers to their advantage. This could sometimes be effective, with reports of them advancing in crescent formation in an attempt to outflank and surround their opponents, waiting out the first volley of shots and then hurling their spears whilst the settlers reloaded. Usually, however, such open warfare proved more costly for the Indigenous Australians than the Europeans.



Fighting between one of Burke and Wills' rescue parties and Indigenous Australians at Bulla, Queensland in 1861

Central to the success of the Europeans was the use of firearms, but the advantages this afforded have often been overstated. Prior to the 19th century, firearms were often cumbersome muzzle-loading, smooth-bore, single shot weapons with flint-lock mechanisms. Such weapons produced a low rate of fire, whilst suffering from a high rate of failure and were only accurate within 50 metres (160 ft). These deficiencies may have given the Aboriginal residents some advantages, allowing them to move in close and engage with spears or clubs. However, by 1850 significant advances in firearms gave the Europeans a distinct advantage, with the six-shot Colt revolver, the Snider single shot breech-loading rifle and later the Martini-Henry rifle as well as rapid-fire rifles such as the Winchester rifle, becoming available. These weapons, when used on open ground and combined with the superior mobility provided by horses to surround and engage groups of Indigenous Australians,

often proved successful. The Europeans also had to adapt their tactics to fight their fast-moving, often hidden enemies. Strategies employed included night-time surprise attacks, and positioning forces to drive Aboriginal people off cliffs or force them to retreat into rivers while attacking from both banks.

Dispersed frontiers

Fighting between Indigenous Australians and European settlers was localised, as Indigenous groups did not form confederations capable of sustained resistance. Conflict emerged as a series of violent engagements, and massacres across the continent. According to the historian Geoffrey Blainey, in Australia during the colonial period: "In a thousand isolated places there were occasional shootings and spearings. Even worse, smallpox, measles, influenza and other new diseases swept from one Aboriginal camp to another ... The main conqueror of Aborigines was to be disease and its ally, demoralisation".



Native police in 1865

British Parliamentary Report on the Aboriginals in New Holland & Van Diemen's Land 1837



NEW HOLLAND

The inhabitants of New Holland, in their original condition, have been described by travelers as the most degraded of the human race ; but it is to be feared that intercourse with Europeans has cast over their original debasement a yet deeper shade of wretchedness.

These people, unoffending as they were towards us, have, as might have been expected, suffered in an aggravated degree from the planting amongst them of our penal settlements. In the formation of these settlements it does not appear that the territorial rights of the natives were considered, and very little care has since been taken; to protect them from the violence or the contamination of the dregs of our countrymen.

The effects have consequently been dreadful beyond example, both in the diminution of their numbers and in their demoralization.

Many deeds of murder and violence have undoubtedly been committed by the stock-keepers (convicts in the employ of farmers in the outskirts of the colony), by the cedar cutters, and by other remote free settlers, and many natives have perished by the various military parties sent against them ; but it is not to violence only that their decrease is ascribed. This is the evidence given by Bishop Broughton.

"They do not so much retire as decay; wherever Europeans meet with them they appear to wear out, and gradually to decay : they diminish in numbers ; they appear actually to vanish from the face of the earth. I am led to apprehend that within a very limited period, a few years," (adds the Bishop), " those who are most in contact with Europeans will be utterly extinct — I will not say exterminated — but they will be extinct." As to their moral condition, the bishop says of the natives around Sydney, "They are in a state which I consider one of extreme degradation and ignorance; they are, in fact, in a situation much inferior to what I supposed them to have been before they had any communication with Europe."

And again, in his charge, "It is an awful, it is even an appalling consideration, that, after an intercourse of nearly half a century with a Christian people, these hapless human beings continue to this day in their original benighted and degraded state. I may even proceed farther, so far as to express my fears that our settlement in their country has even deteriorated a condition of existence, than which, before our interference, nothing more miserable could easily be conceived. While, as the contagion of European inter-course has extended itself among them, they gradually lose the better properties of their own character, they appear in exchange to acquire none but the most objectionable and degrading of ours."

The natives about Sydney and Paramatta are represented as in a state of wretchedness still more deplorable than those resident in the interior. "Those in the vicinity of Sydney are so completely changed, they scarcely have the same pursuits now; they go about the streets begging their bread, and begging for clothing and rum. From -the diseases introduced among them, the tribes in immediate connexion with those large towns almost became extinct; not more than two or three remained, when I was last in New South Wales, of tribes which formerly consisted of 200 or 300."

A further paragraph

Hence has been generated in the minds of the injured party a deadly spirit of hatred and vengeance, which breaks out at length into deeds of atrocity, which, in their turn, make retaliation a necessary part of self-defence." It is true, that to remain passive under actual outrages, would encourage savages in their perpetration, but we regret that in any instance, punishment, which appears disproportionate, should have been inflicted. We find the natives on the Murray River mentioned as amongst the most troublesome in this quarter ; and in the summer of the year 1834 they murdered a British soldier, having in the course of the previous five years killed three other persons. In the month of October 1834 Sir James Stirling, the governor, proceeded with a party of horse to the Murray River, in search of the tribe in question.

The full report is available through a link Sovereign Union of First Nations and Peoples in Australia