

# NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP

## MINI NEWSLETTER No. 26

### Part 2 of Australian Frontier Wars

## Tasmania - The Black War and the Black Line

### *Among our deadliest wars*

*Tasmania's Black War (1824-31) was the most intense frontier conflict in Australia's history. It was a clash between the most culturally and technologically dissimilar humans to have ever come into contact. At stake was nothing less than control of the country, and the survival of a people.*

*Around 1000 lives were lost, but the loss of cultures and histories was far costlier.*

*For the first decade or more after Britain settled Tasmania in 1803, its tiny outposts on the Derwent and Tamar rivers never comprised more than a few thousand poorly equipped colonists. Most of the island remained under Aboriginal control and conflict was infrequent.*

*This invasion of tribal lands was the ultimate cause of the Black War, but it was not just the white man's presence to which Aborigines objected. There were six times as many white men in the colony as there were women, and almost none of the latter were available to frontiersmen.*

*Predictably, some of these men employed violence to procure sex with Aboriginal women and children, and this appears to have been the war's main proximate trigger.*

*As more and more colonists flooded in, Aboriginal attacks soared from 20 in 1824 to 259 in 1830. War parties torched dozens of properties plundered hundreds of homes and speared thousands of sheep and cattle. Even more devastating was the human toll: 223 colonists killed and 226 wounded.*

*This represents an annual per capita death rate two-and-a-half times higher than that of Australians in World War Two. Almost every colonist lost somebody they knew. The war's 200 or so Aboriginal survivors, exiled to Flinders Island in the early 1830s, lost nearly everyone they knew, together with their country and their way of life.*

### **Background**

Although sealers had begun commercial operations on Van Diemen's Land in late 1798, the first significant European presence on the island came five years later, with the establishment in September 1803 of a small military outpost at Risdon on the Derwent River near present-day Hobart. Several bloody encounters with local Aboriginal clans took place over the next five months, with shots fired and an Aboriginal boy seized. David Collins arrived as the colony's first lieutenant governor in February 1804 with instructions from London that any acts of violence against the Aboriginal people by Europeans were to be punished, but failed to publish those instructions, leaving no legal framework on how to deal with any violent conflict.

On 3 May 1804, alarmed soldiers from Risdon fired grapeshot from a carronade on a group of about 100 Aboriginal people after an encounter at a farm, while settlers and convicts fired rifles, pistols and muskets in support. Magistrate Robert Knopwood told a subsequent inquiry into the so-called Risdon massacre that five or six Aboriginal people had been killed, but other witnesses claimed as many as 50 men, women and children had died, with 30 bodies later burned or buried to extinguish the odour as they decomposed.

A wave of violence erupted during a drought in 1806–7 as tribes in both the north and south of the island killed or wounded several Europeans in conflicts sparked by the competition for game, while explorer and naval officer John Oxley referred in an 1810 report to the "many atrocious cruelties" inflicted on Aboriginal people by convict bushrangers in the north, which in turn led to black attacks on solitary white hunters.

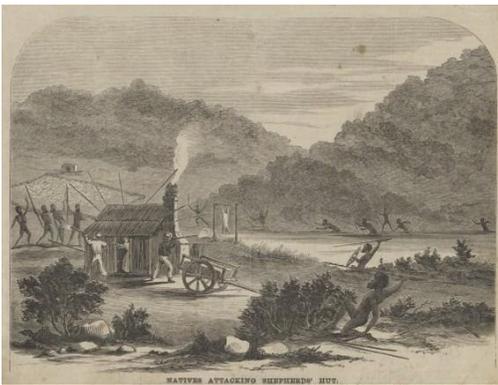
The arrival of 600 colonists from Norfolk Island between 1807 and 1813 increased tensions as they established farms along the River Derwent and east and west of Launceston, occupying 10 percent of Van Diemen's Land. By 1814 12,700ha of land was under cultivation, with 5000 cattle and 38,000 sheep. The Norfolk Islanders used

violence to stake their claim on the land, attacking Aboriginal camps at night, slaughtering parents and abducting the orphaned children as their servants. The attacks prompted retaliatory raids on settlers' cattle herds in the southeast. Between 1817 and 1824 the colonial population rose from 2000 to 12,600 and in 1823 alone more than 1000 land grants totaling 175,704ha were made to new settlers; by that year Van Diemen's Land's sheep population had reached 200,000 and the so-called Settled Districts accounted for 30 per cent of the island's total land area. The rapid colonisation transformed traditional kangaroo hunting grounds into farms with grazing livestock as well as fences, hedges and stone walls, while police and military patrols were increased to control the convict farm labourers.

Over the first two decades of settlement Aboriginal people launched at least 57 attacks on white settlers, punctuating a general calm, but by 1820 the violence was becoming markedly more frequent, with one Russian explorer reporting that year that "the natives of Tasmania live in a state of perpetual hostility against the Europeans". From the mid-1820s, the number of attacks initiated by both whites and blacks rose sharply. It was reported the main reasons for settler attacks on Aboriginal people were revenge, killing for sport, sexual desire for women and children and suppression of the native threat. Van Diemen's Land had an enormous gender imbalance, with male colonists outnumbering females six to one in 1822 and the ratio as high as 16 to one among the convict population. The "voracious appetite" for native women was the most important trigger for the Black War. Sex continued to be a central motivation for attacking natives until around 1828, by which time killing the enemy had taken priority over raping them.

### **Crisis Years 1825-1831**

From 1825 to 1828, the number of native attacks more than doubled each year, raising panic among settlers. By 1828, says Clements, colonists had no doubt they were fighting a war—"but this was not a conventional war, and the enemy could not be combated by conventional means. The blacks were not one people, but rather a number of disparate tribes. They had no home base and no recognisable command structure."



**Tasmanian Aboriginals attacking a shepherd's hut**

George Arthur, Governor of the colony since May 1824, had issued a proclamation on his arrival that placed Aboriginal people under the protection of British law and threatened prosecution and trial for Europeans who continued to "wantonly destroy" them. Arthur sought to establish a "native institution" for Aboriginal people and in September 1826 expressed a hope that the trial and subsequent hanging of two Aboriginal people arrested for the spearing of three colonists earlier that year would "not only prevent further atrocities ... but lead to a conciliatory line of conduct". But between September and November 1826 six more colonists were murdered. Among them was George Taylor Junior, a "respectable settler" from Campbell Town, whose body was found "transfixed with many spears, and his head dreadfully shattered with blows, inflicted either with stones or waddies." The *Colonial Times* newspaper, in response, demanded a drastic change of official policy, urging the forcible removal of all Aboriginal people from the Settled Districts to an island in the Bass Strait. It warned: "Self-defence is

the first law of nature. The government must remove the natives—if not, they will be hunted down like wild beasts, and destroyed!"

Responding to the rising panic, Arthur on 29 November 1826 issued a government notice setting out the legal conditions under which the colonists could kill Aboriginal people when they attacked settlers or their property.

Over the summer of 1826–7 clans from the Big River, Oyster Bay and North Midlands nations speared a number of stock-keepers on farms and made it clear that they wanted the settlers and their sheep and cattle to move from their kangaroo hunting grounds. Settlers responded vigorously, resulting in many mass-killings, though this was poorly reported at the time. On 8 December 1826 a group led by Kickerterpoller threatened a farm overseer at Bank Hill farm at Orielson, near Richmond; the following day soldiers from the 40th Regiment killed 14 Aboriginal people from the Oyster Bay nation and captured and jailed another nine, including Kickerterpoller. In April 1827 two shepherds were killed at Hugh Murray's farm at Mount Augustus near Campbell Town, south of Launceston, and a party of settlers with a detachment of the 40th Regiment launched a reprisal attack at dawn on an undefended Aboriginal camp, killing as many as 70 Aboriginal men, women and children. In March and April several settlers and convict servants were killed and a pursuit party avenged one of the incidents in a dawn raid

in which "they fired volley after volley in among the Blackfellows ... they reported killing some two score (40)." In May 1827 a group of Oyster Bay Aboriginal people killed a stock-keeper at Great Swanport near Swansea and a party of soldiers, field police, settlers and stock-keepers launched a night raid on the culprits' camp. A report noted: "Volley after volley of ball cartridge was poured in upon the dark groups surrounding the little campfires. The number slain was considerable."

In a letter to colonial officials in London in April 1828, Arthur admitted:

"We are undoubtedly the first aggressors, and the desperate characters amongst the prisoner population, who have from time to time absconded into the woods, have no doubt committed the greatest outrages upon the natives, and these ignorant beings, incapable of discrimination, are now filled with enmity and revenge against

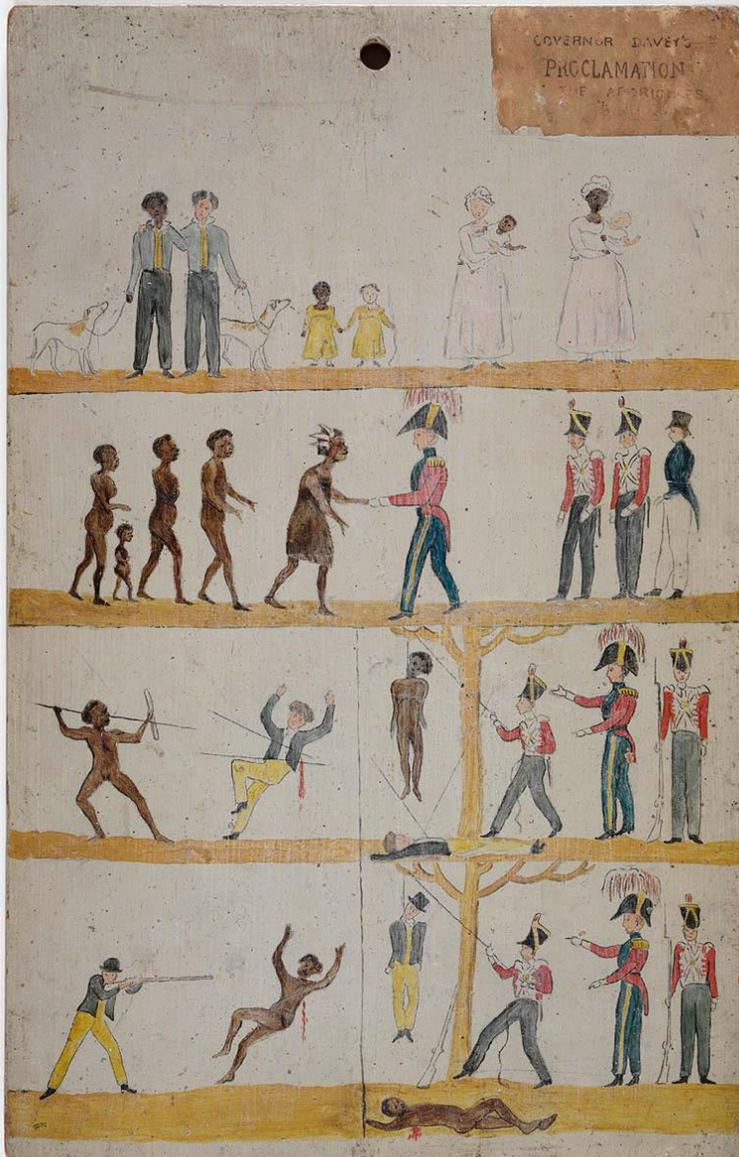
the whole body of white inhabitants. It is perhaps at this time in vain to trace the cause of the evil which exists; my duty is plainly to remove its effects; and there does not appear any practicable method of accomplishing this measure, short of entirely prohibiting the Aborigines from entering the settled districts ..." Arthur enforced the border by deploying almost 300 troops from the 40th and 57th Regiments at 14 military posts along the frontier and within the Settled Districts. The tactic appeared to deter Aboriginal attacks; through the winter of 1828 few Aboriginal people appeared in the Settled Districts, and those that did were driven back by military parties. Among them were at least 16 undefended Oyster Bay people who were killed in July at their encampment in the Eastern Tiers by a detachment of the 40th Regiment.

### Martial law, November 1828

Any hopes of peace in the Settled Districts were dashed in spring. Between 22 August and 29 October 15 colonists died in 39 Aboriginal attacks—about one every two days—as the Oyster Bay and Big River clans launched raids on stock huts, while Ben Lomond and North clans burned down stock huts along the Nile and Meander rivers in the east and west. From early October Oyster Bay warriors also began killing white women and children. Galvanised by the escalation of violence, Arthur called a meeting of Van Diemen's Land's Executive Council—comprising himself, the chief justice and the colonial treasurer—and on 1 November declared martial law against the Aboriginal people in the Settled Districts, who were now "open enemies of the King".

Martial law would remain in force for more than three years, the longest period of martial law in Australian history.

Arthur then established military patrols or "pursuing parties" of eight to 10 men from the 39th, 40th and 63rd Regiments who were ordered to remain in the field for about two weeks at a time, scouring the Settled Districts for Aboriginal people, whom they should capture or shoot. By March 1829, 23 military parties, a total of about 200 armed soldiers, were



**Proclamation board labelled "Governor Davey's Proclamation" painted in Van Diemen's Land about 1830, in the time of Governor Arthur. Nailed to trees, proclamation boards were designed to show that colonists and Aboriginal people were equal before the law, and they depicted a policy of friendship and equal justice which did not exist at the height of the Black War.**

scouring the Settled Districts, mainly intent on killing, rather than capturing, their quarry. Aboriginal people were killed in groups of as large as 10 at a time, mainly in dawn raids on their camps

The Aboriginal attacks fueled settlers' anger and a craving for revenge, the primary emotion colonists experienced was fear, ranging from a constant unease to paralysing terror. He noted: "Everybody on the frontier was afraid, all the time."

Aboriginal people maintained their attacks on settlers, killing 19 colonists between August and December 1829—the total for the year was 33, six more than for 1828. Among the white victims was a servant burned to death in a house at Bothwell and a settler mutilated. But the white response was even more vigorous, with the report after one expedition noting "a terrible slaughter" resulting from an overnight raid on a camp. In late February 1830 Arthur introduced a bounty of £5 for every captured Aboriginal and £2 per child, and also sought a greater military presence, trying to halt the departure to India of the last detachment of the 40th Regiment and requesting reinforcements from the 63rd Regiment in Western Australia, but without success. In April he also advised London that a significant boost to the convict population in remote frontier areas would help protect settlers and explicitly asked that all convict transport ships be diverted to Van Diemen's Land.

### **North-west conflict**

Violence in the island's north-west, where the colonists were servants of the Van Diemen's Land Company, erupted in 1825, fueled by disputes over Aboriginal women, who were often violated or abducted, and the destruction of kangaroo stocks. An escalating cycle of violence broke out in 1827 after white shepherds attempted to force themselves on black women; a shepherd was speared and more than 100 sheep killed in retribution and in turn a white party launched a dawn attack on an Aboriginal campsite, killing 12. The conflict led to the Cape Grim massacre of 10 February 1828 in which shepherds armed with muskets ambushed up to 30 Aboriginal people as they collected shellfish at the foot of a cliff.

### **The Black Line**

Vigilante gangs of soldiers and settlers avenged Aboriginal attacks by killing men, women and children. In 1830 A military operation known as the 'Black Line' was launched against the Aboriginal people remaining in the settled districts. Every able-bodied male colonist convict or free, was to form a human chain across the settled districts, moving for three weeks south and east in a pincer movement, until the people were cornered on the Tasman Peninsula.

The Black line captured only an old man and a boy, but succeeded in clearing the remaining Aboriginal people out of the area.

Between 1829 and 1834 George Augustus Robinson, the 'Conciliator', travelled Tasmania gathering the Aboriginal people who were still alive. He did this with the approval of the colonial government. Robinson thought he was saving the people - he wanted them to become Christians and to abandon their culture. 135 survivors from the mainland were sent to Wybalenna, a bleak settlement on Flinders Island in Bass Strait.

On Flinders Island the people were to be 'civilised' and 'Christianised'. However, they were unused to living in overcrowded European houses; they were forbidden to practice their old ways; and were homesick for their lost country. Many died of respiratory disease, poor food and despair. Robinson left for Victoria before he could see the terrible consequences of his policy.

***Edited from Wikipedia, The Conversation and Indigenous Australia***