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Indigenous War Memorial: Design unveiled in Sydney's Hyde Park

Tony Albert's grandfather inspired his work to honour Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who fought for Australia

Helen Davidson, *The Guardian*, 8 November 2013



Artist Tony Albert in Sydney's Hyde Park with his winning design for a war memorial honouring Indigenous servicemen and women. Photograph: Helen Davidson/Guardian Australia

Tony Albert never got to meet his first world war veteran grandfather, but the story of his war experience inspired the design of Albert's memorial to Indigenous soldiers, which was unveiled in Hyde Park on Friday by the Sydney lord mayor, Clover Moore.

More than 400 Indigenous soldiers fought in the First World War, but only one is known to have received land under the soldier settlement scheme and they continued to face discrimination on their return to Australia. Hundreds of Indigenous soldiers also enlisted in the Second World War, but it was not until 17 years after the end of the war that they were given the right to vote.

The memorial announced on Friday honours Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who fought for Australia and will be ready for the centenary of the nation's involvement in the First World War in 2015.

The City of Sydney council commissioned the work, which it said would be the first of its kind erected in the state, at a cost of \$500,000. It will sit at the southern end of Hyde Park, near the Anzac memorial.

"To be here in Hyde Park and to be beside the very important war memorial, it will really be a way of celebrating the contributions being made by our black servicemen and women," Moore told Guardian Australia.

After 30 expressions of interest, 14 submissions and a shortlist of four designs, the renowned Indigenous artist Albert won with his design for a marble and steel sculpture of four seven-metre high bullets and three fallen shells.

Albert's family has given a combined 80 years of military service. His grandfather escaped a PoW camp in Germany with six others, but they were caught by Italian soldiers and three of his fellow escapees were executed. That experience inspired Albert's design.

"It's these stories that we grew up with that identify us to him," Albert told Guardian Australia.

"It shapes so much of who I am. We grew up hearing stories of our family histories and oral histories."

Albert said he had been planning an artwork of this nature for a long time, and his work as a war artist with the Australian War Memorial in Canberra had brought it closer to fruition.

"I realised the same thing in our family was the reality of all Aboriginal people," he said.

"There is this invisibility, and when you look at something like war which is so relevant and takes so much pride in the Australian psyche, I think it would be amazing if Aboriginal people are part of that and people know that in every single war that's happened, there have been Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women involved.

"It is long overdue, but it could easily have continued without any recognition at all."

The artwork is one of seven in the city council's Eora Journey initiative, recognising Indigenous culture in Sydney. The artwork component of the initiative is guided by the art curator and writer Hetti Perkins and the architect Julie Cracknell.

"When we announced the Eora Journey, we were determined that it would not be a tokenistic gesture," Moore said.

"But it would be a series of important artworks at significant locations in our city. This work fulfils our promise. It's part of the reconciliation process and is a powerful reminder of the undying connection between the first people and this land which we now share."

The vice-president of the Returned and Services League, John Haines, said the league saw the project as "fitting ... in such a significant area that means so much to so many of our members, and it will recognise the contribution of members of our community and their contribution of the Australian defence force".

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/08/war-memorial-indigenous-soldiers-design-project>