

Private Raymond Charles Runga



ANZAC Spirit Prize – Raymond Charles Runga

What of the famous ‘Anzac spirit’ when Aboriginal man, Raymond Charles ‘Charlie’ Runga, enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) to serve his country in the First World War (WW1)? The colour of his skin prohibited him from enlisting in the armed forces of a deeply racist country. Despite this, Charlie enlisted, just like over 1000 of his kinfolk, by denying his skin tone and culture. Such were his strongly held values, that 60,000 years of belonging to this land, could not be denied. Whether he was motivated to serve the king as well as country will never be known, but there can be no denying the ‘country’ element of his patriotism. Charlie joined his battalion after it had fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front in capturing and holding Pozieres, the most costly battle ever fought by Australian soldiers. At such battles the Anzac spirit was born, yet if anyone ever epitomised the Anzac spirit it would be Charles Runga, as his selfless feats of valour outlined below attest.

Raymond Charles Runga was born on the 21st of September, 1889 in the small town of Naracoorte, located in the limestone coast region of South Australia. Charlie was the eldest son of Charles and Eliza Runga. His father died at an early age as did one of his younger brothers, and Charlie became responsible for his small family. His mother remarried and gave birth to two half-brothers. Interestingly, his half-brothers also enlisted in WW1 from what must be considered a deeply patriotic family, at a time when the Aboriginal people were belittled, disadvantaged, and discriminated against in a deeply racist ‘White Australia’. Having lived in a constant state of social ostracize, the AIF presented a sanctuary to Charlie and other Aboriginal men who enlisted; gainful employment, respect among peers, equality regardless of their skin colour and the inescapable spirit of mateship, particularly in the face of a common enemy.

Charlie worked as a farm labourer prior to the outbreak of WW1, and had been working at Hopetoun in the Wimmera region of Victoria before enlisting on the 28th February 1916 in Mildura at the age of 26. After basic training, Charlie embarked from Melbourne with the 17th Reinforcements of the 6th Battalion AIF on 4th of April 1916.

After two weeks in Alexandria Charlie re-embarked for England where he went through exhaustive training before being posted to the 6th Battalion in France on 29th December 1916. In late January 1917, Charlie entered the trenches for the first time near Albert, the heart of the battlefield. The 6th battalion rotated in and out of the front line in February and early March. Trench conditions (Source 1) at the time were extremely poor and unsanitary. Pests such as rats, lice, and frogs were common within the trenches, increasing the risk of infection. Due to the unsanitary environment, medical conditions such as trench fever, trench nephritis, trench mouth, trench foot influenza and scabies were common diseases. Closer examination of just one of these is illustrative. As a result of the unsanitary conditions, Charlie contracted scabies and was treated in hospital before returning to the battlefield.



Source 1: An image of the Trenches in Somme

Upon return, Charlie underwent intensive training once again due to a reorganization in the battalion structure. He then spent some time stationed in the trenches near Frémicourt. Charlie’s battalion participated in the second battle of Bullecourt, which lasted for 14 days in May. The Australian and British armies cooperated in the attempt to secure the fortified village of Bullecourt and succeeded in forcing the Germans to withdraw. The Battle of the Menin Road followed in September 1917, in the Ypres Salient area of Belgium on the Western Front. He then fought in the second battle of Passchendaele, located in the Ypres Salient area of Belgium on the Western Front. This fierce battle lasted for over two weeks, but Charlie suffered serious wounds to both his arms on the first day and was evacuated to a hospital in England for six months of treatment.

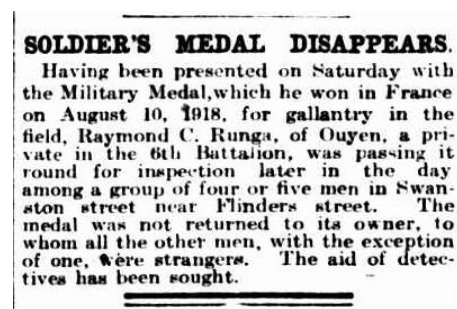
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Embodying the ANZAC spirit of perseverance, Charlie refused to be shipped home. He returned to his unit and a week after doing so was involved in remarkable feats of valour. Facing exceptionally heavy machine gun fire coming from woodlands to the left of his company, Charlie took charge of a small party of soldiers and made a full frontal attack, successfully capturing two hostile machineguns and the crew of 16 men. In the events which followed Charlie was involved in action which resulted in him being recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal, an award surpassed only by the Victoria Cross. His citation read, “*Private Runga rushed forward alone over 70 yards of ground without a vestige of cover and despite point blank machine gun fire, succeeded in bombing the enemy from a communications trench, thus enabling the remainder of his platoon to continue their advance.*” (Source 2, AWM, 1918, Recommendation for Honours and Awards). Without the protection of anything but his own shield of courage Charlie bravely charged; bravery that was recognised in this citation as “*...a heroic example of utter disregard of personal safety and the desire at all costs to worst the enemy, any man of which with one shot carefully aimed could have killed Private Runga.*” (AWM, 1918, Recommendation for Honours and Awards). The Anzac spirit was very much alive and well in Charlie on that day.

UNIFORMS		RIFLES		DIVISION		CORPS		DATE RECOMMENDATION PASSED FORWARD		ARMY FORM	
								Received		W. 5121	
								Division			
								Corps			
								Army			
Serial No. (to be filled in)	Unit	Regt. No.	Rank and Name (to be filled in)	Action for which awarded (to be filled in)				Recommended by	Approved by	(to be left blank)	
	6th Detachment Aust. Inf.	5476	Private Raymond Charles RUNGA.	For conspicuous gallantry on the 23rd day of August 1918 at HEMMILLIS WOOD. During the attack, when the 1st portion of the Company was under exceptionally heavy machine gun fire from a wood in front, this soldier taking charge of a small party dashed forward to the wood and succeeded in capturing two hostile machine guns and their crew of 16 men. On another occasion later on in the day, this soldier rushed forward alone over 70 yards of ground without a vestige of cover and despite point blank machine gun fire succeeded in bombing the enemy from a communication trench, thus enabling the remainder of his platoon to continue their advance. This latter feat was an heroic example of utter disregard of personal safety and the desire at all costs to worst the enemy, any man of which with one shot carefully aimed could have killed Private RUNGA.				W. 5121 1918	W. 5121 1918		

Source 2: Runga’s recommendation for the Military Medal and the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Just three days after his heroic feat, “...Charlie was again wounded, this time in a gas attack. After initial treatment in France he was once more evacuated to a hospital in England.” (Kearney. R.). The war had finished before he could return to the battlefield. Five months after having set foot on Australian soil again, Charlie was officially acknowledged and rewarded for his heroic acts in the war at Government House in Melbourne. He was presented with the Military Medal; deservedly so for his heroic feats which epitomised the ANZAC spirit. Ironically, shortly after the ceremony when he was proudly showing his medal “...round for inspection later in the day among a group of four or five men in Swanston Street near Flinders Street, the medal was not returned to its owner to whom all the other men with the exception of one were strangers.” (Source 3, The Argus, 1920, pg. 4). It is unclear whether or not he received a replacement.



Source 3: News article, 1920

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Charlie was heavily involved with the church and travelled widely post war. He lived and worked in various towns located in rural New South Wales, even becoming a Church Deacon and treasurer at Darlington Point Church. He also participated in building a church in 1937 (Source 4), rebuilding it again in 1944-45. He later married Emily Glass, a Wiradjuri woman who was a mother to several children from her previous marriage. After the death of his wife, Charlie went on to build and maintain churches at Cawthra and Moonahcullah Mission near Deniliquin in the 1940's. He died in Leeton, New South Wales, on 21 March 1956, at the age of 66.



Source 4: An image of a church which Charlie had participated in building.

Indigenous Australian service in WW1 was long overlooked in a country still cursed with the same racist beliefs that forced these soldiers to denounce their true identities. This is all the more disgraceful in a country where they were, and still remain, the longest continuous cultural group in the world. The Anzac spirit was enriched during WW1 by soldiers such as Charles Runga. Moreover, it was further embellished by Charlie after WW1 by the stoic manner in which he continued to live a life of service to the community through his voluntary work in the church. To our eternal shame, Australia continued to deny him and his kin citizenship, a battle still being fought in the National Parliament today. Moreover, many stories of the Aboriginal men who fought for Australia in WW1 remain untold. We can all be thankful that the story of Raymond Charles Runga's remarkable life, characterised by the war service through which he epitomises the Anzac spirit to this very day, has been chronicled. Australians of all walks of life owe a debt of gratitude to Charlie, a truly remarkable man.

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