

YEAR 9 HISTORY: Learning sequence

Sikh and Indian Australians

SIKH ANZACS: ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND THE ANZAC LEGEND

HTAWA



The resource was developed by [HTAWA](#), the History Teachers' Association of WA, for the [Sikh Association of Western Australia](#).

YEAR 9 HISTORY: SIKH AND INDIAN AUSTRALIANS

Learning sequence: Sikh Anzacs

Anzac Day commemorations focus on the nation building feats of Australian soldiers in World War One where the national characteristics of mateship, courage, initiative and sacrifice were forged. According to the Anzac legend the original Anzac experience, although not a military victory, was a “baptism” of the new nation by war. Australia was proudly British, reinforced by a series of immigration laws which aimed to create a homogeneous “white” nation. According to this context the Anzacs were exclusively rugged white men for whom war and the Empire brought out their best characteristics. Historically, the dominance of British culture reinforced this interpretation and maintained a focus on selective stories of bravery and sacrifice of white Anzacs. The Anzac legend includes several elements: pride in the bravery and personal qualities of Australian soldiers, their physical strength, poor British leadership and the unifying effect of the war on the newly federated nation.

Many aspects of this interpretation have been recently challenged by historians, ethnic groups and through individual research into family histories. The narrow mono-cultural legend which focuses only on the role of white Australians during World War One, and where actions during war defined a nation, is incompatible with the richly multicultural more global Australia of the 21st Century. The reality was that the Anzacs who volunteered to fight for Australia and the British Empire, were predominantly Anglo Saxon but also from Indigenous, Chinese, Malay, Indian, Punjabi and German backgrounds, to name a few.

During the 20th century and into the early 21st century the Anzac legend suited many Commonwealth leaders who believed that military action, and the associated values of endurance, mateship, initiative, humour, courage and sacrifice, defined and unified the nation. Over the past few decades the complexity and reality of Australia’s Anzac experience has become a contestable issue. According to Peter Cochrane, a “new inclusiveness” has emerged since the 1990s, where a broader and more realistic Anzac story is being told. See <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/connect-asia/does-the-anzac-myth-lead-to-historical-innaccuracy/1121646>

This Learning sequence explores a group which has been excluded from the Anzac tradition. Sikhs, who came from a powerful military tradition in the Punjab, were among many Indians who joined the AIF and were among Australia’s Anzacs. Sikh attitudes, motivation and determination provide another perspective on World War One and evidence of the diversity of the Anzacs. Activities in this resource support the development of historical skills such as source analysis and evaluation, as well as the development of a historical inquiry.

Activity 1: Indigenous and Chinese Anzacs

Just who were the Anzacs and what were their experiences really like? Research into Indigenous and Chinese Anzacs has led to the recognition of their contribution to the national story. Many excellent resources have been developed for schools to support the teaching of Indigenous and Chinese roles during the Great War. Some of these resources are included in the following Teacher Resource.

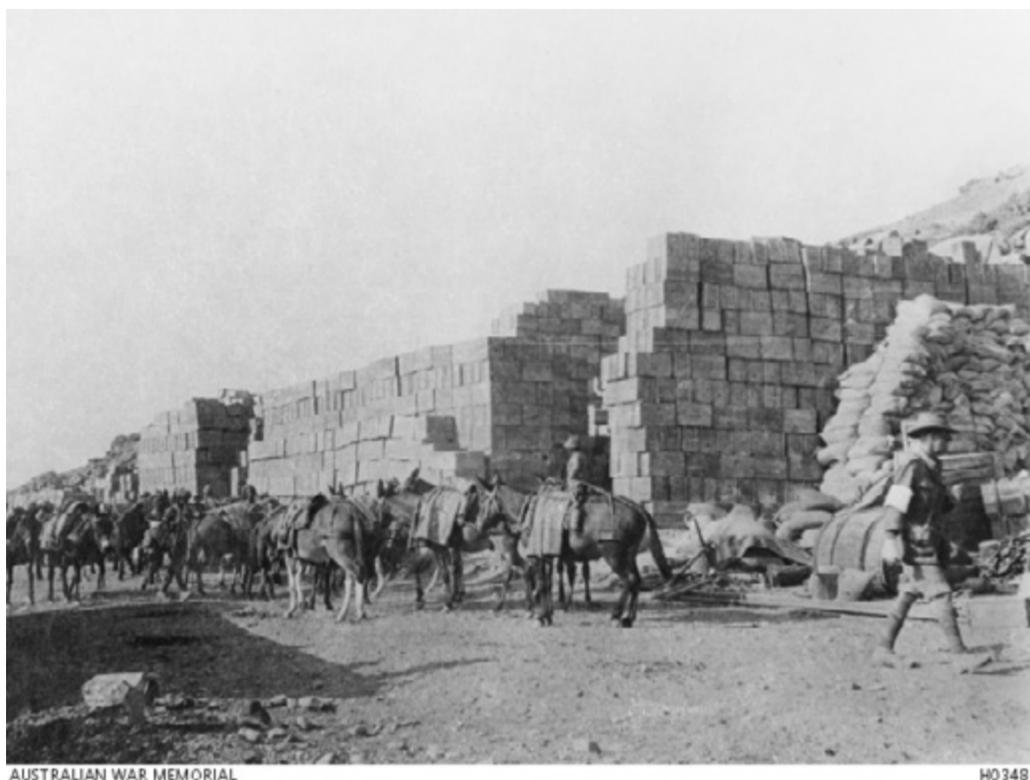
[See Teacher Resource 1 - Indigenous and Chinese Anzacs](#)

Activity 2: The Indian Expeditionary Forces at Gallipoli

Many Australians fought along side the Indian Army at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. Over 1.3 million Indian soldiers fought for the British Empire in World War One. Australian historian Peter Stanley published *Die in Battle, Do not Despair, The Indians on Gallipoli 1915*, in which he noted that the Indian contingent at Gallipoli included four Gurkha battalions, one Sikh infantry battalion and many thousands of Punjabi mule drivers. The Mule Corps contained the largest number of Indian troops and used over 3000 animals to transport supplies. According to Stanley “The Mule Corps [of the Indian Army] basically kept the forces alive for the eight months of the [Gallipoli] campaign”. Letters and diaries, written by Australian Anzacs, provide evidence of friendship and respect for their Indian allies. One such Sikh soldier in the Indian Army was Karam Singh. “Many Anzacs wrote about Karam Singh with great awe, [he] is said to have continued to issue orders to his troops, even after he had been hit by an artillery shell and blinded by it.” See “SBS radio 25 4 2015 Remembering contribution of Indian troops, Gallipoli” and “Radio Australia, Indian role in Gallipoli underestimated”.

Front cover image: Hazara Singh, detail from Indian Anzac photo collage

Len Kenna & Crystal Jordan australianindianhistory.com



Anzac Beach, Gallipoli. 1915. A group of Indian transport animals in front of stacks of reserve supplies for the Australian Army and its Allies. (Donor H.J. Lowe).
Australian War Memorial, [H03485](#).

The strong historical connection between the British and Indian soldiers has also influenced the Australian Army uniform. The band on the Australian slouch hat originated from the Indian turban, the puggaree.

See [Teacher Resource 2: The Puggaree and other useful terms](#)

Activity 3: Connections to the Empire

There were Australians of many nationalities who volunteered to join the AIF from 1914 to 1918. The majority of the 420,000 volunteers were Anglo Saxon, but there were also Indigenous, Chinese, Indian, Greek and Northern European enlistments. As part of the White Australia policy, the 1909 Commonwealth Defence Act determined that AIF recruits had to be “substantially of European descent”. Many non-Europeans were rejected because they did not fit into the “right type” of image of the Australian soldier. One Australian of Chinese heritage wrote a letter to *The Argus* newspaper in 1916:

”When leaving the depot, I received a certificate with ‘not substantially of European origin’ written on it, and signed by the medical officer. ... With the exception of being asked where I came from, I was not asked one question whilst before the medical officer. Now, sir for your own guidance, I might state that my father was a British subject born at Penang ... and arrived in Australia in 1854. My mother was born in Tasmania in 1842 and I myself was born in this state in 1877.”

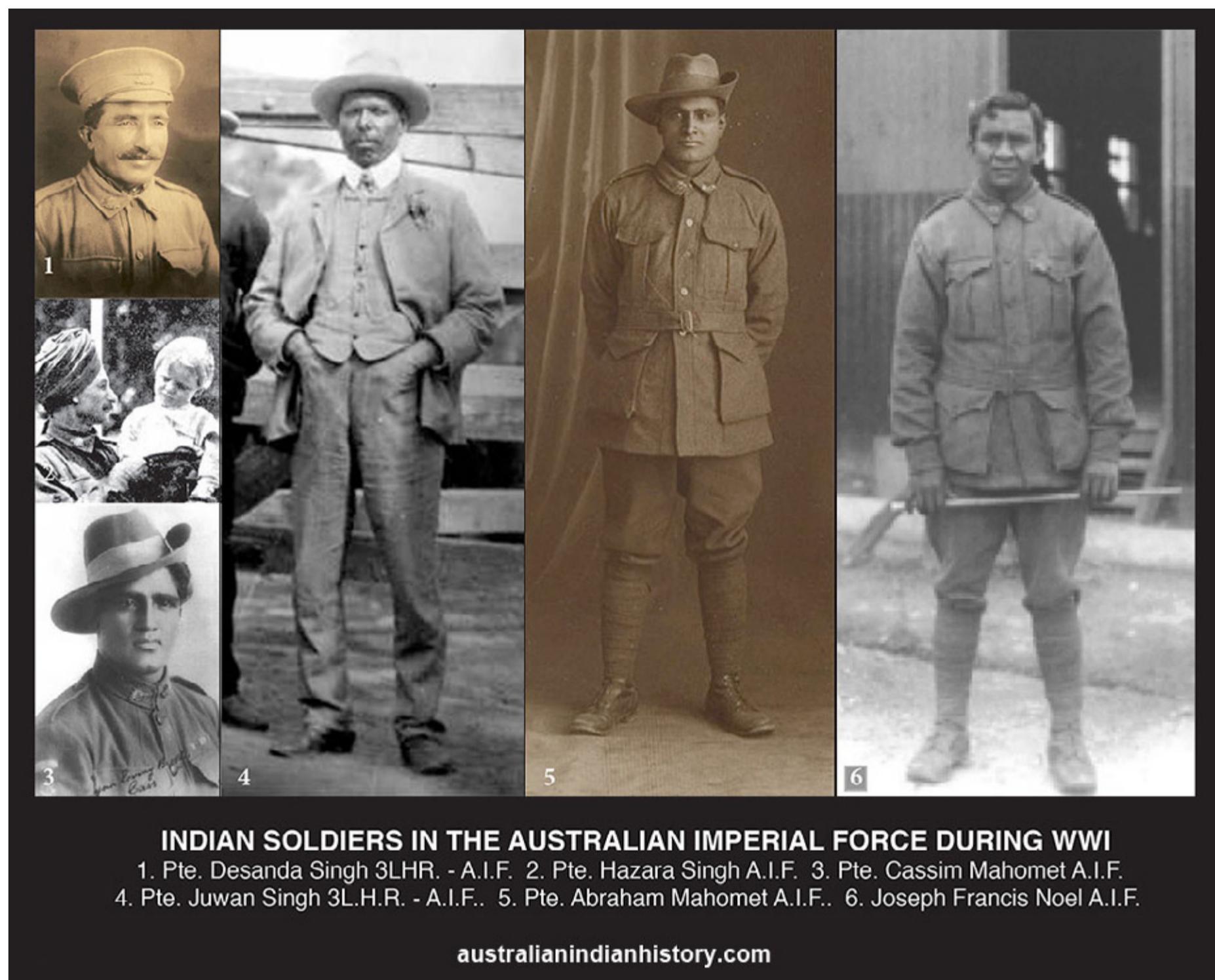
The Argus 24 January, 1916, p 11.

In March 1916 under the heading “Indian Recruit Rejected” a Victorian newspaper reported:

Some extraordinary rulings as to what nationalities may find a place in the [Australian] Expeditionary Forces have been laid down by the Defence Department. Recently an Indian named Yaharra Singh...volunteered at Horsham, and was accepted subject to approval at headquarters. Believing that he would have no difficulty in securing entry to the ranks Singh sold his cart and horses and surrendered his hawking business for the cause of the Empire. [He also instructed the recruiting officer to have one shilling a day from his pay set aside for the Red Cross.] Now, however, he has been informed from headquarters that he “is not sufficiently of European origin” to join the Australian Army. Of course, he makes no profession to being of European origin, but he springs from the same stock that is fighting beside British-born soldiers in the Imperial Army. Surely if an Indian is good enough to be given a pride of place in the British Army, a brother in Australia, if both fit and willing, should not be thrown out because of his birth. The public will sympathise with Yaharra Singh in his misfortune.

Horsham Times (Victoria) 24 March, 1916. p4.

Against such administrative obstacles the determination of many Sikhs and Indians to fight for Australia and the Empire shone through. Eligibility for enlistment into the AIF in August 1914 included the following age range, minimum height and chest measurement: 19-38 years, 5 foot 6 inches and chest 34 inches. In June 1915 this changed to 18 - 45 years and 5 foot 2 inches. The minimum height was reduced to 5 foot in April 1917.



Len Kenna & Crystal Jordan australianindianhistory.com

The table below provides a number of Indians who enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF). There were many other Indian soldiers who joined the AIF who have not been included on this list.

Some Sikh and Indian Volunteers in the Australian Imperial Forces 1914 to 1918

Name	Occupation/s	Age at time of enlistment	State where enlistment took place
Amah Singh (also called James Lawrence)	Sailor, merchant marine	34	Victoria
Basant Singh	A labourer	38	Victoria
Davy Singh	A hawker	34	NSW
Desanda Singh	A hawker, businessman and farmer	38	South Australia
Ganessa Singh	A hawker, businessman and farmer in Waikerie	37	South Australia
Goodger Singh		40	WA (Geraldton)
Gurbachan Singh	A hawker, storekeeper and dealer	41 and then 43	NSW WA

Name	Occupation/s	Age at time of enlistment	State where enlistment took place
Hazara Singh	A hawker and shop keeper (discharged "Overage" in Sept 1917, re-enlisted in November 1917)	51 (said he was 33)	NSW
Johar Singh (also called George Sims)	A contractor	28	Born in Queensland - enlisted in Melbourne
Juwan (Jewan/Juan) Singh	A hawker, later a respected farmer and horse dealer	41	South Australia
Linna Singh	Watchman and later a Traveller	45	WA
Nain Singh Sailani	A labourer	43	WA (Geraldton)
Nundah Singh	A farmer	35	NSW
Sarn (Sarna) Singh	A farmer	33	South Australia
Sirdar (Sidara) Singh	A merchant	39	South Australia
Sundah Singh	A farmer	35	NSW
Yaharra (Yarram) Singh	A hawker	37	Victoria
Kiam Deen	A labourer	30	NSW
Charles Khan	A labourer	30	South Australia
Fatte Allie Khan	A farmer	30	Tasmania
Abraham Mahomet	A labourer	36	NSW
Cassim Mahomet	Vaudeville artist	21	South Australia
Anthony Noel	A labourer	20	NSW
Joseph Noel	A labourer	26	NSW
Glamallie Khan	A hawker	30	South Australia

Compiled from:

<http://australianindianhistory.com/indians-gallipoli-and-world-war-one> and <http://www.australiansikhheritage.com/sikh-anzacs>

Questions:

1. What do their occupations tell you about the working life of Indians in Australia?
2. The national average age for Australian soldiers enlisting in World War One was 24.25 years of age. (There was a fluctuation from 23 in 1914, to 26 in 1916 to 24 by 1918). <https://www.awm.gov.au/journal/j33/mcquilton>
According to the table what was the average enlistment age of: a) Sikh men and b) all Indian men in the table? Describe how this compares to the national average and suggest reasons why it differs.
3. Suggest reasons why some of the Sikhs enlisted twice.
4. What further evidence is provided in the table to indicate the determination of these men to join the AIF?
5. How useful is this secondary resource in understanding the composition of the AIF?
6. In what way might this table be changed or made more useful in the future?

The following activity provides information on a Sikh Anzac as well as opportunities to view a range of primary documents about these men. The resource provides an opportunity to engage students by studying individual war records and encourages them to develop questions and problems to investigate.

Activity 4: Case study of a Sikh Anzac

According to Harjit Singh, Sikhs in Australia enthusiastically responded to World War One for a number of reasons:

- the powerful soldier tradition in their society,
- the belief in the importance of fighting for truth and justice
- as British citizens they possessed a sense of loyalty to Australia and the British Empire.

A Sikh Australian who possessed military experience, loyalty to Australia and the British Empire and great determination was Hazara Singh. For Hazara's story and an opportunity to analyse a range of primary sources from World War One go to [Teacher Resource 3: Sikh Anzac profiles](#).

The participation of the Sikh community today in the Australian Defence Forces and Anzac Day marches and commemorations is testament to their ongoing commitment to these Australian values. For more information type the following into your search engine: Australian Sikh Heritage, Sikhs in the ADF. However, Sikhs have a long history of support for the Australian military. Sikh troops were among the infantry battalion and artillery battery of over 700 men from NSW who supported the British troops in Sudan during 1885. While in 1888 the Victorian Minister for Defence received a letter from members of the Sikh community who, having already served in the Imperial Army in India and other parts of the world, were anxious to enlist in "the defence of the colony". The Minister responded positively to this offer. Another Sikh, Bischin Singh was shown, in a Perth newspaper in 1900, marching with a Union Jack in front of the contingent of troops returning from the Boer War. There is also evidence that Sikh herbalists Esur Singh and Narain Singh were founding members of the NSW branch of the United Navy and Army Veterans Association in 1911. The Sikh community displayed mateship, nationalism and support for the British Empire well before World War One began.

During World War One, even if members of the Sikh community were unable to join the AIF (or travel to India to join the Indian Expeditionary Forces), evidence shows that they supported the war in many other ways. The following are examples of their contribution to the war effort which could be discussed with students (or included in a source analysis).

1. Loyalty of Sikhs in Australia

Mohan Singh communicated the following to the West Australian newspaper: "At the outbreak of the war the Chief Khalsa Diwan, of Amritsar, on behalf of the loyal Sikhs, subjects of his Majesty, begs respectfully to assure his Excellency the Viceroy [of India] of their deep-rooted devotion to the British Crown at home and on the battlefield." The reply was: "The Viceroy desires to thank the Chief Khalsa Diwan most warmly for the loyal message. His Excellency knows that the Sikhs will be true to their traditions of brave and devoted service, if need arises."

The West Australian, Tuesday 22 December, 1914, p.1.

2. Enlistment speech from Harda Singh

In August 1918 at the Geelong Recruitment Rally for World War One Sergeant Broadhurst invited the people in the audience to speak to the youth present. Harda Singh was the only person to respond. He had been in Australia for 25 years. With his hands raised in the air he began his speech with, "There is only one God".... He spoke about Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener and that he had recently heard that another of his three brothers was on service and another brother was mentioned and reported wounded a week before in Sir Douglas Haig's despatches for the fourth time. He also mentioned that his two nephews were in the firing line, as was his own sixteen year old son. He told how he had tried again and again near his home in the Wimmera, Victoria, to join the A.I.F. but was always turned down with ... "too old." He told the crowd what a good country and how well worth fighting for Australia was and that even though they might be killed in battle, they would die knowing the world would be made a better place for their families. Everyone present was so impressed with Harda's speech that many came up to shake his hand and congratulate him. His speech helped to encourage many more young men to enlist.

<http://australianindianhistory.com/indians-gallipoli-and-world-war-one/>

3. Donations to the Red Cross by Indar Singh

The Bunbury Herald listed citizens who donated items to the Red Cross each month during the war. In June 1918 Indar Singh, a store owner from Yarloop in WA, donated packing cases for the war effort.

Bunbury Herald, 22 June, 1918. p.3

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/87169623>

Skills check: [Teacher Resource 4: Source study](#) (An analysis of sources covering purpose, context, reliability, perspective, comparison and usefulness). Both a blank word document and a sample answer are provided.

Activity 5: Fresh perspectives on the Anzacs

The Australian War Memorial is calling for “fresh perspectives” on Australia’s Anzac story by encouraging students to research the cultural and ethnic diversity of the AIF. It is estimated that around 30 per cent of Anzac soldiers were born overseas, most in Great Britain, but others were from diverse backgrounds. To challenge student perspectives, and popular misconceptions, about the Anzac legend the Australian War Memorial has developed a series of case studies of Anzacs from various ethnic backgrounds. To access this website type the following into your search engine: AWM education resources anzac diversity.

It was commonly accepted that the Anzac tradition was inseparably identified with Australians of British descent. The culmination of this series of activities on these diverse Anzacs is a detailed inquiry into Anzacs from a non-British background.

Further information on this inquiry can be found in [**Teacher Resource 5: Research investigation - Fresh perspectives.**](#)