The Pasts and Futures of World War II for Indigenous Communities

After the traumatic years of conflict, it seemed Indigenous people had gained little from their suffering and service. Governments continued to discriminate against and disempower them, and veterans returned to the same disheartening racism they had faced before the war. Yet by the end of the century, Indigenous Rights emerged as a global movement, offering new options for self-determination and cultural diversity. That achievement depended, in part, on wider awareness and public remembrance of Indigenous peoples’ lives and their contributions in the war.

Memories of War

Memory studies examine how communities recall, forget, debate, and commemorate the past. In Germany, forced denazification prescribed how World War II should be memorialized. Japan, in contrast, has been criticized for failing to confront its war legacy. Victorious nations face their own challenges. Most French citizens supported the Vichy government—though the Resistance dominates preferred public memory—making it hard to forge a consensus account. Finland’s changing alliances also challenge public history, though discussion became easier after the fall of the USSR. Great Britain’s war anniversaries are complicated by a narrative not so much about victory as about the dissolution of empire. In China, emphasis on commemorating the civil war (lasting until 1949) overshadowed the Anti-Japanese War, which is only recently receiving officially approved attention. Taiwan’s war memory is inevitably entangled with East Asian international politics. In the United States, contested representations at Pearl Harbor and the “history wars” over the Smithsonian Institute’s plans for an Enola Gay exhibit revealed generational and political splits over how to represent the Pacific War.
Former colonial populations hold their own, often quite different attitudes. India and Southeast Asian nations have been less interested in World War II history than in their own era of independence. Across Micronesia, foreigners’ history is less important than sacred sites that embody local and legendary pasts. Papua New Guinea stopped celebrating Australia’s Anzac Day after 1973—then-Chief Minister Michael Somare said it “had no relevance” as the nation approached independence; instead, they should remember the soldiers of all nations who died there. The country has yet to formulate a shared national narrative of the Pacific War, though the July 23 date chosen for Remembrance Day, honoring military service, marks the Papuan Infantry Battalion’s first action in 1942. Many Indigenous people echo the refrain that “this was not our war”—though Native Americans, First Nations Canadians, Māori, and Taiwan’s Aborigines disagree; for them, World War II is part of their own tribal as well as national history.

For some, the global conflict was just one phase of historical violence affecting them. Hill peoples of Southeast Asia see a sequence of aggression from the lowlands, from ancient states seeking slaves, through colonial invasions, World War II, independence and Cold War conflicts, and current insurgencies. To Nenets veterans of the Soviet Army’s reindeer units, service in the Great Patriotic War was just one in the long series of Russian demands on them. Marshall Islanders saw the Pacific War as the start of a much broader conflict that proceeded from their islands’ invasion beaches, through western Micronesia, then to the nuclear tests, postwar militarization, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, then to the Middle East.

Whatever their interpretation, each culture has its own ways of remembering. Combatant nations recount history in books, films, holidays, parades, and monuments; for many Indigenous communities, history’s lessons are passed on in oral archives of song, dance, and shared recollections. For Micronesians of Pohnpei, war memories offer a warning and guide to dealing with powerful foreigners. In Burma, Shan stories of how holy sites were protected from US bombs instill Buddhist beliefs, good morals, and regard for local spirits.

Personal links are another framework for memory. US Army pilot Fred Hargesheimer was one of the downed airmen rescued by Golpak in New Britain; in 1961 he began to raise funds for a school at Ewasse (one of the villages that had protected him), now “The Airman’s Memorial School.” American veteran and Bahá’í Alvin Blum settled in the islands after the war, became a businessman there, and with Jacob Vouza formed the Solomon Islands War Veterans’ Association. Nearly half a century after New Zealand’s 14th Brigade had been
stationed in the Solomons, New Zealanders in a RAMSI peacekeeping unit benefited from the goodwill left in their wake. Solomon Islands scholar David Welchman Gegeo comments that aid from Seabees after Cyclone Namu in 1986 renewed good feelings about Americans. Their work habits, egalitarian attitude, generosity, and willingness to criticize officers seemed familiar to older Islanders: “They said, ‘That’s just the way those Joes behaved in the war.’”

Veterans of the war in Southeast Asia also maintained connections, despite political upheavals (figure 13.1). Australian guerrillas who fought in East Timor made efforts to stay in touch with those who had helped them, through the troubled postwar decades and through Timor-Leste independence. Aging veterans set up scholarships, urged compensation, and pressured the Australian government in negotiations with Timor-Leste over contested offshore oil rights. Even into the early twenty-first century, British and American ex-servicemen were trying to aid Kachins with economic development projects and other support. British survivors of the Battle of Kohima at their final reunion in 2004 established the Kohima Educational Trust for Naga children. Gordon Graham, awarded
a Military Cross at Kohima, was among those who wanted to repay the “debt of honour” incurred by Naga help in the battle. “When he approached a Naga friend with this idea, the immediate response was ‘you have not forgotten us.’”

Where Axis troops had lived amicably for long periods, postwar visits let memories adjust to reordered international relations. Germans who had been stationed in northern Finland returned in the 1950s and 1960s and reconnected with villagers who had lived near their bases. Japanese veterans also nurtured memories, though travel bans prevented contact in some areas. After the United States eased travel restrictions on Micronesia, veterans and families came to battle sites to raise monuments and hold funeral services, and repatriated settlers returned to seek out family or friends. In 1969 and 1970, veterans and the Japan-Papua New Guinea Goodwill Society visited Sepik villages friendly to occupiers. Michael Somare reunited with his childhood acquaintance, then-Lieutenant Shibata, in the 1980s—in later years, both men spoke of the inspiration of their shared experience. Kokichi Nishimura was the sole survivor of his fifty-six-man platoon during the Kokoda campaign; in 1979 he returned to PNG and he dedicated the rest of his life to repatriating Japanese remains, along with educational and economic development work.

As time passes, official decisions about how the past should be commemorated reflect more contemporary concerns. Most Micronesian calendars include the celebration of “Liberation Day” marking the shift from Japanese to US rule. But in Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, Chamorro historians Vicente Diaz and Keith Camacho describe two very different tales of this holiday. Guam’s July 21 Liberation Day marks the 1944 US invasion, ending Japanese occupation and restoring American rule. The celebrations quickly became popular; by the late 1940s, Liberation Day events were a salute to Guam’s patriotism and an argument that its people deserved full citizenship. Northern Marianas Chamorros, though, had to rethink their past as they transitioned from being part of the Japanese Empire to becoming a US territory. Their “Liberation Day”—July 4—marks the 1946 date when Islanders were released from the camp where they had been interned since the June 1944 invasion. The US military chose the holiday’s date and name to launch a narrative of loyalty to the United States. But Marianas Chamorros did not necessarily see the invasion as “liberation” from familiar Japanese rule, and the celebration fizzled after 1947, not to be revived until 1958. People struggled with difficult memories, gradually softening pro-Japanese attitudes and accepting affiliation as a US Commonwealth in 1978. By the fiftieth anniversary, public memory spoke more clearly in “the language of American loyalty.” Sixty-four Northern Marianas men who served as US Marine scouts
were recognized as US veterans in January 2000, and memorials now draw wide support, though problematic history (such as the Chamorros employed by Japanese occupiers on Guam) is not addressed. In Camacho’s words, history “is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering.”

Holidays and parades are fairly easy to remold as generations pass. But war’s physical legacies—cemeteries, battlefields, and monuments—constitute concrete reminders and international entanglements. The landscapes of battle and resting places of fallen soldiers link homefronts with their distant wars, requiring transnational negotiation of historical meaning.

**Battlefields and Cemeteries**

Long after the guns fall silent, battlefields and cemeteries remain sites of concern for combatant powers and for those living near them. Europe still holds many American dead, but the remains of most who died in the Pacific War were eventually returned to hometown graves or US military cemeteries. At Tarawa, nearly 1,700 Americans were buried at forty-three temporary sites; these were later consolidated and remains repatriated, but records were incomplete, and many bodies were lost. No records were kept for the roughly 4,700 Japanese and Koreans buried in pits or left in sealed bunkers. American dead on Tarawa are still being found and if possible identified, and Japanese too, have been recovering remains there since 1952. British and Australian custom was to inter their dead near where they had fallen, so many war graves are now in independent nations, some on Indigenous territory. India and Southeast Asian countries hold many military cemeteries where Indigenous soldiers and sailors are buried alongside comrades. Japanese cremated their dead and sent ashes home when possible, but there are also Japanese cemeteries across Southeast Asia. After Allied victories, enemy dead were usually buried, but bodies of more than a million Japanese were never recovered for their families. Delegations have collected bones for funeral rituals throughout the islands and Southeast Asia since the 1950s. Until protections were put in place, “bone-collecting” was uncontrolled, resulting in indiscriminate gathering of human remains and damage to historical sites.

Local people, too, have concerned themselves with those buried on their lands. In Tonga, Queen Sālote had each grave of a temporary US cemetery covered in flowers for a memorial on May 30, 1945. Care at battlegrounds took a different form, as people living nearby often helped with burials. After the Battle of Tarawa, Gilbert Islanders handled the decomposing bodies of Japanese dead, while Americans buried their own. On Guadalcanal, Jonathan Fifi’i
carried American dead from the battlefield: “We carried them to the place that we call a burial shrine. If it was our language they would call it a ba’eniibari, for burying those killed in battle. And we carried many dead men there.” On Peleliu, the remains of more than a thousand Americans who died there were repatriated in 1947, but Palauans still experience their presence:

Older locals on the island described how, in the years immediately after the battle, all of Peleliu was visibly full of the foreign dead. They could be seen in their hundreds, everywhere, shadowy figures in uniforms standing silently either alone or in groups, on the beaches, in the forest and hills, on the roads and in the buildings, even right next to you in the store.

The spirits are less often seen in recent times, but their presence is still felt, foreign dead who “were not wanted, nor did they want to be there.”

Burials of war dead on Indigenous land preserve sentimental ties between residents and combatants, but also reflect international politics. The American cemetery on Tarawa became a tool in the debate over longer-term involvement in the region before the United States focused on its Micronesia trusteeship (and removed its dead from the British-held island). In Finland, a cemetery for German soldiers was established in 1963 near Rovaniemi, a town largely destroyed in the war. Too, many Indigenous servicemen who died in foreign lands remain far from home. Fiji has discussed repatriating soldiers from Rabaul War Cemetery in PNG (where Victoria Cross awardee Corporal Sefanaia Sukanaivalu is buried). In 2012, a Māori leader called for repatriating Māori remains from Libya after attacks on New Zealand graves in military cemeteries there. In the same year, an Aboriginal Australian delegation held a ceremony at Bomana War Cemetery near Port Moresby (PNG) to return the spirits of six Aboriginal Australian soldiers to their homeland. And, while Indigenous servicemen may be buried in military cemeteries and included on rolls of honor, many laborers have no fitting memorial, perhaps only an unmarked grave along the trail where they carried supplies for soldiers.

Monuments

Papua New Guinea’s impressive Coastwatchers Memorial Lighthouse rises over Madang as a local symbol and tourist attraction. It was dedicated in 1959 in memory of European and Islander coastwatchers who died in the war. But even when there is general agreement on the desirability of a structure—as for the lighthouse, or the US World War II Memorial in Washington, DC—its
form and meaning may not be settled. Studies of the “political heritage of war” describe how monuments become contested symbols as public memories shift.\(^{21}\)

The situation is complex at sites where bygone empires seek to remember their battles, but now-independent former colonial subjects see a different history. In northeast India’s Manipur State, the British view of the Imperial Japanese Army and the Indian National Army as “invaders” has been replaced in public memory by an INA War Memorial complex honoring them and their local supporters as liberators. In Timor-Leste, histories of Portuguese colonialism, Japanese occupation, anti-Japanese resistance, and the struggle against Indonesian control vie for remembrance. A Portuguese monument to victims of Japanese occupation memorializes Portuguese soldiers and officials, not the estimated sixty thousand Timorese who died. Tributes to the roughly two hundred Australian guerrillas who operated with civilian assistance in 1942–1943 are also problematic. War memories continue to affect international relations. Australian support for Timor-Leste’s independence was framed in part by a sense of indebtedness for aid to the Australian guerrillas; in 2010, Timor-Leste’s prime minister accused Australia of sacrificing Timorese lives to Japanese invasion.\(^ {22}\)

In Micronesia’s battlegrounds, postwar attention from Japan contrasted with Americans’ relative lack of interest in marking their historical claims. After the US lifted travel restrictions in 1962, Guam’s tourist business grew, with Japan as the largest market, forcing residents to rethink public commemoration. When a Japanese group dedicated a site for a peace memorial in 1967, criticism of the lack of a major US memorial prodded creation of the already-proposed War in the Pacific National Historical Park. Established in 1978, the park has its own historiographical problems. It celebrates the story of Guam’s patriotism and liberation from Japanese occupation, but also calls to mind the increasingly contested control of the island by the US military. The park’s design focused on foreigners: the history of Spanish, American, and Japanese occupations of Guam. Only in 1996 was the Memorial Wall of Names dedicated, the first federal acknowledgement of Chamorro experience.\(^ {23}\)

In the Northern Mariana Islands, Japanese, Korean, and Okinawan memorials far outnumber the few monuments to US actions. The proliferation of markers at Marpi Point on Saipan indicates the economic value of Asian war tourism, helped by Chamorros’ personal relationships and familiarity with Japanese language and culture. It was not until the fiftieth anniversary of World War II that American Memorial Park, a small park in Garapan, was developed as a monument. In 2004, the park added a memorial to the 932 Chamorros and Carolinians who died during the war.\(^ {24}\)
Despite the intensity of war in the Southwest Pacific islands, Americans have erected few memorials there, either, reflecting minimal strategic interest in the area until the 1980s saw a burst of competition over historical memory on Guadalcanal. In 1984, Japan donated a peace memorial on a hill overlooking Honiara; at the battle’s fiftieth anniversary in 1992, the United States gave a memorial costing $500,000. Then Japan built Guadalcanal’s airport terminal, donated a large sculpture to commemorate its dead, and suggested renaming Henderson Field to Honiara International Airport, setting up a diplomatic flurry. Solomon Islanders saw the competition as simply wasteful. The local lack of reverence was apparent when in 2008 vandals tried to steal the Japanese peace memorial to sell the bronze for scrap.25

But Solomon Islanders have also rethought how memorials reflect Islanders’ roles. A bronze sculpture of Sir Jacob Vouza erected in 1992 by the American Battle Monuments Commission met criticism as largely a foreign effort representing a limited (“loyal native”) view of Islanders—for example, it shows Sergeant Vouza not in uniform but wearing a lavalava and holding a machete, more like a plantation laborer than a soldier. Criticism of the Vouza statue led to a local effort to raise a new monument. Dedicated in August 2011, the “Pride of Our Nation” statue by Solomon Islands artist Frank Haikiu shows two Solomon Islander Scouts, an Islander radio operator, and a white coastwatcher. Intended to memorialize Islanders’ war service and contribute to national unity after a period of civil conflict and foreign intervention, the statue poses Islanders alongside a European in the same heroic tableau, offering a new vision of history as well as a public site of remembrance for official rituals.26

Fiji’s National War Memorial in Suva, established in 1999 on the site of World War II artillery batteries, carries a different message. It focuses on the history of Fiji’s military, created first for home defense, then for service with Allies in the Southwest Pacific, then as the modern Republic of Fiji Military Forces. The RFMF is now both a powerful national institution and an ongoing link with Great Britain and the international order: several thousand Fijians serve in British armed forces, and more than fifteen thousand have served as UN peacekeepers. In 2013, Fiji held a “conventional” commemoration at the National War Memorial for the seventieth anniversary of the departure of soldiers to the Solomon Islands, but the legacy of the war in Fiji is less conventional. War memories have in the past highlighted ethnic tensions among Fijians, Fiji Indians, and Europeans, and more recently have sought to convey national unity. They resonate with the army’s prominent role in postwar politics and other current issues.27
Like Solomon Islands, Kiribati (Gilbert Islands) has had to manage foreigners “battling for memorials” on Tarawa. A monument to twenty-two British subjects executed by Japanese was erected even before the end of the war; a memorial to US Marines not until 1968. After Kiribati independence in 1979, Cold War concerns drew foreign aid from the United States and also Japan, which built its own memorials in the 1980s and 1990s. Strains between Kiribati and foreign views were inevitable, especially as population growth crowded the US memorial at Betio, invasion beaches and other sites were used as trash dumps, and population pressure at one point led the government to try to reclaim the land of the Japanese memorial, though it pulled back to preserve foreign aid. The United States renewed its presence with an impressive ceremony at Betio in 2003. Few of the many monuments acknowledge Islanders, though one raised by Keuea Village commemorates the forty-eight victims of the 1942 Japanese bombing there. Like late additions to parks in Guam and the CNMI, a 2002 Coastwatchers’ memorial erected by Australia and New Zealand mentions Islanders, and there are plans to inscribe the names of Kiribati people who died on its reverse face.

Combatants see battlegrounds as scenes of victory or patriotic sacrifice. But the local memory is more likely to be one of destruction, as on Peleliu, which, as we saw in chapter 10, is still scarred by battle. Though that battlefield is not an important site for Palauans’ own history, they must deal with outsiders’ interests in it. Americans wish to preserve the memory of sacrifice and victory, while Japanese want to move on from painful sacrifice and loss. Both build memorials on Palauans’ land and extract souvenirs from it; Japanese visitors gather and cremate bones assumed to be Japanese and take soil home to bury in the empty grave boxes given to families during the war. Preoccupied with their own pasts, the two sides pay little attention to current inhabitants. Islanders value their own traditional history, but as Antonio Tewid said of US and Japanese markers, “They are their monuments, not ours. They are not Palauan, so we’re not interested in them.” But people do want to maintain the battlefield out of respect, for tourism, and for diplomacy. Both Japan and the United States provide foreign aid to Palau, so the government must politely manage their differing desires.

Monuments built by foreigners are long-lasting, everyday presences on the landscape of people who may feel no attachment to what they symbolize. Still, the facts that former combatants remain interested, that war ruins are slow to decay, and that battles are indelibly inscribed in national histories, means local people must deal with memories held by foreigners, as well as their own. Where interpretations of conflict are ambivalent and contested, preserving remains
becomes complicated. There is also the possibility for those memories to become economic resources.

War Tourism and “Dark Tourism”

In the first postwar decades, visits to battlefields and cemeteries were dominated by veterans and by relatives and comrades of the dead. Such visits continue, but a wider fascination with sites of war and other tragedies has gained attention as “dark tourism.” As World War II becomes more history than lived horrors, its sites have come to the forefront of dark tourism, from pilgrimages to battlefields and Nazi concentration camps to wreck diving in Bikini Atoll nuclear testing area (now a UNESCO World Heritage site). Across Southeast Asia, cemeteries and battlegrounds attract Japanese, British, and Australian visitors. Ironically, war itself created “pre-adaptations” for tourism. Military infrastructure undergirds modern visitor facilities, and soldiers’ appetites for souvenirs and local color presaged a tourist economy.

In fact, it is largely thanks to tourism that many sites are now preserved. In the first postwar decades, commercial scrap sellers and military cleanups eliminated much matériel; natural decay and clearing for local use further depleted it (chapter 10). Now, their tourist value encourages action to catalogue, protect, and monetize sites, often with aid from former combatant nations.

World War II sites need protection if they are to survive as visible history, but host nations must balance foreign interests with their own needs, the cost of preservation with the relics’ economic potential. Shipwrecks and downed planes anchor dive tourism but require careful management to protect both wrecks and fragile coral reefs nearby. In the sea and on land, scavengers and visitors filch souvenirs, degrading and gradually destroying heritage. At Peleliu, looters have dug through or backhoed sealed caves; restoration hobbyists and museums have scavenged aircraft parts; even dangerous ordnance has been taken. Residents are not immune to the wish to turn (what to them is) junk into cash. Efforts to protect Peleliu battlefield by enhancing its financial value include guided tours and a museum opened in 2004 with the support of Palau’s government. American and Micronesian federal agencies, private entities, and NGOs collaborate with Chuuk State to protect and develop Chuuk Lagoon, once a Japanese Imperial Navy base and now a world-famous diving site. In Vanuatu, two small family-run museums display relics, and a South Pacific World War II museum on Espiritu Santo benefits from cruise ship visits—economic initiatives that also help preserve local memories.
Solomon Islands turned to tourism to rebuild its economy after the recent conflict era. Before the coup of June 2000, more than fifteen thousand foreign tourists visited annually, but the years of violence slashed that number to fewer than five thousand, most interested not in war history but in diving and adventure travel. After regaining stability in 2006, the nation hoped to revive tourism with help from Australia. Landowners charge small fees to visitors to view what are essentially outdoor museums of war equipment, though there is a gap between the kind of display tourists expect and local views of the foreigners’ war. But the US-built infrastructure of war—roads, wharves, and airfields—remains in use, and the growth of tourism itself is in part a legacy of the half-million souvenir-seeking soldiers, sailors, and marines who once passed through the islands.36

The Kokoda Trail across Papua New Guinea’s Owen Stanley Range, where in 1942 the Australian Army blocked the Japanese attack on Port Moresby, is also a modern site of tourism and commemoration. Three thousand Papua and New Guinea men worked as carriers on the track, and more as soldiers, but it is Australians who see it most vividly as their heritage, raising the question of PNG’s obligation to protect the trail for the interests of erstwhile rulers. Kokoda is a symbol of national pride for Australians but has limited significance for PNG, where it is seen as part of local history rather than a national narrative. Canberra has fostered its tourism potential not only out of historical interest, but also to support the PNG government and promote Australian interests there. Tens of thousands of Australians and others have trekked the Kokoda Trail, generating tens of millions of dollars for local communities and the nation of Papua New Guinea, but also creating problems—including, in a sad echo of the war, mistreatment of hired carriers and guides by trekkers.37

Oro Province (at the northern end of the Kokoda Trail) holds other sites of potentially lucrative but troubling tourism. The Australian Army execution of twenty-one Orokaiva men in 1943, and a deadly 1951 volcanic eruption, offer dark tourism resources that cannot be exploited without raising moral issues. Embogi, a local leader hanged for treason, was responsible for turning over Anglican women missionaries who were killed by the Japanese (chapter 8); he also offered significant help to Australians. Today those events are being reconsidered: Was Embogi an enemy collaborator, or an anti-colonial resister? How should such tragedies be memorialized? And who is to benefit from commercializing them?38

It is difficult to project the future of war tourism. Waterloo Battlefield in Belgium has been a popular draw since 1815, but tourism, like public memory, changes over time. In the Pacific Islands, large-scale tourism began in the 1960s
with large-capacity jets and packaged tours—many in the Southwest Pacific initially set up for veterans. But as the American, Australian, New Zealand, and Japanese war generation grew old, stopped traveling, and died—and the Islander war generation too, passed on—Pacific tourism responded. Today’s sightseers are more interested in a tropical paradise than in the tropical hell of war, though a small, specialized industry continues. On the other hand, Nagaland’s Kohima area and Finland’s north are seeing a modest growth of interest in the remains of war.

Seeing Indigenous People in National War Memories

In the homelands of the former combatant powers, public war memory plays a different role for Indigenous citizens. Recognition of their service can be a strong argument in the fight for civil rights, but only if memories persist. We have seen that governments showed gratitude for Indigenous assistance at key points in the war, sentiments that helped revise attitudes and policies. But public memory can also erase history. The service of tens of thousands of African soldiers on French battlefields in both world wars has been expunged or forgotten; for many Indigenous peoples, similarly, recognition has been long delayed.

Those who were enlisted in regular armed forces received commensurate recognition at the time. Papuan and New Guinean soldiers of the PIB and NGIB are named on the “Roll of Honour” at the Australian War Memorial, as are forty-six ANGAU scouts who died. But these official honors, while representing equal sacrifice, also entail an assimilative edge. It may have been an honor when the names of nineteen Palauan men who died abroad in the Japanese emperor’s service were inscribed on a monument at the Shinto shrine in Koror. But in more recent times, representatives of Indigenous Taiwanese tribes have protested the uninvited inclusion of another group of imperial subjects, Aboriginal Taiwanese war dead, in Japan’s Yasukuni Shrine.

In recent decades, public memory in the major combatant nations has become much more inclusive, supported by both government and grassroots. In New Zealand, the Te Rau Aroha Museum commemorating Māori military service opened in February 2020 at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds—the theme of its main exhibit is “The Price of Citizenship.” In Hokkaido, Japan, a movement called minshūshi “people’s history” has made visible the experiences of Ainu and Uilta. In a common phrasing, the “forgotten” soldiers and victims and events of the war are increasingly being remembered and preserved.
included with other minorities in the national narrative of cooperation to achieve victory. A monument in Murmansk dedicated to ski and reindeer battalions acknowledges these special units. In Naryan-Mar, capital of Nenets Autonomous Okrug, one of the three war memorials displays a herder in traditional clothing flanked by a reindeer and a herding dog (figure 13.2). Its erection in 2012 marked official recognition of Nenets’ patriotic sacrifice and also offered a place of mourning for soldiers’ families.46

In Canada and the United States, attention by scholars and family researchers has boosted knowledge of Indigenous World War II service. The Canadian armed forces participate in commemorative events focused on Aboriginal peoples. Canada erected a National Aboriginal Veterans Memorial in Ottawa (2001) near the National War Memorial, and names of Indigenous heroes have been attached to streets and military installations, declaring that the “forgotten warriors” of national militaries were “no longer forgotten.”47 Declassification of the US codetalker program in 1968 opened an era of public recognition for those men and all Native veterans. Native American codetalkers were awarded Congressional Medals in 2000 and 2001; a bronze statue of Creek Medal of Honor recipient Ernest Childers was unveiled in his Oklahoma hometown in 2009.
Indigenous military associations revived, and veterans became more visible in parades and commemorations. Al Carroll’s discussion of the controversy over renaming an Arizona mountain to honor Army Specialist Lori Piestewa (Hopi), killed in Iraq in 2003—the first Native American woman killed in combat while serving in the US military—reminds us, though, that even acknowledged service does not erase racism.48

In Australia, the “digger legend” is a key symbol of national identity. Originating in World War I, identifying special qualities of Anzac and especially Australian soldiers, this public memory has expanded to acknowledge the Indigenous role in the country’s wars. Historian Robert Hall’s deliberately titled 1989 book The Black Diggers helped lay the scholarly foundation for this appreciation. Acknowledgement of Aboriginal Australians, Torres Strait Islanders, and South Sea Islanders as Australian citizens led to awareness of their absence in the “sacred sites” of war memorials.49 The nation’s yearlong fiftieth anniversary program in 1995 helped the public re-evaluate its history.50 Indigenous veterans are now recognized in Anzac Day parades, ceremonies, and memorials, The Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs honors Indigenous service annually since 2007 during Reconciliation Week. In 2016, a bronze statue was raised to honor Tiwi man Matthias Ulungura, who captured the first Japanese prisoner on Australian soil. Remembering the war has created new cultural intersections, for example, European-descent Australians have adopted the Aboriginal Australian ritual practice of burning eucalyptus leaves as a memorial at Anzac sites in North Africa and Thailand. Indigenous defense of Australia against European invaders can also be seen as part of the nation’s war history, though integrating this resistance as part of the national narrative is controversial.51

In Japan, postwar avoidance of war history left colonial and Indigenous peoples who had been part of the empire unrecognized and uncompensated. Only in the 1970s and 1980s did acknowledgement of Japan’s colonial and military past allow minority soldiers to speak out, as in the publication of Uilta veteran Dahinien Gendanu’s memoir, and other accounts of Ainu, Taiwanese, and Micronesian war experiences.52 Openness to these topics was spurred in part by the 1974 appearance of the last Imperial Japanese Army soldier, an Indigenous Taiwanese man whose Amis name of Suniyon had been replaced with the Japanese “Nakamura” when he was drafted in 1943. Realizing that the last IJA holdout was Indigenous Taiwanese opened discussion of colonialism and imperialism that had been missing from Japan’s public memories.53

Worldwide, new generations of writing about the war are redressing previous misrepresentation or neglect of Indigenous participation. The publication
of memoirs and preservation of oral accounts foregrounds Indigenous voices. Museums and archives make recollections more widely accessible by including photos and interviews on websites and inviting the sharing of tribal and family history. In many ways, then, and after much effort by Indigenous veterans and scholars, the public memory of World War II has become more inclusive. But it is possible to take this further. Integrating Indigenous histories can broaden familiar understandings of that era and push beyond the borders of national narratives. Sámi historian Veli-Pekka Lehtola takes up this idea for Sámi history, noting how a transnational perspective reveals how Sámi leaders in Finland benefited from discussions in Norway, Sweden, and beyond. Tracey Banivanua Mar’s study of decolonization in Pacific nations similarly argues for a transnational view of independence movements. In the broadest view, Solomon Islander scholar David Welchman Gegeo emphasizes the value of studying World War II truly as a world event, rather than a history of the contending powers.34

History serves the needs of the present. Any study of Indigenous pasts leads us to inquire into the current actions of Indigenous communities on the world stage. Involvement in the war engaged Indigenous ideas about identity and political status. Human rights and civil rights campaigns opened dialogue and demanded change, a process that continues. These communities lived through the worst that empires and nations can offer—total war—and emerged more determined than ever to live autonomously. But is that possible in a world dominated by nation-states? In the final chapter, we look at how relationships between central governments and Indigenous citizens offer new options for the twenty-first century.