

On July 16th, 1916, my great-great-uncle, Sylvester Sullivan, a proud Aboriginal man, joined the fight in the Battle of the Somme, ultimately sacrificing his life for his Country. He first attempted to enlist for the defence force in Dubbo, where he lived. However because he was an Aboriginal man, he was not legally allowed to join the army.

Instructions issued to the recruitment offices in 1916 stated that *"Aboriginals, half-casts, or men with Asiatic blood are not to be enlisted – This applied to all coloured men"*. So, he found a recruiter who was willing to overlook his Aboriginality and the law, because they were desperate for people to fight in World War 1 (WW1), and so Sylvester ended up enlisting in Liverpool, 350km away from his hometown.

Like many, Sylvester Sullivan was attracted to the army for a variety of reasons. It was advertised, through propaganda, as an adventure and was the first chance for many to visit other countries. Additionally, it was one of the very few jobs where Aboriginal men were paid the same as white men, because there were no records kept of the ethnicity of the soldiers. In the army, Aboriginal people are said to have been treated equally to white people, and many found a great sense of camaraderie with each other. However, upon their return to Australia after the war, Indigenous service members experienced none of the warm welcome of the white soldiers. They were denied soldier settlement schemes and were refused the opportunity to be members of returned servicemen's leagues, or RSLs. Sylvester Sullivan did not make it home to experience this particular case of discrimination. He died on the battlefield in France, sacrificing his life for his country - to protect the futures of you and I. He left behind a wife, Alice French, who was denied support after the death of her husband in the war... and all because he was Aboriginal.

My great, great Uncle, Sylvester Sullivan, joined the Army ultimately because he wanted acceptance, equal pay and camaraderie between himself and the white men who served alongside him in WW1. We have come a long way since his time, but there is still a lot left to do, in terms of reconciliation. Today, Aboriginal people, such as myself, view reconciliation as an ongoing process, targeting multiple parts of everyday life, and governance.

To me personally, a reconciled Australia is achieved when Aboriginal people have the same life expectancy as Non-Indigenous Australians. It is one where we all have the same opportunities. It is one where every person in this room knows that *Sorry Day* is not the day we expect you to apologise for being white, it is the day where we remember the stolen generations, and the ongoing intergenerational trauma caused by discriminatory policies. A reconciled Australia is one where no one asks me what percentage Aboriginal I am. It is one where we all receive an education about Indigenous history, and culture. It is one where the customs of my ancestors are respected, rather than ridiculed. A reconciled Australia benefits us all.

The Reconciliation Week theme for 2026 is *All in*. Reconciliation Australia, who chose the theme every year, expands on this by saying that reconciliation is about **all** people giving **all** of their effort. Sometimes, people feel like they are overstepping when they want to speak up about reconciliation. Nobody wants to say the wrong thing, or to accidentally take the voice of an Aboriginal person in this conversation. However, as the theme suggests, it is really important for everyone, for all of us, to do their bit to achieve reconciliation.

Reconciliation cannot be achieved without every Australian helping. It is important for us all to listen to Indigenous elders and leaders, who live amongst our Aboriginal community, and understand what needs to change in order to achieve reconciliation. I am not telling you to tell Indigenous people what they need. I do not want you to guess what we need. I am saying that you need to listen to Aboriginal people when we talk about reconciliation, that you should be curious about our culture and educated about our history, so that you can be part of the change.