

When Glenda met Sandy: descendants of massacre survivor and soldier unite in grief

At least 14 Aboriginal men, women and children were shot and killed in the Appin massacre. Countless others fell to their deaths in the gorge below

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Glenda Chalker, Sandy Hamilton and the cliff at the Cataract River gorge, where an unknown number of Aboriginal families were killed in the Appin massacre.

In the small hours of 17 April 1816, Aboriginal families were asleep in their camp at the top of the Cataract River gorge. Close by the 46th Regiment fanned out in a line and crept through the bush, on the orders of Governor Lachlan Macquarie. It was dark and quiet, until they heard the cry of a child.

The only written account of what happened next is by the man who led the killings, Captain James Wallis.

As moonlight gave way to the “grey dawn of morn, so dark as to be able only to discover their figures bounding from rock to rock”, the 46th Regiment shot and killed at least 14 Muringong, Dharawal and Gandangarra men, women and children.

Others rushed “in despair over the precipice” and fell to their deaths into the “deep rocky creek” – the Cataract River – below. Wallis was taken by regret at his “melancholy but necessary duty”.

When the shooting was done, he ordered the bodies of two warriors, Durelle and Cannabayagal, be suspended from the trees as “a deterrent to the other blacks”. Later their heads were cut off and sent to Sydney, paid for in shillings and rum.

Three survivors – two children and a woman – were brought to Sydney. The smallest, a girl called Giribunger, was sent to the Parramatta native institution.



‘How do we name the people we’ve lost?’: Dharawal elder Glenda Chalker is a descendant of one of the few survivors of the 1816 massacre

Glenda Chalker is one of Giribunger’s descendants and lives nearby. Chalker points out the hill where the men were hanged, on the drive to the Cataract dam, where a small plaque sits beneath a sandstone overhang on the one piece of public land close to the massacre site.

“Imagine being woken up in the middle of the night with something dramatic going on around you, she said. “It would have been terrible, not knowing what the consequences were going to be.

“Not many people knew the story. I guess I went to school and was told Captain Cook discovered Australia. I was in my early 20s when we found out about the massacre.

“How do we name the people we lost who we don’t know the names of? At least in the army you have a number and a name. We can only acknowledge them as a group of people, not as individuals. We have no remains.

“And yet the stories keep being told. A lot more will be told, especially as Aboriginal people start acknowledging that it happened. A lot of stories aren’t being told at this point in time.”

Sandy Hamilton is telling her story for the first time. Hamilton is descended from a 19th-century superintendent of convicts at Port Macquarie, Stephen Partridge.



Sandy Hamilton is a direct descendant of Stephen Partridge, who served with the 46th Regiment

Partridge was an ancestor of note. Arriving from Scotland in 1814, he’d travelled with the explorer John Oxley before being sent to Port Macquarie in 1820, where he oversaw the beginnings of the town.

He had served with the 46th Regiment in 1816.

“As a child we were taught this, we were very proud of him,” Hamilton said. “Then I was watching TV one night and saw news about the 200th commemoration of the Appin massacre. They interviewed Glenda and she told the story of what happened, that Macquarie had instructed the 46th Regiment to go with ‘secrecy and dispatch’.

“As soon as she said 46th Regiment, I went and checked and it clicked: yes, he was there at that time. I knew I had to do something about it.”

Hamilton said she had jumped in her car and driven to Appin, hoping to be there in time for the ceremony.

“I felt quite afraid but also fearsome, because I was angry at Partridge and I was disgusted and ashamed of him. So at that point I was thinking, ‘You bastard, I’m going to tell the world, because everybody thinks you’re a good bloke.’”

“On my way Glenda rang me and said, ‘I’m a descendant of the Dharawal people,’ and I said, “I’m Sandy Hamilton, I’m a descendant of the 46th.



The Aboriginal and Australian flags flying in Bargo

“And there was a long pause. And then she said, ‘I’ve always wanted someone from the other side to come forward, no one ever has, and over the years that’s been my wish, because you can’t have reconciliation with only one side.’ And I said, ‘Well, I’m on my way.’”

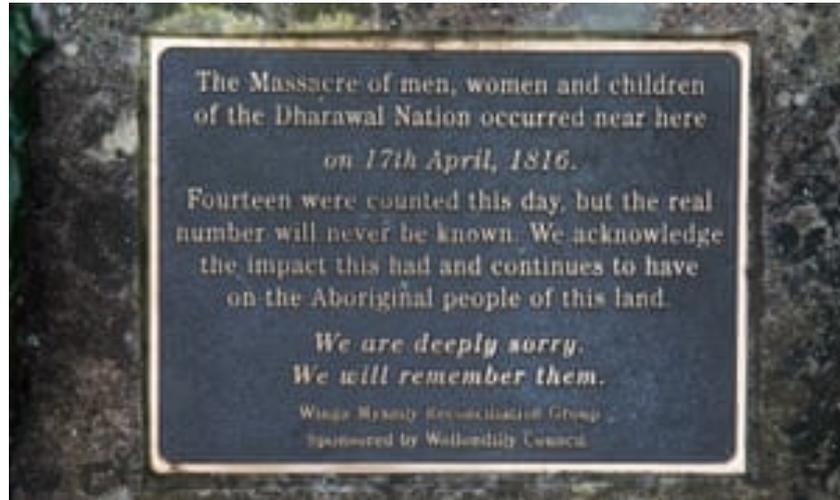
“That day was very difficult. Everybody was in family and community groups, hundreds and hundreds of people. I stood out like a sore thumb, not mixing with anybody. A few hours went by, and they had the commemoration and that was very moving, and I guess I felt – embarrassed isn’t the right word – shameful, I guess, shameful for my ancestor ...”

“At the end of the ceremony I introduced myself to Glenda. She was lovely and warm. We both felt a bit awkward. She introduced me to people and one by one they said, ‘How wonderful you’re here, thank you for coming.’ It was a relief. The day finished and I drove home.”

Chalker said the meeting had been challenging for everyone but “I think people should not be shamed into not coming forward. It is part of a reconciliation.

“Sandy came up, and put herself out there because she needed to. There are probably other people out there who’ve stayed in the background. And there are still people doing their genealogies and may not know.

“But my family? They’ve all been here. Kids, grandkids, great grandkids, they’ve all been here, they know the story. Not the really little ones, of course. But hopefully they’ll pick up my banner when I can’t do it any more.”



A memorial plaque at Cataract dam

Hamilton attended the anniversary again in 2017 with her mother, sister and niece.

“It’s a kind of grieving,” she said. “I was taught to be proud of my history, my name and the wonderful stock we come from. We made this nation. But there’s a lot of anger and grief. He is both. That’s where this whole thing is complex. It’s not simple, it’s not black and white.

“We are all Australians and need to take ownership of our history. We deserve to know the truth of how we came to be who we are. Then we can also make real choices about who we want to be as a society, as Australians.

“To go forward, we can’t start from a position of ignorance or denial, as unpalatable as it is. If we can bravely look at the past to see how today was created, then we have more agency in making tomorrow what we would like it to be.

“If we can embrace our history for all its successes and failings then we will be a more cohesive and compassionate nation, which will benefit everyone.”