

## Chapter 2

# The Tribal Warrior Association: Reconstructing identity

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**Abstract:** *Small groups of Aboriginal people living on Darug, Tharawal and Gundungurra country around Sydney, many with connections to other areas of Australia, have been participating in a study of Indigenous identity and Aboriginality, as expressed through the work of contemporary Aboriginal visual and performance artists, researchers, writers, historians, curators, sports people, elders and other members of Indigenous communities. Participants in the study have been discussing how they give expression to their Indigenous identity through their work and in their daily lives, and how what they do affects them as Indigenous people. The participants, whose stories contribute to a narrative of present-day Indigenous identity making, include members of the Tribal Warrior Association, a non-profit maritime training company based in Redfern, Sydney, and operated by Aboriginal elders. The training program aims to help young Aboriginal men and women gain accredited qualifications and work experience, which will enable them to make choices in their own lives, rising above the negativity they had previously experienced to ‘a new vision’ of themselves. A tourism arm of the association links the training to Aboriginal cultural cruises on Sydney Harbour, which are designed to showcase Aboriginal seamanship and to counter public misconceptions about Aboriginality by gaining public recognition of the continuing Aboriginal presence in Sydney. A landmark event on 9 June 2003 was the re-entry into Sydney Harbour of the Tribal Warrior after a 21-month voyage around Australia, visiting and conveying ‘letters of goodwill’ to 120 Aboriginal coastal communities. The circumnavigation symbolised Aboriginal self-affirmation at many levels: as a form of initiation for the trainees, a reconnection with traditional ways of interacting through the renewal of links with Aboriginal communities around the Australian coastline, and as a flagship for nation building and reconciliation Australia-wide.*

## Introduction

In 1998 a significant reaffirmation of Aboriginality took place on The Block in Redfern,<sup>1</sup> where a group of elders<sup>2</sup> met with Daniel Ariel, a local resident, who offered to give his boat, the *Tribal Warrior*, to the Aboriginal people of Sydney: 'That's what led us to where we are today', Board member Michael Mundine said when I interviewed him at the Tribal Warrior Association in Redfern on 28 July 2008.<sup>3</sup> On the strength of that offer, the elders set up an Indigenous maritime training company, which they named the Tribal Warrior Association after the boat.

The Tribal Warrior Association was incorporated in 1999 and was registered as a non-profit organisation directed by Aboriginal elders and operated by Aboriginal people to provide 'certified commercial maritime training, employment opportunities and mentoring to underprivileged Australians, with an emphasis on Aboriginal youth' (Tribal Warrior Association 2008). In an interview in Sydney on 11 August 2008, Shane Phillips, Chairman and Chief Executive of the company, said that the training program was developed without government funding: 'It was a community initiative which aimed to empower Aboriginal people by helping them gain practical skills and theoretical knowledge to qualify for work in the maritime industry.' Establishment of the Tribal Warrior Association represented a step towards achieving greater autonomy and self-determination (Phillips, interview, 11 August 2008):

For us, it's just two simple things: economic empowerment and development. We can call things on our own terms, if we are making our own money and we are doing it the right way, then we can choose to take pathways that we think may help other people. By not being dependent on someone else's money, it allows us to be independent to make our own decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Organisational autonomy and independence in decision making were prerequisites in safeguarding the Aboriginal identity of the Tribal Warrior Association and ensuring a culturally appropriate and secure work environment for crew members, trainers and trainees. From its Redfern origins, the Association had credibility within the Aboriginal community, and in its negotiations sought to ensure that the standpoints of local Aboriginal people informed and directed its policies and decisions. This approach involved working in conjunction with the community to reinforce its authority, in contrast to the consultation processes used in the past by external bodies, which had undermined Aboriginal authority by raising expectations then failing to deliver positive outcomes (Brennan et al. 2000, cited in AHC 2007:15).

In this chapter<sup>5</sup> I look at how the gift of a boat launched an Aboriginal maritime training and cultural tourism company, which, while operating independently of government for more than ten years, has had marked success in reviving Aboriginal maritime traditions, which had been disrupted by colonisation, and building a bridge

between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities at Sydney's cultural interface (Tribal Warrior Association 2008).<sup>6</sup> The Tribal Warrior Association initiative holds particular interest as a definitive reaffirmation of Aboriginality on The Block in Redfern's Aboriginal heartland, and is led by elders and others with diverse Aboriginal heritage who are working in collaboration. Through its training programs, the Tribal Warrior Association has enabled young Aboriginal people to obtain TAFE-accredited qualifications, which have led to 'real jobs' in the maritime industry and related trades and launched them on new career paths.

This chapter draws on interviews with Tribal Warrior Association Board members, staff, crew, trainers and trainees, who discuss how they give expression to their Aboriginality through their work with the association and in their daily lives. Daniel Ariel, the donor of the boat, declined to be interviewed, saying that he would prefer 'no limelight' as he did not want any coverage of his story to detract from the achievements of the Tribal Warrior Association (Ariel, pers. comm., 2009).<sup>7</sup>

In order to appreciate the significance of the Tribal Warrior Association, it is necessary to look back to the origins of the project in the Redfern community. In 1998, when the Tribal Warrior Association was being established, morale on The Block was at a low ebb. Families and groups were increasingly divided as residents struggled to find solutions to problems that had become deeply embedded as a result of longstanding government neglect. Housing was dilapidated, culturally inappropriate and far below the standard of housing in other inner-Sydney suburbs. Relationships within The Block community had been severely undermined by drug and alcohol abuse, and ill health, aggravated by cramped living conditions, 'crime, vandalism, drug dealers and criminal manipulation' (AHC 2007:8). In a classic example of blaming the victim, much of the crime and substance abuse for which the Aboriginal community was blamed originated outside Redfern, and non-Aboriginal drug peddlers and petty criminals preyed on residents of The Block.

The community felt stigmatised by the positioning of a 'Needle Bus' for more than ten years next to the Redfern Community Centre and a children's playground, and four doors away from a pre-school.<sup>8</sup> Michael Mundine, Chief Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Housing Company, described how, 'In the beginning, we didn't object to the bus because we were going through a bad time, but now the drug problem on the Block has been largely resolved' (Mundine, interview, 28 July 2008):

Today [28 July 2008] all the drug users from everywhere are using the bus, and the Health Department hasn't got the respect for us to move it on... The Redfern [Police] Command want it moved, Aboriginal organisations and local residents, white and black, want it out of there, but the Health Department and the City of Sydney refuse to listen.<sup>9</sup>

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The stigmatisation was doubly unfair. People interviewed recognised that white society had been responsible for the introduction of drugs in their country, and that the drugs had represented a form of acculturation to white social values. Phillips (interview, 11 August 2008), reflecting on the injustice of the situation, said:

I was an angry man. I was angry when I thought — I think — the white man has put us in this position, and now they want us to get up and run with them, alongside. And I thought, what if we can't do that straight away? Are they still going to resent us and make us even angrier?

At a time when choices for young people had been limited to drugs, alcohol and self-harm, the Tribal Warrior Association offered an alternative, although the introduction of tertiary-level training courses in a community that had become demoralised required much preparatory groundwork. The involvement of elders in guiding the project helped the trainees re-establish links to traditional culture and values, and the trainers ensured that the training programs were attuned to the trainees' needs for a community to belong to, endorsement of their Aboriginality, encouragement in their career paths, and support as they underwent rehabilitation. Skipper Dallas Clayton, in an interview on board another Tribal Warrior Association vessel, the *MV Deerubbun*, at the Sydney Fish Markets on 31 July 2008, said the Tribal Warrior Association has helped 'hundreds of troubled kids':

We've dealt with a lot of troubled kids from around the metropolitan area and the country. They've come down from the Kimberley, Central Australia, the Desert, West Torres... The importance of the training is it gives the kids a bit of incentive, encouraging them to 'have a go'. It's helped them develop self-esteem.

Between 1998 and 2007, 562 students participated in the Tribal Warrior Association's maritime training courses, including 209 who trained as general purpose hands, 12 as coxswains, 19 as master class 5, four as Australian Yachting Federation coastal skippers and two as boatswains. Twenty-two undertook Marine Engine Driver 3 Engineer training, while others trained at Marine Engine Driver 2 Engineer and Master 3 level (Tribal Warrior Association 2008). The Tribal Warrior Association is recognised as 'the only Indigenous maritime training company in the country' (Clayton, interview, 31 July 2008).

There is always a waiting list for enrolment in the courses. In the absence of government funding, 'it's a struggle financially to keep things going, to have the maintenance done on the boats, to have an office and people working in the office. So we're not actually running a day-to-day training program at the moment', Keefo 'Kippa' Zechariah said when interviewed at the Tribal Warrior Association, Redfern, on 8 August 2008. The two trainers, Kippa and David 'Seaweed' Vincent, both from

TAFE NSW Open Training and Education Network Maritime Studies, Strathfield, have always worked voluntarily for the association.

Graduates of the training programs have high-level technical skills and are in demand across the industry. The training succeeds through being tailored to each trainee's experience and level of education, and is 'far more rigorous and more practical than other courses' (Zechariah, interview, 8 August 2008): 'We've always had youngies and oldies among the trainees, mixing together. We have two women trainees at the moment, and we've had women trainees before.'

The courses are adapted to Aboriginal learning styles and preferences, building on the Aboriginal trainees' excellent oral and memory skills, as Skipper David Bird said when interviewed on board the MV *Deerubbun* at the Sydney Fish Markets, 5 September 2008:

Most of our exams are oral, and they enable us to examine people with low literacy. What I'm saying is that Aboriginal people have very good memories through having relied on the oral tradition and, working orally, we are able to translate materials for a lot of the fellas without the need for an education in literacy. You see, it's in us to understand that because we don't know the written words.

The training relies less on text books than other TAFE courses and more on data summaries, although standards in theoretical work are equivalent, and in practical work are higher than in TAFE, according to the trainers. Zechariah (interview, 8 August 2008) outlined how training practices endeavoured to meet the needs of Indigenous trainees:

When we first ran this course, we didn't give them set books, just sheets of paper stapled together each time, because they would have been put off by the amount of books. So ever since then, all the training that we do, we've always tried to help the guys with their assignments to get through it. We do that as quick as we can, and we concentrate on the practical training as much as possible. We help them with their assignments, so they can get that out of the way and get on with the practical training so that they become proficient at it, not just head-locked.

Under the direction of elders and community members, the TAFE trainers have adapted training methods to blend with Aboriginal culture and patterns of learning. The training adopts Aboriginal customary learning practices, as Clayton (interview, 31 July 2008) explained:

With our training, it isn't like classrooms or school. It's a different curriculum altogether. We make sure you look and learn and, it's not cheating, we help one another out. It's not like where the teacher stands out the front, uses a board and

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says, ‘Copy this’ or ‘Do this’, and you’re allowed 10 or 20 minutes, otherwise you’ll fail. Practically no one fails with us; we make sure they understand, because that’s the traditional way of learning of our people anyway — you practised doing whatever collection task you were given until you got it right, and it’s the same with our training with the *Tribal Warrior*: unfortunately, a lot of non-Indigenous people haven’t had the opportunity to train our way.

The training program’s potential for rehabilitation was tested in 1999 when Phillips approached mates working on the *Tribal Warrior* (Skipper David Bird and Trainers Kippa and Seaweed) to enlist their help with a group of a dozen young men from Redfern who were undergoing drug detoxification. Phillips, who had been working with the group as a volunteer counsellor, recalled that ‘After the kids had been working through the detoxification program for a few weeks, everyone was asking, “What are we going to do after?”’; it was an important question if they were to break the drug cycle, so Phillips approached Ariel, his neighbour, who suggested, ‘We’ll do days out on the *Tribal Warrior* with your kids, once they’re clean, so they can have some time away with their families’ (Phillips, interview, 11 August 2008).



**Figure 1:** Shane Phillips

Being able to take the young people on board the *Tribal Warrior* offered the prospect of a breakthrough in the drug-dependence cycle. Phillips (interview, 11 August 2008) described the exhilaration the young people experienced out on the harbour, reunited with their families, after weeks of separation while they were undergoing rehabilitation: 'For the first time for a long time, their new day included their families. The kids and their families had lunch out on the boat, going for a cruise, being able just to enjoy the sunshine and the breeze. That's how the Tribal Warrior came about.'

That experience indicated that maritime training, which distances trainees from the site of their problems and offers a taste of a new life offshore as part of a supportive crew, had the potential to help break down drug and alcohol dependencies. Employment, which is critical in breaking the drug-dependency cycle, was generally unattainable until people had been weaned off their substance abuse and had their self-confidence rebuilt. Hence, rehabilitation programs, combined with mentoring, were seen as essential components of the maritime training courses.<sup>10</sup>

Phillips is proud of the association's achievements in rehabilitation, which he has incorporated into the training program informally by drawing on existing support networks. The rehabilitation depends on 'community', and there is also an expectation that 'once you get help, you help someone else: I love the fact that people here who at one stage of their lives were on substance abuse, heavy drugs, petty crime, broken families, low, low self-esteem, and with no vision for themselves, just didn't think they were worth anything, now seeing them helping people' (Phillips, interview, 11 August 2008).

Zechariah (interview, 8 August 2008) described the interweaving of support into the training program:

Because some trainees were having drug and alcohol problems, we gave them a bit of extra support. It wasn't just maritime training...it was a bit of everything; it was full-on, ministering to them, trying to empower them, basically, to give them some self-esteem, a new taste of life, a new vision with better horizons.

For those who had been long-term drug users, rehabilitation was often uneven, with occasional relapses, in some cases after 'going straight' for six to eight years; other relapses occurred much sooner. The Tribal Warrior Association offers ongoing support to people fighting drug addiction. Phillips (interview, 11 August 2008) said, 'There's also this cultural thing, people helping themselves, and as a group of people they all support each other together. They all have different beliefs, but they all just try to do something to help themselves':

They don't get many chances, but we've got options for them, we've got people in rehab, we've got people who are counsellors, we talk to the courts, and we link them with sponsors who've come through the organisation. Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Christian groups also offer support.

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Tim Gray, who is studying for his Master 5 Certificate while working in the office of the Tribal Warrior Association, had been homeless before commencing training: 'I was so depressed, it was an actual choice to live on the streets: I'd lost all hope. But now, I've gained all that back again, since returning to the Tribal Warrior Association after a period of rehabilitation', he said when interviewed at the Tribal Warrior Association, Redfern, on 11 August 2008.

The Tribal Warrior Association's management practices are not democratic, Phillips (interview, 11 August 2008) was careful to point out:

We have to be hard...we deal compassionately with them, but when they are with us, we have to make sure that they understand the full ramifications of their role — to be a representative of our people. The standard has to be high, as every one of our kids represents us, and we have to represent them, so we don't want to give them any crap, but we have to make sure they understand the big picture, so that they can use their training as a tool for their own future.

During interviews, crew members and trainees alike strongly endorsed the Tribal Warrior Association training programs, which they said had given them work skills and confidence to overcome problems, enabling them to reconnect with their Aboriginality. An important factor contributing to their recovery had been the traditionally supportive Aboriginal community they found in the Tribal Warrior Association. 'This organisation is the best thing that ever happened,' said Skipper Chris Duckett (interview on board the *MV Deerubbun* at the Sydney Fish Markets, 1 August 2008); 'Some of these fellas here would give you the shirt off their back, and they have had hard lives.' Duckett was elated to have recently gained his Captain's Certificate, recalling how before joining the Tribal Warriors his situation had been dire: 'I was going bad. Five and a half years of my life I was inside — in all the prisons, Long Bay, Lithgow, Goulburn, Grafton, Maitland, Cessnock. Coming back out the other end was an achievement, and being a father made the difference...'

### Continuities on The Block

The Block at Redfern seems an unlikely birthplace for an Aboriginal maritime training company: a landlocked inner cityscape of some 8000 square metres, bounded by narrow streets — including Eveleigh Street, which has a reputation for drug dealing and violence. Yet that small space, on Gadigal lands that form part of the Darug nation, has been a hub of Aboriginality for more than 200 years, and its significance to its present-day Aboriginal owners is disproportionate to its size. It continues to be a meeting place and point of disembarkation for travellers from country areas, accustomed to staying with or close to relatives.



Of some 50 to 60 Gadigal traditional owners of Redfern who were alive in 1788, only three survived the smallpox epidemic and remained alive in 1791 (Kohen 1993:15; AHC 2006). In the 1920s Aboriginal people from rural communities began migrating to Redfern, seeking work at the Eveleigh rail yards and on the waterfront, their numbers becoming 'an influx in the 1950s, after modern farm machinery eliminated seasonal jobs in the bush' (Stephens 2004). The intermixing of Aboriginal people from diverse communities, brought into close proximity on the site, encouraged the development of political activism. John Maynard (2005:2) records that at the Sydney docks, Aboriginal wharf labourers encountered international black seamen, and 'realised that they were not alone' as they learned that 'others around the globe were...speaking out against oppression, racism, and prejudice directed against black people.'

Six terrace houses on The Block were bought by the Whitlam government in 1973 and handed over to Aboriginal ownership.<sup>11</sup> Other houses remained in private hands until, in 1997, the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) bought the last privately owned terrace house on The Block to become the owner of more than one hundred individual parcels of land. Only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their partners and families live on The Block, and the AHC, under its memorandum of association, is unable to rent any property to non-Indigenous people (NSW Parliament 2004).

Aboriginal ownership of The Block did not result in autonomy in land management, however, and the area remained a contested space where Aboriginal residents continued to experience a form of cultural apartheid (Mundine, interview, 28 July 2008):

Our land beside Redfern Station is the second biggest Aboriginal nation in New South Wales, and [it has] got to go forward. From a government point of view, we're a stumbling block for their vision. That's where we're isolated. Their attitude is: 'You're a black man — you stay over there!' That barrier is part of the vicious cycle of racism that's got to go.<sup>12</sup>

Against opposition from New South Wales Government planning authorities, the AHC persisted and in 2001 submitted a Community Social Plan for the redevelopment of AHC properties in Redfern. A second edition of the plan, developed with support from the non-Indigenous community, was published in 2007, as Mundine (interview, 28 July 2008) described:

With our new concept plan, since non-Indigenous people came to help us, we were able to put the plan in to the Planning Authority, simply because the whole mob came together as a people. That's what can happen if you show respect. The non-Indigenous people involved know that it is an Aboriginal company, and that we've got the last say on what happens, and I have the last say from the CEO point

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of view. But we sit at the table, and talk to one another. We've got the vision as Aboriginal people, but to bring the concept to reality, you've got to have architects, planners, landscapers and surveyors.<sup>13</sup>

The AHC's Pemulwuy Project Concept Plan for The Block moved a step closer to being implemented after gaining the approval of the New South Wales Minister for Planning and Minister for Redfern, Kristina Keneally, on 2 July 2009 (Keneally 2009).<sup>14</sup> The election of a new state government on 26 March 2011 resulted in further delays for the project until, on 22 December 2012, Premier Barry O'Farrell announced that his government had granted planning approval for the Pemulwuy redevelopment of The Block.<sup>15</sup>

The approval was a landmark after 'a very long, long journey of trials and tribulation', Mundine said in a telephone interview on 2 April 2013. Mundine observed, in the AHC's fortieth year, that he had witnessed 'greater respect for Redfern after we made a stand and said "No more!" to the vicious cycle of racism in which people in our own community had been caught up as much as anybody else'. He added:

You cannot blame Aboriginal people for blaming others and dwelling on the past because of what they went through, ones who had suffered all these many, many years. But I believe that now it's time to [not] dwell on the past, live in the present and look forward to the future.

This community we are building is for the next generation of children, and Redfern in general. We want to change the image of Redfern, to change the face of Redfern... With the Pemulwuy project, I want people to come and say, 'Oh, we'll go to Redfern! That's my meeting place.'<sup>16</sup>

The Block community is made up of permanent residents and a transient population of temporary residents staying with relatives, including people from rural areas seeking employment and better educational opportunities for their children, and other people travelling between communities. Clayton spoke of having 'moved in and out of Redfern on and off over the years, staying with aunties and uncles'; at other times he stayed with his mother at Bonnyrigg, or travelled to Bowraville, where his Wiradjuri family members have a land claim (Clayton, interview, 31 July 2008).

Redfern residents, both short- and long-term, draw strength from their community, as Duckett (interview, 1 August 2008) observed:

There is a bit of community here, although there's a struggle with the alcohol and drug dealers down at The Block. Redfern has always been a meeting place for the Stolen Generation people, and people travelling through, they'd put them up for the night while they travelled between towns.

Skipper David Bird's involvement with the Tribal Warrior Association over ten years had, he said, 'nailed me to Sydney, because of the great vision it offers — I like being part of it'. Bird feels he belongs to the Redfern community, despite having been born in Dubbo (and being Wiradjuri on his mother's side, and from Cherbourg on his father's side of the family). From his observation, 'everyone that has come to the vessel, during their time with the Tribal Warrior Association gets involved with the movement in Redfern and La Perouse and with those communities more than the communities they came from' (Bird, interview, 8 August 2008).<sup>17</sup>

The self-containment of the Redfern community has undoubtedly contributed to its residents' sense of belonging, kinship and political solidarity, with ostracism by white society encouraging cohesiveness in self-defence. Several participants in this study conceptualised the Redfern community as the core of their understanding of their Aboriginal identity. The *Tribal Warrior* and the MV *Deerubbun* act as a bridge to maintain lines of communication between residents of The Block and Aboriginal communities around Australia. Even crew members who originated from other areas of Australia felt a sense of belonging to The Block and concern for the wellbeing of the Redfern community.

During interviews, residents of Redfern and adjacent areas identified multiple factors making up their identities as members of the Redfern community, including connections to ancestors, as Phillips (interview, 11 August 2008) described:

I'm from the Redfern community...my Mum's mob is from down here. It was actually across the road in Lawson Street in the late 1800s that her grandmother and grandfather used to work in that street on some big old cart. There's a connection — that's why I love Redfern so much...I know within my own spirit that it's from this area, that there's this connection.

Both Phillips and Bird spoke of their deepening sense of identification with Redfern — Phillips referred to Redfern as his country and spiritual home, while Bird described his sense of growing connection to the people and history of the place. For Mundine (interview, 28 July 2008), the Tribal Warrior Association seems 'rather like the water-side of the Aboriginal Housing Company, down at the sea':

The totem for this area is sea creatures, and I believe the sea creatures, the dolphins and whales make the spiritual flow of the water. So the *Tribal Warrior* is trying to get the good spirit from the sea level and bring it back on the land, and clean out the vicious cycle, the bad karma. That's my belief, anyway.

## On the harbour

The Tribal Warrior Association was an idea that had wings — a courageous venture to attempt to float an Aboriginal maritime training and cruise business on two small vessels. The *Tribal Warrior*, a 15.4 metre gaff-rigged ketch, was built in the Torres Strait Islands in 1899 and worked as a pearling lugger off Broome (Tribal Warrior Association 2008).<sup>18</sup> On Sydney Harbour it acquired a new layer of identity, becoming the flagship of the Tribal Warrior Association after the elders had performed a traditional smoking ceremony to purify, cleanse and heal past memories. The vessel today bears testimony to Aboriginal history in its mast, carved with the Whale Dreaming story, a story of reconciliation. For public occasions and celebrations, the *Tribal Warrior* flies the Koori flag, a special events jib sail bearing the words ‘It’s a Koori harbour’ and a ‘Black Duck (Guindaring) painted in Aboriginal design...the totem of the Yuin — south coast of New South Wales’ (Tribal Warrior Association 2008).<sup>19</sup> MV *Deerubbun*,<sup>20</sup> acquired in 2001, is a wooden-hulled ex-Navy torpedo recovery vessel.<sup>21</sup> Aboriginal carvings now decorate the woodwork of the vessel, which is used for Aboriginal Cultural Cruises and corporate charters on Sydney Harbour.

Aboriginal Cultural Cruises on Sydney Harbour, linked to the training program, are designed to showcase Aboriginal seamanship, to teach Aboriginal culture and gain public recognition of the continuity of an Aboriginal presence in Sydney. The cruises,



**Figure 2:** *Tribal Warrior*, Sydney (photograph: Wayne Quilliam)

which depart from the Opera House steps and attract many tourists, demonstrate that Sydney's harbour and waterways belong in Aboriginal culture, as Bird (interview, 8 August 2008) described:

Aboriginal people were familiar with everything associated with the water, tidal zones, up and down the streams, when were the best times to fish. Down here in Blackwattle Bay there's evidence of Aboriginal rock carvings of the larger Orca whales keeping the fish within the sandbanks, and when the tide was right out, there were these nice pools of fish here for the people, who were signalled and able to go down and grab these fish, working in with the creatures themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Trainer David Vincent, in an interview in Sydney on 1 August 2008, said the cultural tours aimed to dispel public misconceptions about Aboriginality by educating the general public to recognise that, in Sydney, 'There are coastal Aboriginal people. There always have been coastal Aboriginal people.' The cultural cruises are run in a way that encourages 'everyone that comes along to offer an aspect from their culture as part of our cultural cruises' (Bird, interview, 8 August 2008).



**Figure 3:** Skipper Dallas Clayton at the helm of MV *Deerubbun*, Circular Quay, Sydney, 31 August 2008 (photograph: Stephanie Lindsay Thompson)

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One crew member, who is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, is a traditional dancer and on the tours presents ‘the live history of the songs, dance, artwork, and also a bit of knowledge of the Aboriginal people today’ (pers. comm., 9 August 2008<sup>23</sup>). He described his sense of belonging to the ship’s company: ‘It’s a real community with these guys here — we’re a community within ourselves. In addition, there’s the performing arts side’:

With dance, one of my elders taught me to dance, and she said to me, ‘I’ll teach you to dance, but it’s not for you to have. It’s for you to pass it on.’ And the reason I have to pass it on is to keep our culture alive. If you keep it, it’s not going to be there for the next generation. It’s just like the land, we don’t own the land, the land owns us. It’s the same with our songs and dances.

Working with the Tribal Warrior Association melds very well with Aboriginal lifestyles as people move in and out of Redfern taking up different roles in their lives. Troy Russell, who travels frequently between Sydney and Dubbo, taught music at Dubbo TAFE for five years. After moving to Sydney he joined the Tribal Warrior Association, ‘starting out as deckhand, and later doing the commentary on the boat. I did some training, passed my tests and exams, and got my certificates. When I get the chance, I work on maintenance too’ (Russell, interviewed at the Tribal Warrior Association, Redfern, 11 August 2008):

I love being around the boats, and I love being out on the harbour. It’s also about who’s working here as well: there’s the mateship of these people, the crew and office staff...Once out on the harbour, we are doing our thing, and it’s strictly Aboriginal...People ask me what I do for a living, and I go, ‘Well, I work for an organisation called the Tribal Warrior Association’...Once you start talking about it, you become proud of what you do out there in maritime work as an Aboriginal person...*Deerubbun* is a whole new experience, and I’ve learnt through the maintenance on one boat.

Russell is well known as a musician and film maker. He currently works in commercial television, and has made two documentary films, one being the award-winning documentary, *The Foundation 1963–1977*.<sup>24</sup>

### The circumnavigation

On 30 August 2001, three years after the Tribal Warrior Association was established, crowds of well-wishers gathered at Cockle Bay for the departure of the *Tribal Warrior* and its crew on a circumnavigation of the Australian continent. After Uncle Max Eulo performed a smoking ceremony, Aboriginal dancers farewelled the crew members,

who were presented with ‘letters of goodwill’ to all the coastal communities the *Tribal Warrior* would visit (Tribal Warrior Association 2008).

The circumnavigation of 25 760 kilometres of Australian coastline aimed to encourage coastal and river communities to join the Tribal Warrior Association in developing a chain of Indigenous maritime training and tourism industries right around the coastline (Tribal Warrior Association 2001). The Tribal Warrior Association (2008) issued a press release inviting the coastal communities to come on board the *Tribal Warrior*:

We are inviting each community we visit to burn or carve an identifying piece of art on the timber of the vessel to signify their assent and involvement. When the Tribal Warrior returns to its place in Sydney Harbour, it will bear the ‘signature’ of all the coastal nations.

The communities were generally enthusiastic, and each sent an artist to put some art work on the boat (Vincent, interview, 1 August 2008).

Twenty-one months later, on 9 June 2003, the *Tribal Warrior* sailed back into Sydney Harbour on the completion of its circumnavigation, which had included visits to 120 major Aboriginal coastal communities. On board was ‘the first Aboriginal crew to circumnavigate Australia in a voyage of reconciliation’, which rekindled memories of early Aboriginal mariners, notably Bungaree, who 200 years earlier accompanied Matthew Flinders in the *Investigator* on a circumnavigation of the continent (Smith 2011:2; Jopson 2003; McCarthy 2013[1966]).<sup>25</sup> On the waterfront and at sea, Aboriginal mariners frequently joined forces with colonial voyagers, who drew on their mediation skills and readiness to share in the work of the crew.<sup>26</sup>

For Phillips (preliminary interview, 2 June 2006, Circular Quay), who had completed his training as a deckhand before joining the circumnavigation, it was ‘a voyage of self-discovery’:

We handed the vessel over to the elders in all the coastal communities on the way through, and they would share it with the whole town. So it was like a vessel of goodwill, which enabled people who normally wouldn’t spend time together out on the water and in the town, to share the vessel and spend time together...

The circumnavigation was symbolic at several levels: in reconnecting with Eora saltwater traditions and early mariners, and establishing links with communities around Australia as part of an Aboriginal nation-building process; as a voyage of reconciliation in which the *Tribal Warrior* was taking a leadership role; and as a form of initiation into Aboriginality for the trainees. For crew and trainees, it was an introduction to the national and international dimensions of Aboriginality, and some people moved

into new careers in the international shipping industry, leading them far from the community on The Block.

Among the trainees on board, Craig Timbery, aged 28, who had gained his Marine Engine Driver's Certificate, as well as a commercial maritime qualification, was about to join the 34 000-tonne alumina carrier *Alltrans*. Five years earlier he had been 'cutting grass and painting houses on work-for-the-dole', as he told Debra Jopson (2003) of the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'There's no looking back now. I'll be on ships for the rest of my life.' For crew members from troubled backgrounds, the circumnavigation represented an emphatic self-affirmation of their personal achievements. It was cause for celebration of Aboriginality, not only for the participants, but for all associated with the Tribal Warrior Association and the Redfern and La Perouse Aboriginal communities. The voyage demonstrated the power of Aboriginality, Mundine (interview, 28 July 2008) said: 'It was like Captain Cook landing in Australia, and the *Tribal Warrior* going to show him: "We've been here first. Hey, look at us! Respect us!"'

### New horizons

Through its cruise business, the Tribal Warrior Association has opened up lines of communication with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities across Sydney's cultural divide, and around Australia. The training programs on board the Tribal Warrior Association's two small vessels showcase Aboriginality in a phase of rapid growth: they are modern and outward-looking, but continue to draw strength from tradition and are guided by elders. As a result of positive affirmations of their Aboriginal identity, while working with the Tribal Warrior Association, trainees have become strong enough to offer support to other disadvantaged people across the wider community (Tribal Warrior Association 2008).<sup>27</sup> The experiences which members of the Tribal Warrior Association describe in this chapter illustrate evolving processes of identity formation within urban Aboriginal communities (Lewins 1991:172).<sup>28</sup>

The Tribal Warrior Association's operations are significant nationally for the ways in which they encompass a cultural interface, described by Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata (2007:215–16) as 'a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses'.<sup>29</sup> Bird (interview, 5 September 2008) outlined how, from his observations, he believed that the Tribal Warrior Association's interventions at the public interface had brought about change:

What do other Aboriginal people say? They sing our praises. They tell everybody, the Tribal Warrior name is well and truly out there, and we haven't had nothing at all untoward in what we do. Non-Aboriginal people say lots of good, positive



things as well. Where we sit at this moment in this pen outside the Sydney Fish Market, the non-Aboriginal owner of the Fish Market, Mr Peter Manetti, was so impressed with our maritime training and the way we are community-based, he has given this \$200-a-week pen to the Tribal Warrior Association that we've been using ever since we've been here. How can we be biased against non-Aboriginal people when we have so many good people who are willing to support the Tribal Warrior Association?

In summary, 'Daniel [Ariel]'s gift was a blessing', Mundine (interview, 28 July 2008) said, 'because it's given our people back a bit of pride, a bit of respect... This has shown everyone out in Australia, non-Indigenous and our own people too, "Hey, look, we can do things ourselves as Aboriginal people!"'

## Postscript

Since the interviews in 2008–09, 'the Association has seen some nice growth', Shane Phillips said in a telephone interview on 19 March 2013. In 2009, Phillips, in collaboration with Redfern police commander Superintendent Luke Freudenstein and Indigenous leaders Michael Mundine and Mark Spinks, initiated Clean Slate Without Prejudice, a boxing training program at the gym in the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence at Redfern. Participation is voluntary and an Aboriginal mentor brings participants to training, where the trainers are police. Phillips (interview, 19 March 2013) observes:

*Clean Slates* has changed the way we interact with each other, the way policing happens, the way that police deal with Indigenous young offenders here, and with community-based policing. The idea is that they just do exercises in the morning at the 6.00am exercise program. Everyone drops their guard, and at the end of the session, everyone's equal, and they learn about each other. After that, the kids go on to school or work, the police go to work, and when they see each other in the street, there's something simple that they do together, and they become friends. So it helps in the way the youth form, and if you're in a police car and you see one of the young guys who may in the past have had some difficulty with you, or vice versa, and you say, 'How y'a goin?' And they may be able to influence the other people that are with them. It sounds really simple, but it's huge. It's the human level of life.

Between 2009 and 2010 the number of robberies committed by local youth declined by 80 percent (Feneley 2012).

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## Notes

1. A block of houses, bounded by Eveleigh, Vine, Louis and Caroline streets in Redfern, was one of the first pieces of land in urban Australia owned by Indigenous people when it was purchased for Indigenous housing in 1973. Subsequently, what had been ‘a dream for Aboriginal self-determination, turned into a ghetto’, as conditions on The Block deteriorated as a result of government and organisational neglect, and ‘poverty, crime and drugs...overwhelmed a community still struggling to believe in itself’ (*Four Corners* 1997).

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2. Uncle Lionel Mongta from the Walbunja community, Uncle Bruce Stewart from the La Prouse community, and, from the Redfern community, Uncle Max Eulo, Uncle Allen Madden and Uncle Solomon Bellear.
3. Mundine described Ariel as 'a guy with a good heart who always had time for Aboriginal people and people who were down-and-out' (Mundine, interview at the Tribal Warrior Association, Redfern, 28 July 2008).
4. Phillips, interview at the Tribal Warrior Association, Redfern, 11 August 2008. Phillips added that in the past four months they had received government funding to train a business development manager, but the funding does not cover any of the running costs of the association.
5. This profile of the Tribal Warrior Association draws on a thesis chapter of my current PhD study on 'Contemporary Indigenous identity in landscape, culture and narratives of history in the Sydney region'.
6. The Tribal Warrior Association has received numerous awards for its work, including awards in 2003 from the New South Wales Premier for 'Outstanding Services to the Community and New South Wales' and for 'Social Justice, Tribal Warrior Aboriginal Training Program' and a 'Certificate of Appreciation, Local Cultural Awareness Training, NSW Police, Redfern Local Area Command'.

In 2013 Shane Phillips was named 'Australia's Local Hero 2013' in the Australian of the Year Awards in recognition of his work as full-time Chief Executive Officer of the Tribal Warrior Association, which offers maritime training for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, emergency relief for struggling families, and a linked mentoring program designed to help young people achieve their full potential.

7. Daniel Ariel has an Aboriginal background and holds the position of Public Officer with the Tribal Warrior Association.
8. In 1993 the New South Wales Health Department introduced a mobile needle exchange service, which operated from The Block, handing out up to 700 needles per day. In response to representations from the Aboriginal Housing Company, in 2003 the department reduced the hours that the Needle Bus was stationed at The Block, from 10am to 3pm Monday to Friday. On 17 June 2008 the Health Department announced, in response to community requests, that the 'outreach service is stationed near the corner of Hugo Street and Caroline Street between 10am and 2.30pm (Monday – Friday) and relocated, after school hours, to Hudson Street from 3pm until 4.30pm' (NSW Parliament 2008:2207).
9. On 3 April 2013 Mundine (interview) reported that the Needle Bus had been removed: 'Would you believe, that's finally gone after 15 years? Now, it's so sad, I think the Needle Bus was put in for a reason, to crucify this community, and this was by a government of faceless men!'
10. Phillips (19 March 2013) reported:

One of the things that we were recognised for as a community is our mentoring program. It's part of the Clean Slate Without Prejudice program, which commenced

in Redfern in June 2009, and has been very successful in its outcomes for young ones in our area. The outcomes are based on getting into a routine and getting a job, or back to school, and it's very simple, but its effectiveness has been proven ten-fold.

11. In 1973 Prime Minister Gough Whitlam provided an initial grant to the Aboriginal Housing Company for 'the first housing purchases on this parcel of land in Redfern and the Block became the birthplace of urban land rights in this country. At that time, there were 102 houses in and immediately around the Block. Now only 19 inhabited houses remain' (Dabscheck 2006:43).
12. Mundine had worked with the AHC for 33 years.
13. Mundine said: 'We've got Sydney University, Redfern Police Command, we've even got the City of Sydney, architects and barristers [helping us]. And our Chairperson of the Committee for our new project is Tom Uren, so people out there have got a heart: they're not looking at our colour of skin; they're looking at justice.' (The Honourable Tom Uren AC, former Deputy Leader of the Australian Labor Party, helped establish the heritage and environment movement in Australia and, in particular, worked to preserve the heritage of inner Sydney.)
14. On 2 July 2009 Keneally (2009) announced the New South Wales Government's approval of the AHC Pemulwuy Project Concept Plan for The Block, a project that was expected to deliver 300 jobs, 62 homes and more than 9000 square metres of commercial uses, shops, and community and cultural space.
15. A media release issued by O'Farrell and Planning Minister Brad Hazzard on 22 December 2012 announced planning approval for the Pemulwuy redevelopment project, as 'the result of the Aboriginal Housing Corporation working closely with the department [of Planning and Infrastructure] and Government agencies including the Sydney Metropolitan Development Authority, Railcorp, the Redfern Local Area Command of the NSW Police Force as well as the City of Sydney Council'. The project would allow for construction of:
  - 62 affordable housing dwellings and a 42-unit student housing facility to be managed by the Aboriginal Housing Corporation;
  - A gymnasium, child care centre and community gallery;
  - An open space area in Eveleigh Street, between Lawson and Caroline Streets, to be known as 'Pemulwuy, the meeting place' [which would] contain public art which reflects the important history of the site;
  - Shops and other commercial uses in the ground floor of most buildings to create a vibrant mix of uses that will activate the area;
  - High-quality public open spaces and landscaped streets; and
  - A 115-space underground car park. (O'Farrell 2012)
16. Mundine (interview, 2 April 2013) is confident that Pemulwuy will succeed:
 

I really feel it's going to happen. We got approval in 2009 when no one thought it was going to happen, and a DA [Development Application] approval last year. We relocated all our tenants when no one thought we would be able to do that.

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But we did that in a good manner; no tenants were kicked out in the street. We showed respect both ways, including to the drug runners. Some were the big drug runners who just wanted their community to be a safe haven for drugs. We just said: 'No more!'.

17. For residents of Redfern who had experienced 'the vicious cycle of racism' that Mundine described, 'community' had high significance in defining their identity grounded in 'country', a sense of belonging and connection with family and ancestors, where people felt safe and protected from racist hostility. Community was particularly important where people felt vulnerable, as Redfern residents had since the death of TJ Hickey on 14 February 2004, after a coronial inquest exonerated the police involved. 'As protesters gathered in Redfern on February 14, 2013, to mark the ninth anniversary of the 17-year-old Aboriginal youth', Ray Jackson, President of the Indigenous Social Justice Association, said 'the rally was magnificent and shows what solidarity between black and white Australians can do' (Payne-Baggs 2013).
18. Originally named *Mina*, early mariners engraved their stories in the timbers of the *Tribal Warrior*. In the 1980s, the Ganabaar Morning Star Clan, traditional people of the Arnhem Land and Gove Peninsula, adopted the boat, which they renamed *Wutuku*, meaning 'drifting wood' (Tribal Warrior Association n.d.a).
19. Kohen (1993:9–10) cites word lists compiled by RH Matthews, which show that 'the word, "kuri" (*koori*) was used by Darug-speaking people from the Hawkesbury River in the north to Appin in the south, and west into the Blue Mountains "to describe themselves", and is still used by most Aborigines from around Sydney. Victorian Aborigines also use the term to describe themselves.'
20. Darug for 'running water' and the name of the Hawkesbury River.
21. The *Deerubbun* was built by Halvorsen Shipyards, sold to the Snowy Mountains Authority in the 1960s, and later used as a charter boat on the Hawkesbury River before the Tribal Warrior Association acquired it (Tribal Warrior Association n.d.b).
22. Smith (2008:ix) notes that:

Saltwater, as much as the land, was the natural habitat of the inhabitants of the Sydney coastal area, who identified themselves as Eora ('people'). Theirs was a canoe culture and they had depended for countless generations on fresh fish and seafood. The harbours, rivers, creeks and lagoons, sandy beaches and muddy estuaries were their natural highways and principal sources of food. Men and women skimmed across the water in their fragile bark canoes (*nawi*).
23. The crew member did not wish to be identified.
24. Russell (2002) was the director of *The Foundation 1963–1977*, 'a documentary that intercuts interviews with historical footage to tell the history of The Foundation of Aboriginal Affairs, an organization significant in the push for the 1967 referendum in which Aboriginal people were given the vote'.
25. 'Bungaree (c1775–1830) from Broken Bay, north of Sydney, adopted the role of a mediator between the English colonists and the Aboriginal people' (Smith 2011).

- Smith (2011:5) observes that 'Flinders relied on Bungaree's knowledge of Aboriginal protocol and skill as a go-between with coastal Aborigines', and in 1799 'took Bungaree with him on a coastal survey voyage to Bribie Island and Hervey Bay'.
26. Smith (2008:ix) observes that 'from their experiences, Aboriginal mariners sought and found a place in the colonial society that had dispossessed them. Going to sea gave them status and confidence in dealing with English officers and officials.' On board ship, 'all members of the crew ate, talked, slept, smoked and drank together and learnt something of each other's language and customs.'
  27. The Tribal Warrior Association (2008) charter states that it will provide a 'respected social, cultural and business role model for the local Aboriginal and wider community'.
  28. Lewins (1991:172) observes that a 'new discourse on Aboriginality...is of interest to social scientists because it means that Aboriginal identity is no longer taken for granted in academic circles. Instead, it is viewed as an aspect of social process rather than a static given.'
  29. Nakata (2007:215-16) considers that 'at the Cultural Interface' each Indigenous person experiences 'a push-pull between Indigenous and not Indigenous positions' and a 'familiar confusion with constantly being asked at any one moment to both agree and disagree with any proposition on the basis of a constrained choice between a whitefella or blackfella perspective'.