

THE CRESCENT UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS:

FOUR AUSTRALIAN STORIES
OF SACRIFICE



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This report is about a documentary film project we have produced with funds from the Department of Veterans' Affairs and in-kind contribution from Deakin University and our partner organisations. On behalf of my team, I am grateful to all of them and to the families of Muslim Anzacs who shared their stories with us.

These Muslim Anzacs were prepared to sacrifice their lives for democracy, freedom, and liberties of Australia by serving in the Australian army in World War II. I am honoured and very privileged to be the team leader responsible for acquiring funds for this project and then planning and managing the project as project leader and executive producer.

Thanks to the generous funds, support of the partner organisations and Muslim Anzac families, and Deakin's film production infrastructure and equipment, our team has been able to produce the documentary film, a dedicated website, and this report.

The project team would like to acknowledge the contribution of the family members of service personnel featured in this film. These families opened their doors to us, and bravely shared stories and memories that were often painful and upsetting. We also thank the historians who provided vital background information on Muslim contributions to Australian war efforts.

We thank the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and the Australian War Memorial, who have enabled us to access footage, images, and historical records of soldiers. This valuable information has aided in contextualizing these unique and too-little-known contributions.

Lastly, our team is grateful to the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) and Deakin University, who have been supportive of this project from day one, and have fostered an unwaveringly encouraging environment for research.

Professor Ihsan Yilmaz

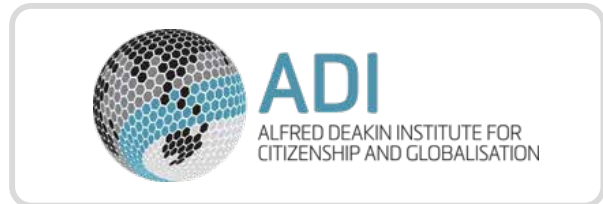
Research Chair in Islamic Studies,
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Team Lead

Partner Organisations



The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is a department of the Commonwealth of Australia, established in 1976, and charged with the responsibility of delivering government programs for war veterans, members of the Australian Defence Force, members of the Australian Federal Police, and their dependants.



The Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) is a leading humanities and social sciences research institute based at Deakin University, Australia. ADI creates cutting-edge knowledge about citizenship, diversity, inclusion, and globalisation which informs scholarship, debate, and policy.



Deakin University is a public university based in Victoria, Australia. Founded in 1974, today it is one of Australia's leading tertiary education providers.



The Islamic Museum of Australia is a community foundation and leading cultural institution dedicated to providing education experiences focused on the heritage of Muslims in Australia.



The Australian Intercultural Society (AIS) is a not-for-profit organisation focused on building relationships and fostering positive relations between the different cultural communities of Australia.



The Shepparton Albanian Moslem Society (SAMS) is one of the oldest continuous Muslim associations in Australia, being founded in 1955. The SAMS serves both the Muslim community of Shepparton and district, including its mosque, which is the oldest purpose-built mosque in Victoria.

Project Team



Professor Ihsan Yilmaz

Professor Yilmaz is Research Chair of Islamic Studies at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He has been the team lead responsible for acquiring funds, planning, managing, carrying out the project, film production and website & project report creation as project leader and executive producer.



Dr. James Barry

Dr James Barry is an Associate Research Fellow at ADI. His research interests involve the intersections of religious, linguistic, and national conceptions of identity in the Middle East, specifically Iran. He led the research and script-writing, and has been instrumental in the conceptualization and promotion of the research project and documentary.



Dr. Simon Wilmot

Dr Simon Wilmot is Head of Group, Film/Television/Animation and Performing Arts, Deakin University. Simon is currently interested in making films about processes of memory and imagination in the construction of identity and a sense of belonging. Some of his acclaimed productions included 'Kotla Walks, performing locality', 'Sisters of the Sun' and 'Fiery creek. Connecting the catchment'. Simon directed the film.



Will McCallum

Will McCallum is a PhD candidate and Research Assistant at Deakin University, within the School of Communication & Creative Arts. Will has worked in the pre-production planning of this project, as well as identifying archive materials.



Kainat Shakil

Kainat Shakil is a PhD student at Deakin University. She also works as a Research Assistant at Deakin. Her work has assisted with research and dissemination of this project.

Executive Summary

Christianity features heavily in the symbols and imagery of Australia's War memorials and commemorations of the ANZAC story. Until now, this story has missed the many Muslims who risked and sacrificed their lives in defence of Australia. The Crescent Under the Southern Cross tells the story of four such Muslim men, all temporary migrant workers who were trapped in Australia by the outbreak of World War II and who made significant and important contributions to the defence of Australia. These four men are archetypal of the many other Muslim men who served in the Australian army in World War II.

The Crescent Under the Southern Cross uses a rich archive of moving and still images to illustrate and support voice-over narration, and interviews with family members and historians to recount what is known about the lives of these four Muslim men. The film puts Muslim experiences and contributions into the picture of Australian and wartime history.

This project is funded by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Australia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the prominence of the ANZAC narrative in the Australian popular consciousness, the diverse makeup of the soldiers involved is not widely known.

1.1. Project Background

This project came about when Professor Ihsan Yilmaz and Dr. James Barry successfully won a grant supported by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Australia in 2021. The duo proposed the production of a film that could help highlight and amplify the historical and present-day contributions of Muslims to Australian society. In particular, the aim of the project was to commemorate the unheard and forgotten stories of Muslim service personnel who served in the Australian armed forces.

Dr. Simon Wilmot, Head of Film, Television, Animation and Performing Arts at Deakin University, was quickly brought in as a key member of the project team. Dr. Wilmot's approach to film as processes of memory and imagination in the construction of identity and a sense of belonging, made him an asset for showcasing these historical contributions and what they mean for Australia today. In due course the Australian Intercultural Society, the Islamic Museum of Australia, and the Albanian Muslim Society Shepparton become instrumental in the processes of research and dissemination of this film.

1.2. Project Context

Muslim servicemen fought for Australia and the broader British Empire in World Wars I and II. Most Muslim servicemen whose names can be found in military lists and records had origins in India, Afghanistan, Malaya, Indonesia, or Albania along with those of an Arabic background (Haveric, 2018).

Service in the Australian army and expressions of loyalty – even when fighting against a

Muslim state – could be justified on religious grounds, as “flouting such an order may endanger the life, property and honour of the remaining Muslims living in the non-Muslim state” (Rahman Doi, 1999). In fact, serving under these conditions and with good intentions was not only permissible (jā'iz, also right/possible), but commendable (mandub) (Rahman Doi 1999, cited in Haveric 2018).

Despite their involvement in Australia's defence forces, their Australian Muslim identities were not recorded accurately in historic accounts, for a few reasons. Muslims were often an 'invisible' minority group in Australia – they remained publicly silent about expressing their identities, while others used Anglicised names and/or nicknames and some embraced diverse cultures (Haveric 2018).

Both Dzavid Haveric (2018) and Nahid Kabir (2004) provide detailed accounts of the role played by Australian Muslim servicemen in the ANZAC campaign, including descriptions of specific individuals and notable events.

While Australia prides itself for its multiculturalism, it has not been immune from a post 9-11 global wave of Islamophobia. Muslims in Australia are regularly targeted (Convery 2022; Australia HRC 2021; Iner 2021), ranging from subtle cases of workplace discrimination to more aggressive public attacks (Australia HRC 2021; Iner 2021). Historical empirical studies of Albanian Muslim migrant communities in Shepparton, Victoria, have explored how migrants were portrayed as liminal between their first arrival and acceptance as Australians a generation later

(Barry and Yilmaz 2019). This is characteristic of a practice which the authors term "migrant hazing", where a migrant group is demonized as a threat to the society during the liminal phase. Project members Dr James Barry and Professor Ihsan Yilmaz (2019) found that migrant hazing remains present in contemporary depictions of Australian Muslims.

This project aims to reclaim the historical contributions of Muslims in Australia, by bringing forth their stories. Their lives can help with defogging the migrant hazing which dominates the characterisation of Muslims in contemporary times.

1.3. Target Audience

This film will appeal to several audiences. Firstly, it will appeal to the growing population of Muslims in Australia who have questions about how they connect with the ANZAC story and whether there is a place for them in the Australian narrative. This interest and need initiated the project. For instance, the Sirius College network in Victoria has a predominantly Muslim student body. In 2019 the School proposed to establish a cadet program and polled its parents. The School received the highest number of responses from parents on any issue for this proposal. 68 responses were strongly in favour of a cadet program and the dominant reason was that parents saw the cadet program as a way their children could integrate effectively into mainstream Australian culture. The program has been very successful, especially with female students and the demand for participation is much greater than the places that the school can provide. The next audience are those interested in Australian military history. The ANZAC story remains a key part of the Australian narrative. This is reflected in the prevalence of museums, memorials and historical sites across Australia that mark Australian military history, and the continuing stream of publications on Australia's military history, such as the success

and critical recognition of *Semut: The Untold Story of Secret Australian Operations in WWII Borneo*, which won the 2022 Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Australian History. Interest in the ANZAC story peaks each year on ANZAC day and media across Australia generate new content on the ANZAC story each year.

The third audience are those interested in the recognition and celebration of diversity in Australia and in addressing the bias in the Australian narrative toward Christian-Europeans. Across many topics related to Australian-ness, tackling exclusion and prejudice has been productive in engaging, especially young audiences. The Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne has embraced this interest with exhibitions on First Peoples and LBGTQIA+ involvement in Australian Defence Forces.

The film will engage with the audience through the pathos that is in these stories. The film develops this pathos through a focus on these stories as the journey of migrants seeking a better life, only to be tangled up in events that offered possibilities but also terrible hardship, betrayal, and death.

2. PROJECT DESIGN

The project challenges the view that Muslims are all newly arrived migrants who did not contribute to the ANZAC story. Through this effort we understand that several generations of Muslims from a variety of European and Asian backgrounds have served in the army both before and after the Second World War.

2.1. Exploring Muslim Wartime Stories

With the aim of renewing an understanding of Australian wartime heritage, this project focused on amplifying the stories of Muslim service personnel.

The first step towards telling these stories was undertaking substantial archival research. Historical records of service personnel from the early twentieth century were traced. The team accessed the National Archives of Australia to trace the professional lives of Muslim soldiers who served in the Australian armed forces.

This initial research refined the target subjects of the documentary film to four soldiers: Abu Kassim, Laver Xhemali, Muharem Ali and Samsudin bin Katib.

The second stage of research involved piecing

together a narrative of the four individuals, encompassing both their personal lives and periods in service. This involved extending the research significantly beyond military records.

Family members of these soldiers were sought out with the help of local community organisations – particularly the Australian Intercultural Society, the Islamic Museum of Australia, and the Shepparton Albanian Moslem Society – and filmed interviews were conducted with several individuals. Interviews were also conducted with numerous historians who specialise on this topic.

The ‘paper edit’ stage of this film transcribed all interviews and selected the materials appropriate for inclusion. These edits were then paired with archive footage and imagery, sourced predominantly from the Australian War Memorial, as well as the National Film and Sound Archive.

3. A SHORT SYNOPSIS OF CRESCENT UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS



Laver Xhemali as a soldier

3.1. Kurbet and Stranded in Australia

From the 1920s, many southern Albanian young men came to Australia on a cultural practice called kurbet, a temporary migration where young men travel outside of their villages to learn about the wider world and earn money. They were expected to return with knowledge and wealth for their families. Mussolini's annexation of Albania in the late 1930s left these kurbet men stranded in Australia and then the outbreak of war trapped them as enemy aliens. Many were interned but some such as Muharem (Rem) Ali and Laver Xhemali enlisted in the Australian Army.

Both Rem and Laver had come to Australia as teenagers and worked as farm labourers. Their skills and knowledge of animals and horticulture were valued but they often faced hostility as 'wogs' and 'dagos'. Laver later told his family that what prompted him to enlist was that he was being paid junior wages on a farm in Gippsland where he was milking cows. When the farmer refused to pay him more, he quit and went to Melbourne where he had to lie about his age to join up. When Rem enlisted, he had been working in Melbourne and had married a Christian woman named Silvia in a Presbyterian Church.



Farming in Werribee, sometime in the 1940s, courtesy of the Velisha family



Laver Xhemali on the farm

4. FROM PEARLING TO CONFLICT



Still from *The Pearlers*,
Australian National Film Board

The pearling industry in Broome relied on divers from Asia. The powerful political connections of the Pearling Industry bosses meant that the industry could circumvent the White Australia policy ban on Asian migration by contracting the divers as indentured labour. This meant they had no rights and worked for conditions less than white Australian workers. When the Japanese declared war on the United States of America with the bombing of Pearl Harbour, all non-military and essential populations were evacuated from Broome. Divers such as Malay Abu Kassim bin Merah and Sumatran Samsudin bin Katib, were evacuated to Perth where they were co-opted into the Civil Militia. In many cases, such non-citizens were pressured into enlisting on the threat of being deported, even where their Islands were now occupied by the Japanese.



Abu Kassim enlistment
photo.NAA: B883,
WX36796



Samsudin bin Katib
enlistment photo. NAA:
B883, WX36791



Muharem Ali
enlistment photo. NAA: PP246/4,
ALBANIAN/MUHAREM A

Before the war, Abu Kassim had fallen in love with a local Yawuru woman named Patricia but had been barred from marrying her by the local Protector of Aborigines. Despite this, they had two daughters who were removed from them and put into an orphanage in Broome. These girls remembered him visiting them at the orphanage before he left for Perth.

In 1941, Muharem Ali joined the ill-fated 2/21st Battalion that was sent to Ambon in December 1942. Leadership of the Battalion was poor, and it took the Japanese only a few weeks to overrun Ambon and the entire Battalion surrendered. Rem was imprisoned in the Tan Tui camp on the Island.



Tan Tui prisoners of war camp.
(Australian War Memorial – A.N.: 118253)



Laver Xhemali enlistment photo.
NAA: B883, VX76616

5. THE AUSTRALIAN WAR EFFORT CONCENTRATES ON ASIA

When Laver Xhemali joined the 2/23rd Battalion in 1942, he was sent to North Africa from where he planned to abscond and make his way back to Albania. He was soon caught and sent back to his unit. At the beginning of 1943 the Battalion returned to Australia to be retrained in jungle warfare and then sent to New Guinea where Laver was involved in the brutal battle of Wareo. Laver recalled how he would have to take cover behind the bodies of his deceased comrades, fighting through nights. He witnessed hard men break down while he himself was caught up in the excitement of battle. His older Sergeant warned him “one day son, you will feel this”.

The Japanese invasion of New Guinea and British colonies in Asia revealed to the Australian military command that they had insufficient knowledge of these places to defend them or to mount counter offensives and so created Special Operations Australia (SOA). In 1943, Abu Kassim and Samsudin were recruited into SOA because they could blend into local populations in Japanese held territory in Dutch East Indies and Malaya. Abu Kassim seems to have been recruited specifically for Operation Semut, an operation to gather intelligence and organise local resistance in Sarawak ahead of an Australian invasion.



Laver Xhemali as a soldier

Asian pearl divers may have been viewed as cheap labour by many, but they were in fact highly motivated, hardworking, resourceful adventurers, use to working in dangerous situations.



Abu Kassim (bottom right) with Teh Soen Hin and other members of Z Special Unit

In March 1945, Kassim was parachuted into the remote highlands of Borneo where the local headhunting populations had little contact with the outside world. No one could be sure how the European SOA operatives would be received. As a South-East Asian and Malay-speaker, Abu Kassim was central to the campaign to push the Japanese out of the Rejang River Basin. But because of the secrecy that SOA operated under, little is known of Samsudin's activities other than he too was sent into Borneo to gather intelligence ahead of the Australian troops who began invading Borneo from May 1945.

5.1. Death, Demobilisation and Return

Abu Kassim returned to Australia in late 1945, suffering from leukemia. He found Patricia had married Snowy Dodson and reunited with her daughters. Patricia and Snowy went on to have more children including Pat and Mick Dodson. Abu Kassim's applications for naturalisation were rejected and he died in Hospital in Perth in



The grave of Muharem Ali

1948 and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave which was only properly located in March 2022.

On demobilisation, Samsudin Bin Katib travelled to Melbourne where he worked in the General Motors factory in Fishermen's Bend, joined the Union and met up with Indonesian Independence activists. When he applied for naturalisation, it was realised he was still contracted as a diver, and he was returned to Broome. In Broome he campaigned for better conditions for Asian divers and the pearl industry bosses pressured the immigration department for him to be deported, despite a public campaign in support of him, including calls for his war service to be recognised.

After the War, Laver was unable to return to Albania because it had fallen behind the 'Iron Curtain' and closed its borders to the outside world. He moved between Mareeba and Victoria as a farm labourer, always wearing his ANZAC badge proudly. In the early 1960s he travelled to Yugoslavia, trying to get back home to see his parents and to find a wife. But he could only get as far as the border in Montenegro and the city of Ulqin. Here he met a young single mother, Shemsie and married. They had four children together and he eventually bought a farm outside Kyabram in Victoria, becoming a respected member of the Albanian community around Shepparton. He helped build the first purpose-built Mosque in Australia in Shepparton in the late 1950s and later other mosques in Melbourne. He died, aged 70 in 1991. His headstone was the first official Australian war grave bearing the Crescent of Islam.

6. FILM PARTICIPANT LIST

- 1 **Ridvan "Riddy" Ahmet** - Shepparton Albanian Community Leader

- 2 **Hysni Merja** - Imam, Shepparton Mosque

- 3 **Cr. Shane Sali** - Mayor of Greater Shepparton

- 4 **Shemsie Jemali** - Wife of Pte Laver Xhemali

- 5 **Mediha Selmani** - Daughter of Pte Laver Xhemali

- 6 **Aslan Jemali** – Son of Pte Laver Xhemali

- 7 **Prof Adrian Vickers** - Author of "the Pearl Frontier" (Historian, University of Sydney)

- 8 **Prof Christine Helliwell** - Author of Semut. The Untold Story of Secret Australian Operations in WWII Borneo. Winner of the 2022 Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Australian History. (Anthropologist, ANU)

- 9 **Trevor Winnell** - President, 2/21st Battalion Association (Son of Ambon survivor, Sgt Edward "Ted" Winnell)

7. CONCLUSION

This project has amplified little-known stories of Muslim servicemen in the Australian armed forces. It shows the profound contributions that have been made, and confronts stereotypes about Muslims in Australia.

The Crescent under the Southern Cross: Saluting our Muslim Anzacs is an attempt to revive and disseminate the stories of unsung heroes.

This film is an attempt to help younger generations of Australians to learn about the past and hopefully let it shape the future.

8. HOW TO WATCH THE FILM



muslimanzacs.com



Crescent Under the Southern Cross: Saluting our Muslim Anzacs



Crescent Under the Southern Cross: Saluting our Muslim Anzacs



@UscCrescent



@crescentusc



@crescentusc

Contact

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