

Highest Award of the Commonwealth



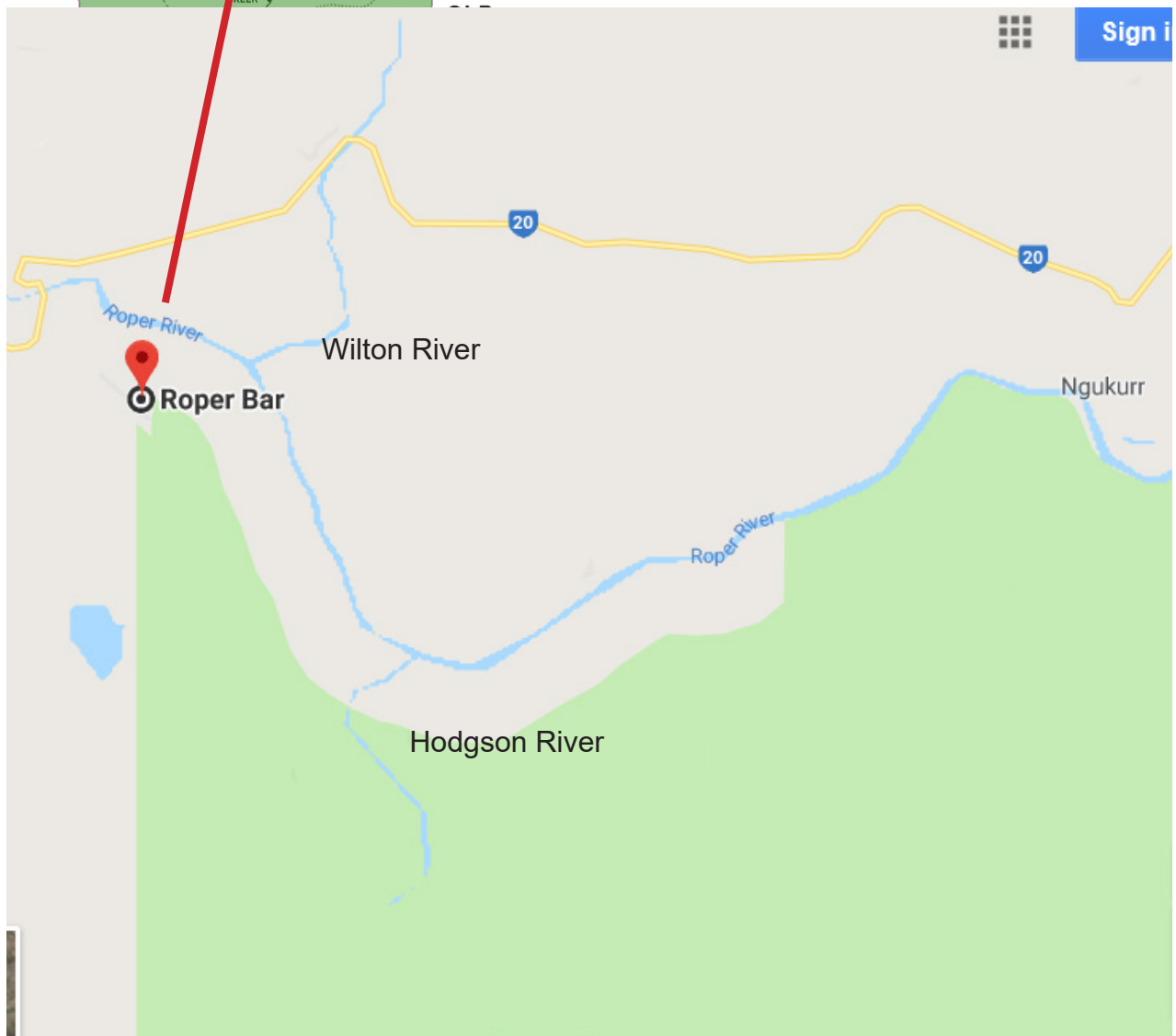


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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are advised that this resource contains images of people who have died.



A Special Award

There was a very special award presented at Government House in 1912. It was called the Albert Medal and it was the only one ever awarded in the Northern Territory. It is only ever given to someone who showed outstanding bravery and it was the Commonwealth's highest honour. It was given to an Aboriginal man, not just any man but a prisoner. This is his story.

These events took place in the Roper River region of the Northern Territory, on the traditional lands of the Alawa, Marra and Ngalakan peoples, 600 kilometres south of Darwin. In the early 1870's, pastoralists began driving cattle onto Aboriginal lands for the first cattle stations and there was a lot of conflict between the pastoralists and the Aboriginal people. A tiny township was established at Roper Bar with a small police station.



Above: Ayaiga

William Francis Johns, known to many as 'Mulga Bill', was a policeman in the Roper River region at the time.

It was middle of the wet season in February 1911, when Constable Johns was asked to investigate some thefts from a hut on Hodgson Downs Station.

He found and arrested four Aboriginal men including Ayaiga (Ay-I-ga), also known as 'Neighbour'. Ayaiga was described as about 5ft. 10in tall, straight and muscular, and about 25 years old.

Right: Constable Johns



The trooper locked chains around each of the prisoner's necks and they began the long 32-kilometre trek back to the Roper River police station for their trial.



Above:

JACK JOHN, LEICHADEK BOR. POL. STATION
AT LOCKUP ABOUT TO START FOR DARWIN
WITH PRISONER NEIGHBOUR (3RD FROM LEFT)



Constable Johns and the prisoners arrived at a tributary of the Roper River, the Wilton River, which was near the police station. The river was in full flood and flowing swiftly. Constable Johns planned to wait until the morning to cross the river and the group camped that night on the bank of the flooded Wilton River. In the morning, the river was still flooded but Constable Johns decided to attempt the crossing.

The prisoners swam across the river and Constable Johns crossed on his horse but the horse stumbled in the current and rolled over. Constable Johns went under the water. The horse kicked him in the head and knocked him out of the saddle. He floated down the river, semi-conscious and injured.

Ayaiga saw Constable Johns desperately grabbing at some pandanus leaves in the river. At any moment he was going to be swept away and drown. But Ayaiga had a heavy chain around his neck. If he entered the water, the weight of the chain could put his life in danger as well.

Ayiga didn't think twice. He coiled the chain around his neck and raced down the banks of the river near where Constable Johns was floating nearly conscious. He plunged into the crocodile infested river, and swam towards the drowning constable.

Ayaiga struggled in the current and it took all his effort to drag the 'senseless body of his captor' to the banks of the river and to safety. He had save Mulga Bill's life.







Left:
Constable
Johns' grandson
Greg Johns is
a renowned
Australian
sculptor. In
2010, Greg
Johns created a
sculpture that he
called Monument
to Mulga Bill
and Neighbour
which depicts
the story of his
grandfather's
rescue. Johns
donated the
sculpture to
the Northern
Territory Library
in 2011.

The Court Case

Mr Johns regained consciousness when he reached the riverbank. He said, “Let’s keep going to the Roper Bar Police Station.” Constable Johns delivered the men and said, “Here is the prisoner but I have no evidence to offer.”

Of course, Ayaiga had to be released.

The Award Ceremony

News of Ayaiga’s courage spread. The Royal Humane Society had to receive a nomination from the Prime Minister at the time but he refused to nominate Neighbour for the award. They continued to talk to people to get Neighbour nominated. Finally, the officer of the Governor General told Dr Gilruth, the Administrator in Darwin to report the details of the event to the Prime Minister’s office.

It took seven months until finally, King George V decided that the Albert Medal - the Commonwealth’s highest award for saving life - should be awarded to Neighbour. Only 27 Australians have ever received the medal and Ayaiga remains the only Aboriginal man. Dr Gilruth presented the medal to Neighbour at a ceremony at Government House in Darwin on 16th December 1912.

And who do you think was there to see Neighbour receive his award?

Mulga Bill. They had become good friends since the incident.

Constable Johns' grandson Greg Johns created a sculpture that he called Monument to Mulga Bill and Neighbour, which depicts the story of his grandfather's rescue. Johns donated the sculpture to the Northern Territory Library in 2011.



Award Speeches

Speeches given at Neighbour's award ceremony give insight into the attitudes of the time. These are parts of the speeches given by Professor Spencer, Judge Bevan, Dr Gilruth and Bishop White.



Professor Spencer:

"Neighbour's brave action was by no means singular, and related to some other instances of native courage and intelligence that had come within his own personal knowledge. There were many such instances of which nothing was ever heard. They must be a source of great satisfaction to those who were endeavouring to uplift the aboriginals, because they went far to prove that these children of nature were capable of higher things."



His Honor, Judge Bevan:

"Congratulation to Neighbour and all present should feel it a privilege to be participant in so unique a function. Never before had there been an instance of a Government recommending an act of bravery of an Australian aborigine for the award of this much coveted medal. Although Australia had a policy of the ideal of a White Australia, this Territory was in the peculiar position of having a dark native population largely in excess of the whites. Our duty towards these natives was to get them a standard they could look up to."

It was an old and a grand characteristic of the British race to recognise and appreciate courage in all its varied phases and it had been the peculiar genius of their race to understand and assimilate the native races of many lands. I trust that this ceremony would mark the beginning of a new era, that the story of this public recognition of Neighbour's act would be old among the tribes and that the natives might thereby be induced to imitate the virtues rather than the vices of the race, the only way in which we could ever hope to elevate the natives to a higher place of life. If this were the result then this function would not have been in vain."

Dr Gilruth:



"I agree with the sentiments the others have expressed, and it gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity of presenting to Neighbour, in the name and by the direction of his Majesty the King, the Albert Medal in recognition of his bravery in saving a life at the risk of his own."

Bishop White:

"I am glad to be present at so interesting and memorable a function. It was a remarkable one of Professor Spencer's early works that had first directed my attention to one peculiar characteristic of the aboriginal mind. Many people charged the aboriginal with being ungrateful. But as was shown by Professor Spencer's book, the aboriginal had entirely different special ideals from those of the white race. They held property and everything in common; they were practical "communists", consequently generosity and mutual help were regarded as matters of course. Thus they were not profuse or demonstrative in their gratitude when a kindness was shown to them, and this phlegm was often mistakenly regarded as evidence of an ungrateful nature.

The fashion in these days was to regard the aboriginal as something even beneath contempt. In fact one scientist – Haeckel had gone so far as to say that the Australian aboriginal was little better than the anthropoid ape. But those who had any knowledge of the aboriginal at all knew this to be false. They might be described as a child race mentally with all the keen observation of children and all their capacity for growth. They could be taught, and influenced, and it was on this fundamental basis that all missionaries were working today.

There was Jacky who had risked his life for that of the ill-fated Queensland explorer Kennedy; there was the aboriginal who faithfully accompanied Eyre on his heroic and hazardous journey across the Great Australian Bight; and there were numerous other instances of exceptional bravery displayed by natives, which might be cited. It is a courageous action on the part of the Government to recommend this aboriginal's action as being worthy of this distinction. I believe the recognition of this aboriginal's deed would be of service to those who were trying to raise the aboriginal to a higher standard of life."

Later Life

Neighbour was offered work as a police tracker. He was said to be loyal and devoted to his job. He was also a man that the stations of Nutwood and Hodgson relied on for his ability as a stockman. It wasn't the last time that Neighbour saved someone's life. In 1940, when the Roper River was in flood, he helped ferry supplies and rescue people who were stranded by the floodwaters. Neighbour died in 1954.

His Grandson

In remembering Ayaiga one hundred years on, his grandson said,

“What I've learnt from my father and what he's learnt from his father is that we'll always carry what this man would do and what he did... The bravery of my grandfather.

I thank the people who held on to what he did... it will be passed on to my kids and their kids. One day it will be your kids doing the greatest things for the future. You will see him through the eyes of your grandchildren.”

Perhaps, the importance of the event was best summed up in a simple statement, one that we can all learn from:

‘He did it for a purpose – to bring us together.’



Neighbour's medal remained at Government House "to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands." He was allowed to wear it on formal occasions.

Reference

Story and photos from:

Northern Territory Library, The Story of Ayaiga, February 1911.

<https://ntl.nt.gov.au/story/story-ayaiga>

