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# The “Black Line” of 1830 in Van Diemen’s Land and the involvement of the 63rd Regiment of Foot

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The Black War 1825-1832

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## **The “Black Line” of 1830 in Van Diemen’s Land and the involvement of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot**

There have been many authors who have written about the extent and causes of the killings of Tasmanian Aboriginals during the so-called “Black War” from 1825 to 1832 and the impact of the “Black Line” operation in 1830. It is only in recent times that the explanations of the causes and the estimates of casualties on both sides, based on the scant evidence available, have begun to approach the truth.

Early versions of the history of Tasmania tend to emphasise the role played by the British Army in the “Black Line” in October-December 1830 and tend to suggest that the military were responsible for much of the killing that led to the loss of the Aboriginal population in Tasmania. Modern studies bring that conclusion into serious doubt. The exception to the early historian’s focus on the role of the military is perhaps in John West’s “The History of Tasmania”, first published in 1852, which provides gruesome accounts of the role of what he called “commandoes” of stockmen in the atrocities against Aboriginals.

By 1830, there were approximately 30,000 Europeans living in Tasmania - then Van Diemen’s Land (VDL), of which some 6,000 were tickets-of-leave convicts or assigned servants, often working as stockmen in remote areas. Estimates of the Aboriginal population at the time vary but probably amount to about 1,000. A large proportion of the European population was scattered in small settlements and remote properties in southern and central VDL. The spread of settlement into the best grazing areas had by then seriously threatened the traditional hunting grounds of the Aboriginals.

During the period 1828-1830, there were numerous newspaper reports of incidents involving outlying settlements and ‘marauding’ aboriginals. For example, The Hobart Town Courier claimed that 18 settlers had been killed, including one incident in which a settler’s wife and two children had been brutally murdered. The settlers clamoured for more military protection but also set about forming privately organised “roving parties” to drive Aboriginals from their properties.

Governor Arthur was very reluctant to use military force in the crisis. He wrote to the former British Prime Minister, Frederick Robinson in January 1828 saying:

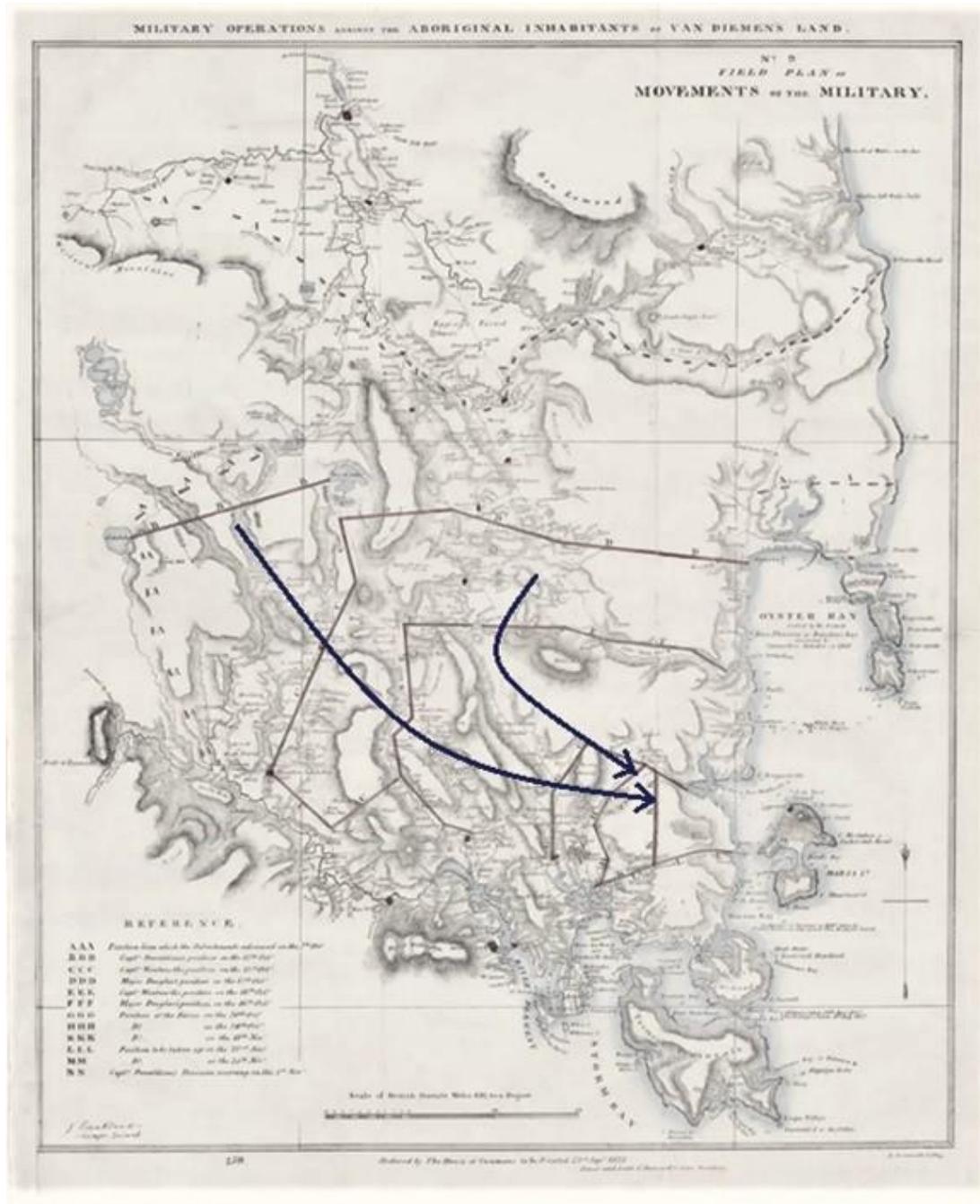
*“Notwithstanding the clamour and urgent appeals which are now made to me for the adoption of harsh measures, I cannot divest myself of the consideration that all the aggression originated with the white inhabitants, and that therefore much ought to be endured in return before the blacks are treated as an open and accredited enemy by the government.*

From a military point of view, the ‘threat’ had altered quite dramatically during the last half of 1829. Increasingly frequent reports had been coming into Hobart, indicating that the aborigines were now being led by runaway convicts in their attacks on outlying settlements. The usually cautious blacks were said to be becoming more adventurous and daring. For the small detachments of soldiers in the bush, this meant that they now faced a much more formidable and unpredictable ‘enemy’.

In response to the deteriorating situation, Governor Arthur had initiated two plans to solve the Aboriginal problem. In 1829, he first engaged George Robinson, a local businessman and untrained preacher, as a “conciliator with the Aboriginals” and several Aboriginal guides to try to placate the various tribes and encourage them to move to “reserves” in North East and

North West Tasmania. Despite his efforts, he was largely unsuccessful. The Governor then backed down to public pressure and followed up his previous declaration of martial law the year before, and on 25 September 1830, ordered a “drive” that required approximately 2,000 military and civilian personnel to ensure that:

*“the natives should be driven from the extremities within the settled districts of the country of Buckingham, and that they should subsequently be prevented from escaping out of them’; and the following movements are, therefore directed, first to surround the hostile native tribes; secondly, to capture them in the county of Buckingham, progressively driving them upon Tasman’s Peninsula; and thirdly, to prevent their escape into the remote unsettled districts to the westward and eastward.”*



The “drive”, made up of a total of approximately 2,200 men comprising 1,700 civilians and approximately 550 soldiers from the 63<sup>rd</sup>, 57<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Regiments, under the command of Major Sholto Douglas, was designed to drive the Aboriginals to a Reserve in the South East. The results however were embarrassing in that only a handful of Aboriginals were caught. The available records do not include any references to skirmishes between the soldiers of the 63<sup>rd</sup> and the aboriginals during the “drive”. Rather, it is well recorded that the Aboriginals had little trouble avoiding the “drive” all together.

Following the “drive”, it appears that the attitudes of most of the tribal elders had changed, perhaps by a combination of the massive show of force during the drive and the efforts of George Robinson, as many now complied with resettlement. It appears that the combination of the conciliatory and military tactics had achieved the settlers’ aims as the incidence of clashes between Aboriginals and settlers declined significantly from 1831. It will be noted that there is no persuasive evidence that the men of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment were involved in any killings during the operation but there are some estimates of up to 41 killings by colonists during the period in which the “drive” took place. John West’s history makes it clear that the civilian population had developed an almost “sporting” attitude towards the killing of Aboriginals.

Research of the scant evidence into the deaths on both sides of the “Black War” in the decade (1820-1830) before the 1830 “drive” indicates that between 500 and 900 Aboriginals died and 450 settlers had either been killed or wounded. The impact of introduced disease and abductions of Aboriginal women by settlers contributed significant loss of life in the Aboriginal population. It is known that at least 200 Tasmanian Aboriginals survived the Black War and the “drive”, and many were subsequently relocated to Flinders Island in Bass Strait and Oyster Cove in Southern Tasmania.

Whatever view is taken of the causes of the disastrous losses of the Tasmania’s Aboriginal population, it would be an error to attribute significant blame to the men of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot during their deployment in the period 1829-1833. It seems clear from all the evidence that the settlers (particularly stockmen) were primarily responsible either by their direct involvement in the killings or by their advocacy for clearance of the Aboriginals from areas of European settlement.

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