



# Massacre at Risdon Cove?

## AN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY MYSTERY

On 3 May 1804 there was a violent clash between a group of British settlers and a large party of Aboriginal people at Risdon Cove, near Hobart in Tasmania (then known as Van Diemen's Land).

Different writers and historians have given varying accounts of what happened then.

Here are two examples.

**1** Look at the two accounts, and identify and compare what each says about:

- the nature of the clash
- the number of casualties
- the reason for the behaviour of the two groups
- the ultimate responsibility for the deaths.



[It] was not a slaughter of . . . innocent men, women and children. It was a defensive action by the colonists in which three Aborigines were shot dead and at least one, though possibly more, wounded . . .

Moreover, it was an incident in which neither party could be easily blamed. The Aborigines were on a kangaroo hunt and were incensed to see some of their game expropriated by these strange new white people. The colonists mistook the natives' purposes and believed they were under attack. The troops had no intention beforehand to kill any of them. The commander in charge was concerned to justify his actions by the threat to his own people. He did not believe he could shoot Aborigines without good justification . . . No one took the event lightly and no one urged that shooting Aborigines was an acceptable thing to do. To call the incident a 'massacre' is to beat it up beyond credibility.

Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Australian History, Volume 1 Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002 page 26

The whites saw them approaching and were clearly disturbed . . . In fact, the Aborigines were almost certainly on a kangaroo hunt . . . Men, women and children from different groups gathered and, forming a huge arc across the valley, herded the kangaroos towards the cove. They had no spears: spears in such an enclosed space were dangerous. They carried large pieces of wood with which to beat the cornered animals when they tried to escape by rushing between the hunters . . .

[Lieutenant] William Moore . . . had been drinking heavily the night before. Hung over, depressed and antagonistic, he saw the approaching Aborigines through blurry, bloodshot eyes and decided that it would be good sport to 'see the Niggers run'. He called his troops to arms. The Aborigines were oblivious to the danger. At around eleven o'clock in the morning, as they came within range, the troops started firing . . . Moore would claim that only three had been shot but other evidence, more reliable than his attempts at an official cover-up, would suggest that the figure was somewhere between thirty and sixty.

Lieutenant Moore, trying to justify his actions, claimed that 'from the numbers of them and the spears etc. with which they were armed, that their design was to attack us . . . and that they had wounded one of the settlers, Burke, and was going to burn his house down and ill-treat his wife.'

It was bureaucratic nonsense. A glib rationale for a massacre. A justification without logic. Moore never explained why the Aborigines, who had been friendly and non-confrontational up to that time, suddenly formed themselves into a gigantic, and very European, 'war party', and started attacking the tiny settlement. He didn't explain because there was no explanation.

Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle, Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788*, Child & Associates, Sydney, 1988 pages 28-29

This was a significant event — one of the earliest clashes between the old and the new people in Tasmania. There were to be many more clashes, until the last of the original inhabitants were moved first to Flinders Island in 1833, and then finally to Oyster Bay in 1847.

How can two history books present such fundamentally different accounts, particularly when there is only a very small amount of evidence available for them to work with? How can we work out which one is more likely to be the truth?

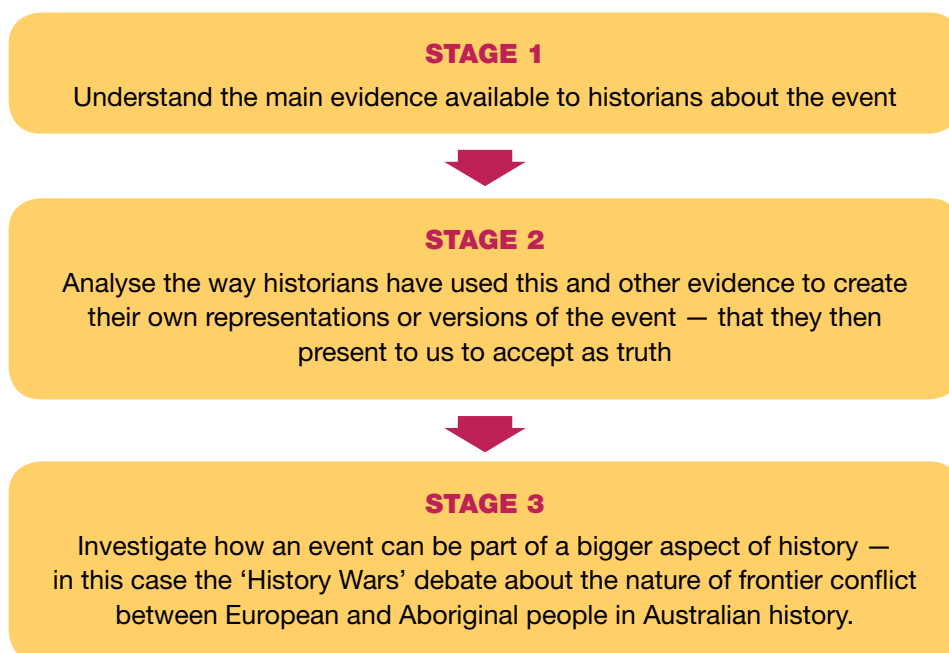
## What is history?

We believe that history involves exploring all these elements:

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Facts</b>          | What happened? When did it happen? Where did it happen?<br>How did it happen? Who was involved? |
| <b>Causation</b>      | Why did it happen in that way and at that time?   |
| <b>Empathy</b>        | What might it have been like to be there at the time?   |
| <b>Perspective</b>    | How did different participants see the situation?   |
| <b>Outcome</b>        | What were the impacts of the events (short-term and long-term)?                                 |
| <b>Representation</b> | How has it been presented over time?  |
| <b>Judgement</b>      | How did people see it at the time? How do we see it now?  |
| <b>Significance</b>   | How important were these events in history?   |

**YOUR TASK** in this unit is to work through these elements and decide what you think happened at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804. In doing so you will need to decide which of the two accounts at the start of the unit is the better history.

To do this you need to work through three stages:



**STAGE****1****Understanding the main evidence available to historians about the event**

There is very little 'core' evidence that historians rely on to develop their understanding of what happened at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804. It is presented below.

**2** Read the information and evidence that follows and use it to complete a summary table like this about what happened on that day.

| Aspect of the events                      | Eyewitness Evidence from 1804 (SOURCES 3–4) | Eyewitness Evidence from 1830 (SOURCE 5) | Other sources of information (SOURCES 1–2, 6) |
|---|---|--|---|
| Why were the Aboriginal people there?     |   |  |   |
| Why were the settlers there?              |   |  |   |
| Were the Aboriginal people armed?         |   |  |   |
| Did they attack or threaten the settlers? |   |  |   |
| Why did Moore order the troops to fire?   |   |  |   |
| How many Aboriginal people were killed?   |   |  |   |
| What happened to the bodies?              |   |  |   |
| How often was the cannon fired?           |   |  |   |
| What was fired from it?                   |   |  |   |

## A Background information

### The Risdon Cove settlement

In 1803 a party of officials, soldiers, sailors and convicts landed at Risdon Cove in Tasmania. This was the start of the European occupation of that island.

A few months later the main settlement was moved to Sullivan's Bay to create what is now Hobart, leaving about 70 at Risdon Cove — some free settlers who had farms, some convicts, and a party of 15 soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Moore of the New South Wales Corps.



### Aboriginal society

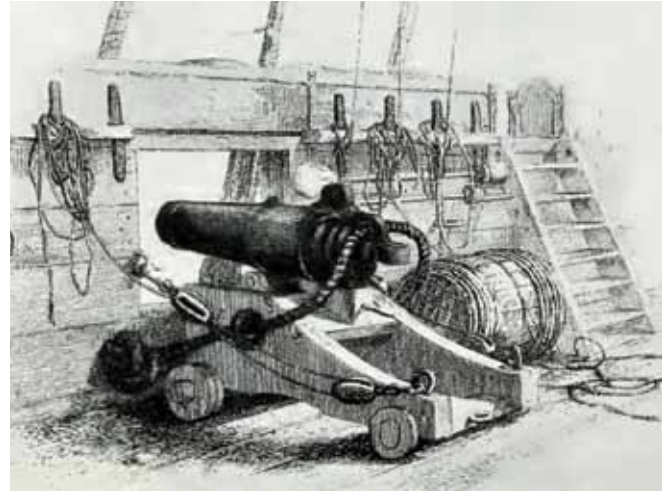
The new settlers at the time did not have any local knowledge about Aboriginal society in Van Diemen's Land. We now know that Aboriginal people who were involved in the Risdon Cove killings were from the Oyster Bay area on the east coast of Tasmania, about 90 kilometres away. They visited the Hobart area periodically as part of their use of the natural resources available. Kangaroos were a significant resource — as a source of food, skins, sinews and bones. The Aboriginal people whose domain this was had probably not had any contact with Europeans before the day of the clash.

### Weapons available at the time

Aboriginal hunters had spears and waddies — wooden clubs used to bash animals on the head. An Aboriginal hunter or warrior could throw several spears in a minute with great accuracy.

The soldiers had rifles that needed to be reloaded after firing. Trained soldiers could usually fire a few times a minute. The rifles were not reliably accurate over more than short distances.

The camp had two 12-pound 'carronades', small cannon that could fire 12 pound (5.4kg) iron balls (to punch holes in ships), 'grapeshot' (small metal balls that were used to wound and kill people at close range), or blanks for ceremonial firing.



A carronade aboard a ship

### SOURCE 1 British government instructions to the Governor of the colony

*The instructions the Colonial Office gave the new Governor David Collins when he founded the British colony in Van Diemen's Land in February 1803 were:*

You are to endeavour by every means in your power to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their goodwill, enjoining all persons under your Government to live in amity and kindness with them; and if any person shall exercise any acts of violence against them, or shall wantonly give them any interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, you are to cause such offender to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.

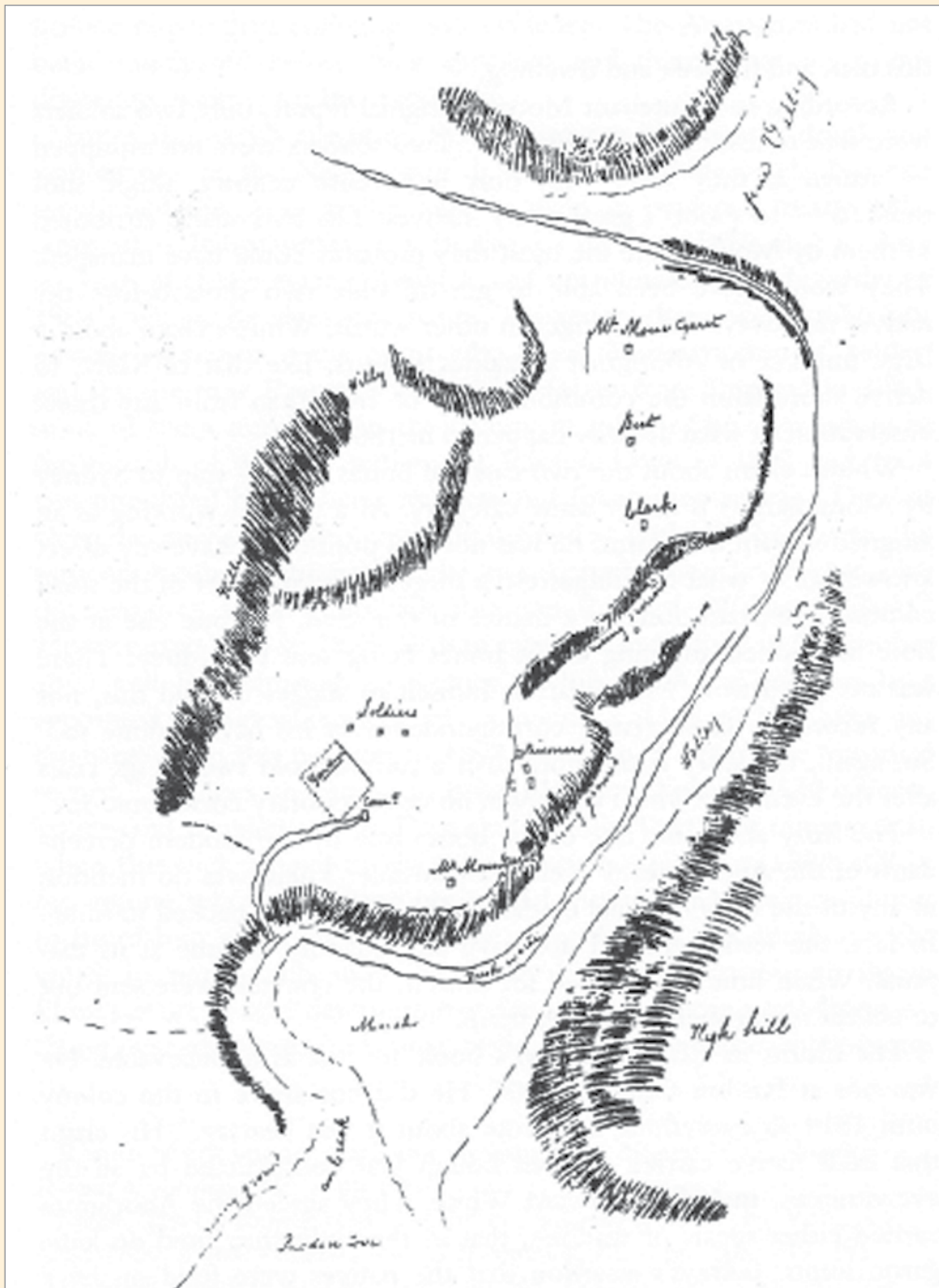
Quoted in James Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, London, 1832, page 211

- 3 How are the new settlers to behave towards the Indigenous people?
- 4 These instructions were given to the new Governor from thousands of kilometres away. Would the Governor have been likely to take this order seriously? Explain your reasons.
- 5 Would the officers in charge of the settlement have been likely to know about this order? Why or why not?

**Now look at the only first hand or direct evidence available for what happened on that day.**

## The evidence from the time

**SOURCE 2** Map of the location of settlers at Risdon Cove in 1803



Reproduced in Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume 1 Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002, page 23

- 6** Identify these places on this map:
  - The Risdon Creek
  - The location of the soldiers' camp
  - Clark's hut
  - Birt's hut
  - Mountgarrett's huts
- 7** Describe the general topography (geographical features) of the area.
- 8** How might this have influenced the events? Explain your ideas.

**SOURCE 3 Three diary entries by a local settler in Hobart, Reverend Knopwood**

*Diary Entry 1*

Thursday 3 May 1804, at 2 pm we heard the report of a canon once from Risdon and the Lieutenant Governor sent a message to know the cause.

*Diary Entry 2*

At ½ past 7 Lieutenant Moore arrived at the camp to see Lieutenant Governor Collens, and I received the following note from Risdon:

Dear Sir,

I beg to refer you to Mr. Moore for the particulars of an attack the natives made on the camp to-day, and I have every reason to think it was premeditated, as their number far exceeded any that we ever heard of. As you express a wish to be acquainted with some of the natives, if you will dine with me to-morrow, you will oblige me by christening a fine native boy who I have. Unfortunately, poor boy, his father and mother were both killed; he is about 2 years old. I have, likewise, the body of a man that was killed. If [surgeon] Bowden wishes to see him desected, I will be happy to see him with you to-morrow. I would have wrote to him, but Mr. Moore waits.

Your friend,

J. MOUNTGARRET [a surgeon and magistrate],  
Hobert, six o'clock.

The number of natives, I think, was not less than 5 or 6 hundred. — J.M.”

*Diary Entry 3*

At 8 Lieutenant Moore [commander of the troops at Risdon] came to my marquee, and stayd some time; he informed me of the natives being very numerous, and that they had wounded one of the settlers, Burke, and was going to burn his house down, and ill treat his wife, etc. etc.

- 9 What are we told about:
- the behaviour of the soldiers
  - the firing of the cannon
  - the behaviour of the Aboriginal people
  - how long the fighting lasted
  - the number of deaths and wounded
  - what happened to the bodies
  - the small boy?
- 10 Are these diary entries likely to be an honest and accurate account of what Knopwood was told?

**SOURCE 4 Report by the officer in charge of the soldiers, Lt Moore, 7th May, 1804 to Governor Collins.**

Sir,

Agreeable to your desire, I have the honour of acquainting you with the Circumstances that led to the attack on the Natives, which you will perceive was the consequence of their own hostile Appearance. It would appear from the numbers of them, and the Spears, &c., with which they were armed, that their design was to attack us. However it was not until they had thoroughly convinced me of their Intentions by using violence to a Settler's wife and my own Servant, who was returning into Camp with some Kangaroos, one of which they took from him, that they were fired upon, on their coming into camp and surrounding it. I went towards them with five soldiers. Their appearance and numbers I thought very far from friendly. During this time I was informed that a party of them was beating Birt, the settler, at his farm. I then despatched two soldiers to his assistance, with orders not to fire if they could avoid it. However, they found it necessary; and one was killed on the spot, and another found dead in the valley.

But at this time a great party was in the camp; and, on a proposal from Mr. Mountgarret to fire one of the carronades [cannons] to intimidate them, they departed.

Mr. Mountgarret, with some soldiers and prisoners, followed them some distance up the valley, and have reason to suppose more was wounded, as one was seen to be taken away bleeding. During the time they were in camp, a number of old men were perceived at the foot of the hill, near the valley, employed in preparing spears.

I have now, Sir, as near as I can recollect, given you the leading particulars, and hope there has nothing been done but what you approve of.

I have the honour to be, &c.,

William Moore,  
Lieut. N.S.W. Corps.

[Note: Collins accepted this account and it was the basis of his report of the event back to the British government.]

- 11 What are we told in this document about:
- the behaviour of the Aboriginal people
  - how they were armed
  - the behaviour of the soldiers
  - the number of deaths
  - how long the fighting lasted
  - the firing of the cannon?
- 12 What motive might Lt Moore have for distorting the truth in this document? What motive might he have had for telling the truth?
- 13 Is this account consistent or inconsistent with what was reported in source 3? Is this of any significance?

- 14 What are the main strengths and weaknesses of this document as evidence of what happened on that day?

**SOURCE 5 Testimony of the former convict Edward White before the Broughton Committee.**

*The Broughton Committee was set up in 1830 to inquire into the origins of the hostility of the Aboriginal Tasmanians to the European settlers between 1803 and that date.*

*White was present at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804. The minutes record White's answers, but not the questions he was asked:*

- Was one of first men who landed 27 years ago;
- built Lieutenant Bowen's house at Risdon;
- and was then servant to a man named Clark;
- was hoeing new ground near a creek;
- saw 300 of the natives come down in a circular form and a flock of kangaroos hemmed in between them;
- there were men, women and children;
- they looked at me with all their eyes;
- I went down to the creek, and reported them to some soldiers, and then went back to my work;
- the natives did not threaten me: I was not afraid of them;
- Clark's house was near where I was at work, and Burke's (Birt) house near Clark's house;
- the natives were never within half a quarter of a mile [220yd or 200m] of Burke's house;
- the natives did not attack the soldiers;
- they would not have molested them;
- the firing commenced about 11 o'clock;
- there were a great many of the natives slaughtered and wounded;
- I don't know how many;
- some of their bones were sent in two casks to Port Jackson by Dr. Mountgarrett; they went in the *Ocean*;
- a boy was taken from them;
- they never came so close again afterwards;
- they had no spears with them, only waddies;
- they were hunting and came down into a bottom;
- there were hundreds and hundreds of kangaroo about Risdon then, and all over where Hobart Town now stands;
- the soldiers came down from their own camp to the creek to attack the natives; I could show all the ground;
- Mr Clark was there; the natives were close to his house;
- they were not on Burke's side of the creek;
- never heard that any of them went to Burke's house;
- is sure they did not know there was a white man in the country when they came down to Risdon.

- 15 What are we told in this document about:
- where White was to witness the events
  - which Aboriginal people were there
  - why they were there
  - the behaviour of the Aboriginal people
  - how they were armed
  - the behaviour of the soldiers

- the number of deaths
- how long the fighting lasted
- the firing of the cannon
- what happened to the bodies?

- 16 What are the main strengths and weaknesses of this document as evidence of what happened on that day?

**SOURCE 6 Aboriginal accounts**

There are no recorded Aboriginal accounts of what happened on the day.

- 17 How might this absence of an Aboriginal perspective on the events influence our knowledge and understanding of what happened on that day?
- 18 Now use all the information and evidence to create your summary table.
- 19 What you think happened basically depends on which of the two accounts — the ones given by the participants in 1804, and the one given by the convict witness in 1830 — you believe. Which version do you think is more likely to be accurate and truthful? Why?

Look back at the two historical accounts at the start of this unit.

- 20 Identify where each has taken his information from.
- 21 Identify claims or facts which the writers have made in their accounts for which there does not seem to be any evidence.
- 22 Where do you think these 'unevidenced' aspects have come from?
- 23 Why do you think two people telling the history of the event are able to create such different accounts?

**That's your task in the next stage of the investigation:**

- to look at how historians have used other, perhaps less than reliable, sources of evidence to build up their accounts,
- to investigate why they choose to emphasise the aspects they do, and
- to understand why and how they fit Risdon Cove into a bigger picture of the meaning of Australian history.

You can do this by going to [www.australianhistorymysteries.info](http://www.australianhistorymysteries.info) where you will find a PDF that you can download to continue exploring Stages 2 and 3 of this inquiry. This site is explained on the next page.

## Australian History Mysteries website

[www.australianhistorymysteries.info/](http://www.australianhistorymysteries.info/)



This is a subscription-based website containing the rich content provided in the *Australian History Mysteries* resource kits. It contains each of the videos and case study units of work from the kits, as well as exciting multimedia interactive modules related to a number of these case studies. Subscribing to this site will enable teachers and their students to gain access to this material seamlessly and will also ensure access to new content as it becomes available.

The *Australian History Mysteries* case studies are designed to stimulate students' interest in and engagement with aspects of their history and heritage, and to develop the skills needed in pursuing historical studies. They have been designed for use at a middle secondary level but teachers will find the materials and ideas adaptable for both higher and lower levels. Each case study contains a wide range of primary and secondary source evidence, including museum objects, national archival collections and historic sites. They are relevant to the new national history curriculum with its emphasis on inquiry learning and historical skills development.

By subscribing to this website users will be able to access:

- high quality videos (MP4 and Windows Media) for each case study which introduce the mystery, 'visit the scene' of the events and set out clearly the nature of the investigation
- inquiry learning units of work (pdf) for each case study containing photocopiable evidence and classroom activities
- interactive modules (flash) for a number of case studies designed to further explore aspects of these case studies in exciting, stimulating ways and offer a different learning experience for visual learners
- STUDIES Magazine curriculum units (pdf) that are relevant to the respective history mysteries
- a 'What is History?' introductory game (flash) called *Ghost Town* which is designed to help students understand and weigh up the relative merits of historical evidence

| Title   | Introductory Film Segment | Printable Inquiry Worksheets | Associated Online Interactive                                    |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| What is history?  |                           |                              | Ghost Town   |
| Who 'discovered' Australia?   | ✓                         | ✓                            | Build a timeline   |
| What was the life of a female convict really like?                                  | ✓                         | ✓                            | Archaeological dig at the Ross female Factory                    |
| The Eureka Rebellion – could you have stopped it from happening?                    | ✓                         | ✓                            | The Eureka Rebellion – could you have stopped it from happening? |
| What happened in a frontier conflict near Broome in 1864?                           | ✓                         | ✓                            | Key moments decision-maker                                       |
| Was Ned Kelly a hero or a villain?  | ✓                         | ✓                            | Kelly country — the race to Glenrowan                            |
| World War 1 — Did WWI divide or unite local communities?                            | ✓                         | ✓                            | It is 1916 - Do you join the RSL?                                |
| Coniston Massacre — What happened at Coniston in 1928?                              | ✓                         | ✓                            | Bell's Falls Gorge   |
| Great Depression — Testing images of the Great Depression                           | ✓                         | ✓                            |  |
| What happened to 'Smithy'?  | ✓                         | ✓                            | What happened to 'Smithy'?                                       |
| Why did the Government lie about the bombing of Darwin?                             | ✓                         | ✓                            | The bombing of Darwin  |
| What are the mysteries of Maralinga?  | ✓                         | ✓                            | Cold War timeline  |
| Snowy Hydro-Electric Scheme — A melting pot of different nations?                   | ✓                         | ✓                            |  |
| Freedom Ride and 1967 Referendum — What do they tell us about Australian attitudes? | ✓                         | ✓                            | The 1967 Referendum  |
| What happened to Juanita Nielsen?   | ✓                         | ✓                            | What happened to Juanita Nielsen?                                |
| Vietnam — Can you be a Vietnam War 'Myth Buster'?                                   | ✓                         | ✓                            |  |

Note that additional units and resources are added to the site periodically and are available to subscribers.