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M A N D U R A H C O M M U N I T Y M U S E U M

Pinjarra Battle/Massacre

1834

When European settlers arrived in Western Australia in 1829 they came to a land which had been inhabited for over 40,000 years. The people living in today's Peel Region were known as the Binjareb tribe. They were distinguished from the surrounding peoples by their skill in spear making, a valuable craft which saw Binjareb spears traded as far the Gascoyne region in the state's mid west. Access to the fish trap, or Mungah, on the Serpentine River and the rich hunting grounds of the Mandurah estuary meant that the Binjareb were supplied with everything that they needed to live their traditional lives.

When the settlers arrived, the newcomers were looked upon as the returned spirits of the dead who would once again depart over the sea to their homes. When this proved not to be the case, tensions increased. As the Europeans began to fence off land and hunt native wildlife, tensions increased further. Traditional Aboriginal burning of the land to encourage regrowth was seen as a form of attack by the Europeans. European farm animals such as sheep were looked upon as game by Indigenous people, open to be hunted in the same way as kangaroo and other native animals. When this happened, the Europeans saw their own scarce food resources as being threatened.

When, in 1830, Thomas Peel and his remaining settlers came to Mandurah, this was the situation in which both sides found themselves. Added to this was the issue of flour rations. In order to foster good relations with Indigenous groups, Governor Stirling had instituted a daily ration of flour. This was a heavy burden on the meagre resources of the colonists, and a boon for the Indigenous population who now had access to an easily prepared food source. Knowing that the settlers had supplies of flour and believing that they had a right to access as much as they needed; the Binjareb tribe went straight to the source. On April 24 1834 they raided the mill at South Perth, carrying off 445kg of flour. Despite being pursued, they made it back to Mandurah. The mounted police and soldiers were able to capture three of the men involved in the theft a few days later when they reported to the military barracks in Mandurah to collect their legitimate flour rations. The captives, Calyute, Monang, and Yeydong, soon joined by Wamba and Gummol, were taken to Fremantle for trial in a cart leant by Thomas Peel. Yedong, Gammol, and Calyute were found guilty and flogged.



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After the pain and public humiliation of a flogging, Calyute looked to pay Peel back for his treatment, seeing the lending of his cart to transport the prisoners to Fremantle for punishment as a sign of Peel's complicity. Calyute soon saw his chance. Edward Barron, a settler, had come to Mandurah to buy a horse from Peel. Calyute had already driven the horse away from Peel's homestead and speared it. Expecting Peel to accompany Barron to look for the horse, Calyute and other members of the tribe prepared to kill Peel while they were out in the thick bush. But Peel refused to go. Instead, Hugh Nesbitt, a soldier stationed in Mandurah offered to accompany Barron. When out in the bush, accompanied by a large number of Binjareb tribesmen who had offered to help in the search for the horse, Barron and Nesbitt were attacked. Barron, severely wounded, managed to spur his horse on and gallop back to Mandurah. Nesbitt did not, and was killed. Despite a month of searching by soldiers and mounted police, no one apart from two elderly women from the tribe could be found.

Governor Stirling returned to the colony from England in July 1834 to news of Nesbitt's murder. Peel was soon in contact with him outlining a proposal to move the focus of his settlement to the area around modern Pinjarra. Land here was more fertile than Mandurah, but he recognised that to move into the heart of Binjareb territory he would need military protection. So Peel and Stirling agreed to mount an expedition to the area, to be led by Stirling, with the aims of surveying the country, leaving a small garrison on the Murray River to allow settlement to go ahead, and if possible, find the killers of Nesbitt.

So on the 25th of October 1834 Stirling set off from Perth accompanied by John Septimus Roe, the surveyor general, George Smythe assistant surveyor, Captain Meares and his son Seymour, Captain Ellis and five mounted policemen. They reached Mandurah by nightfall, with Peel providing accommodation. The next day the group set out for Pinjarra, picking up 10 soldiers who were intended to be left on the Murray as a garrison along with Mr Norcott, superintendant of native tribes. Peel and his servant also accompanied the party. They camped overnight at the location close to Ravenswood known as Jim-Jam.

The 28th of October dawned with heavy clouds massing on the southern horizon. The party moved south east away from the river, planning to meet it again above the site of modern day Pinjarra. The party crossed the river to the east bank by means of a ford and a fallen tree at a place now known as Polly Island. After travelling along the east bank for a short distance, shouts were heard from the west bank. Peel went forward to call to the Aboriginals from the river bank to see which tribe they were from, but couldn't make himself heard. At this, Stirling sent Captain Ellis, Mr Norcott, and three of the mounted police back across the ford to make contact with the group. The mounted party was observed at 200 yards distance at which point the warriors in the camp grabbed their spears. Ellis increased the pace of his advance until he was in the camp, and recognised some of the men as those involved in the killing of Nesbitt. It is difficult to establish who began the fighting. One account gives the tribesmen throwing a volley of spears; another that Ellis was the first to fire after one of the warriors began to cast his spear. Whoever it was that struck the first blow, for the next hour the fighting was general.



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The camp which Ellis and his men had approached contained 70 to 80 people, men, women, and children. Among those were a number of male warriors who now began to throw volleys of spears at Ellis and his men while they returned fire. The result of this was that Ellis suffered a disabling spear wound to the head, throwing him from his horse. Trooper Heffron was wounded in the arm and rendered helpless. Another trooper was knocked from his horse. A number of warriors were also killed. The situation for the mounted party was critical. Where was Stirling? With the rest of the party Stirling had been proceeding north along the bank of the river while Ellis investigated the camp. The party had reached another ford about half a mile from the one they had used to cross earlier, and at the sound of the firing from the camp, he left a Corporal and three men who were without horses and lead the rest of the party back towards the Polly Island ford. Surveyor Roe, being unarmed, was sent to guard the party's baggage at the Polly Island ford with four soldiers. Upon reaching the bank opposite the camp, Stirling lined his men along the steeply sloping bank just as some of the warriors from the camp were crossing the river. Stirling referred to this as the 'critical moment' of the fight. Stirling was now able to catch the warriors in a cross fire. Some warriors were, at this point, prepared to try and break through Stirling's position. Others fled to the other ford only to find it barred by the dismounted Corporal's party that had been left there. For the rest of the fight warriors hid in the dense undergrowth, throwing spears as the opportunity arose or concealed themselves underwater with only their eyes and nose showing until a spear could be hurled. After an hour, Stirling had the cease fire sounded.

Stirling concentrated his force at the Polly Island ford where Roe gave first aid to Trooper Heffron and Captain Ellis. Heffron was to recover, but Ellis never recovered from his wound and died a fortnight later. Eight women who had been taken prisoner were let go at this point, and told to carry a warning to the rest of their tribe, that any further attacks on settlers would result in more severe punishment. It is interesting to note that the leader of the attack on Nesbitt, Calyute, escaped past Roe at the lower ford with several other warriors and disappeared into the bush.

With two wounded men, and fearful of a counter-attack, Stirling got his party together and retreated towards Mandurah at 10:05am. As Roe noted in his diary, the primary objectives of the expedition were now a failure, namely the surveying of the land around Pinjarra and the establishment of a garrison there.

The number of casualties sustained by the Binjareb has been hotly debated over the years. Stirling indicated that around 15 were killed. Another report put the number at 25 to 30. All accounts acknowledge that women and children were numbered amongst the dead. Oral histories handed down amongst the Binjareb give a much higher casualty figure. The results for the Binjareb were devastating. If a person died, their totem animal or plant could not be eaten by any member of the tribe for a year. With so many dying at once, the tribe's food sources were severely compromised. This allowed surrounding groups to exploit the weakness of the once powerful Binjareb.



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On departing Mandurah, Stirling left Norcott and the other mounted policemen behind and ordered reinforcements under Captain Daniel, the most senior officer in the Colony, to be posted to the barracks on the Mandurah estuary. They patrolled extensively towards Pinjarra but encountered no Aboriginals. However, by the end of 1834 a truce was made in Perth between the settlers and the Binjareb, with both parties agreeing not to attack or harm each other further. But it was to be over a year before the settlement of Pinjarra began and the military post that was Stirling's original intent to be set up. Over the coming years the Binjareb began to work for the newcomers in clearing and farming the land which had once been theirs alone. Land which they had been prepared to fight the colonists for, and one to which their descendants remain the original and ongoing custodians.