For ACU National teaching graduate Vanessa Seekee, OAM, the discovery of World War II relics in Torres Strait has sparked a quest for justice for some 880 Indigenous Australians who played a key role in defending Australia.

**Abandoned relics**
Vanessa (nee Crowdey), who graduated from the University’s Brisbane Campus in 1993, found herself teaching primary students at Sacred Heart Schools on Thursday Island, north of Cape York.

When she and a fellow teacher were relocated to nearby Horn Island, she was thrilled to find an abandoned aeroplane, concrete trenches and bunkers overgrown with jungle vines.

With a grandmother who had served as a nurse in WWII, Vanessa had always had an interest in the era, and was surprised to find that no-one seemed to know much about these relics, nor about the 880-strong Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, some of whom are pictured above.

**Advocating for Indigenous soldiers**
Employed as a receptionist at Horn Island’s Gateway Resort in 1997, Vanessa began giving tours of the sites and creating a heritage museum. She relished the ongoing challenge and, with it, the opportunity to advocate for the Indigenous men who had served Australia alongside 8,000 non-Indigenous soldiers at a time when Indigenous Australians were not even recognised as citizens.

“The Kaurareg people were removed from Horn Island in 1922, and when war broke out there were only a couple of pearling families on the island,” Vanessa explained.

“All but 10 men on all the islands left their families to enlist and serve Australia, and the area became extremely important strategically. Horn Island became the base for launching air attacks on New Guinea and for reconnaissance missions.

“The Japanese dropped 500 bombs on Horn Island, and planted 170 sea mines in the waters around it, while the allies planted 450 sea mines.

“Among the 157 Australians killed while on duty, 13 were Indigenous, yet after the war, these people were ignored by the Australian government.”

**Inequality ‘abhorrent’**
In 2001, thanks to Vanessa’s efforts, the remaining veterans were awarded 1939–45 Star Medals and, with them, access to veterans’ medical benefits, but she is still campaigning for them to receive full service pensions.

Having trained and served as equals alongside other Australians, the Kaurareg people took their families back to Horn Island after the war, but, along with other Indigenous Australians, were not given the right to vote until 1967.

Such inequality struck Vanessa as “abhorrent” even when she was a student at ACU National. “My education at ACU National facilitated a desire to find out more about certain issues I knew needed to be addressed.”

**Award for reconciliation**
In 2005, Vanessa, an author and mother of two girls, Morgan and Mason, earned a Master’s degree from Central Queensland University with her thesis ‘Horn Island, Torres Strait and the 1939–1945 Star Medal’, and was also awarded the Order of Australia Medal for services to the World War II veterans of the Torres Strait.

This year the Torres Strait Heritage organisation, run by Vanessa and her husband, Liberty, won the Queensland Emerging Business Award and the Premier’s Reconciliation Award.

“My husband, Liberty, and I would like to thank our parents, especially Fay and the late Richard Seekee, who have supported us with the Torres Strait Heritage Museum and Horn Island WWII tours,” Vanessa said at the time.

“We would like to dedicate the award to all those Torres Strait WWII Indigenous and non-Indigenous veterans who were practising reconciliation 65 years ago.

“We can certainly learn a great deal from their example and carry this on through our own lives. We hope this award will highlight the need for the conservation of their WWII sites in the Torres Strait, and assist Torres Strait veterans in their striving for the Service Pension.”

Liberty and Vanessa have also established the Torres Strait WWII Conservation Plan, which will ultimately see the conservation of WWII sites in the Torres Strait.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

- Vanessa’s books, *Horn Island, In Their Steps 1939–1945* and *Discover Horn and Thursday Islands*, are available from the Torres Strait Heritage Museum.
- Email tsangseekee@bigpond.com or telephone (07) 4090 3333.

Footnote: *acunique* was alerted to Vanessa’s achievements by former Canberra Campus Library manager Nancy Clarke, who visited Horn Island in the dry season earlier this year and was given a WWII tour of the island by Vanessa, who has also campaigned successfully for some of the sites to be preserved.