

Finding Home and Sharing It

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN SAUNDERS

Ken Saunders is among the last of the Gunditjmarra people to have lived as a child at the old Lake Condah Mission, located between Portland and Hamilton in western Victoria. The old mission was built near a lake that was once at the heart of an extensive and ancient eel-farming system maintained by the Gunditjmarra. However, the lake was drained by the incoming farmers and eventually the mission was closed (and the church destroyed) to force the remaining Aboriginal families to move to nearby towns or the Framlingham Aboriginal settlement near Warrnambool. The Gunditjmarra fought successfully for the return of the Lake Condah lands to the Kerrup Mara Aboriginal Elders Corporation, and after living in Melbourne, Sydney and other places for forty years, Ken returned home with his wife and family in to participate in the Lake Condah restoration project. He worked in the successful campaign to achieve national heritage status for Lake Condah and the old mission. He has also worked hard to build partnerships between the Gunditjmarra, represented by the Windamara Corporation and non-Aboriginal people and organisations in the district to realise the potential in Lake Condah becoming a powerful symbol of reconciliation and mutual learning. The following is an extract from a longer interview with Ken conducted by Martin Mulligan and Yaso Nadarajah at the visitors centre at Lake Condah in August 2004.

MM: Let's begin at the beginning.

KS: Well, I was born in Portland on 23 August 1944. My mum was raised on Lake Condah mission and I was brought directly from Portland Hospital to Lake Condah at that time.

MM: So your mother was Gunditjmarra?

KS: Yes, she was, but when we started digging back into the history of the past of her mum and dad, we found a very, very grey area, because Aboriginal people weren't put on the list when they had their babies; they weren't registered. The Gunditjmarra tribal grouping is very large and we are

still trying to find out more about the different clans because they were all mixed up when they brought them to the old mission here at Lake Condah.

MM: And your father's people?

KS: Dad's a different kettle of fish. From what we can gather, his mum came from South Australia. We believe that my grandfather on my father's side is from Jamaica. He jumped ship around here somewhere. That's another interesting part of my history, I guess.

MM: What are some of your memories about living here as a child? Can you tell us about some of the important people and places?

KS: My memory as a child growing up here brings up a lot of bitterness and anger. The important places were Dunmore, where Aunty Fanny and the mob lived over there at what they called Murderers' Flat, and Greenvale, where the Lovetts were. And then Tyrendarra, where the Clarks were. So it was all about family connections. They were the happy times, being brought up with the cousins and stuff. But school was horrific, especially when I went to school in Heywood.

YN: Do you have any happy memories from being a child, living here?

KS: Oh yes. The mission was my playground and I had many exciting adventures. I had about five or six dogs. I used to get a pinch of salt, a sharp knife, box of matches, and I'd leave early in the morning and wouldn't come back until night time. I'd just go hunting. Right through, as far away as Mount Eccles, nearly to Macarthur, all the way to Tyrendarra. I had the salt in case I caught a rabbit or an eel, and then I would light a fire and cook it up out in the scrub.

MM: You considered that this was your country?

KS: Yes, but I didn't really understand that. It was just a playground, and it was thick bush. I hadn't been told the stories about this place. I remember finding some rock art once but I haven't been able to find it since.

MM: Who was living on the mission at that time?

KS: There were only two families left then – the Fosters and the Saunders.

MM: Did it make you feel sad, that so many people had left this place?

KS: I guess the saddest part was when my cousins – Gloria, Ronnie and Eunice – were taken away and put into the Ballarat orphanage. I can't remember exactly when that was because I have a mental block about that. But I remember howling a hell of a lot, along with the rest of my brothers and sisters.

MM: And you said that school was horrendous. Can you say a bit more about that?

KS: I learnt to put up a barrier to the teachers. We were never just called kids; it was always 'the mission kids'. So when I had the experience of

working with my dad, digging potatoes *et cetera*, I just wanted to leave school; I couldn't stand it. Keith, Theo, and myself were the only ones at school in Heywood. There were others, such as the Lovetts, at school in Hamilton, but we were alone at Heywood. But you've got to remember that we moved around a lot. We moved from here to Portland. Then, for some unknown reason, we moved to another place just up the road from here, when this place [the old mission] was really falling apart. We lived in the old dormitory at the mission and before that we lived in an old schoolhouse. So we moved a lot and there are some missing links in my mind.

MM: Did you experience a lot of racism when you lived around here as a child?

KS: Yes. I guess that made it difficult for me. Dad used to talk about his army mates, and then we'd be walking along the road and they'd drive past us and I couldn't work out why they wouldn't pick us up. I used to wonder why. And yet Dad always tipped his hat to them and shook hands with his mates. Eventually, it was that sort of thing that made me want to leave and hide myself in the cities.

YN: You say you weren't told the stories from around here, and I guess you didn't have a chance to learn the language?

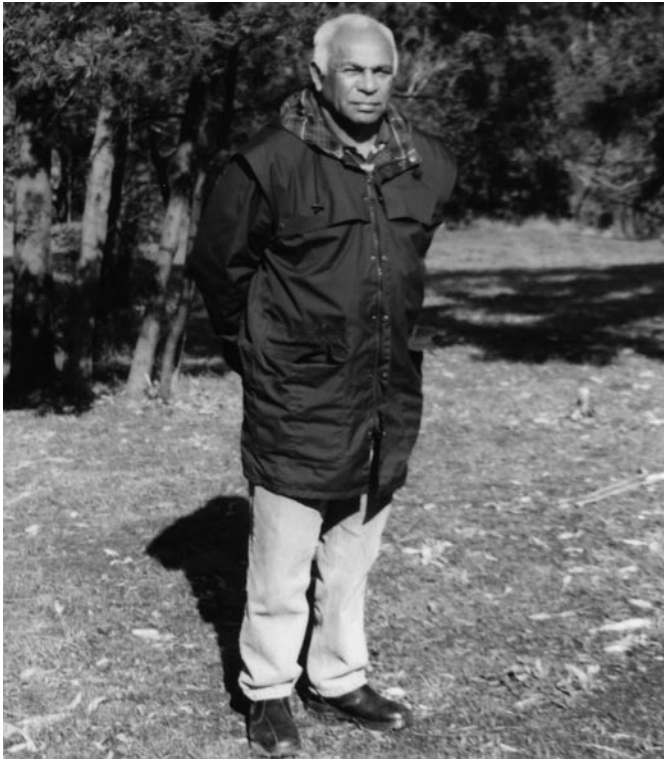
KS: I used to try and invent languages. I think every child has a certain companion that they invent, and I remember doing a lot of talking to myself and to my dogs, at that particular time, in made-up language.

MM: When you were young, were the older people still taking people out into the bush and telling the stories?

KS: No, it wasn't happening. It had broken down. We were told that no girls were allowed to cross Darlot Creek. We were allowed to cross it, but we had to be back this side at a certain time. So, we were told some things but not the full story. But as I said the place was falling apart. My mother and my younger brother and my younger sister were the last three to walk off Lake Condah Mission.

MM: Did you know about the old eel and fish traps when you were young?

KS: Oh yes. Dad and I used to work them. There were three. One just down from where Uncle Reg's plaque is now.¹ Another one just down here [pointing]. And one called Arden's fish trap, just down from the old Arden's Bridge. We used to work those three; mainly for food. But we also did it for money. We used to skin the eels, salt them down, wrap them up in newspaper, and then Dad and I would hitch-hike, first to the pub at Condah and sell them there, and then we'd hitch-hike to Hamilton, Casterton, Coleraine, Dartmoor and Heywood. And then Dad would order the tucker—sugar, milk, bread, tea and meat. And we'd put all that on our backs and walk from Heywood back to the mission here. We'd only get two or three bob [around fifty cents] for an eel, selling them like that. But those were



Ken Saunders at Lake Condah
(Image: Yaso Nadarajah)

exciting times for me. I absolutely idolised my father. He was my first god. And then my grandmother and my father taught me about the other God.

MM: Was your Uncle Reg an influence on you? He is a well-known figure right across Australia.

KS: He was an influence only because of his status as a soldier. But Dad was also in the army and he was a stronger influence than Reg was. He always said things like: 'You can't leave home without a handkerchief' and 'Soap and water are cheap' and 'Make your own bed as soon as you get out of it'. He was very, very strict, and those habits have stayed with me.

MM: When was the church at the old Lake Condah mission destroyed?

KS: I believe it was in 1957. I wasn't living here when they pulled it down. But I do remember going to one service there before it was pulled down.

MM: Did people know it was going to be destroyed before it happened?

MM: No, and that made them very angry. People have always wanted to put something back in place of the old church.

MM: Why is it important to replace the old church?

KS: Because when you look at what has been happening to churches and Christianity around the world today, we need to find some healing processes. People all over the world are looking for something that they can attempt to do as an individual person on this earth, and many people are trying to find a space for healing. As a group we can heal. But I think there needs to be the individual healing process as well. So I think the rebuilding of that church could be a very strong outcome for individual and group healing.

YN: Is that mainly for the older people who remember the church or can the younger people get something out of it as well?

KS: I honestly believe it is going to be beneficial for everybody; black and white, young and old. Because we all need some healing and we can create a space there that everyone can use. If the doors aren't locked and there is an eternal flame in there then people can go there when they feel they are going through some problems. They can just go and sit and reflect on what's going through their mind. You need to admit your faults and fears from the past to move on and you can start by doing that internally first. And they'll end up meeting someone with similar thoughts and experiences.

MM: Okay, we have talked about your childhood around here. However, you left here when you were fourteen and started to travel. Can you tell us a bit about that? Why did you want to leave?

KS: It was mainly to find a job and also to work out some other things. When I first left here, I hitch-hiked to Melbourne and met up with my cousin Johnny Austin, and we went and picked grapes up near Swan Hill.

MM: I guess you would have met other Aboriginal people doing that sort of work?

KS: No, no, it was mainly Greeks or Italians or white Australians who were in the same boat as us at that particular time. So that was a good learning curve. I left there and came back to Melbourne to try to establish myself in the city. Then I packed my bags and headed for the bright lights of Sydney. I stayed on the streets for a long, long time. Went from Sydney to Brisbane, and from there up to Cairns and Mackay, and then across to Mount Isa.

MM: Were you chasing work all that time or was it just curiosity?

KS: It was a bit of both. You just had to go where you could. For example, I remember meeting up with one old guy this side of Cairns who had a property on the other side of Cairns, and he said, 'Come on and I'll give you two or three days work'. I was broke and hungry, so I ended up staying with him for about twelve months. He was a racist old wriggly. But he was also old and very, very lonely. He used to go to the pub and I would never go with him because of the racist thing. I lived in the stables because I refused to sleep in the house with him. His dogs would come down, and the country

and western music would be going full bore, and I'd hear him singing out, 'Why don't you come up here and have a drink with me?' He used to tell me, 'I know you don't like whitefellas and I don't like blackfellas'. So that was all the conversation we had. He was very upset about me leaving and so were his farming mates. One night he was late coming home, so I got on the phone and rang around and they all said he should be home soon. But I was not so sure so I got on the horse and rode around in the dark. The dogs found him. His old ute had tipped over into a gully. So I got him out and dragged the old ute out with a couple of big draught horses. I couldn't start the car so I got him back to the house and rang the neighbours and they took him to hospital. Of course, I thought this was a good opportunity to pack my bags and go. But two or three of his neighbours came around and said, 'Don't go; you can't leave him now. The horses have got to be fed, the dogs have got to be fed, the mail's got to be collected, and there's a bit of extra fencing that needs doing'. So I had to stay there a bit longer because he was a terribly lonely old man as well as being a damned old racist.

YN: So you learnt to feel sorry for someone who was horrible to you?

KS: Yes I did because in the finish he was not a bad sort of an old bloke. He was very, very hard and had been imprisoned by his life. He was going nowhere. And he died a lonely old man. I can't remember him ever talking about family. He had so much anger and frustration that he didn't know what to do about it. We used to have some terrible arguments during the day, but in the end we always had a big pot of stew at night. He paid me well and got an old car done up for me – new motor, new tyres – and that got me back to Sydney and then back to Melbourne.

MM: Where were you living when your children were born?

KS: In Melbourne, mostly. Joseph was actually born in Bega Hospital [in southern New South Wales], because I was living in Eden then.

MM: Was that where you met your wife Julie?

KS: No, I met her in Melbourne, and at first she didn't like me one little bit. But we kept bumping into each other at blackfella meetings and she started to change her mind.

MM: Where is Julie from?

KS: She's from Bairnsdale way; Cairn River. But she was raised in Sydney.

MM: In all your travels you must have visited a lot of Aboriginal communities in different parts of the country.

KS: The main chance I had to visit Aboriginal communities was when I worked for the Aboriginal Health Service. I was in the dental section, and we used to tow this big caravan around doing surveys all around Victoria and parts of New South Wales. So that got me around quite a bit. I learnt about dental work and I was actually a dental nurse on quite a few occasions. That was pretty fascinating, going from Bega up to Wollongong. We weren't

supposed to go to Mount Druitt in Sydney, but I hooked the caravan up and took the crew to Mount Druitt and on to places in New South Wales, such as Dubbo, Peak Hill, Wellington, and also Canberra.

YN: When you go to so many places do you feel connected to the people?

KS: Yes, it was good because I was the driver, and I used to drive around and pick up people who didn't have cars and made sure that they got their appointments. It was pretty exciting at that time, letting people know that we had our own Aboriginal Health Service in Melbourne. But some Aboriginal communities didn't have a strong sense of community identity. And that reflected in the faces of the mob and how they felt. So it was different to what I knew in Melbourne because we had a strong sense of identity there. The Aboriginal Health Service was a very strong organisation and I helped organise conferences all around Australia. I lived out of a suitcase for quite a long time and that was very difficult. I had to spend a lot of time chasing my wife. And I'm still chasing her.

YN: Oh, a love story!

KS: I actually got her to become a dental nurse, and then I went back to driving the dental van again because we could work together.

MM: Did you ever feel that you were not welcome in any particular community?

KS: No, because I think if you are offering a community service then there's going to be good, strong acceptance. You know, people used to tell me, 'If you ever leave your van in the middle of a place like the Wallaga Lake [a settlement in southern New South Wales] you will come back in the morning and find all the windows smashed and the tyres missing.' Well I actually did it on purpose, just to test the value of the service we were offering. I left the van there and there wasn't a scratch on it. Not even the spare tyre was taken, and it wasn't even bolted down. So they appreciated the service they got and we were always accepted into their communities. We worked for very, very long hours and we never had a single problem.

MM: From all your travels, can you tell us about some of the inspirational people you have met, who had an influence on you?

KS: One of them was Chicka Dickson up in Sydney. I loved to listen to his stories, and I always got him to tell me the story about when he met the Chinese government, when a delegation of Aboriginal people went over there in 1972. He said it was pretty powerful when the Chinese government bowed to them and said, 'Welcome, first peoples of the world'. But it's the way he tells the story, his satisfaction at what was achieved. His political movement for indigenous peoples in NSW was pretty good at that particular time. And Charlie Perkins was another one. I didn't like his politics so much, but his freedom ride was a pretty strong statement and it meant a lot to me at that particular time.

MM: Chicka always tried to teach other people what he knew; he was a good mentor wasn't he?

KS: Yes, and so was Charlie Perkins. I got on very well with those two men.

MM: Okay, we are back in Melbourne again. What happened in your life to make you want to come back to the Lake Condah area?

KS: I have no idea, to be honest. I think there was a strong influence from the boys, Joseph and Fred. I was a little bit frightened about the way they were headed at Northcote Technical College in Melbourne, so we thought about our options. Cairns looked good, nice weather. Mackay looked good and my memories sort of prompted that because I got on well with the mob up that way. But then Julie and the boys got together and said, 'Well you like going home so why not go there to live?'

MM: So you had kept visiting this place when you were living in Melbourne?

KS: Yeah, we would just jump in the car on a Friday night and come here and camp on the mission. Just put the mattresses out here and light a fire. It was just a spontaneous thing I guess.

YN: This has always been home to you?

KS: Yes, this was always home. But I hadn't thought of coming back to live here. So we kept talking about it and kept talking about it. And, eventually, we just packed up the house in Melbourne and came to live here.

MM: Everybody in the family was happy with that decision?

KS: Yeah, and the school at Heywood looked okay. A lot better than when I went to school there. We talked to the teachers. I was a bit nervous because of my bad experiences but I kept thinking, 'It will never happen with these guys. It can't happen because that's all gone, in the past now.' Still, I had to face all those issues for myself. I had to say to myself, 'Don't be silly, get over it, it's gone, it's finished, even if some of the guys and girls that I went to school with are still around the place'. I just had to face those demons of the past, I guess.

MM: In all that time you had been travelling, some people from around here had never gone anywhere?

KS: That's right and it's a shame. Their parents hadn't been anywhere and they didn't know much about the world.

MM: Were they interested in knowing your stories, about where you'd been and what you'd done?

KS: Very interested actually, and that was very surprising to me. So I felt like I had come home, and I remember that one day I was driving across a creek when my mobile phone rang and I wound down the window of the car and tossed it into the creek and just kept driving. That felt good. I really appreciate Julie and the boys for making the decision to come here, and I'm

glad we came back because there are a lot of people living in Melbourne who are connected back to Lake Condah, and they know the history side of it, but they have never actually personally dealt with some of the things that have happened here. They talk about the mission, but they have no real idea of what it's about. I could never ever blame them for that. I actually feel sorry that they have never been connected as strongly as some of the families have. There is an empty void there that they haven't quite got through yet. They haven't quite connected for some unknown reason. And the distance is getting longer, and then they'll find it will only be a very, very distant memory. The history then will just be pain for them.

MM: Does Julie have a sense of belonging in this country now, because of the boys perhaps?

KS: Only because of the boys. She's got her own country and she misses it. She's got her own family and she misses them. They are spread out from Bairnsdale to La Perouse, Redfern and Liverpool in Sydney, and all the way back down to Albury-Wodonga, Griffiths and Mildura.

MM: And do your boys have a sense of belonging to her country too?

KS: Oh yes, absolutely. They stay in touch with her family and find out every bit of information that floats in and out.

MM: You have been making a big effort to involve non-Aboriginal people around here in planning the future of Lake Condah. Why have you put the emphasis on that?

KS: Well, when I came back here I wanted to respect everything that the mob here had already done and see if I could add something new to that. So I talked about a community partnership to get other people around here onside with what we want to do at Lake Condah. As I said before, this can be a special place for all the community, not just the blackfellas, but we have to find a way to involve non-Aboriginal people in the project. We had to build a partnership and let it build up slowly. We have a strong community organisation in the Windamara Aboriginal Corporation and it takes a lot of effort to keep that going. They have to work on health, housing, education, social support, and they have to be careful about taking on anything else. So I said we have to talk about a management structure that can help us get support to rebuild Lake Condah. We needed help to do the work to get Lake Condah on the National Estate [heritage listing] and we have to talk to people about the great vision we have for Lake Condah, to re-flood the lake and build a reconciliation centre.

There were some problems at that time with the Kerrupmara Elders Aboriginal Corporation. It actually went into liquidation because of funding problems and bad management. So I convinced Windamara to take over the running of Lake Condah Mission from Kerrupmara so that they could look after the funding and the management of the place. Then I started talking

to potential partners such as AFFA [Agricultural Fisheries and Forestries of Australia], ILC [Indigenous Land Corporation] and Southern Grampians Shire Council.

MM: How did you choose potential partners to approach?

KS: It was very simple, actually, because we talked about the resources we needed to fulfil our vision. The lake wasn't being filled to its capacity, so then it was an environmental issue and we wanted people who knew about those issues. We chose the Shire Council because we are ratepayers – we pay enormous amounts of rates – so they had to be a partner. We wanted an industry partner that could help us get some non-government funding so we chose Alcoa at Portland. We wanted to focus on primary health care so we talked to the Western District Health Service. We had to knock on some doors and say, 'We are an Aboriginal organization that is already doing things, but we don't want to work on our own; we want to form a Lake Condah partnership'.

MM: Did the creation of that kind of partnerships bring more unity to the Aboriginal people involved with Lake Condah?

KS: Absolutely. And more acceptance of whitefellas. They couldn't sit there in their own little world and say, 'I'm not going to worry about those bloody whitefellas'. It was time for them to say 'How do we engage with them on our terms?'

MM: If we go back to your earlier experiences, meeting people such as Chicka Dickson, and so on. Did all that help when it came to this work?

KS: Yes it did, and I had learnt a lot about network building. Networking is crucial for an organization like Windamara. And you have to be confident. You just pick up the phone and ring people like project managers and just establish some human contact with them.

YN: So you are getting your community to connect with a bigger world?

KS: Yes. And it was so important that that happened in a little town like Heywood. We had to start planning not just for next year but for the one after that, and that's a big change. We are not just sitting there waiting for funding bodies to ring us up and tell us what we have to do to get funding for another year. We got comfortable and waited and said 'the funding will come in next month or next year at this time'. There's \$2,000 here and \$4,000 there if you apply for it very quickly. But it's only band-aid stuff. It doesn't fill the long-term gap or build the capacity for a community organization. It doesn't take the community to the next level. We have to have longer-term thinking.

MM: Are some younger leaders starting to emerge now?

KS: I think there's a gap there right around Australia. A lot of the old guys, like myself, will have to step aside very shortly. But there's a gap. We've nurse-maided our people too much. A lot of Aboriginal people are

too happy in letting other people speak and take the leadership roles. And the Chicka Dicksons and the Charlie Perkins are few and far between. The ATSIC [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission] Commissioners were supposed to be leaders for the future, but that didn't work out.

MM: How are you going to mentor younger people to play the roles that people such as you have been playing?

KS: Well, if we have a five-year plan for Lake Condah you have to look at kids who are thirteen years old and see that they will be eighteen in five years and the ones who are now eighteen will be twenty-two. So you have to concentrate on the people in that age range of thirteen to eighteen. They are the people who will benefit most from what we are doing now. We want to keep people, black and white, excited and involved. So we'll look at what we have achieved after two years and keep working towards the long-term vision.

MM: Is it important for you to build relationships with Aboriginal communities and organisations outside this area?

KS: That is important, but it's going to take a while to build up those relationships because we still compete with them for funding. I think we also need to build relationships with people and communities in other parts of the world to exchange ideas. For example, what is the difference between our organisation and another one in India? What do they do? Where do they get their funding? How do they manage their health and education programs? And so on.

MM: Can you tell us a bit about ways of handling conflict within your community?

KS: Well, we don't always handle it very well. Aboriginal people tend to be led by their hearts rather than their brains, so things sometimes become very emotional. The majority of domestic violence is based around drugs, alcohol and being at the lower end of the economic scale. And the family structure started to break down way way back; being so poor and not able to put anything on the table to eat. People were raised in that environment.

MM: And, of course, people who have grown up with a history of racism will not necessarily trust the police.

KS: Absolutely. When I was young, if ever we saw a police car in Hamilton or Portland we never walked beside the shop window. We walked on the edge of the footpath because if you ever did any window-shopping they assumed you were there to thief. That was the mentality. So you walked on the edge of the gutter and you looked straight ahead, and that was our mentality as well, just accepting it. And if there was an argument up the street between whitefellas, you made sure you put plenty of distance between yourself and that argument so that you didn't get blamed for it. So

you grew up with that. It's 100 per cent better now than it was in those days, but the scars remain.

MM: What has brought about that kind of change?

KS: We didn't have the education at that particular time. There was no Aboriginal Health Service or Aboriginal Legal Service or Aboriginal Housing at that time. They would come along in my lifetime. I was fortunate enough to work in the Aboriginal Health Service and see it grow from where it was up to where it is today.

YN: Do you think that your children will be able to handle conflict better because of those kinds of changes?

KS: Well Joseph is the big, deep thinker. He thinks about how it all fits in and what he wants to achieve. He wants to see the world and he also wants to see Australia, and he thinks he can do that through football and education.

YN: So is his anger different?

KS: The anger is different. It's safer. And my kids have got more white mates than black mates now. The young people are still waiting for a settlement of the history, of what happened to their parents, so there can be peace between black and white. As I've said, I'm not bitter myself now because I have worked through the issues. I learnt from my Dad and people like Uncle Reg that you can get acceptance from white mates, and I think I have passed that on to my kids.

YN: I am fascinated by your capacity to remain positive. What gave you that capacity?

KS: I guess I was fortunate enough to spend some time with some old traditional men. That was my yearning for language; the hunger for identity. But also the hunger for knowledge about society and where communities fit in. Those traditional guys knew so much without having television and newspapers and computers. They had a knowledge of two worlds. I often wonder how those two worlds survived so long in their minds without the language, the stories, songs and dance. That kind of knowledge gives you the strength to speak in front of politicians and judges and all that. So I was lucky to have that contact with that. And then I've also had contact with other peoples of great knowledge and compassion and understanding; people from different cultures. I think it's a life-long journey.

Endnotes

¹ Reg Saunders was the first Aboriginal person to become an officer in the Australian army when he served during World War II. A plaque to commemorate his life and achievements was erected at Lake Condah in 2004