

= Len Waters =

Leonard Victor (Len) Waters (20 June 1924 ? 24 August 1993) was the first Aboriginal Australian military aviator , and the only one to serve as a fighter pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) during World War II . Aborigines at the time suffered significant discrimination and disadvantages in Australian society , such as restrictions on movement , residence , employment , and access to services and citizenship . Born in northern New South Wales and raised in Queensland , Waters was working as a shearer when he joined the RAAF in 1942 . Training initially as a mechanic , he volunteered for flying duties and graduated as a sergeant pilot in 1944 . He flew P @-@ 40 Kittyhawks in the South West Pacific theatre , where he completed 95 missions , mainly close air support . By the end of the war he had risen to the rank of warrant officer . Following his discharge from the RAAF in 1946 , he attempted to start a regional airline but was unable to secure financial backing and government approval . He went back to shearing , and died in 1993 at the age of 69 .

= = Early life = =

The fourth of 11 children to Donald and Grace Waters (née Bennett) , Len Waters was born at Euraba Mission , near Boomi in northern New South Wales on 20 June 1924 . He grew up at Nindigully , near St George , Queensland , and was educated to the seventh grade at Nindigilly State School . Hearing tales of pioneering aviators Charles Kingsford Smith , Amy Johnson , Bert Hinkler and Charles Lindbergh , and reading stories of Biggles , Flash Gordon , and Buck Rogers , he had , as he put it , his " head in the clouds " from an early age . Waters left school when he was 14 to support his family , working alongside his father as a ring barker . He was paid 10 shillings per week , for a seven @-@ day week , less than one @-@ sixth of the average wage at the time . In 1939 , he began working as a shearer .

= = RAAF career = =

Although the military had officially barred or restricted the recruitment of Aborigines in earlier periods , these impediments were significantly relaxed after Japan entered World War II , and Australia came under direct attack for the first time . Waters volunteered for service in the RAAF on 24 August 1942 , at Brisbane , and was accepted . He began training as an aircraft mechanic , but later volunteered for flying service , and commenced initial training at Somers , Victoria , in December 1943 . The aircrew interviewer thought he looked " a bit rough " but " should make a fighter " . Waters believed his lack of education would be a disadvantage , and studied nights to make up for it . Keen to be a pilot , he was concerned that he would be allocated to duty as a wireless operator because he showed an aptitude for Morse transmission early on . He was also asked to imagine himself as the tail gunner in a Lancaster or Halifax heavy bomber , to which he replied , " I had a very disappointed look on my face , sir ! " So convinced was he that he would not achieve his dream of becoming an aviator , Waters made three separate bets against himself being selected , and had to pay out £ 15 when he was nevertheless chosen .

Waters undertook his basic flight instruction at No. 1 Elementary Flying Training School in Narrandera , New South Wales , where he flew De Havilland Tiger Moths . He completed his training on CAC Wirraways and received his wings as a sergeant pilot at No. 5 Service Flying Training School in Uranquinty . Posted to No. 2 Operational Training Unit at Mildura , Victoria , he converted to P @-@ 40 Kittyhawk fighters . Once , while he was on leave , Waters was reportedly gaoled in Moree , New South Wales , for not carrying an identity card , which was one of the racially discriminatory institutions affecting Aborigines at the time . On 14 November 1944 , he was posted to No. 78 Squadron , a fighter unit based on the island of Noemfoor , off Dutch New Guinea . When he arrived , he was allocated a P @-@ 40 Kittyhawk . By chance , a previous pilot had nicknamed the plane " Black Magic " and painted those words on its nose . Waters found the name of his plane an amusing coincidence and chose to retain it .

By this stage of the war , Japanese aircraft were almost non @-@ existent in the South West

Pacific theatre ; No. 78 Squadron 's main role was ground attack , bombing and strafing enemy positions . Waters flew 95 sorties from Noemfoor , and later from the air bases at Morotai and Tarakan , in Borneo . During one mission , his aircraft was struck by a 37 mm cannon shell that embedded itself behind him in the cockpit without detonating . He flew for another two hours , with the possibility of the shell exploding at any time , a situation he likened to having a loaded gun against his head . " I 'll tell you what " , he said after returning to base , " that was the best landing I ever made " . On 1 January 1945 , he was promoted to flight sergeant . By the end of the war , Waters was commanding operations which included commissioned officers . A colleague described him as a " gaunt , genial figure , humble despite his daring feats " . In addition to his combat flying , Waters also held the RAAF middleweight boxing title .

One of Len Waters ' brothers , Donald Edward (Jimmy) Waters , had served as an infantryman with the Australian Army during the war . With the end of the Pacific War in September 1945 , Len considered volunteering for the Australian component of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan , if his brother did also . Jim declined at the time (he later changed his mind) , so Len returned to Australia and left the air force with the rank of warrant officer on 18 January 1946 .

= = Post @-@ war life and legacy = =

After returning to Australia , Waters attempted to start a regional airline serving South West Queensland . However , he was not able to secure finance or bureaucratic agreement . He reportedly wrote four letters seeking government approval , but never received a reply . He never flew a plane again . While racism in the military during World War II was considered to be minimal , Waters and other Aborigines who had served their country found that the skills they had acquired were not valued in peacetime . He wrote later that , having put off his uniform , he simply " returned to being a blackfellow " .

Four weeks after his discharge from the Air Force , Waters married Gladys Saunders , with whom he had six children . He worked as an automotive mechanic , but was forced to cease by union rules , which required him to serve an apprenticeship . Waters was then briefly employed by a local council in Queensland as a road worker , before returning to shearing , which took him away from his family to properties stretching from North Queensland to Victoria . He personally estimated that he sheared a million sheep during his life .

Waters applied for housing commission accommodation and was allocated a house at Inala , Brisbane , in August 1956 . He eventually bought the property and lived there for 33 years . He died on 24 August 1993 at the age of 69 in Cunnamulla , and was buried in St George Cemetery .

In 1995 ? 96 , Waters was commemorated in several ways : Australia Post depicted his portrait on a stamp and that of his P @-@ 40 Kittyhawk fighter " Black Magic " on an aérogramme , as part of its Australia Remembers series ; Black Magic Port was named after his personal Kittyhawk ; Len Waters Place , a park in Inala , was opened ; Moree Plains Shire Council dedicated Leonard Waters Park in Boggabilla , New South Wales ; and Len Waters Street in Ngunnawal , Australian Capital Territory , was named after him . In 2003 , Balonne Shire Council erected a monument to Waters and another local RAAF identity , Squadron Leader John Jackson , in St George . In 2011 , the Sutherland Shire Council recognised Len Waters ' memory and achievements by dedicating Len Waters Park , with a memorial plinth and plaque , at Timbrey Circuit , Barden Ridge , New South Wales .