THE LEGACY OF INDIGENOUS RAAF MEMBERS FROM WORLD WAR II

I was the coloured boy in it and I might add that there was 169 of us … on the course, and there were 44 or 46 finished up as pilots that graduated and got our wings. The end result when we got our wings … there were only three blokes in front of me on my average. So, from my humble beginning I was pretty proud of what I am.

Warrant Officer Len Waters

Although approximately 3000 Aboriginals and 850 Torres Strait Islanders served in Australia’s armed forces during World War II, few Australians know the details of any notable Indigenous soldiers, airmen or sailors. The Air Force was at the forefront of recruiting non-Europeans during World War II, due largely to the need to supply 27 000 airmen to Britain under the Empire Air Training Scheme. The Indigenous airmen who served in that conflict are part of the heritage of today’s Air Force.

Born at Euraba Mission in far northern New South Wales in 1924, Leonard Waters grew up in country south-west Queensland. He left school aged 14 during the Great Depression, and was compelled to work with his father as a ring-barker and then as a shearer. Inspired at an early age by the exploits of aviation pioneers such as Kingsford-Smith, Hinkler, Lindbergh and Johnson, Waters volunteered for the Air Force in August 1942.

Initially trained as an aircraft mechanic, he was accepted into aircrew training in December 1943. Fearing his education would preclude him from becoming a pilot, which was his preference, he studied tirelessly to enhance his chances of being selected for his preferred category. He went so far as to bet against himself on three occasions, believing he would not be selected. His fears were not helped by staff asking him to imagine himself as a tail gunner in a heavy bomber. However, his efforts paid off when he was selected for pilot training at the end of his initial training.

Waters converted to P-40 Kittyhawk aircraft at No 2 Operational Training Unit at Mildura and was posted to No 78 Squadron. Based at Noemfoor, Dutch East Indies, the squadron flew ground attack missions against the Japanese on neighbouring islands. Between November 1944 and August 1945, Waters flew 95 operational sorties in an aircraft that had been named ‘Black Magic’ by a previous pilot—a name that Waters found appropriate and retained. On one sortie, a 37-mm anti-aircraft artillery shell hit his aircraft and failed to detonate, lodging itself behind his head at the rear of the canopy. Showing immense courage and airmanship, Waters continued flying for another two hours before safely returning to base. By the end of his operational tour, Waters had been promoted to flight sergeant and was leading missions on a regular basis. Promoted to warrant officer at the end of the war, he declined the opportunity to deploy to Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force and left the Air Force. Despite showing immense interest in establishing a regional civil airline, he could not obtain financial or Government support. After the war, he never flew again, eventually returning to shearing.

A lesser-known Indigenous RAAF pilot, David Paul, served with distinction in the European Theatre during World War II. Born in 1920 in Sydney, Paul did not disclose his Indigenous heritage (his great grandmother was Aboriginal) until after the war. Like Waters, Paul left school at 14 to become a drover. With the declaration...
of war in 1939, he saw his future in the Air Force and enrolled at a local technical college to improve his education. Paul enlisted in January 1941 and travelled to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) for training under the Empire Air Training Scheme.

In late 1941, having successfully completed pilot training, Paul was posted to No 454 Squadron where he conducted maritime patrol missions over the Aegean Sea for the next two years. In December 1943 on the final sortie of his operational tour, Paul’s Baltimore Bomber was shot down by two German Bf 109F fighters. Despite his aircraft’s fuel tanks bursting into flames, Paul successfully ditched the aircraft and swam through flames to rescue another crewmember. Three surviving aircrew, including Paul, were captured by German forces.

Paul was well respected and experienced, being one of No 454 Squadron’s initial cadre of pilots when it formed. His Commanding Officer, Wing Commander John Coates, described him as one of the squadron’s most outstanding pilots. This assessment was confirmed by the award of a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for Paul’s outstanding actions over numerous missions, often in the face of aggressive enemy attacks. The citation noted his outstanding leadership, initiative and determination. Returning to Australia after the war, David Paul had a distinguished career with the New South Wales Police Force and served as a squadron leader in the RAAF Reserve until his death in 1973.

The account of Flight Sergeant Arnold Lockyer provides a more sobering example of the sacrifices made by Indigenous members during World War II. Lockyer joined the Air Force in May 1942, aged 27, and served as an aircraft mechanic with No 17 Repair and Salvage Unit at Cunderdin, Western Australia. Like Waters and Paul, Lockyer wanted to fly so in 1944, he applied for and successfully completed flight engineer training on B-24 Liberator bombers at Tocumwal, New South Wales. Promoted to sergeant, Lockyer was posted to No 24 Squadron in April 1945 as a flight engineer, and saw service in the Northern Territory, Morotai, Netherlands East Indies and Balikpapan. While based at Morotai on 27 July, Lockyer temporarily joined the crew of a No 21 Squadron Liberator (A72-92) as flight engineer for a photo-reconnaissance mission over the Celebes. When his aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire, Lockyer was one of three aircrew to successfully parachute from the doomed aircraft, only to be captured by Japanese soldiers. One of the aircrew was killed by their captors the following day. Lockyer and the other crewmember were interrogated and imprisoned near Manado, in what is now Sulawesi, Indonesia. Both crewmembers were subsequently murdered by Japanese soldiers on 21 August 1945—six days after the Japanese surrender. Of the five Lockyer brothers who served in World War II, three survived.

The accounts of Waters, Paul and Lockyer are inspiring but little known. They highlight the proud heritage that the RAAF has, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders having served with distinction in World War II. Their service and sacrifice should be commemorated by current and future RAAF personnel as examples of not only Indigenous, but Air Force courage, determination and dedication. They are key contributors to Australian military history.

Key Points

- The contribution of Indigenous people to the defence of Australia over the last 100 years is not well known.
- During World War II, Indigenous Australians served in the Air Force in all operational theatres.
- Today’s Air Force has inherited a proud history of service, courage, dedication and determination by Indigenous members that should be remembered.