

Memorial Box 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wartime Service

Warrant Officer Leonard Waters



Warrant Officer Leonard Waters in his winter flying uniform, c. 1943

Born in 1924 on the Euraba Aboriginal Mission, Leonard Waters was the fourth of Donald and Grace Waters' 11 children. Len, as he was known, developed a fascination with aviation from a young age, listening with admiration to news of the exploits of Charles Kingsford-Smith and Amy Johnson.

Waters left school before his 14th birthday to support his family, and he worked as a shearer before volunteering for service in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in 1942. Desperate for manpower to support the air war in Europe and the Pacific, the RAAF's rules regarding Indigenous Australian enlistment were far less restrictive than those for the Second Australian Imperial Force.

Waters was initially trained as an aircraft mechanic but dreamed of becoming a pilot like his childhood heroes. His application was accepted in 1943 and he undertook training across New South Wales before graduating as a pilot in 1944.

Later that year Waters was posted to No. 78 Squadron, which was stationed on the island of Noemfoor off Dutch New Guinea. He flew on more than 90 missions from here over the next year and later flew from air bases in Borneo. On one flight his aircraft was

This document is available on the Australian War Memorial's website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/education/memorial-boxes/1>.

You may download, display, print and reproduce this worksheet only for your personal, educational, non-commercial use or for use within your organisation, provided that you attribute the Australian War Memorial.

struck by a Japanese 37-millimetre cannon shell, which wedged itself in the cockpit without detonating. Waters flew for another two hours before landing safely with the shell still intact.

At the end of the war, Waters was discharged from the RAAF as a Warrant Officer. He returned to Queensland and never flew again. He hoped to start a regional airline but was unable to secure financial or government support, and soon returned to his pre-war life of shearing to provide for his wife and six children. He died in 1993, aged 69.

This document is available on the Australian War Memorial's website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/education/memorial-boxes/1>.

You may download, display, print and reproduce this worksheet only for your personal, educational, non-commercial use or for use within your organisation, provided that you attribute the Australian War Memorial.

Activities for research and classroom discussion

1. Listen to the following oral history recording:
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S01652> [number 2, tape 2] or download the transcript. What are some challenges Waters had to overcome to realise his dream of becoming a pilot?
2. Search the Memorial's website for the Empire Air Training Scheme. How did this affect RAAF recruitment in the Second World War? What other factors may have contributed to the need to establish a large pool of trained aircrew?
3. How do you think Waters may have felt about finally receiving his "wings"? How do you think his family would have felt?



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01757.004

Waters receives his "wings" at graduation, c. 1944

This document is available on the Australian War Memorial's website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/education/memorial-boxes/1>.

You may download, display, print and reproduce this worksheet only for your personal, educational, non-commercial use or for use within your organisation, provided that you attribute the Australian War Memorial.

4. Waters' P-40 Kittyhawk fighter had been nicknamed "Black Magic" by the previous pilot. Why do you think Waters chose to keep this name?



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02808.001

Waters' P-40 Kittyhawk fighter, c. 1944-45

5. After the war Waters struggled to find work that matched his skills and experience, but in recent years parks, monuments, and streets across Australia have been named in his honour. What does this suggest about how attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have changed since the end of the Second World War?

This document is available on the Australian War Memorial's website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/education/memorial-boxes/1>.

You may download, display, print and reproduce this worksheet only for your personal, educational, non-commercial use or for use within your organisation, provided that you attribute the Australian War Memorial.