



## **Leonard V. Waters: WWII Aboriginal Fighter Pilot**

as told by Ben Henderson

Leonard V. Waters was born on June 20, 1924 at Euraba Mission near Boomi in Northern New South Wales. He grew up at Nindigilly, Near St. George, and Queensland. At a very early age, he developed an interest in aviation. Being the fourth of eleven children, he was forced to leave school at the age of fourteen to help his father support the family. In 1939, he worked as a shearer harvesting wool from sheep.

Aboriginal people in Australia were not considered citizens of their country, even though they had occupied the continent of Australia thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. When Japan entered World War II, the Australian Government was forced to relax its military policy which prevented Aboriginal people from entering the Australian Military. At an early age, Leonard set his sights on flying. He decided to join the Air Force. On August 24, 1942, at eighteen years of age, Leonard volunteered for the Air Force (RAAF). He began training as an Aircraft Mechanic. Still consumed with the idea of becoming a pilot, he applied for Flying Service and began flight training at Somers, Victoria in December, 1943.

Leonard began his basic flight instructions at No. 1 Elementary Flying Training School in Narrandera, New South Wales, where he flew the De Havilland Tiger Moths and completed his initial training on CAC Wirraways. The Wirraway was a training and general purpose military airplane manufactured in Australia by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC) between 1939 and 1946. It was an Australian development of the North American NA-16 training aircraft. After receiving his wings as a Sergeant Pilot, he was posted to No. 5 Service Flying Training School, Uranquinty.

Later Leonard was posted to No. 2 Operational Unit at Mildura, Victoria where he converted to the P-40 Kitty Hawk Fighter. The Curtiss P-40 fighter was a single-engine, single-seat, all metal fighter and ground attack Aircraft that made its initial flight in 1938. The P-40 was not equipped with turbo superchargers and, as a consequence, they were inferior to German Fighter Aircraft such as the Messerschmitt BF 109 and the Focke-Wulf 190 in high altitude combat. It was primarily used in theaters where high altitude combat was not critical. However, it was used effectively as a ground attack fighter for the entire length of its service.

On November 14, 1943, Leonard was posted to number 78 Squadron, a fighter unit off the coast of Dutch New Guinea on Noemfoor Island. When he arrived, Leonard was assigned a P-40 Kitty Hawk, which had been named by a previous pilot, "Black Magic." It is believed that Denny Baker, the previous pilot of "Black Magic," may have named the aircraft before Len Waters flew it. According to Gordon Clark's article written in flight path, "Will the real Black Magic Stand Up," the name may have been given to the airplane in honor of the indigenous and Island people



who supported the Australian War effort by joining the Military during wartime to contain Japanese aggression in the Pacific, and in particular, on the continent of Australia.

In a letter received from W. L. Burns, EX 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron 1943-45, Clark stated that Leonard Waters flew "Black Magic" on many occasions. He wrote,

"Warrant Officer Leonard Waters RAAF, Australia's first Aboriginal Fighter Pilot 1942-45, worked as a Shearer (sheep) before joining the RAAF in 1942 as a Mechanic.

He later remustered to become a pilot and his first posting as a fighter pilot was to the 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron at Noemfoor Island, Dutch New Guinea in 1944. He flew Kitty Hawk A29-575, "Black Magic," being the name of the aircraft inherited from the previous pilot. Len flew many operational sortie during the war in HU-L, A29-575, before returning to Australia in 1945. Unfortunately, "Black Magic," never came home, the aircraft was destroyed by burning at Tarakan Island."

The primary role of the 78<sup>th</sup> was performing ground attacks, bombing, and strafing enemy positions due to the decline of Japanese military strength in the area.

The P-40 that Leonard Waters flew had an Allison V-1710 engine that the Curtis Industry was able to produce in large numbers. It had been battle tested in China with General Clair Chennault's United States of America volunteers and used extensively in China. Chennault had been a strong advocate of "Pursuit" (Fighter Aircraft). His Fighter group of American volunteers in China was called the "Flying Tigers" and flew their P-40B's and P-40's with much success against Japanese aircraft.

A total of 2,320 P-40E's were produced by Curtis production lines, mainly in 1942. Two-thirds of this model were designated Kitty Hawks MK 1A and were sent to the RAF (England), RCAF (Canada), RAAF (Australia), and the RNZAF (New Zealand).

In January 1945, Leonard was promoted to Flight Sergeant and, by the end of the war, he had been promoted to Warrant Officer. After the War was over, he returned to Australia and attempted to start a regional airline. He was unable to secure the necessary finances or Governmental agreements to operate. The Australian government refused to issue him a pilot's license after he left the RAAF.

After leaving the military, Leonard never again flew professionally. Dismayed because of his inability to follow his dream, he commented about his life after he left the military and hung up his uniform. It has been reported that he said, "He had simply returned to being a Black fellow."



Not long after his discharge, Len met Gladys at a birthday party and within 12 days, they were married. They moved to Cunnamulla in Western Queensland, and raised a family of five children – four daughters and one son.

Leonard Waters passed away on August 24, 1993, in Cunnamulla, Western Queensland. He was honored with a detachment of RAAF personnel and ex-members of the 78<sup>th</sup> Fight Squadron, attending his funeral and burial in the Town of St George, Queensland. His personal medals and decorations are on display at the War Museum in the Capitol City of Canberra. A park and street in Australia was named in his honor.

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### **P-40 Statistics**

- Maximum Speed – 362 MPH @ 15,000 feet
- Maximum Range – 850 miles @ 270 MPH (with drop tanks)
- Armament – Six 50 wing-mounted machine guns
- Empty Weight – 6,900 lbs.
- Loaded Weight – 8,400 lbs.
- Wing Span – 37' 4"
- Length – 31'
- Height – 12' 4"
- Wing Area – 236 sq. ft.
- Production (1940-1945) – 13,739 total
- Engine – Allison V-1710 rated at 1,00 HP