

BOOK REVIEW:

The missing man: from the outback to Tarakan, the powerful story of Len Waters, Australia's first Aboriginal fighter pilot

by Peter Rees

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The motto of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), *Per Ardua Ad Astra – Through Struggle to the Stars*, could not be more apt for Len Waters, an aboriginal whose parents left the Toomelah Aboriginal reserve to move beyond the reach of authorities who could forcibly remove their children.

Len Waters was the only Aboriginal to qualify in the RAAF as a fighter pilot during World War II. He flew 157 hours with No. 78 Squadron, flying from Noemfoor, Morotai, Balikpapan, and Tarakan. One hundred and four sorties were on operations, including 41 strikes and attacks. He finished the war as a warrant officer, despite the limited opportunities for Aboriginals to enlist in Australia's armed forces.

Waters left school at 13 and gave up an opportunity to study at Brisbane Church of England Grammar school to help support his family. This eventually led to a sheep-shearing occupation. At the time, the top level of education normally available to Aboriginals was Grade 5, the Aboriginal Protection Board believing that Aboriginals were best suited to manual work.

Enlisting in the RAAF, Waters qualified as an engine fitter, reflecting his natural mechanical aptitude. A Military Board memorandum had been issued stating that "enlisting people of non-European origin was neither necessary nor desirable". This directive was followed by the Army and Navy, but not by the Air Force, which was struggling to meet the demand for candidates to enter the Empire Air Training Scheme – a stroke of luck for Waters.

Having survived the rigorous Air Force flying training, Waters was posted to No. 78 Squadron to fly Kittyhawks in the Pacific theatre, while the majority of graduate pilots were streamed for Bomber Command and the European campaign.

He served with distinction and was a much-respected member of the squadron at a time when the war was bypassing the islands to our north, but casualties continued to mount at an alarming rate while attacking entrenched Japanese forces, resulting in the "Morotai Mutiny". Waters did not take part in this protest.

Waters was a handy boxer, stepping into the ring for 15 fights during his posting to the islands, winning the Australian and American Services middleweight title and the earning the respect and admiration of his comrades, both in the air and on the ground.

Waters commented that he never experienced racial discrimination during his time in the Air Force, but instead had a strong sense of belonging to a team with an intense

camaraderie.

Demobilised at the end of the war, Waters returned to a community that still held strong racial discriminatory attitudes and a government that still refused to remove barriers against non-Europeans.

Waters applied for a civil pilot's licence, and while not refused, the Department of Civil Aviation never acknowledged his applications. Thus, his ambition of establishing a regional airline was shattered and after several other knockbacks, Waters was forced to return to "the life of a Blackfella".

Having experienced "both sides of the fence" as Waters put it, he suffered discrimination from both. Having attained so much at such high levels of achievement in the Air Force and in the eyes of his community, like Icarus, he had much further to fall. He was very much "the missing man".

Thwarted ambitions, shunned by communities from both sides of the fence, shearers' lifestyle led to a life of disappointment and eventually alcoholism – a tragedy for such an accomplished and devoted family man. Nevertheless, he and his wife Gladys, raised a large and well-educated family, members of whom attained positions of respectability within the community.

The Missing Man addresses the success of Waters' steadfast ambition; his perseverance in the face of adversity; fortitude; and the dare to dream. The author has researched the life of Len Waters comprehensively. He confronts the racial prejudice that dogged Waters all of his life, except while in the Air Force – and has not been afraid to tell it as it was, putting the issue into context for the period. The story is told with compassion and understanding and captures the very spirit of Len Waters' life.

The author, Peter Rees, has been a journalist for 40 years as federal political correspondent for the *Melbourne Sun*, the *West Australian* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. He is the author of *The Boy from Boree Creek: The Tim Fischer Story* (2001); *Tim Fischer's Outback Heroes* (2002); *Killing Juanita* (2004), which was a winner of the 2004 Ned Kelly Award for Australian crime writing; *Desert Boys* (2011); and *Lancaster Men* (2013). He lives in Canberra.

The Missing Man has righted some of the wrongs endured by Len Waters and reminds us of many things that we need to hear. It is an easy-to-read book and absorbs the reader into the life of Len Waters, fighter pilot, family man, shearer, and Kamilaroi man. I recommend it to all Australians.

Bob Treloar