

## SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

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### LAC GEORGE TONGERIE AM

General Hand, World War 2

*From Stolen Generation to serving his country overseas  
and then being a leader in his community back in South Australia*

Approximately 3000 Aboriginals and 850 Torres Strait Islanders served in Australia's armed forces during World War II. 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. However, unfortunately there is little knowledge on the Indigenous South Australians who served in the Air Force. Recent research has now identified over 20 Indigenous South Australians who served in the Air Force during World War 2 in various roles such as mechanics, general hands, nursing and cooks. LAC George Tongerie is one of the few on which we have some knowledge.

George Tongerie was born on 28 February, 1925, near Quorn. After his mother died during childbirth, he was taken from his family and placed at Oodnadatta Children's Home becoming one of the Stolen Generation. The Oodnadatta Children's Home moved to Quorn in 1927 and was renamed the Colebrook Home. One of the first aboriginal children in the Oodnadatta Home, he was one of twelve aboriginal children who moved to the Colebrook Home. Managed by Matron Ruby Hyde and Sister Delia Rutter, Colebrook Home was one of the noted South Australian aboriginal homes between the wars running up to the early 1970s.



*LAC George Tongerie as a young airman.*

Tongerie enlisted in the RAAF on 29 June 1943 at the tender age of only 18 at No 5 Recruit Centre, Adelaide. On his enlistment papers, he identified his guardian as a Miss M Wiley of 57 Pulsford Road, Prospect, and his trade as a Tanner's Assistant employed by a W Forster of Hindmarsh. On his personal RAAF Record of Service his next of kin was identified as his foster parent, Ruby Hyde, at Colebrook Home, Quorn. There are other references to him working as a ringer on a farm at Wilmington prior to his employment as a Tanner's Assistant. His enlistment was reported in the local Adelaide newspaper, The Mail, on Saturday 10 July 1943 with the title "Two South Australian Aborigines for Air Force" which suggested Tongerie was the second South Australian aboriginal to join the RAAF in World War 2.

Enlisted as a General Hand with the rank of Aircraftsman, Tongerie was initially posted to Laverton. Serving in various positions before being posted to No. 8 Stores Depot in October 1943 just after it had formed up at

Townsville where Tongerie's rural upbringing would have been handy given such units invariably had their own vegetable gardens to augment rations.

In April 1944 he was posted to No 12 Squadron based at Merauke, Dutch New Guinea. Operating Vengeance dive bomber aircraft the squadron was intended to be involved in interdiction and close air support but was largely delegated to support missions such as escort, anti-submarine and army support missions. In July 1944 the squadron was withdrawn to Australia and Tongerie was posted to the Merauke based No. 44 Operational Base Unit which provided the base support functions for the airbase. George also worked with No. 86 Squadron, a Kittyhawk unit at Merauke, he would later march with for ANZAC Day marches in Adelaide. While Merauke was very operationally focused in 1943 and early 1944, by late 1944 the base was increasingly used as an operational support base as the advance on Japanese forces moved towards the Dutch East Indies. On 29 December 1944 he was reclassified to Leading Aircraftsman. He remembers being the only aboriginal with the RAAF at Merauke and was looked at unusually by the New Guinea natives.

Tongerie returned to Australia from his operational service on 27 July 1945 having served about 16 months on operational service overseas. He served out his time in the Air Force at various support units in southern Australia with his last unit being No. 5 Maintenance Group Headquarters based in Sydney before discharging on 14 February 1946 at the rank of LAC.



*86 Squadron Kittyhawks at Merauke in April 1944.  
Tongerie would later lead the 86SQN contingent in Adelaide ANZAC Day marches. (AWM)*

Returning to South Australia after the war, George Tongerie encountered the same indigenous racial issues he knew before the war. Ironically, having served for his country, a group of 'white fella's' signed a petition to have George and his wife removed from their street in northern Adelaide where he had been given a war service home. The petition was not successful and George became a leader in South Australia's indigenous community. During the 1960s he and his wife became active members of the Aborigines Progress Association (APA) in South Australia, which became a hub for Aboriginal activists advocating indigenous rights and education.

In 1980, he returned to his childhood community as the Community Development Officer with his wife Aunty Maude in South Australia's north. He managed the Oodnadatta General Store and was also elected Chairman of Directors of the Oodnadatta Aboriginal Community Enterprises for the period 1987-2002.

He held a number of positions throughout his extensive career. He was one of the first Aboriginal Justices of the Peace, was a member of the South Australian Parole Board, held the position of Aboriginal Ombudsman and was involved with the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. As a proud veteran, he was Vice President of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans Association and marched regularly on ANZAC Day. In 1985, he was awarded the South Australian Aboriginal of the Year Award. In 1988, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia along with his wife, Maude Tongerie, for services to the aboriginal community.

Passing away on 21 August 2013, George Tongerie emerged from being one of the Stolen Generation to serving for his country overseas and becoming a leading advocate for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as equals in South Australia.

During NAIDOC Week in 2020, RAAF Edinburgh installed a display in honour of LAC George Tongerie at the Airman's Mess to tell the story of Indigenous airmen who have served and to inspire the next generation of indigenous airmen, soldiers and sailors that will serve at RAAF Edinburgh. Mr Shane Tongerie, the grandson of LAC George Tongerie, unveiled the display with AIRCDRE Brendan Rogers, Senior ADF Officer Edinburgh Defence Precinct. Today, George Tongerie's influence and impact as an Indigenous veteran is inspiring not only the next generation of young indigenous serving members but also enhancing the understanding of our non-indigenous serving members of the proud contribution our First Nation's people have and continue to make in the service to our nation.



***AIRCDRE Brendan Rogers and Shane Tongerie, grandson of George Tongerie, unveil the LAC George Tongerie display at the RAAF Edinburgh Airman's Mess in 2020.(AFA-SA)***