

IN CELEBRATION OF OUR MILITARY GREATS: Mural: Wilifred Walter Reeves

Mural Opening 10:00 am, 25th February, at the Military Museum, Wharf Street

Wilifred Walter Reeves was born in Maryborough in 1921. Although he served his country with distinction fighting for our freedom, he didn't enjoy those same freedoms in his own country. He endured the harsh racial inequality of the day, where Aboriginal people were not recognised as citizens, who could not vote.

Wilfie was one of seven children and the second son of Fred Wondunna and Ethel Marianne Reeves, (Nee Gribble). Even this marriage was a matter of contention as it was the one of the first occasions where a white woman, the daughter of an English missionary, married a full blood Aboriginal man.

Fraser Coast featured prominently in Wilifred's infant years, living on K'gari (Fraser Island) and attending North White Cliffs and later Urangan State School, til the age of 13 when he left to go to work.

He enlisted in the Army in 1942 and served in on the Kokoda Track, in New Guinea and was subsequently given a medical discharge when it was discovered that he suffered from epilepsy.

Uncle Wilfie was a practitioner of his Butchulla cultural knowledge and hunted, trapped and fished within the boundaries of Butchulla country, passing on his knowledge to his nieces, nephews and others.

Nephew Glen Miller has fond memories of Wilifred "I remember going to Nana and Uncle Wilfy's place and there always being some sort of bush tucker cooking on the top of the old wood stove" he said "but I also remember the sadder times, standing on the footpath in front of the Dayman Store, Urangan and watching my father go into the Urangan Hotel for a drink and Uncle Wilfy standing on the footpath outside, not allowed to go into the hotel because he was Aboriginal, despite the fact that both of them had served in the army, in New Guinea."

During the 1960's, he became a member of the Maryborough Writer's Group and had stories and poems included in their publication, the Moonaboola Quill.

This interest led to the creation and publication in 1964, of The Legends of Moonie Jarl, which was illustrated by his younger sister, Olga Miller.

This book would become an important piece of Australian literary history, being the very first book of Aboriginal stories, authored and illustrated by Aboriginal people. This historical fact being revealed by research conducted by Latrobe University.

Legends of Moonie Jarl was republished on its 50th Anniversary in 2014, by the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and continues to pass on Wilifred Reeves's stories to a new generation of readers.

"Sadly, Uncle Wilfie passed away in 1968, just one year after being recognised as a citizen of the nation he was happy to fight for, but unfortunately he never got to enjoy the recognition he deserved" Glen said.

"The remarkable thing about him was that with his military service, his involvement in the Maryborough Writers Group and the authoring of Legends of Moonie Jarl, these things were all done before he and all Aboriginal people were eligible to take their place as Australian citizens"

The creation of this mural is a tribute to the quiet contribution of one Aboriginal man who made his nation, his town, his tribe and his family proud