

Aviator proud to share culture at base



PAMELA RONTZIOKOS

Sitting in the centre of the first yarning circle at Darwin's Royal Australian Air Force base is a large, dried-up tree surrounded by six stumps – a vision Wilhelm Lauenstein brought to life.

“A tree fell down in the first year that I was here, we had a cyclone come through. I asked them just to leave it because I knew that I was going to have a cultural space built,” the Wuthathi man from Shelburne Bay, Cape York, told *The Australian*.

Without any funding, the Indigenous Liaison Officer, who is also a leading aircraftman, went “back on the tools” to build the table and seats for the Gudlugwa Cultural Space.

Leading Aircraftman Lauenstein is an ILO for 13 Squadron RAAF Base Darwin – a role which aims to foster ties between the Australian Defence Force and Indigenous communities, while supporting Indigenous aviators.

“That was a milestone in its own (right),” he said, explaining that it built on the connection between the Defence base – which sits on Larrakia land – and the Larrakia community in the Northern Territory.

This initiative led by Leading Aircraftman Lauenstein earned him a nomination for national RAAF Aviator of the Year – which he was awarded in March.

“From where I come from and my family, we don't have too many people, too many of us that are in Defence,” he said.

The award is highly recognised within the ADF as it honours individuals who have made a significant contribution to their community and the air force.

“Just seeing how proud they are of me, and then especially our Indigenous community within the bases and all over the RAAF – and even in the army and navy –



CHLOE GRACE

RAAF Aviator of the Year Wilhelm Lauenstein

they're all very proud. It's just nice to see how much everyone supports each other ...,” Leading Aircraftman Lauenstein said.

He said he “never thought” he would be a recipient of the award.

“In my role I just work hard and I just try to do the right thing by everyone,” he said.

Leading Aircraftman Lauenstein said he was shaped by the support of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which had provided him a boarding school scholarship at Ipswich Grammar School in Queensland after he and his parents had left his home of 10 years in the Torres Strait in pursuit of his education.

“I'm very grateful for that chapter of my life,” he said of his schooling. “Without it, I don't know, to be honest, where I would be.”

Leading Aircraftman Lauenstein began his journey with the ADF by chance. He was initially invited to speak to a young cohort about his marine electrician trade, but after an impromptu exam and a few meetings, was offered a role in the ADF, and with three weeks' notice at the height of the pandemic in 2020, he was off to training in Wagga Wagga, NSW. He then worked as an electrician at RAAF Base Richmond in NSW, and RAAF Base Tindal in the Territory, before taking on the ILO position in Darwin.

Leading Aircraftman Lauenstein is set to deliver the Welcome to Country at The Australian's Defending Australia conference on Tuesday.