

**THE BRITISH  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF PORTUGAL**

THIRTIETH ANNUAL REPORT  
AND REVIEW 2003

Quinta Nova  
2776-601 Carcavelos

## **LESLIE HOWARD**

I vaguely remembered his having come out as father met him for dinner on one or two occasions. The last having been on the day of his departure, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1943.

My father was director of Babcock and Wilcox in Portugal and at that time a London director had come out to visit some important clients. He stayed at the Hotel Palácio in Lisbon. Leslie Howard was also staying there so the two met up and had meals together and so did father. Having mentioned at home that he had met Leslie Howard and would be dining with him once again I asked father to get his autograph.

A Mr Shervington was going on the same flight. He was short and thickset so in figure perhaps resembled Churchill. All I know was that when the plane was shot down the story got around that the Germans believed Churchill was on it. Churchill at the time had been in North Africa.

**Joan Croft de Moura**

## EXTRACT FROM A LETTER FROM PROFESSOR HAROLD V. LIVERMORE

Dated 8<sup>th</sup> March 2003

A letter was received from Estel Eforan early in January (extract below) requesting any information we could possibly give on Leslie's Howard's visit to Portugal.

This extract from Estel Eforan's letter containing the advertisement published in the British Council's magazine "New Horizons".

"I would be very grateful indeed to be able to speak to anyone who remembers any details of the visit of Mr Leslie Howard to Madrid and Lisbon in June 1943. The mystery of Mr Howard's death is a story which crops up now and again, but there is very little in the way of validated and witness evidence. Press speculation has, in its time been wild, and Mr Colvin's book "Flight 777" seems particularly extravagant. Mr Howard's son, Ronald, also investigated. Mr Walter Starkie, the British Council representative of the time, died in 1976, but would any successor, or any person who has heard details of that time, especially of the lady known as "Countess Miranda", or anyone who knew Mr Starkie, or Mr Neville Kearney or Miss Helen Girvin of the British Embassy, be willing to speak to me? I am attempting a short biography of Mr Howard using the evidence that can be gathered, rather than taking a sensationalist view"

\*\*\*\*\*

If any member of the Society can help with further information please contact the British Historical Society in Portugal and we will forward anything received to Estel Eforan.

In November 1942 I decided to entrust St. Julian's to the care of others and to return to England, where the Consulate seemed to think I might be of more use. My wife and I had not flown before, and took the KLM plane from the airfield at Sintra. It was generally believed that German planes did not interfere with the flights since both sides obtained information from or through Lisbon. Ann was in a state of great tension when we took off and asked the steward when we would land at Oporto. She wanted to get off there. The answer was that the plane no longer touched down there, as it was safer to go straight out to sea. We were given lunch: sandwiches on a plastic tray, soon after the windows cracked and a spray of bullets fired from below broke the glass and passed through the roof. The sky had been perfectly clear but a patch of cloud appeared on the surface of the sea and the pilot made a dive for it. We seemed to be heading for the ocean, but leveled out and the distance between the water and us seemed fixed. I held the plastic tray over the window to keep back the rush of air out. Ann at once became relaxed. The German fighter did not pursue us and we landed somewhere in Devon. As we got out, we could see that the nose and side of the plane were peppered with bullet holes. It was a miracle that nobody was hit, as there were children playing in the aisle and the plane was pretty full. We were taken into Bristol for the night and telephoned home from the hotel. Ann decided not to trust airplanes again and for many years we crossed the Atlantic by the *Queen Mary* or *Queen Elizabeth* and took the transcontinental train to Vancouver. I decided that planes were here to stay and that I had better get used to them, but it took Ann until the seamen's strike in 1968, which made the crossing by ship too irregular, that Ann became willing to fly again. The popular version was that on that occasion the Germans hoped to catch

Churchill, who was flying to or from somewhere. The Dutch went on to do it again and again. I think there was no fatality until June 1<sup>st</sup> 1943.

How apposite that Wheeler should be giving his talk on St. Julian's Sports Day. I have photographs of the children running and jumping on Sports Day in 1942, when parents had to get passes from the Cable Station to get in and we were supplied with a couple of mounted men from the GNR to look after us.

With all best wishes,  
**Harold Livermore.**

## LAST OF THE GREAT AIR MYSTERIES OF THE WAR

by Douglas Wheeler

On the afternoon of Tuesday, June 1, 1943, the Luftwaffe shot down an unarmed, scheduled civil airliner en route to Britain from Portugal. Aboard Flight 777A, a KLM/British Overseas Air Corps operation, was the celebrated actor, director, producer Leslie Howard and 13 other passengers. The incident is the last remaining great air mystery of World War II. Nothing was found of the plane or of its passengers and Dutch crew, as planes and ships searched a section of the Bay of Biscay off Spain.

My own personal search for the truth about what happened to one of Britain's film greats of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began when I visited England in the fall of 1980 and phoned Leslie Howard's actor son, Ronald Howard, who lived in a small place near Bridport. Speaking to me in my friend's house near Slough, Berkshire, Howard asked me why I was interested in the story of his father's still mysterious death so many years before. I was writing a book on Portugal, the country from which his father was returning during World War II and the story of his father's disappearance intrigued me.

An actor on stage, screen and TV, Ronald Howard added that he had retired to tend an art gallery near a place called Morcombelake, that I should visit him and noted that he had a book manuscript on the history of Leslie Howard's wartime film career and an inquest into his father's untimely passing.

Ronald Howard later informed me that he had a publisher for his book Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father: A Portrait of Leslie Howard* (London: Wm. Kimber, 1981); since I had suggested he approach Kimber, I felt I had played a small role in the evolving quest.

When I got a copy of Howard's fascinating book, I devoured it and was intrigued to learn that Ronald Howard's theory of why the German air force had shot down his father's plane was that the interception of the airliner by war planes was no accident. Though Howard could find no "smoking gun" in terms of Luftwaffe orders or orders from Nazi propaganda minister Goebbels, an official who despised Leslie Howard as an anti-Nazi film star and war propagandist, Ronald Howard had solid evidence that agents of the Third Reich had the means, motives and opportunity to target Leslie Howard and his plane after it left Lisbon's Portela airport, around 9.35am, Tuesday, June 1, 1943.

Although I never did actually visit Ronald Howard in person, and take up his kind invitation, I continued to correspond with him and to phone him now and then until about 1993. Then there was a silence and a letter or two of mine received no response. Last summer, following my retirement as a Professor of Portuguese History at my university, I took up the search for Leslie Howard and the truth about his strange fate once again.

Through library research I learned that Ronald Howard had died in December 1996 and soon I began a correspondence with his widow Jean Howard, who continues to reside near Bridport. Her letters have assisted my continuing search as I have begun to review the many theories about why Flight 777A was shot from the sky in the middle of the war, just following the surrender of German armies in North Africa.

Jean Howard told me that her late husband devoted much time and effort after his book was published in order to ask British authorities about an ULTRA connection to the incident - silence was their response. ULTRA was the name for the operations in which British Intelligence was secretly intercepting and reading (and acting on) many German radio messages being dispatched by the German enciphering machine, the Enigma. When I discovered that neither the airlines nor the British Government made a thorough investigation of the incident or, if they did, never made it public, I became more suspicious.

British Airways kept the June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943 file secret until 1984 and when I was able to study it, in 1989, the slim dossier revealed little. As students of World War II intelligence history know, the ULTRA secret itself remained a secret until an insider's book was published in 1974. In considering the British Airways file, I found it odd that authorities persisted in referring to the incident as an "accident".

On the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incident, it is worth reviewing some of the theories and rumours and pointing out that in my opinion there is a reasonable possibility that the many rumours and theories nicely suited an official policy of silence, especially since one theory was so widely accepted even Mr Churchill repeated a version of it in Volume IV of his published memoirs - that it provided a convenient cover story for decades.

This premier theory is "the Winston Churchill double or look-alike theory" which surfaced in Lisbon and London within hours of the official news announced by BBC on June 2<sup>nd</sup> that Leslie Howard's plane was missing and presumed lost. The gist of this was that the Germans in Lisbon as well as possibly in Berlin believed that Prime Minister Churchill, who had flown to North Africa on a visit just days before June 1<sup>st</sup>, was in fact, on board Leslie Howard's plane and was returning to England through Lisbon. Portugal was a neutral country where secret agents of all sides brushed shoulders. Since 1940, despite war in other regions, Portugal has allowed the flights in and out of Lisbon of regularly scheduled civil airliners of several of the belligerents and neutrals: US, UK, Holland, Germany and Switzerland.

In actual fact, Churchill had flown to North Africa on May 28<sup>th</sup> to meet with President Roosevelt and he was set to return to England in early June. He returned on June 5<sup>th</sup>, when he flew an armed military plane with fighter escort, via Gibraltar, a British possession in Spain.

Despite the fact that this theory was widely accepted, there was more than one "Churchill" theory and the circumstances surrounding

this story were often obscured by rumour, speculation or by many sources who simply got the dates that Churchill actually flew wrong.

My research suggests that the story that the man resembling Churchill boarded the plane with Leslie Howard that morning was true but its true significance for history remains arguable. Leslie Howard's companion on the mission was Alfred Chenhalls, Howard's accountant and manager, a man who was bald, smoked a cigar and dressed like Churchill. Chenhalls enjoyed playing up the resemblance, it was said, but he was not an official double for Churchill and was a good bit younger, taller and slimmer than the Prime Minister.

An inexperienced, myopic or even dumb spy at Lisbon airport could well have mistaken Chenhalls for Churchill, could have been unaware of Chenhalls' occupation, and ignorant of the established custom that the British Prime Minister with the resources he commanded and with security concerns never would have flown in a civilian, scheduled airliner, without an armed escort and through spy-infested Lisbon.

Anyway, why were Howard and Chenhalls in Portugal to begin with? Following a personal request from Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, Howard reluctantly flew to Spain and Portugal, on behalf of the Ministry of Information, to promote British films in Iberia.

"The Churchill theory" nevertheless, is more complex than this because of two more facts. Weeks before June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943 rumours began to circulate in Lisbon that Churchill would pass through that city and such rumours reached the spy-heavy German Legation in Lisbon. Furthermore the ill-fated Chenhalls was not the only passenger aboard who bore a resemblance to the Prime Minister. Some witnesses indicated T. Michael Shervington as another "lookalike".

A British businessman long resident in Portugal, Shervington was not only head of Shell Oil in Portugal but had acted as a secret agent for MI6 and was known to German intelligence in Lisbon for his role

in a secret SOE (Special Operations Executive) operation in Portugal which went wrong the previous year, when Portugal's political secret police broke up a spy ring.

Adding Shervington to the target list, however, does not exhaust the sources of other likely German motives behind the June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943 tragedy, possibly unique in the annals of civil aviation in World War II. At least three other passengers beside Howard, Chenhalls (for his looks) and Shervington had a "record" with the Nazi authorities, which would have attracted attention and possible orders to kill. The three included Ivan Sharp, top British wolfram (tungsten ore, a valuable war industry raw material) warfare executive. Wilfrid Israel, an important German-born but British-based Jewish refugee rescuer and refugee executive. While Leslie Howard had played two rescuers in two famous films, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1935) and *Pimpernel Smith* (1941), Israel was actually a real life rescuer who had visited concentration camps.

The third passenger cited above was an "Inspector General" of British diplomatic establishments abroad – a rapid perusal of the Flight 777A passenger list and unfamiliarity with the meaning of the term in English Inspector General could have led to the mistaken belief by the Germans that this person was a high-ranking military officer, a General.

--ooOoo--

**Douglas Wheeler is Professor of History Emeritus, University of  
New Hampshire, USA**