

LAST OF THE GREAT AIR MYSTERIES OF THE WAR

From the Echo, first published Friday 13th Jun 2003.

ON 1 June 1943, Tuesday afternoon, the Luftwaffe shot down an unarmed, scheduled civil airliner en route to Britain from Portugal. Abroad Flight 777A, a KLM/British Overseas Air Corp operation, was the celebrated actor-director-producer Leslie Howard (1893-1943) 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 all of the truth about what happened to one of Britain's film greats of the first half of the 20th century began when I visited England in the fall of 1980 and phone 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 this father's still mysterious death so many years before. I was writing a book on Portugal, the country his father was returning from 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 gotten 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.

When 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; official silence was their response.

When I discovered that neither the airlines nor the British Government made a thorough investigation or, if they did, never made it public, I became more suspicious. British Airways kept the June 1, 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 60th 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 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, 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 to meet with President Roosevelt and he was set to return to England in early June. He returned on June 5, 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 as 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 him in a civilian, scheduled airliner, without an armed escort and through spy-infested Lisbon.

Any 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, 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 'look-alike'.

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 MI-6 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, 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. German military broadcasts after the plane's loss gave a garbled version of the passenger list and included 'a manufacturer of aeroplane parts' (Leslie Howard had played the role of Spitfire inventor R. J. Mitchell in the 1942 film, *The First of the Few* and a General.

Even if the Germans in the end did not necessarily credit Churchill being on the flight in question, the war-related jobs, missions, and reputations of at least five other passengers added up to a powerful motive for ordering the shooting down of Flight 777A.

A final theory is the 'accident theory', one which Ronald Howard after years of research and after taking seriously the findings of Ian Colvin's book of 1967 which mildly and subtly hinted at what was in effect the ULTRA secret connection, dismissed out of hand.

The 'accident theory', however, has lately taken on a new life thanks to recent research in the 1990s in Dutch and Luftwaffe archives and interviews with surviving Luftwaffe pilots. This theory is that Luftwaffe action against the plane over the Bay of Biscay was not ordered by higher-ups but was a chance encounter which ended in tragedy. It was, they claimed, a case of young stressed out pilots who were now losing the air war to the allies, flying out of a base near Bordeaux, France, they claimed that they chanced on the KLM/BOAC plane, at first mistakenly identified it as a military transport, shot it up and, when the wing commander ordered a ceasefire, found that it was too late - the plane was doomed to disappear in the Bay of Biscay.

The surviving Luftwaffe pilots' accounts as recorded contain several inconsistencies and revealing oddities. Their accounts of how one pilot attempted but failed to stop the others from firing on Flight 777A do not agree on all major points.

Further, their general claim that they were unaware that the scheduled civil airliners regularly flew over that western sector of the Bay of Biscay strains credulity. The KLM/BOAC scheduled daytime flights to and from Lisbon from an airport near Bristol began in 1940 and by mid-1943 had safely completed hundreds of such flights on the same route; in only three known previous cases (1940, November 1942 and April 1943) did the Luftwaffe fire at their plane, without fatal result.

These pilots' interviews also suggested that after the loss of the plane when they returned to base they were immediately informed that they had shot down a civilian plane full of VIPs.

Since flight 777a's passenger list was not made public until after June 2, when the plane's presumed loss was announced in London, unless the authorities in France and Germany had already received the relevant intelligence from their Lisbon sources, how could the briefers have known about VIPs?

Finally, in what may have been an unwitting slip of the tongue, one surviving Luftwaffe pilot claimed to his interviewer, who was in fact the surviving son of one of the last Dutch crew members, that the pilots who finally understood that the plane was not a military aircraft could have 'saved' the damaged plane simply by escorting it to a nearby German base in France. Was here a kidnap or hijack plot against Churchill as well? Stranger kidnapping plots of World War II were planned by more than one belligerent.

What is there to the theory that this incident was connected with World War II's ULTRA secret, 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?

Was it possible that in order to safeguard the return flight of Churchill from North Africa and to keep safer the ULTRA secret, on one of the top secrets of the war, British Intelligence deliberately did not warn KLM/BOAC's Flight 777A in Lisbon when Bletchley Hall authorities detected especially intense German interest on May 31, 1943 in the passenger list for the next day's flight? Did ULTRA intercept Luftwaffe orders to intercept and shoot down this aircraft?

Jean Howard's letter, which mentioned Bletchley Hall and recounted how Ronald Howard invariably ran into a brick wall, prompted me again to review my notes on the case. I rediscovered three printed sources, included a newspaper story by no less a discoverer than columnist William Safire, and an American radio broadcast, that Leslie Howard's loss was connected to the ULTRA secret, that for security reasons all the circumstances of the incidents were not discussed.

At first, knowing how the history of ULTRA and the bombing of Coventry was mythologized by popularisers, I was very sceptical regarding any connection between ULTRA and this case, but now I am convinced that much more of the true story can be found in the Public Record Office (Now the National Archives).

I never made the visit to Dorset I promised Ronald Howard. But now his personal quest for the truth about June 1, 1943 has become mine as well.

On the 60th anniversary of this loss to the film world and to that war effort of long ago, it is time to set the historical record straight.