

THE ASSASSINATION OF ASHLEY WILKES

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When we think of Ashley Wilkes, Margaret Mitchell's quintessential antebellum Southern gentleman, we instinctively visualize Leslie Howard, the gifted, exquisitely sensitive English actor who played the character so memorably in the classic 1939 motion picture *Gone With the Wind*.

Leslie Howard was the only star of the movie who did not attend the gala Atlanta premiere.

He was also the first of the movie's stars to die. The 50-year old actor perished in a strange incident in WW2--an apparent attempt to assassinate Winston Churchill in the air. On June 1, 1943, Flight 777, the BOAC DC-3 commercial airliner Howard was aboard, was shot down by the German Luftwaffe over the Bay of Biscay, the portion of the Atlantic Ocean immediately north of Spain and immediately west of France. There were 17 persons on board, 13 passengers and 4 crewmen. None survived.

The doomed airliner, named *Ibis* (after the water bird venerated by the ancient Egyptians), had departed from Lisbon that Tuesday at 9:35 a.m., local time, heading for England on a regularly scheduled daytime flight. Three hours later, at 12:54 p.m., with the *Ibis* flying over water and the Spanish peninsula 200 miles behind, the airplane's wireless operator suddenly broke radio silence and tapped out a chilling message in code: "From G-AGBB [*Ibis*'s call sign] ... I am followed by unidentified aircraft ... I am attacked by enemy aircraft ..." No more signals were received from the airliner, and no trace of its occupants or wreckage was ever found.

It is now known from captured documents that less than ten minutes after it was sighted the *Ibis* was attacked by an entire squadron of eight Junkers Ju 88's--two-engine fighters bristling with cannons and machine guns. The unarmed, unescorted, slow-moving airliner had no chance. Punctured by shells and bullets, wrenched by thunderous concussions, the *Ibis* caught fire, went out of control, and went into a steep dive until it smashed into the choppy waters of the ocean. The horrible final moments of those trapped inside the plane may be imagined.

After the airliner crashed into the bay, the attacking fighters photographed the smoking wreckage floating on the rough seas and then returned to their home base near Bordeaux in occupied France.

Ibis was one of the few commercial airliners downed in combat in WW2. It had departed from a neutral country, Portugal. Commercial airliners had been safely shuttling back and forth on routes between England and Portugal since 1941. Why then was Leslie Howard's plane ambushed?

One theory, which surfaced only days after the shootdown and is accepted by scholars, is that the Germans intended to kill Winston Churchill and mistakenly thought he was on the plane. Three days after the shootdown the New York Times reported "it was believed in London that the Nazi

raider[s] had attacked on the outside chance that Prime Minister Winston Churchill might be among the passengers."

There is plenty of evidence supporting the mistaken identity theory. In late May 1943 Churchill was preparing to return to England from a trip to North Africa and Gibraltar; the Germans were planning to destroy Churchill's plane if they could find it; and partly due to a British secret service disinformation campaign, the Nazis actually believed that Churchill might fly the commercial route from Lisbon. In 1942 Churchill had traveled from Bermuda across the ocean in a scheduled commercial airline seaplane.

Nazi spies had the Ibis under surveillance before it took off, and at the Lisbon airport they scrutinized the boarding passengers. These spies may have mistaken for Churchill a passenger named Alfred Tregear Chenhalls, who physically resembled and dressed like Churchill and smoked cigars like Churchill. Chenhalls, dubbed by historians "the man who looked like Churchill," was Leslie Howard's business manager and traveling companion.

In one of his books on WW2, *The Hinge of Fate* (1950), Churchill regarded the mistaken identity thesis as proven fact, and referred to Leslie Howard's death as one of "the inscrutable workings of fate."

Two books about Leslie Howard's death, *Flight 777* (1957), by Ian Colvin, and *In Search of My Father* (1981), by Ronald Howard, Leslie Howard's son, appear to agree that the mistaken identity view is the most likely explanation for the destruction of the airliner.

Even if they had definitely known that Churchill was not aboard, the Germans might still have blasted the Ibis out of sky. The England-Portugal air route had a reputation as a spy-line for both Allied and Axis agents, and the passenger list for Tuesday, June 1, 1943 reveals the Ibis was a nest of Allied spies the Nazis would have been eager to eliminate en masse.

Every one of the eight men passengers had proven or likely connections with British or Allied intelligence. There was a mining engineer--almost certainly an industrial spy for the British secret service--specializing in locating tungsten, a vital war metal; a Jewish intelligence operative, working for the British, who heroically rescued Jews from the clutches of Nazi Germany; a continental director of an engineering firm, sponsored by the British Department of Overseas Trade; an inspector-general in the British consular corps on a "routine inspection tour;" a manager of Portugal Shell Co., sponsored by the British Ministry of Fuel and Power; and the Washington correspondent of Reuters news agency.

Leslie Howard himself is known to have had connections with British intelligence services, and his month-long lecture tour of Spain and Portugal, from which he was returning on the fatal airplane, may have been a cover for spying activities. His friend Chenhalls also probably had intelligence connections.

It was Chenhalls and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden who had induced Leslie Howard, against his better judgment, to undertake the tour of Spain and Portugal, a trip which the actor deemed arduous, dangerous, and of minuscule importance to the war effort.

One of the women passengers worked in a consulate, and may therefore have been in intelligence work, using diplomatic cover; and another of the women passengers, the wife of the Reuters correspondent, might also have been involved in spying. But not all the females on the *Ibis* could have been spies. Two were young sisters: Petra Hutcheon, 11 years old, and Carola Hutcheon, 2, traveling with their mother.

Had Leslie Howard, to the knowledge of the Germans, been the sole passenger on board, the plane might still have been attacked. Leslie Howard was a towering figure in the British government's anti-Nazi propaganda policy, and his anti-German movies and radio broadcasts had enraged Joseph Goebbels, the fiendish Nazi propaganda minister and Howard's bitterest enemy. Goebbels had surprising influence in Nazi wartime affairs, and it would not be surprising to discover that he had arranged for German military forces to kill Leslie Howard. There is no doubt that before they attacked the airliner the Germans knew Leslie Howard was on board.

When the Ultra secret was disclosed long after WW2 ended, the public learned that the Allies had broken the Nazi codes for most of the war. Subsequently it was also revealed that the British had known in advance of possible German plans to intercept the airliner. To avoid compromising the Ultra secret, the British did not pass on their knowledge to the airline.

Amazingly, three persons who had boarded and been seated on the *Ibis* in Lisbon that fateful Tuesday were taken off the plane before it took off, and thereby narrowly escaped certain death. One was a Catholic priest who benefitted from a mysterious anonymous telephone call summoning him back to Lisbon. The other two were the young son of a British diplomatic official and the boy's nanny; the two were bumped to make room for Leslie Howard and Alfred Chenhalls.

Leslie Howard was a great motion picture actor with a wistful face and a haunting, silvery voice; he was also a great stage actor, an author of belle-lettres, a radio broadcaster, and a movie director and producer. As an actor he specialized in playing idealists (such as Ashley Wilkes) and heroic men of action (such as the Scarlet Pimpernel). As a man he possessed ineffable sweetness of character and was filled with the noble spirit of those firmly attached to love and to just causes. Writing of Howard in 1934, the *New York Herald Tribune* observed: "There is a splendid air of rightness about everything he does."

Sensing the nearness of war, Leslie Howard left Hollywood and returned to his native England a few days before WW2 began. Once war commenced, he strove mightily to help his country. He made uplifting patriotic movies; in BBC radio broadcasts he castigated Nazism and defended democracy and human rights; and at the request of the British government, he even reluctantly undertook a hazardous journey which led to his premature and violent death.

Wallis Budge, late Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities for the British Museum, wrote in his commentary on *The Book of the Dead* that "early Egyptians believed that the souls of the just passed from earth to heaven on the wings of the ibis..." The assassination of Leslie Howard eerily confirms the wisdom of ancient Egyptian mythology.

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APPENDIX

List of the persons aboard Flight 777, the BOAC DC-3 airliner, call sign G-AGBB, en route from Lisbon, Portugal to England, and shot down over the Bay of Biscay on Tuesday, June 1, 1943.

Crew

Quirinus Tepas (pilot)
D. de Koning (second officer)
Cornelis van Brugge (radio operator)
Engbertus Rosevink (flight engineer)

Passengers

Leslie Howard
Alfred Tregear Chenhalls
Francis German Cowlick (elderly engineer traveling under the auspices of the British Department of Overseas Trade)
Wilfrid Jacob Berthold Israel (British Secret Service agent)
Gordon Thompson Maclean (British Foreign Office)
Ivan James Sharp (mining engineer; specialist in tungsten)
Tyrell Milmay Shervington (Lisbon manager of Shell-Mex Corporation)
Kenneth Stonehouse (Washington correspondent for Reuters)
Evelyn Stonehouse (wife of above)
Cecilia Amelia Falla Paton (on way to secretarial job at a consulate in England)
Rotha Violet Lettie Hutcheon (mother of Carola and Petra)
Petra Hutcheon (11 years old)
Carola Hutcheon (2 years old)

SOURCE OF APPENDIX: Ian Colvin, *Flight 777*, at 23-25 (1957); Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father* 210-211 (1981) (which gives the first name of the younger Hutcheon sister as Caroline); Wikipedia entry, "BOAC Flight 777."