

Leslie Howard, Actor and Patriot – David Gray



On June 3rd 1943, the death of Leslie Howard *left*, was reported in the press. Howard, the film actor and director was among 17 people missing when a passenger plane was lost on the way from Lisbon, Portugal to Whitchurch, England. The plane took off at 9.30 on Tuesday morning, 1st June, and at 11 o'clock it signalled "Enemy aircraft attacking us." That was the last heard of it. The announcement that the plane was lost came in a statement issued by the British Overseas Airways Corporation (B.O.A.C.):

"The British Overseas Airways Corporation regrets to announce that a civil aircraft on passage between Lisbon and the United Kingdom is overdue and must be presumed lost. The last message received from the aircraft stated that it was being attacked by an enemy aircraft. The aircraft carried 13 passengers and a crew of four. Next of kin have been informed."

Two British children were on the plane. They were on the way back from the United States. The passenger list included:

- Leslie Howard.
- Mr. Kenneth Stonehouse, Reuter's Washington Correspondent, and his wife. Mr. Stonehouse was a South African, aged 35. Mrs. Stonehouse was formerly Miss Evelyn Peggy Margetts, who lived at Forest Hill.
- Mr. Alfred T. Chenhalls, 43, a chartered accountant with offices in Chancery Lane, E.C. Among the people he represented professionally were Leslie Howard and the English pianist Myra Hess.
- Mrs. Rotha Hutcheon and her two daughters, Petra, aged 11, and Carolina, aged 2.
- Tyrrell Mildmay Shervington, director of Shell-Mex & BP in Lisbon.
- Ivan James Sharp, a senior official of the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation.
- Wilfrid Israel, a prominent Anglo-German Jewish activist working to save Jews from the Holocaust.
- Gordon Thompson MacLean, an Inspector of British Consulates.

Flight 777a was full and several would-be passengers were turned away, including British Squadron Leader Wally Lashbrook. Three passengers disembarked before departure. Derek Partridge, the young son of a British diplomat, and his nanny Dora Rove were "bumped" to make room for Howard and Chenhalls, who had only confirmed their tickets at 5:00 the night before the flight and whose priority status allowed them to take precedence over other passengers. A Catholic priest also left the aircraft after boarding it, but his identity remains unknown. Anne Chichester-Constable, 7-year-old daughter of WRNS Chief Officer Gladys Octavia Snow OBE was also booked on the flight which

connected her return to England from New York. At the last minute, her guardians in Portugal decided that she was too tired and kept her in Portugal. Full passenger list *below*:

BRITISH OVERSEAS AIRWAYS CORPORATION
(and Associated Companies)

P A S S E N G E R L I S T

(EMPIRE SERVICES)

(ALL WEIGHTS IN KGS)

(Date: 1.6.43.
From LISBON
To: ENGLAND U.K.
Service No.: 2.L.57
Aircraft G - AGBB)

FROM To	NO.	NAME & TICKET	No. of Un. Reg.	Bagg. Reg. No. of Baggage	Sex	Nat ion ality	Per sonal Weight	Free Bagg. Weight	Ex- cess Bagg.	Total weight	Payme nt in cess Far
U/166	1	Mr. I. J. Sharp	1	2 1655	M	Brit.	88	20		108	"
U/1664	2	Mr. F. G. Cowling	1	3 1664	M	"	72	20	8	100	"
U/1656	3	Mr. T. M. Sherington		1 1656	M	"	118	18		136	"
U/1657	4	Mr. G. T. Maclean	1	1 1657	M	"	75	16		91	"
U/15665	5	Mr. W. J. Israel	1	2 15665	M	"	83	20	8	111	"
U/1662	6	Mr. K. Stonehouse	1	4 1662	M	"	74	40	8	122	"
U/1663	7	Mrs. E. P. Stonehouse	1	1663	F	"	68			68	"
U/1658	8	Mrs. C. A. Paton	1	2 1658	F	"	63	20	4	87	"
U/1675	9	Mr. L. Howard	1	2 1675	M	"	76	20		96	"
U/1676	10	Mr. A. T. Chenhall	1	1 1676	M	"	101	18		119	"
U/1659	11	Mrs. Hutcheon	1	4 1659	F	"	59	30	14	103	"
U/1660	12	Miss Hutcheon	-	- 1660	F	"	35			35	Cr
U/1661	12a	Miss Hutcheon	-	- 1661	F	"	-			-	Bal
List Prepared by			TOTALS	10	22		912	222	42	1176	
TOTAL WEIGHTS CREW							Names.				
as shown on							COMMANDER Capt. Tepas				
Load Sheet.							First Officer Capt. De-KONING				
-----							Radio Officer Mr. Van Brugge				
Pas. 912							Flight Engineer. Mr. Rozevink				
Bag. 264											
Crew 331											
Bag. 60							T O T A L S				
Total 1567							331	60		391	

Berlin radio said the passengers included "some British economists." According to a message from Lisbon the plane was shot down in the Bay of Biscay. Efforts were made to trace the aircraft without success. She had a Dutch crew. Weather reports, it was stated, indicated a rough sea thus reducing the chances of the passengers escaping in the plane's rubber boats. But search for the boats continued.

The Germans announced in a communiqué the day after the incident that reconnaissance planes had shot down "three enemy bombers and one transport over the Atlantic." Later Berlin, quoting Lisbon reports that the plane was missing said: "It is feared it had met with some accident. When news of this was learned in Lisbon, other planes for England did not sail."



Howard in 'Pimpernel Smith.'

The news report stated that "Mr. Leslie Howard went to Lisbon in April at the invitation of the British Council to deliver lectures in Portugal and Spain. During his visit he was awarded a gold medal for the best film shown in Portugal last year. His mission was extremely successful in both countries, as a result of it, 900 cinemas in Spain have agreed to show British documentary films. He illustrated his lectures with the film 'Pimpernel Smith,' the story of a professor who helped refugees to escape from Germany.

Mr. Howard was to have returned to England three or four days ago, but postponed his journey so as to be present at the showing in Lisbon of the film 'The First of the Few.' He was to have supervised the final stages of his new film 'The Lamp Still Burns.'

Leslie Howard, the son of a London Stockbroker was 50. He changed his name from Leslie Stainer. He served in the last war from the first day until 1917. He first appeared on the London stage in 1918. He is married and has one son in the Navy, and a daughter.

The first attack by German aircraft on a British civil plane on the Lisbon route was made in April. On that occasion the Dutch pilot successfully evaded six Heinkels. A regular service has been maintained between Lisbon and Britain throughout the war, and attacks on the planes have been very few. The plane link with Lisbon is one of the fastest out of Britain. Planes that fly regularly between Lisbon and this country are unarmed and clearly marked. They have rarely been attacked, because they carry prisoner-of-war mail and British newspapers, which Germany is always anxious to obtain."

B.O.A.C. Flight 777a was a KLM flight scheduled as a British Overseas Airways Corporation civilian airline flight from Portela Airport in Lisbon, Portugal to Whitchurch Airport near Bristol, England. On 1st June 1943, the Douglas DC-3 serving the flight was attacked by eight German Junkers Ju 88 bombers and crashed into the Bay of Biscay, killing all 17 on board.

One theory suggests that the Germans attacked the aircraft because they believed that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was on board; another suggested that it was targeted because several passengers were British spies, including Howard. During the Second World War, British and German civilian aircraft operated from the same facilities at Portela, and Allied and Axis spies watched the incoming and outgoing traffic. The Lisbon–Whitchurch route frequently carried agents and escaped POWs to Britain.



Howard *left*, with David Niven in 'The First of the Few.'

Aircraft flying the Lisbon–Whitchurch route were left unmolested at the beginning of the war, and both Allied and Axis powers respected the neutrality of Portugal. However, in 1942 the air war had begun to heat up over the Bay of Biscay, north of Spain and off the west coast of France; the Douglas DC-3 lost in this attack had survived attacks by Luftwaffe fighters in November 1942 and April 1943.

Leslie Howard Steiner (3 April 1893 – 1 June 1943) was an English actor, director, producer and writer. He wrote many stories and articles for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair* and was one of the biggest box-office draws and movie idols of the 1930s.

Active in both Britain and Hollywood, Howard played Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). He had roles in many other films, including *Berkeley Square* (1933), *Of Human Bondage*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (both 1934), *The Petrified Forest* (1936), *Pygmalion* (1938), *Intermezzo* (1939), "*Pimpernel*" *Smith* (1941), and *The First of the Few* (1942). He was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor for *Berkeley Square* and *Pygmalion*.

Howard's Second World War activities included acting and filmmaking. He helped to make anti-German propaganda and shore up support for the Allies; two years after his death, the *British Film Yearbook* described Howard's work as "one of the most valuable facets of British propaganda." He was rumoured to have been involved with British or Allied Intelligence, sparking conspiracy theories regarding his death in 1943 when the Luftwaffe shot down BOAC Flight 777a.