

SOUND COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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TITLE: HOWARD CHARLES LESTER, RAAF, MALTA
1942

INTERVIEWEE: MRS ELLA LESTER

INTERVIEWER:

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SUMMARY:

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Identification: The date is January 21st, 1989. My name is Ella M. Lester and I live in my unit at 3/41 Seafeld Avenue, Kingswood, South Australia, 5062.

I am the widow of Howard Charles Lester who died on July 1st, 1985. Howard enlisted in the RAAF in June 1940. His number was 400147. He did his elementary flying course in Tiger Moths at Narromine. He was sent to Canada in the Empire Air Training Scheme. He left Sydney on the Awa Tia in October 1940. He acquired his Wings at Camp Borden. He crossed the Atlantic - destination U.K. - in a banana ship called Chrysalis, which was in convoy. This ship had the startling experience of witnessing the ship in front and the ship behind being torpedoed.

His next training was with 605 Squadron near Coventry. Here he witnessed the near-destruction of Coventry by German bombers. He and his companions were told to conceal their kites under the trees.

So far, this is a brief summary of Howard's activities before he was dispatched to Malta. His squadron, now 185, landed at Gibraltar in March, 1941, on board the ship [HMS] Argus. They disembarked from the Argus to board [HMS] Ark Royal, which sailed with an escort of His Majesty's Ships Renown and Sheffield. The pilots were briefed on procedure for fly-off with their Hurricanes. They had had no previous experience in this activity. Several hundred miles into the Mediterranean they were directed to take off for Malta and landed at Takali Airstrip in their Mark 2 Hurricanes. There were twelve. To the best of my knowledge, the twelve were; Beckett, Howell, Peter Low, Sonny Ormerod, George Allan, Ron Noble, Phillip Wigley - all from the U.K.; also Robin Wilson - New Zealander; Fletcher and Ted McKay - Canadians; and Howard Lester - the only Australian. The official account refers to them all as Englishmen.

Thereafter, they went into combat from Takali and Halfar. I have a few snapshots from these bases which were given to Howard by his friends. He lost everything in the debacle that followed, including his log book.

Of the twelve, only four survived Malta. They were: Wigley, Noble, Mackay, and Lester - the two latter both severely wounded.

Phillip Wigley kept a meticulous log book and has a stock of stories, and I am sure he would be willing and able to give you any information. Incidentally, the 185 Squadron motto was 'Ara feun hu' which, roughly translated from the Maltese, is 'look for him'. The emblem was the Maltese Cross with the lion in the centre. If you should want any squadron plaques or pictures these are obtainable from G.H. Munday, Oxford House, 8 St Johns Road, St Johns, Woking, Surrey.

Lighter moments the airmen spent at the Honeymoon Hotel, where the proprietor was an old Royal Navy pensioner and lived in Marsasirocco. His son is Edgar Smith, who has kept in touch with Phillip Wigley.

As you are aware, Howard Lester was shot down on March 18th whilst engaging Messerschmitt 109. The cannon ammunition which hit him from behind shattered his glycol tank. Perhaps, fortunately for this, because the tank deflected the shrapnel so that he was hit in both legs but his spine was not hit. However, the misfortune of the hit was that the cockpit was immediately filled with the glycol fumes and he could not see anything. On descending he knew that the instructions from the CO were always, 'Save your kite.'

Save your kite', and this rang in his ears as he tried so to do but could not see his controls.

When he hit the water, he hung on to his inflated dinghy but did not have the strength to climb into it. Whilst floating in the sea for many hours he thought a shark must have hold of his leg, then he reflected back to his schooldays, when he remembered that he had been taught that there are no sharks in the Mediterranean. In the twilight he was picked up by an air-sea rescue launch but was barely conscious by then. In fact, his pulse was so weak that two out of the three of the crew of the launch were for putting him into the bag of stones and committing it to the deep. This was customary with the dead out at Malta, as there is not much burial ground on the islands. One of the crew said he could feel a pulse, so they gave him a slug of whisky instead of the bag. Of course, Howard was unaware of this, but the story came to me from Don Hamilton-Smith, who had just arrived in Malta with the Spitfire Squadron. Don Smith was told the story by John Bisley of Sydney.

Howard Lester was in hospital in Malta for nearly six months and not the least of the hardships the hospital was enduring was food shortages. He could not be flown out of Malta in anything but a Sunderland because he was a stretcher case. For good measure, the Sunderland that flew him to England eventually was attacked en route but managed to make it to port. Howard arrived at hospital at Torquay Palace Hotel - as it was before the war. When he arrived he weighed five-and-a-half stone. I have a very good picture of him as a cot case, taken soon after his arrival.

More sensation followed soon after. At that time, Lord Haw Haw, the English traitor, was broadcasting from Germany, and he announced: 'We are going to get all those loafing airmen at Torquay'. Sure enough, the next day, the hotel-hospital was bombed and shattered from the sea. Because the Palace had been built on a cliff-top above the bay for the view and the breeze, it was an easy target for the bombers who came in across the water and sent their cannons straight through the middle of the building. There were many casualties of both staff and patients. The ambulatory patients were able to take some cover. Amongst these was Don Smith, who had heard of Howard Lester when they were both at Malta. Don walked around after the raid and saw Howard in his bed and gasped when he said, 'I saw that there was a wall beside you, and now it's missing.' Amongst the casualties was a Sister from Sydney who had nursed Howard. Don Smith showed me some music he had bought in Torquay and played it for Howard on a piano. That was before the raid, of course.

Then it was by ambulance for Howard to another hospital, and finally to Loughborough, which was a rehabilitation establishment. There they did wonders with his shattered hip and legs. I have some good pictures of Loughborough with Howard doing many exercises. I also have a photograph of Howard which was published in an English newspaper and the heading read: 'Wounded Eagles' - and the text - 'How wounded airmen are helped towards recovery'. In the picture there is a woman in uniform who is inviting 'Flight Lieutenant Howard Lester of the RAF' to take the floor and dance, despite his wounded legs. This was part of the work carried out at the rehabilitation centre where it was realised that nothing succeeds so much as trying. Incidentally, for his swim in the Mediterranean, he was made a member of the Goldfish Club.

He was finally dispatched for home aboard the Queen Mary via the Atlantic. Because the war in the Pacific had not been terminated he was billeted in a lavish home owned by Wickersham family for a month in 5th Avenue, New York. He arrived back in Sydney on VP Day. His rank on termination of service was Flight Lieutenant, and the date of

termination of service from the RAAF was November 19, 1945, thus completing five years and five months of service.

Civvy street: Howard's entitlements with the Repatriation Department - as then it was - were many and varied, even to a left inguinal hernia. Consequently, he was in and out of the Repatriation Hospital for surgery to his ankylosed hip, knee, ankle, et cetera. He was most anxious to take his place in the work force and joined the PMG as a clerk in 1950. In spite of his many disabilities he carried on at work until 2nd June, 1972. At this stage the Commonwealth doctor literally sent him home for good.

Retirement: On retirement, the question was what to do? Howard had always been fond of sport. He was on the short list for Sheffield Shield cricket before the war. Friends suggested that he play lawn bowls on their home-made green. Howard became quite keen when he found that he could bowl from a fixed stance and not the usual step-in-to-bowl. He was persuaded to join the Burnside RSL Bowling Club where he had much success, and it gave him much pleasure.

Cruelly, he suffered a stroke in September, 1974, which left him with his left arm totally paralysed and his left leg - the much already injured leg - was further disabled. The report in The Advertiser of 23rd March '81 is not quite correct. After the stroke, he was not totally confined to a wheelchair, but the paralysis on the left side made it difficult for him to stand, and he had always had to prise himself out of a seat with his left arm. This, of course, he could no longer do. I persuaded him to go to the bowling club and watch the game from a wheelchair. Then the idea occurred to me: bowl from the wheelchair. This meant a special wheelchair with four pneumatic tyres - to save the greens - and his left leg had to be platformed out in front. We had trial and error designing the chair and the Repatriation [Department] helped. And the circus - always - two wheelchairs aboard the car as well as walking sticks and bowling paraphernalia.

During this first period of stroke, Howard also became keen on handicrafts, and at the Red Cross craft centre became very proficient at pottery and to a lesser degree at weaving and basketwork. He would show other members of the pottery group how to thumb a piece of clay into many shapes with his one hand.

The saddest day was in February '83. He was demonstrating bowling from the wheelchair to other disabled persons, when he was violently sick. It was the signal of a more extensive stroke and his final years were spent in a nursing home.

To me his epitaph is: 'Never admit the pain; bury it deep. Only the weak complain; complaint is cheap. Cover thy wounds. Fold down the curtain place. Silence is still a craft; courage a grace.'

These facts and stories are correct as far as I am able to tell you. Howard was self-effacing and a humble man and seldom talked about the war, so I have gathered facts from friends, books, records, photographs, et cetera. The names and addresses of Phillip Wigley, Ron Noble and Don Hamilton-Smith are enclosed. Hoping this will be of use to you for your book.

Sincerely,

Ella Lester.

This is a PS which has just occurred to me, Mr McAulay. After Howard was shot down in the Mediterranean, another member of his squadron came up behind the German and shot the German into the sea. The German was picked up by a launch and, extraordinarily, finished up in the bed next to Howard in the hospital in Malta. Howard could not but remember how arrogant this German continued to be, and he would say, 'Of course we'll win in the end'. I do not know whether he survived.

Thank you.