

# Leslie Howard A mysterious fate

Steve O'Brien explores the puzzling circumstances that surround the death of British *Gone With the Wind* star

“A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” That was Winston Churchill’s famous quote about the Soviet Union, yet he could just have easily been talking about the actor Leslie Howard and specifically his mysterious death, at the age of 50, on June 1, 1943.

It’s 80 years since the Academy Award-nominated actor’s plane was shot down over the Bay of Biscay, and yet we’re no nearer to finding out exactly what happened that day. Books have been published, documentaries have been made and countless newspaper articles written, but the truth has proved hard to grasp. If his death remains frustratingly unsolved, much of it is to do with the fact that there’s a lot we don’t know about Leslie Howard’s life.

Rumours have abounded for years that, apart from being one of our most famous and revered actors in the Thirties and Forties, he was also involved with British intelligence, working on instructions from the highest level.

Howard’s most famous role was as Ashley Wilkes opposite Vivien Leigh’s Scarlett O’Hara in civil war saga *Gone with the Wind*



When it was reported that his plane had been shot down over Spain, most people at the time simply thought it was a random attack by the Luftwaffe. Why, the thinking went, would the Germans target a man of the stage and screen, an actor whose most famous role was as the gentlemanly Ashley Wilkes in 1939’s *Gone with the Wind*?

Yes, he volunteered for propaganda films at the time, but so did any number of actors to aid the war effort. His first movie made for the British Ministry of Information was the Powell & Pressburger war drama *49th Parallel*, in 1941, which was followed by *'Pimpernel' Smith* (1941), about a man who helps Jewish refugees fleeing from the Nazis, and *The First of the Few* (1942), about the invention of the Spitfire, both of which he directed himself.

But who was Leslie Howard and how did he become one of our most lauded stars of the screen? He’d been born Leslie Howard Steiner in London in 1893 and had worked as a humble clerk before enlisting as a Private with the



**DID YOU KNOW?**

Leslie Howard was Oscar nominated for his roles in *Berkeley Square* (1933) and *Pygmalion* (1938).

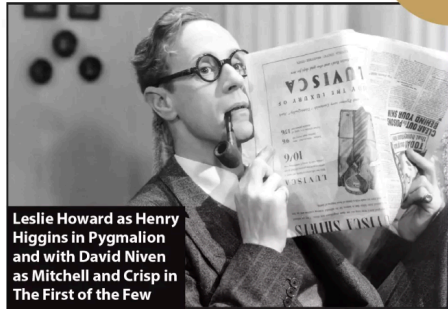
British Army's Inns of Court Officer Training Corps in the first days of the Great War, later becoming a junior officer, before he was discharged due to neurasthenia. He made his stage debut not long after, travelling to the United States to star on Broadway. Films naturally followed.

**FILMS OR FRANCO?**

By the time war broke out again, Leslie Howard was one of the most famous movie stars in the world and so it didn't look odd at all when, in 1943, he was invited to Portugal and Spain for a series of lectures on filmmaking. At least, that's what it appeared to be. It has been alleged in the years since that he was actually in the region to rally support for the Allies, on orders from British Intelligence.

Shortly before her death in 2007, the Spanish actress Conchita Montenegro, who was having an affair with Howard, claimed he had used the fact that she was married to a senior member of the far-right Falangist Party to contact Spain's General Franco, who, it was believed, was contemplating joining the Axis powers. Howard's mission, Montenegro claimed, was to convince Franco to spurn Hitler's advances.

Whatever the truth of Howard's actions in Portugal, what is known is that the route BOAC Flight 777 took on that day in June



Leslie Howard as Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion* and with David Niven as Mitchell and Crisp in *The First of the Few*



1943, from Lisbon to its intended destination of Bristol, wasn't considered dangerous.

Exactly why six Junkers Ju 88 fighters attacked this small 13-passenger plane is a mystery. Was it random or were those fighters acting on orders to eliminate a specific target? And if so, was Leslie Howard the intended victim? Certainly the actor's late son Ronald believed so. In his 1984 book *In Search of My Father: A Portrait of Leslie Howard*, he claims the order to shoot down the airliner came directly from the Nazis' Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels

who believed him to be a dangerous and influential British propagandist. It's a view shared by author Jerrold M. Packard who states in his 1992 book *Neither Friend Nor Foe: The European Neutrals in World War II*, "Goebbels had seen Howard's 1941 film *Pimpernel Smith* [and] decided to get the man who not only starred in

this attack on the Reich, but who directed and produced it as well."

**MISTAKEN IDENTITY**

Not everyone, however, is convinced that, if there was an intended target, it was Leslie Howard. The *New York Times* speculated that German agents mistook Howard's agent Alfred Chenhalls for Winston Churchill due to their similar appearance, a theory that the wartime leader referenced in his memoirs, writing: "The brutality of the Germans was only matched by the stupidity of their agents. It is difficult to understand how anyone could imagine that with all the resources of Great Britain at my disposal I should have booked passage in an

unarmed and unescorted plane from Lisbon and flown home in broad daylight."

It's entirely possible, however, that it was all a terrible mistake and the Germans weren't targeting anyone on that plane. That was certainly the belief of Estel Eforogan in his book *Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor*, who concludes that neither Howard nor Churchill was, in fact, a target and quotes German sources saying the attack was "an error in judgement".

Our government has never officially acknowledged whether Leslie Howard really was working for British Intelligence. So, not only is the mystery of Leslie Howard's life no nearer to being answered, but the manner of his death is far from being solved too. The wreckage of BOAC Flight 777, and consequently the remains of its most famous passenger, have never been found, but one thing is certain – whatever the truth of Leslie Howard's life, Britain lost one of its most gifted actors that day, not to mention one of its most loyal patriots.

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