



Wing Commander Charles Gordon Chaloner Olive CBE DFC

[1916 - 1987]



Wing Commander Olive is distinguished by having been an air Ace in the Battle of Britain, and the Club President in 1970-71

Overview

Charles Gordon Chaloner Olive CBE, DFC (3 July 1916 - 20 October 1987) was a rare Australian, a remarkable person and a notable member of the United Service Club, including serving on the Committee from 1947 and as President in 1970-71.

He was one of the few Australians who fought while flying Spitfires in the early stages of the Second World War, in both the Battle of France (over Dunkirk) and in the Battle of Britain¹. He completed four operational tours operating from Britain, totaling 180 hours operational flying comprising 219 operational sorties. Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO, then

¹ Only 25 Australians were eligible for the Battle of Britain clasp, and fewer also fought in the Battle of France.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

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Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia said of him ², *Gordon Olive was an example of the daring, pluck and humour that gave the RAAF its deserved reputation in the service of the RAF. Shortish, wiry, cocky, mustachioed, and highly intelligent, he was the archetypical “fighter pilot”. To me, he was the Battle of Britain....*

He also forged a successful career as a company manager after the war, as well serving the community ³, being recognised for his community service by his appointment as MBE, elevated to CBE in 1978.

Gordon was an author ⁴ and a very talented and prolific painter. A series of paintings from his prodigious memory provide a unique record of multi-aircraft engagements from the pilot's cockpit. Such paintings provide a unique insight as they were impossible to capture in a photograph, and virtually no photographs from such a perspective exist. The Club displays one of his paintings, currently hanging in the main staircase on Level 3. It depicts a squadron of Spitfires climbing desperately to intercept and attack an oncoming armada of Luftwaffe aircraft during the Battle of Britain. Gordon's technique was to draw the aircraft in pencil before painting them, and a close look at this painting will reveal an interesting characteristic (see the separate History and Heritage Note: Artwork. Painting. Battle of Britain). (Sadly, the photograph above does not do justice to the vibrancy of the colours in the original painting.)



Gordon Olive has also been recognised in other, somewhat surprising, ways:

- the Mayfield State School named its each of its Houses after a famous World War II pilot of the English-speaking world: Olive (Australian), Bader (British), Malan (South African), and

² During her speech at the Battle of Britain Wreath Laying Ceremony at the Australian War Memorial on 13 September 2013. See Attachment 1 for a fuller extract from her Address

³ He was Aide-de-Camp to HM The Queen 1961-63, Chairman of the Commonwealth Youth Council, Queensland, 1950-72, and Chairman Brisbane Metropolitan Fire Brigade 1979-87.

⁴ *The Devil at 6 O'Clock: An Australian Ace in the Battle of Britain*, by Gordon Olive & Dennis Newton, was published in 2001. *Spitfire Ace: My Life as a Battle of Britain Fighter Pilot* by Gordon Olive DFC was published in 2015, (compiled from Gordon's manuscripts by Dennis Newton)

- an award-winning Defence Housing Estate at McDowall was named the Gordon Olive Estate in his honour *as a permanent reminder of his significant contribution to Australia and his community.*

Pre-War

Charles Gordon Chaloner Olive was born at Paddington, Brisbane to New Zealand-born Hugh Chaloner Olive and his Queensland-born wife Lucinda Maud, (nee Exley) ⁵.

After attending Brisbane Grammar School and, briefly, the University of Queensland, Gordon was a civil engineering cadet in Brisbane when he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as a cadet in January 1936, training at Point Cook in Victoria.

Gordon gained his pilot's wings in December 1936, and in January 1937 he sailed for England to take up a short-service commission with the Royal Air Force (RAF). Holding the rank of Pilot Officer, he served with No.2 Flying Training School until 22 May 1937 when he was posted to No.65 Squadron, Hornchurch Wing ⁶. Promoted Flying Officer on 19 August 1938, he became a flight commander at the outbreak of World War II.

Of fair complexion and 168 cm (5ft 6in) tall, he was a champion javelin thrower in service and inter-service athletics, breaking the RAF javelin record in 1939.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P03655.001

*Informal group portrait of pilots from 65 Squadron, RAF.
017934 Pilot Officer (PO) Gordon Olive second from left.*

Second World War

⁵ His parents and grandparents also have interesting stories:

- Hugh Chaloner Olive was born on a ship sailing from Fiji to Australia via Auckland. Hugh's father was Captain Henry Olive, a Royal Marine who established the Fiji police force. His birth certificate says 'Auckland'. He was a chemist who worked for the Brisbane City Council.
- His maternal grandfather was a school teacher sent out from England who was headmaster of several schools, President of the Qld Teachers Union, and first chairman of the teachers' superannuation fund. He lived in Bardon House. The history of the QTU makes numerous mentions of him. His wife, Elizabeth Exley was a founder of the forerunner of Blue Nurses and a member of the politically active prohibitionists, although her Tonic was legendary and *more alcoholic than falling-down water*, according to Gordon's father (the chemist), who had tested it.

⁶ By then the squadron had converted from Gladiators to Spitfires

Gordon Olive was one of the small number of Australian pilots who participated in both the evacuation at Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain ⁷. Olive was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on 24 September 1940 ⁸ in recognition of his service during this period.

He was one of Winston Churchill's famous *Few* in the Battle of Britain and an officially-acclaimed fighter Ace ⁹.



Spitfires of No 65 Squadron.

(This was a pre-war publicity shot and Olive was flying aircraft FZ-A, the fourth in the line, when it was taken.) ¹⁰

Promoted to Flight Lieutenant in July 1939 and piloting a Spitfire, Olive was flight commander with No 65 Squadron RAF and completed three tours of duty between September 1939 and March 1941, totaling 165 hours comprising 193 sorties in this period.

The first tour was from the commencement of hostilities to the evacuation of Dunkirk. 65 Squadron formed part of the air cover for the evacuation from Dunkirk in May 1940 where Olive may have scored several successes which, unfortunately, were not witnessed.

During this tour the squadron operated from Hornchurch (Essex) and helped to cover the left flank of the Allied retreat in France and the evacuation of Dunkirk. During this tour he completed 25 operational sorties. On 28 May, his last sortie of this tour, he was listed as missing but was reported safe three days later after having been shot up and wounded in the leg. His injury was caused by shrapnel from his pressurised air cylinder which was hit and exploded during the dogfight. He crash-landed at Manston while landing without flaps or brakes.

⁷ The Battle of Britain was officially 10 July to 31 October 1940.

⁸ The citation reads: *Flight Lieutenant Olive has led his flight and, on occasions, his squadron both on operations in France and later throughout the intensive fighting in the defence of his country. He has personally destroyed at least five enemy aircraft. His fearlessness and cool courage in action have been a splendid example to other pilots he has led and have contributed largely to their successes against greatly superior numbers of the enemy.* See Attachment 2 for a copy of the file extract

⁹ To become an Ace required five confirmed victories. Only 8% of the total pilots involved in the Battle of Britain qualified as an Ace.

¹⁰ When war broke out the RAF changed all of its squadron codes to confuse the Germans (it confused a lot of the RAF too). No.65 Squadron's code was changed from "FZ" to "YT", hence Olive's Spitfire in his painting would be YT-A, leading the third vic formation as usual, although he often led the squadron.

He married Helen Mary Thomas on 22 June 1940 at the parish church, Kensington, London. She was to be one of the first English war brides to come to Australia, in 1943, but died in 1946.

On the last two tours in this period, he occupied the position of Senior Flight Commander and as such he led the Squadron during the Battle of Britain on many occasions. Transcripts of radio interviews share his experiences as a fighter pilot in the Battle of Britain - and recount the respect he had for his fellow pilots, British, Dominion, and Polish alike.

The second tour commenced in June 1940, during which time No.65 Squadron operated from Rochford (Essex) and Manston (East Coast of Kent). Manston was the most easterly aerodrome in England. He completed 96 operational hours comprising 125 sorties during that tour. The third tour commenced on 29 November 1940 and finished March 1941 at Tangmere (Sussex). On that tour he completed 43 sorties.

Gordon Olive became an Ace during the Battle of Britain credited with destroying five enemy aircraft. He scored his first confirmed victory, a Messerschmitt Bf 109, on 20 July 1940 and on 12 August he probably destroyed another. Next day he shot down two and probably a third and on the 14th he scored another probable. He brought his score to five on 26 August 1940 by destroying a Messerschmitt Bf 110.

He was operating in a high-intensity environment up to eight hours a day. Owing to the proximity of hostile bases on the French coast (only 25 miles from Manston), the airfield was under continuous air attack suffering up to 200 raids from 12 to 24 August 1940.

Furthermore, interceptions were usually effected within a few minutes of take-off and No 65 Squadron was nearly always the first to intercept by a margin of some five to ten minutes. This meant that they were outnumbered, usually by odds in excess of 20 to one.

He crashed again during this frantic period, and having successfully bailed-out, proudly wore the badge of the *Caterpillar Club*.

He told his pilots that they were safer in the air. Olive used to tell his pilots the tale of a particularly memorable incident. On the occasion when he bailed-out, his parachute nearly failed to open. When he landed in a paddock he was confronted by members of the Land Army and Home Guard and had to convince them he was not German. That accomplished, he thought he'd made it, but the ambulance taking him back to the aerodrome overturned. *I scrambled out with a few more bruises and was then picked up by a fire engine dashing to the spot where my Spitfire was burning itself out. The fire engine, too, ended up a minute later in the ditch. After that, I decided to walk.*

On 9 December Gordon Olive shot down a Messerschmitt Bf 110 for what turned out to be his sixth and final victory ¹¹ although he claimed a probable Junkers 88 on 15 February 1941.

In March 1941 he was promoted to Acting Squadron Leader and was 'rested' on fighter controller duties at Tangmere, during which period that aerodrome was bombed at night on at least ten occasions.

In July 1941 after this rest period and at the age of just 24, he was appointed to command No. 456 (RAAF) Squadron, Australia's first and only night-fighter squadron ¹² which he formed and trained as Commanding Officer. The Squadron became operational in August 1941 but on re-equipping with Beaufighters ¹³ the Squadron had to be converted and retrained.

¹¹ The twin-engined Messerschmitt Me110 was evidently on a lone reconnaissance mission, from 4 Staffel, Fernaufklärungsgruppe 14, a long-range reconnaissance unit. The crew of Feldwebel Otto Mercier and Oberfeldwebel A. Schönwald were listed 'missing'.

¹² See Attachment 3 for a brief squadron history.

¹³ The squadron was originally equipped with Boulton Paul Defiants. The Beaufighters were equipped with Airborne Radar to assist interception of enemy aircraft at night.

He was promoted Squadron Leader in September 1941 and Acting Wing Commander the following month. The Squadron became operational again in December 1941. Before ill health cut short his tour of duty in March 1942 he had carried out 19 hours flying comprising 17 sorties.

Following several short postings, he rejoined the RAAF in June 1943, although he remained attached to the RAF. At the end of October 1943, he departed for Australia where he served briefly with No.3 Embarkation Depot. In February 1944 he joined RAAF Command and became Wing Commander ¹⁴ on 1 April 1944. He took over No.101 Fighter Control Unit on 29 December and the following month moved to Air Defence Headquarters in Sydney. His final wartime posting was to Air Defence Headquarters, Morotai (Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia), which he commanded from 16 July 1945.

Post War

He was demobilised on 7 March 1946 and transferred to the RAAF Reserve. In 1948 he became State Commandant of the Air Training Corps.

Olive became an executive with Rheem Australia Ltd and later Boral Ltd. He ran for the seat of Brisbane as a Services Party candidate in the 1946 federal election, without success.

He married Beryl Gwendoline North on 17 April 1948 at St John's Cathedral, Brisbane.

He was Honorary Aide-de-Camp to the Queen in 1961 and stood for the seat of Petrie as a Country Party candidate in 1972. He was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1967 for his work organising the Empire Youth Movement and elevated to Commander (CBE) in 1978. He also served as Chairman of the Commonwealth Youth Council, Queensland during the period 1950-72, and Chairman Brisbane Metropolitan Fire Brigade 1979-87.

He was President of the United Service Club 1970-71.

He was a talented painter who produced many scenes of aerial warfare with a *pilot's eye view*. His paintings are to be found in the Queen Mother's collection ¹⁵, in the RAF Museum, and elsewhere including in private ownership.

He kept prodigious notes of his experiences. His book *The Devil at 6 O'Clock: An Australian Ace in the Battle of Britain* (co-written with Dennis Newton), was published in 2001. As its title suggests, he was unsparing in his criticisms of the cumbersome organisation of the RAAF that he found on his return to Australia. He also disagreed with the *big wing* tactics adopted in the later stages of the Battle of Britain, championed by Douglas Bader.

He retired in 1981 but died at Boonah on 20 October 1987, survived by his wife and their two sons ¹⁶ and one of their two daughters.

Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents
- advice from his family through his son - Colonel RJ Olive AM RFD.

¹⁴ The RAF and the RAAF were at odds over promotions and to Gordon's annoyance he went from wearing Wing Commander's rank back to Flight Lieutenant's rank when he returned to Australia.

¹⁵ Source: *Royal Air Force Historical Society Journal* 26 (book review from Dr Tony Mansell), but not confirmed from other sources.

¹⁶ Colonel Rick Olive served as Club President in 2000-2001. This is the first and only time (so far) that a father and son have served as President.

- Dennis Newton, 'Olive, Charles Gordon Chaloner (1916–1987)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/olive-charles-gordon-chaloner-15420/text26630>, published in hardcopy 2012, accessed online 15 May 2014.

ATTACHMENT 1

Address By
**Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO Governor-General of the
Commonwealth of Australia**

On the occasion of
Battle of Britain Wreath Laying Ceremony
Australian War Memorial, Canberra

13 September 2013

We gather here today to remember the sacrifices of the Second World War, and in particular the courage and determination of the RAF, the Commonwealth and other allied forces in defending the shores of the United Kingdom, in what we know with pride as The Battle of Britain.

Winston Churchill, in his speech to the Commons said, in what seemed to be the end of Hitler's planned Operation Sea Lion: "Never before in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

I want to talk to you about one of the "few"; in fact one of the very few Australians who flew with the RAF squadrons in that epic battle.

His name is Wing Commander Gordon Olive DFC, and I have a particular reason for singling out Gordon, because our lives became entwined for some years.

Charles Gordon Chaloner Olive was born in 1916, attended Brisbane Grammar and RAAF Point Cook, where he gained his pilots wings in 1936.

He took a posting to 2 Flying Training School RAF, on a short service commission.

In August 1938 he was promoted to Flying Officer and piloted a Spitfire as a Flight Commander between September 1939 and March 1941, completing 193 sorties, totalling 165 hours.

In the Battle of Britain he was credited with destroying 5 enemy aircraft, though his unconfirmed total tally was much higher. He was awarded the DFC in September, and in December shot down his 6th confirmed enemy, officially entering the list of "aces".

In 1941 Olive was appointed the first Commanding Officer of No. 456 Squadron RAAF Australia's first and only night fighter squadron after which he rejoined the RAAF and served in several significant command posts including Morotai in the Pacific, and transferred to the Reserves in 1946 with the rank of Wing Commander.

One of the remarkable feats of Olive's service was a prodigious memory and artistic skill, which years later led to a series of graphic paintings of combat over the skies of Britain.

These paintings from his memory provide a unique record of multi-aircraft engagements from the pilot's cockpit.

Gordon Olive was appointed an Honorary ADC to The Queen; in 1967 he was appointed MBE for organising the Empire Youth Movement, and in 1978 elevated to CBE.

Gordon Olive was an example of the daring, pluck and humour that gave the RAAF its deserved reputation in the service of the RAF.

Shortish, wiry, cocky, mustachioed, and highly intelligent, he was the archetypical "fighter pilot". To me, he was the Battle of Britain.

In 1955 I was a Cadet Pilot Officer in the Air Training Corps. I was 17. Wing Commander Olive was Commandant of the ATC in Queensland. He was then 39.

He was a legend and an inspiration to us all, and he was to define my life from then on.

Gordon died in 1987 and left a legacy in his community work in Brisbane, tirelessly supporting veterans and his mates.

It is in men like Gordon Olive that a whole generation of younger men have found inspiration and a sense of an ideal – men with positivity, modesty, cheerfulness, loyalty to their mates, and pride in their service.

While the legacy of the Battle of Britain held such people high, it will always remain an example of how courage and determination can overcome mighty odds.

It was also a tragedy of huge proportion that we honour here today, and we remember those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

As Churchill most famously said: "If the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say 'This was their finest hour'".

Lest we forget.

Published on Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia (<https://www.gg.gov.au>)

456-2

PERSONAL FILE - W/C. C.G.C. OLIVE

Acting Wing Commander Charles Gordon Challoner Olive, D.F.C. was appointed to command the squadron in June, 1941. He had previously served on flying duties since 1937.

He was born in 1916 and was educated at Brisbane Grammar School, Queensland, the Teachers Training College and Brisbane University. He was granted a cadetship in the R.A.A.F. in January, 1936, and in the following year was commissioned in the R.A.F.

He was promoted Flight Lieutenant in July, 1939, Squadron Leader in September, 1941, and Acting Wing Commander in the following month.

He was awarded the D.F.C. in September, 1940, when it was stated (A.M.B. 1737):

"Flight Lieutenant Olive has led his flight and on occasions his squadron both on operations in France and later throughout the intensive fighting in defence of this country. He has personally destroyed at least five enemy aircraft. His fearlessness and cool courage in action have been a splendid example to other pilots he has led, and have contributed largely to their successes against greatly superior numbers of the enemy."

456 Squadron RAAF A Brief History

No 456 Squadron was the RAAF's only Night Fighter Unit of WW2 and saw service over the UK and Europe. It was formed on 30 June 1941 at RAF Valley in Wales.

Foundation members of the Squadron were a mixture of British and Australian personnel. The first CO was Wing Commander Gordon Olive DFC an Australian veteran and Battle of Britain ace whose tally included at least five enemy aircraft destroyed. Later in the war he served in the Pacific War.

First Aircraft were the Boulton Paul Defiant followed by Beaufighter 2's equipped with Airborne Radar to enable interception of enemy aircraft at night. The first enemy aircraft destroyed was a Dornier 217 in January 1942.

In June 1943 the squadron moved to RAF Station Middle Wallop and this brought them into the front line of the defence of the UK, which enabled it to launch offensives over Northern and Western France.

Intruder and ranger operations against enemy airfields and the French railway system were the main targets and 456 Squadron personnel were involved. In May Flying Officer "Peter" Panitz strafed six trains in as many minutes. He was later to become a Wing Commander DFC and CO of 464 Squadron.

In December 1943 Wing Commander Keith Hampshire assumed command of the squadron and ended the war with a DSO and Bar, DFC and to his credit put some new life into the squadron.

Early 1944 saw the move to Ford in Sussex, re-equipping with Mosquito XVII with improved radar equipment. From this time on, through D-Day and until May 1945, the squadron served in the ADGB (Air Defence of Great Britain) as part of the 2nd Tactical Airforce over France, Belgium, Holland and Germany almost without respite.

Prior to and following D-Day 1944 while based at Ford the squadron destroyed many enemy aircraft over the Channel and D-Day landing areas. These included 13 Heinkel 177 bombers, one of Germany's largest aircraft fitted with radio controlled bombs designed to sink our capital ships operating in the landing area.

456 finished the war with a total of 40 enemy aircraft destroyed, over 29 V1 Flying Bombs, many locomotives and other ground targets. Intruder patrols as far as Berlin were carried out to cover enemy airfields when our bombers were operating over Germany.

The Squadron was the first to use the red kangaroo in the Airforce Roundel in 1943. It is now used on all RAAF Aircraft.