



History and Heritage Series

Battle of Britain Painting

(by Gordon Olive)

Sources include advice from his family through his son (Colonel RJ Olive AM RFD) and various websites.



These Background Notes have been prepared as 'bite-sized' light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden awareness and understanding of selected aspects of the Club's rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. **Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these notes.**

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigor, attributions, and acknowledgements required for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

Introduction

The Club displays a painting signed Gordon Olive, and presented to the Club by him. It currently hangs 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.

Such paintings provide a unique insight as they were impossible to capture in a photograph, and virtually no photographs from such a perspective exist.

Wing Commander Olive was a remarkable Australian fighter pilot who achieved the status of Ace, and who was also a Member and post-war President of the Club. His story is summarised below and there are more detailed biographical notes posted separately within this History and Heritage Note series (see: *People. Notable Members. Olive*).

Gordon Olive's Paintings

Gordon Olive was a prolific and talented painter who produced many scenes of World War II aerial warfare, from a *pilot's eye view*. His paintings are to be found in the Queen Mother's collection¹, in the RAF Museum (at Hendon in London), and elsewhere including in private ownership.

His paintings capture the action and drama of aerial battle scenes in life and death struggles between Luftwaffe and RAF aircraft over France or Britain in 1940.

He usually did not name his paintings.

Gordon's son, Rick Olive², has provided some insights from the family perspective:

I also remember that the Sunday Mail did a colour magazine of Dad's paintings in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

He painted progressively often only an hour at a time. It infuriated my mother who stormed into his shed one morning and demanded to know why he didn't paint something useful; like the house.

The Club's Piece

This artwork is a large piece, acrylic on canvas board, currently hanging above the main staircase on Level 3.

It is a realistic depiction of a squadron of Spitfires, climbing desperately to intercept a large formation of approaching Luftwaffe bombers. It has striking attention to detail.

Unfortunately, the photograph overleaf does not do justice to the vibrancy of the colours in the painting.

The painting was not named by the artist, and there are a couple of interesting features of the painting visible only on close inspection and that may not be appreciated without a detailed knowledge of the Royal Air Force at the time of the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain.

¹ Source: *Royal Air Force Historical Society Journal* 26 (book review from Dr Tony Mansell), but not confirmed from other sources.

² Colonel RJ Olive AM RFD was also President of the Club, the only instance in the Club's history of a father and son served as President.



The RAF aircraft are those of Olive's squadron (No 65 Squadron) during the Battle of Britain and the lead aircraft of the third *vic*³ of Spitfires carries the designation of the one that Olive flew, either as Red Section leader or when he was leading the Squadron⁴.

Additionally, there are a number of additional German aircraft pencilled-in, but not painted. All the planes in his paintings started as pencil shapes. This was his usual method of working, but it is not known if he was happy with the painting at that point, had second thoughts about the extra aircraft, simply forgot and signed and presented it to the Club without checking, or donated the painting with an intention to return to it later. It is a charming feature visible only from close range.

Other Works

Gordon Olive produced many paintings depicting scenes of World War II air battles. His works are to be found in the Queen Mother's collection, in the RAF Museum, and elsewhere including in private ownership. They share a common theme and some look very similar to others in the series.

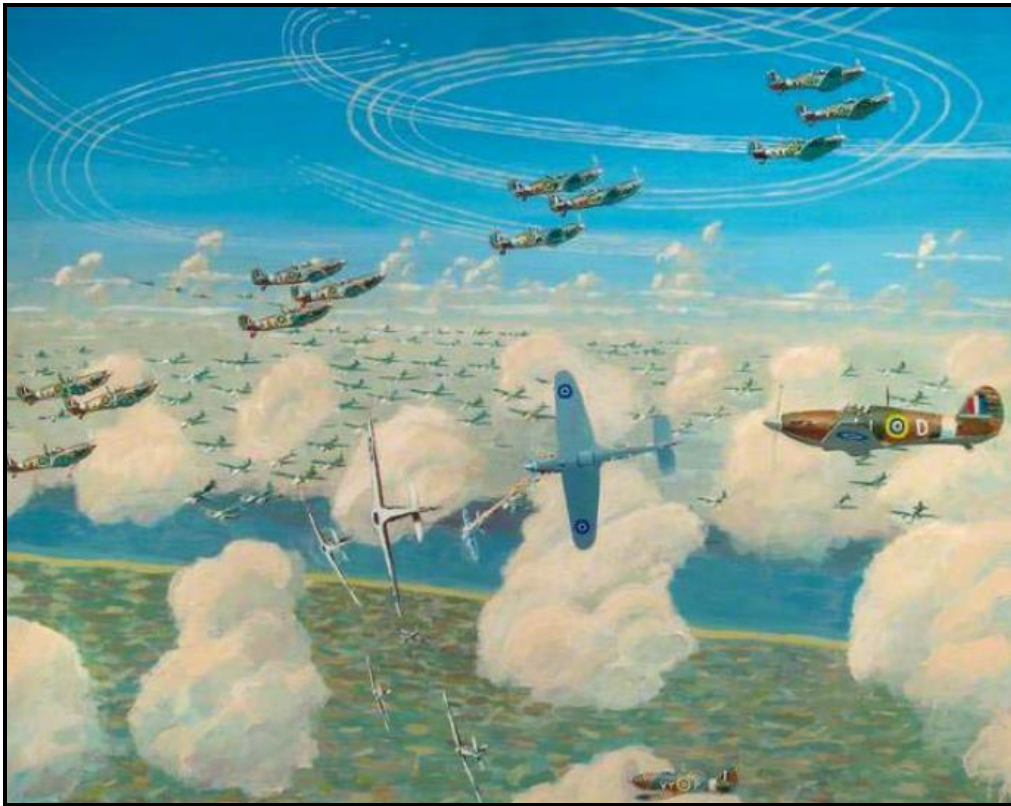
The RAF Museum at Hendon has two of Gordon Olive's paintings in its collection.

The top painting overleaf is another Battle of Britain scene, acrylic on canvas board (59.1 x 74.3cm).

³ The term '*vic*' was and is still used to refer to the vee-shaped formation of the three aircraft that forms in a Section within a squadron.

⁴ When war broke out the RAF changed all of its squadron marking-codes to confuse the Germans. No.65 Squadron's marking-code was changed from "FZ" to "YT". Olive's Spitfire was YT-A, and is shown leading the third *vic* formation as usual, although he often led the squadron.

This painting captures Hurricanes peeling off to attack the Luftwaffe bombers that are a lower altitude but with fighter escort high above. It shows the usual RAF tactic, ie attacking the bombers with the slower Hurricanes while the Spitfires were tasked to take on the German fighters, usually Messerschmitt Bf 109s. The squadron of Spitfires in the centre of the painting are similar to those Spitfires in the Club's painting, also climbing desperately, and appear to have the same squadron designations (ie are also those from No 65 Squadron).



The second painting in the RAF Museum collection depicts a scene over Dunkirk, when Olive's No 65 squadron was tasked to protect the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force. It is oil on canvas board (43.2 x 53.3) and referred to as *65 to Dunkirk*.

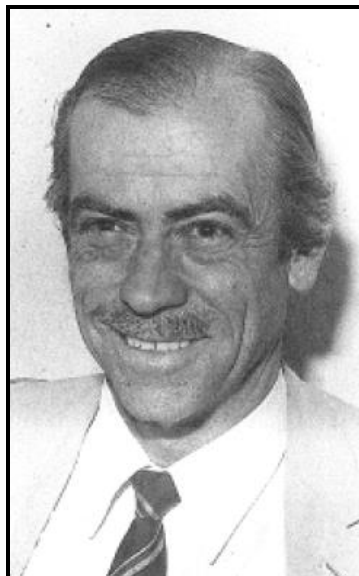


A similar theme and scene recurs in a painting that is still held by the family. Rick Olive said: *the 'Flight to Dunkirk' painting hangs above my desk. He was shot down that day and survived to crash at Manston. It reminds me that good fortune plays no little part in our lives.*



The Artist: Wing Commander Charles Gordon Chaloner Olive CBE DFC

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, flying Spitfires, over both France and England in the Battle of Britain in the early stages of the Second World War⁵. In total, he completed four operational tours operating from Britain, involving 219 operational sorties and 180 hours operational flying. He was one of Winston Churchill's famous "Few" in the Battle of Britain and an officially-acclaimed fighter 'Ace'. (To become an 'Ace' required five confirmed victories. Only 8% of the total pilots involved in the Battle of Britain qualified as an 'Ace'.)

⁵ Only 25 Australians were eligible for the Battle of Britain clasp, and still fewer also fought in the Battle of France.

Gordon Olive was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on 24 September 1940⁶, in recognition of his service during this period.

Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO, then Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia said of him⁷: *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....*



*Informal group portrait of pilots from No 65 Squadron, RAF.
017934 Pilot Officer (PO) Gordon Olive is second from left.*

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, Olive 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.

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
- 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.

He also forged a successful career as a company manager after the war, as well as serving the community⁸, being recognised for his community service by his appointment as MBE, promoted to CBE in 1978.

He retired in 1981. He died on 20 October 1987 and is survived by his wife and their two sons and one of their two daughters

A separate Note⁹ in this series (in the 'People' section, see: *People. Notable Members. Olive*) provides more detailed biographic details.

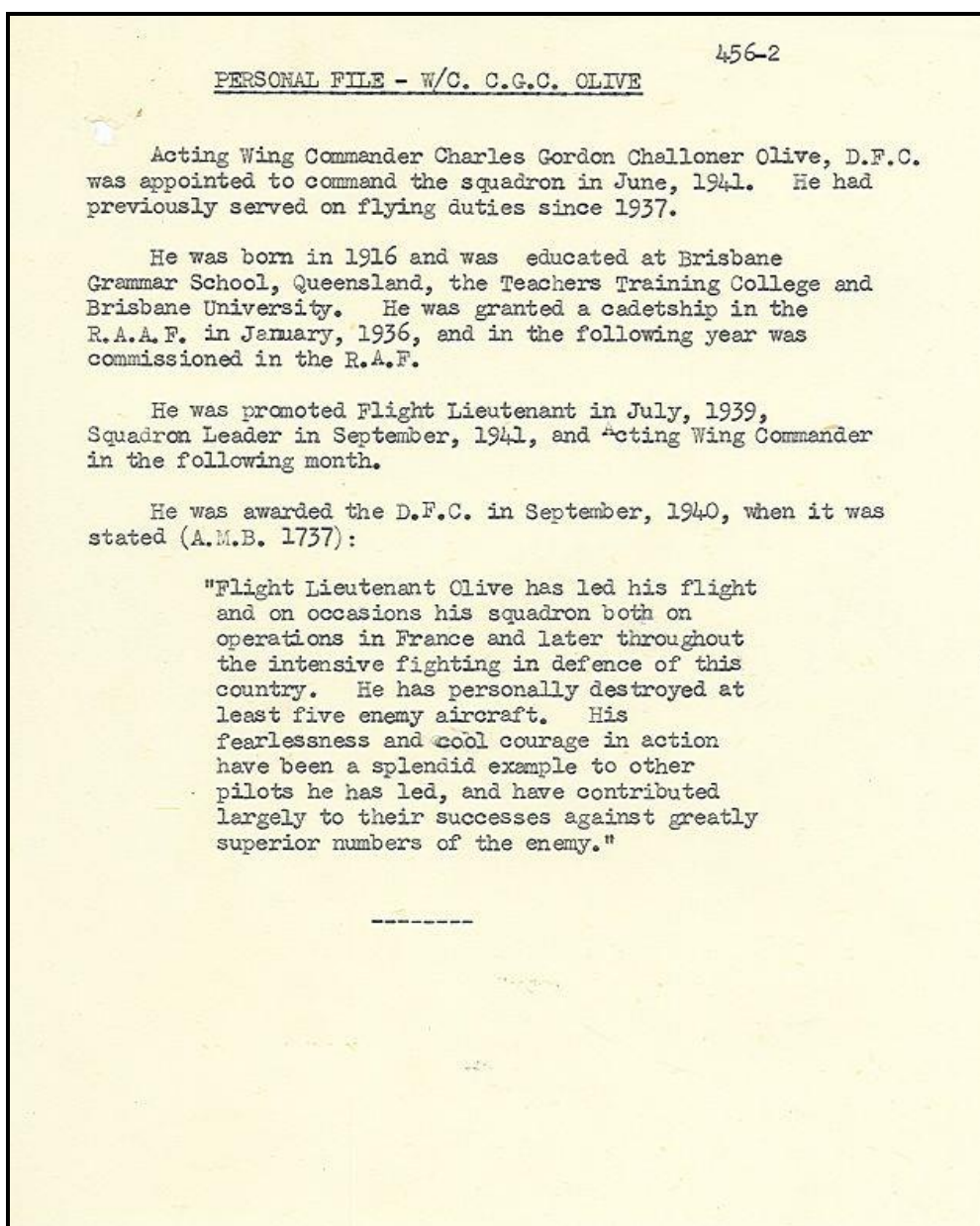
⁶ See **Attachment** for a copy of the file extract.

⁷ During her speech at the Battle of Britain Wreath Laying Ceremony at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra on 13 September 2013.

⁸ 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.

⁹ See 'People. Notable Members.Olive.V2.26.06.14.RM'

Extract of File including DFC Citation



(See also The London Gazette Issue 34951 published on the 24 September 1940)